

The resurrection of Wellscroft

Remote century-old Adirondack manor house, twice abandoned, is slowly being restored by latest owners

STORY BY LEE MANCHESTER

Wellscroft is a huge, two-story Tudor Revival house set on the slopes of Ebenezer Mountain overlooking little Upper Jay, an Essex County hamlet that straddles the Au Sable River. The Wellscroft estate has gone through several changes of ownership since being built nearly a century ago. Twice abandoned, twice logged, twice looted, the estate has now found owners who understand its potential and have dedicated themselves to its restoration.

The Wells family legacy

The Wellscroft story cannot be told without the tale of the couple who built it in 1903: Wallis Craig Smith and Jean Wadham Wells.

Jean Wells was born in 1876 in Saginaw, Michigan. Her father Charles, a native of Upper Jay, and her mother Mary, a Keeseville girl, had come to Saginaw after the Civil War, where Charles had made his fortune in the lumber and hardware trade. He and his partner founded the Marshall-Wells Hardware Co., for several decades one of the largest chains of hardware stores in the United States. Despite the Wells family's mercantile wealth, tragedy struck it repeatedly, taking two of Jean's three sisters and leaving her an orphan six months before her 18th birthday. She inherited a Marshall-Wells trust income and her family's home.

Wallis Smith was born in 1875. He was the son of Jay Smith, a local pharmacist who had come to Michi-

gan from western New York in 1851 to help settle Saginaw City, building a prosperous business there for himself. Wallis earned his law degree in 1899, and the following year he went into practice as an attorney in Saginaw.

The connection between Wallis and Jean came through her late father's business. Charles' former partner, Allen M. Marshall, was the widowed husband of Wallis's sister, and Wallis himself was later to become a director of Marshall-Wells.

On June 29, 1901, Wallis Smith married Jean Wells at her family estate, which became their Saginaw home. After the wedding the two wealthy young people — she 25, he 26 — went on a honeymoon through Europe and Egypt. Upon returning, the Smiths started building a summer retreat on land that had been given to Jean by her Keeseville relatives in December 1899. The 750-acre plot lay on the slopes of Ebenezer Mountain, overlooking the Au Sable River and the hamlet of Upper Jay, where Jean's father had been raised. To honor her family, the estate was named Wellscroft. It was finished in 1903.

A self-sufficient retreat

The construction of Wellscroft was part of a growing trend in the Adirondacks, according to an architectural history survey of the estate conducted by Steven Engelhart, executive director of the nonprofit Adirondack Architectural Heritage,

based in Keeseville. Beginning in the late 1860s, adventurous travelers began to discover the natural beauty of the Adirondack Mountains, its many opportunities for outdoor recreation, and its beneficial health effects. Some wealthy seasonal visitors constructed private backwoods kingdoms like Camp Santanoni, in Newcomb township, started in 1890. Others put up their vacation estates using more conventional models of architecture. Wellscroft was an example of the latter.

Built in 1903 at a cost of \$500,000 — or about \$10 million in today's dollars — Wellscroft was designed as a large, self-contained summer retreat, including a 15,000 square foot main house and a caretaker's cottage, firehouse, powerhouse, carriage house, and icehouse. Wellscroft had a small artificial lake for boating and two more reservoirs providing water for electric generation, fire fighting and household use. After the birth of the Smiths' two daughters in 1906 and 1908, the family added a children's playhouse to their Ebenezer Mountain-side complex.

The predominant architectural mode of all the buildings on the property, from the manor house to the humblest storage shed, is the Tudor Revival style. Characteristics of this style, which was especially popular from 1890 through 1940, included the moderately to steeply pitched roof dominated by several prominent cross gables, stone and

decorative half-timbering on its facades, narrow diamond-paned windows, and massive chimneys. During the 1920s and '30s, the style was so popular for middle- and upper-middle-class homes that they were dubbed "Stockbroker Tudor." According to Engelhart, Wellscroft represents a kind of high water mark for the Tudor Revival style in America.

