

An Outing to Debar Pond Lodge

with Adirondack Architectural Heritage

July 19, 22, and 23, 2004



View of Debar Pond, from main lodge, with Baldface, Loon Lake, and Debar Mountains in the distance

Early History of the Site

Debar Pond Lodge is located on the end of an 1,100 acre pond named after John Debar, a Canadian trapper who discovered it on a hunting trip in 1817. Robert Schroeder, the son of a German brewer, began acquiring land around the pond in the 1880s and eventually amassed more than 2,100 acres. He planted more than 300 acres of his holdings in hops, an essential ingredient in the manufacture of beer, making Debar one of the largest hop plantation in the world at the time. Schroeder's first residence at Debar burned two years after its completion but Schroeder immediately replaced it with a 60 room mansion built in two sections, one of wood frame construction for his guests, the other of stone for himself. The new structure included such amenities as solid mahogany staircases, a ballroom, Dutch furniture, and four large German stained glass windows in the entrance hall. A large wood-frame building (Echo Lodge) was also built for the Schroeders' tubercular son. Through profligate spending and monumental foolishness, Schroeder managed to squander both his and his wife's fortunes (she was the daughter of the owner of the Ullman Breweries). After the liquidation of their Adirondack property, they ended up in a Brooklyn flat, where she took her life by gas asphyxiation. Robert died in the same manner, a few years later, in 1913.

The property was then sold to Berton and Herbert Reynolds and Clarence Briggs from Malone, who envisioned converting the mansion into a clubhouse or sanitarium. While this never came to pass, one photo (right) from the period shows a large group gathered on the steps of Echo Lodge. In the early 1920s, they used the property to raise silver foxes.



The Present Camp

In 1939, the property was acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Wheeler of Palm Beach, Florida. By this time, the mansion was in very deteriorated condition, so was razed by the Wheelers. In its place, the Wheelers built an impressive seventeen-room, cedar log, main lodge. The lodge was designed by William G. Distin of Saranac Lake and was likely constructed by Branch & Callanan, also of Saranac Lake. Bill Distin began his architectural career in 1901, working as a draftsman for William Coulter. Coulter was an extremely prolific Saranac Lake architect who designed churches, houses, commercial buildings, sanatoria, and many large camps in the region including Camp Eagle Island, Prospect Point, the Knollwood Club, and Moss Ledge. In 1907, Distin enrolled in the architecture program at Columbia University and, in 1910, he rejoined the firm, now headed by Max Westhoff (Coulter died in 1907). By 1918, they were full partners

but, around 1920, Westhoff relocated to western Massachusetts, leaving Distin as the principle architect of the firm. Over the next several decades, he designed many buildings in the region, including: the Adirondack Community Church (1926) in Lake Placid, the 1932 Olympics Ice Arena, and Camp Wonundra (now The Point) on Upper Saranac Lake for William A. Rockefeller in 1938. His last large project was Minnowbrook on Blue Mountain Lake in 1949. He died in 1970.



In addition to the main lodge, other buildings were constructed by the Wheelers, including a guide's house, garage,

boathouse, greenhouse, chicken coop, sheds, and large barn. One of Schroeder's smaller 19th century buildings survived at least until 1978 when the property was surveyed by the Preservation League of New York State as part of their *Research Report on the Great Camps of the Adirondacks*.



Debar Pond Lodge's Great Room

The Wheelers enjoyed Debar Pond Lodge for nearly two decades. Family photographs (left) from the period show the camp furnished in typical mid-20th century fashion, with stuffed chairs, contemporary tables, lamps, beds, and dressers, and a wagon wheel light fixture in the "great" room. They also show a billiard room, well-stocked bar, modern kitchen, and room for cutting and wrapping meat, presumably deer. Other photos show the family's many activities there, including hunting, canoeing, picnicking, playing badminton, having cook-outs, and riding around in their WWII era Jeep.



Canoeing on Debar Pond

In 1959, the Wheelers sold the property to Farwell T. Perry of Greenwich, Connecticut, for a "low six figure" price. Perry was a World War II Navy pilot and is remembered by many local people for coming and going from camp in a his seaplane.

The Future in State Ownership

New York State acquired the Debar Pond Lodge property (1,200 acres) in 1979 for \$413,500 and has honored a twenty-five year leasehold interest on a 25-acre portion of the property with the buildings since. This leasehold interest will expire in September 2004, at which time New York State will take full possession of the property. Until just recently, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) had planned to raze the entire complex of buildings. However, due to increasing public advocacy from AARCH (as early as 1994), the Duane Parks Commission, state and local representatives, and others, DEC is now studying several possible uses for the buildings, including for administrative uses and conservation education. The complex has been determined to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. For more information about local efforts to preserve the camp, visit www.debarlodge.org

We are most thankful for the cooperation and support of Barry Silverstein, Debar Pond Lodge's current lessee, without which these outings would not have been possible. We wish to thank Mrs. Frederick Gardner (formerly Mrs. Arthur Wheeler), Connie and Peter Geisler, and Albert Wheeler, for sharing their memories of life at Debar Pond Lodge. We also thank Peter Geisler, Jr, for assembling and sharing with us so many family photos of life at Debar Pond Lodge.