The interior of the main house was designed in the manner of the Arts and Crafts movement, founded in England by John Ruskin and William Morris and given currency in America by designer Gustav Stickley through his influential magazine, *The Craftsman*. Wellscroft's interior displays all the hallmarks of the Arts and Crafts style, including the liberal use of wood in floors and decorative trim, beamed ceilings, wainscoting, fireside nooks, window seats and built-in cabinets and other furnishings.

Estate goes thru many hands

Wallis and Jean Smith and their two daughters continued to visit their summer home for nearly 40 years, despite the decline of the Marshall-Wells Hardware chain during the Great Depression and the resulting loss of income from Jean's trust and Wallis's work as a corporate director. It was not until the beginning of World War II that the Smiths were finally forced to relinquish the deed to their vacation retreat.

In 1943 the 750-acre estate was sold to Lamb Lumber Co., of Lake Placid. Lamb logged Wellscroft for 13 years, taking between 4 million and 5 million board feet of lumber off the property before selling it to a pair of businessmen from the Paramus, New Jersey area: Alexander Kueller and Raymond Van Olst.

Between 1956 and 1963, Kueller and Van Olst ran Wellscroft as a mountain resort, complete with an on-premise restaurant, fishing lake, horse-and-hiking trail complex — and, some say, as a brothel. Accord-

ing to the tales told in the hamlet below, a code phrase was passed among the local clientele whenever a new batch of girls arrived at the main house: "The band is playing at Wellscroft tonight." Though often denied, such stories are too widely circulated in Upper Jay to be easily dismissed. Those tales say that it was the ever-more-public knowledge of the private goings-on at Wellscroft that forced Kueller and Van Olst to sell the place in 1963.

The new owner was Charles Fletcher, of Franklin, N.J. The retired Navy aviator and inventor of the Hovercraft was (and continues to be) president of a corporation that manufactures aeronautical equipment. Fletcher did little with Wellscroft during his three decades of ownership. In 1979 he split the property, dividing the timberland on the rear acreage from the manor house and its surrounding 15 acres.

In 1989 the timberland was sold to local lumberman Bill Ward Sr., who logged the same land that had been cut from 1943 to 1956 by Lamb Lumber. Ward logged more than just the back acreage at Wellscroft, according to several reports. The front 15 acres were also logged during that period, the property's current owners claim. Both the children's playhouse and the powerhouse were severely damaged when trees were dropped through their roofs, and several huge pines planted almost 100 years before around the main house site were cut and removed. In 1992 Bill Ward Sr. sold his acreage to a Florida investment company that ended up surrendering the land a year later to Wilmington township in lieu of back taxes. Wilmington has been trying to find another buyer for the land ever since.

In July 1993, the main house and its surrounding 15 acres were bought by Nikdonto Ltd., a company with a Champlain address that had only been registered with the N.Y. Department of State since October 1992. The company's president, Di-

ane Saracino, said in an interview with the Lake Placid News that Nikdonto was a small marketing firm for the larger Tetra Penta Group, supposedly a biotechnology company. Saracino herself had registered Tetra Penta Ltd. with the state in April 1993, six months *after* filing Nikdonto's paperwork.

Saracino and her boyfriend, Robert Roy, of Montreal, moved into the main house at Wellscroft. Roy said he owned Alpha Cell Technologies Inc., a research group that was also involved in constructing infrastructure projects in Third World countries. Saracino said that she and Roy were going to convert Wellscroft into an international research center for biotechnology. "It will never be a home," she told the Plattsburgh Press-Republican in 1995, "but a corporate headquarters for our huge corporation that we will make public this year."

On March 2, 1995, disaster struck. The Wellscroft caretaker's cottage, which Saracino had recently renovated, was destroyed in a kerosene-heater fire. The main house, however, was untouched, thanks in large part to the Upper Jay Volunteer Fire Department.

The following February, Saracino personally took over ownership of Wellscroft, paying off the back taxes owed since Nikdonto had purchased it. Then, late in 1997, Saracino disappeared, evidently in a great, big hurry. Not only were business papers and children's effects left behind, but food was left in the refrigerator and on the supper table.

According to one investigator, Saracino was located on Dec. 24, 1997, somewhere in Missouri, where she was served with papers for defaulting on her mortgage. A Lake Placid attorney familiar with the case said, "She's a real flake who got involved with a bad relationship. The guy bolted, she got stuck, the bank made a bad loan because of a wrong (high) appraisal, etc. The principal mortgage was for

\$360,000.” Another \$300,000 in loans was also picked up by the bank when Saracino skipped town.

New owners rescue Wellscroft from verge of disintegration

Between late 1997 and April 1999, when the current owners bought the Wellscroft estate, the lodge was vandalized and systematically looted. Youngsters from the area used the house for a while as a secluded hangout, trashing the place. “There were 228 window panes broken,” one of the new owners said, “and we took six of those commercial Dumpsters of garbage out of the basement.” When this writer first visited the house in July 2000, 15 months after its purchase, the owners had still not been able to touch one room in the basement, which was a foot deep in trash. “That’s what the whole basement was like,” the owner said at the time, “and three feet deep in water, too.”

Randy and Linda Stanley, the new owners of Wellscroft, had been looking for a big, old house to renovate for several years. When Randy, the owner of a Saranac Lake auto dealership, saw the ad for Wellscroft, he said that “something seemed right about it.”

“Our families, our friends, they all tried to persuade us not to do it,” Linda Stanley said recently. “That was three years ago (April 1999), and we still have a year or two to go for the landscaping and the outbuildings. But it’s well worth it — it’s an amazing old home. But to really appreciate it, you had to see what was *here*, and not what *wasn’t* here.”

The restoration of Wellscroft has been a truly Herculean task, according to Linda Stanley. “We bought 120 gallons of polyurethane,” she said, “and roofing shingles by the tractor trailer load.” The charred remains of the old caretaker’s house had to be leveled; the powerhouse had to be reroofed; a wood furnace had to be installed (the main house is now heated with hot water, the pipes

installed between the first and second floors), and mountains of debris had to be removed, inside and out, before the place could be considered habitable. It was well over a year after they bought the property before the Stanleys could move in. Even then, years of restoration work were still to be done. Yet today, just three years after the estate’s rescue from the verge of disintegration, visitors to Wellscroft can see much of the house and land as it was when Wallis and Jean Smith built it as a grand summer retreat for their young family.

Inside Wellscroft

The main house at Wellscroft is laid out in a long, irregular rectangle with two stories, a basement, and an attic. An open porch extends from the southern end of the first floor, which is faced with native cobblestone carried up from the Au Sable riverbed. A sleeping porch extends out from the master bedroom on the northern end of the second floor, which is finished with either wood shingles or decorative half timbering of wood and stucco. Three dormers and five massive brick chimneys punctuate the moderately pitched roof.

Five doors of various sizes and types lead into the main house. The grand entrance opens off the rounded carriage port into a tower-like two-story semicircle containing the central staircase between the first and second floors. A single set of stairs leads up to a landing halfway between the stories lined with window seats. From that intermediate landing, two separate staircases wrap around the outside of the tower to the second-story landing. The dark wood of the stairs, the banisters, and the window casings seems to glow in the light that pours through the high, leaded windows.

On the far end of the tower entrance’s ground floor are a pair of double doors with two Tiffany stained-glass windows. Those doors

lead into a huge, open living room, the eastern wall of which is full of windows that let light pour in from the Jay mountain range across the river. Here and throughout, the house has been furnished with period pieces in the mission style designed by Stickley. The Tiffany shades on the wall sconces and hanging light fixtures are mostly reproductions, but they were chosen to reflect the originals shown in old pictures of the house that were shot before its looting in the late 1990s. The walls downstairs are covered in carefully chosen, authentic Arts and Crafts-style canvas or linen wall coverings.

Moving through the rest of the main floor, with its billiard room, bar, ladies’ tea room and dining room, many of the same design and decorating elements echo throughout: beamed ceilings, paneled wainscoting, floors of oak and southern yellow pine, brick fireplaces, hand-painted murals, and built-in benches, cupboards and window seats. Moving from room to room, these elements bring a string of words to mind: Simple. Elegant. Attractive. Comfortable. Durable.

The second floor is dominated by a 90-foot hallway flanked by bedrooms, all with large windows facing either the Jay Range or Ebenezer, all with built-in window seats, all with coal-burning fireplaces, and almost all with large closets and their own attached bathrooms — both features quite unusual for the architecture of the time. Each bath on the second floor is fitted with a corner sink, a built-in medicine cabinet and solid nickel plumbing fixtures.

But these parts of the house are only half the story. Distinct from the family quarters are the servants’ quarters and work areas. From the large kitchen and pantry areas downstairs, with their three large walk-in coolers, a narrow enclosed staircase leads to the second-story servants’ area, with two bedrooms, a simple bath and a huge linen closet for mak-

ing up the guest rooms. The doorway that separates the servants' area from the guest rooms on the second story speaks volumes about the social arrangements of the time, fitted on one side with a plain brass handle, on the other with a small, solid crystal knob the size of a billiard ball. Another narrow staircase leads from the second story to the attic, which was all servants' territory. From a rough, wainscoted central living area, doorways lead to four closed, private bedrooms and one large dormitory. Running vertically through the main house, from attic to basement, are a laundry chute and an open, hand-operated elevator, windows set into one side of the shaft, ordinary doors into the other.

Outbuildings and grounds: Works in progress

Much more work remains to be done outside the main house than inside at Wellscroft. The century-old trees that once graced the lawn cannot be restored, but the Stanleys are removing the brush that has grown among the debris on the dry bed of the small lake below the main house. From the renovated gazebo, visitors will one day be able to look down upon small boats floating gently on the renewed lake waters.

For one of the three ruined Wellscroft outbuildings there is only a past, no future. The Stanleys say

they do not plan to rebuild the curious six-room children's playhouse, built by Wellscroft workmen from a kit. "I think that was pre-assembled somewhere else," said Linda Stanley, describing the playhouse from the wreckage that she and her husband had salvaged for use in restoring the main house. "All the pieces were numbered and labeled."

For two other outbuildings now in ruins, however, the Stanleys have plans for future restoration, using photographs to rebuild the caretaker's cottage and the two-story carriage house — the latter complete with second-floor apartments and bell tower — to resemble their originals.

Cut into the hillside between the site of the children's playhouse and the ruins of the caretaker's cottage is a small root cellar. The stairway leading down into the ground is lined in cut stone, just like the walls and the low, barrel-vaulted ceiling of the cellar itself.

The powerhouse roof has been rebuilt, and the structure now holds the Stanleys' mammoth wood furnace and a huge store of firewood. Next to the powerhouse is the old firehouse, where Wellscroft's copper-pumped fire engine was stored along with an all-purpose repair shop.

Immediately above the powerhouse on the Ebenezer Mountain

slope is the lower of Wellscroft's two storage reservoirs, both built of stone and concrete, this one now drained and awaiting a swimming-pool liner. The upper reservoir, set a mile back in the hills on its own brook and surrounded by small pines and birches, is still filled with water. The reservoir is mostly intact, but it is starting to leak, ever so slowly, from several cracks opened by a recent earthquake in nearby Au Sable Forks.

Between the twin reservoirs is one more pair of outbuildings from the Wellscroft estate, a small storage shed and a large icehouse, which stand on the part of the estate now belonging to the town of Wilmington.

Visitors are welcome at Wellscroft, which the Stanleys operate as a bed and breakfast. For information or reservations, call (518) 946-2547 or visit Wellscroft on the Web at wellscroftlodge.com

Last year the Stanleys were recognized with an award from Adirondack Architectural Heritage for their exemplary preservation and stewardship work at Wellscroft. "They are to be commended for taking on such a large, difficult project," said AARCH, "for maintaining high standards for its restoration, and for bringing an important and endangered property back to life."