

Visiting historic Placid Lake

AARCH takes guests on tour of two classic lake camps

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, September 13, 2002

Many thousands visit the village of Lake Placid each year, situated along Mirror Lake.

But only a select few summer on the 225 camps situated around the shores and islands of Placid Lake. The lack of public access to the lake and the private retreats around it — most can be reached only by water — makes it a more exclusive location than one might imagine of a body of water named for such a prominent and well-visited resort town.

That may be what makes Adirondack Architectural Heritage's annual boat tour of "Historic Placid Lake" one of the most popular among its 40-some summer programs: the chance to see historic Adirondack structures rarely seen by the masses, and to see them in the company of knowledgeable authorities.

Mary Hotaling, architectural historian and executive director of Historic Saranac Lake, is the guide for "Historic Placid Lake."

Hotaling met her tour group last Friday morning on the dock of the Lake Placid Marina, formerly known as the George and Bliss marina. Brian Bliss, operator of the "Lady of the Lake" tour boat, would be taxiing Hotaling and her charges for the day, providing additional interpretive remarks developed over a lifetime of experience.

The weather could not have been better: clear skies, mild temperatures and just a slight breeze prevailed as Bliss pulled his 1926 wooden boat away from the dock. The focus of Friday's tour was two lakeside retreats, Gull Rock Camp on the West Lake and Camp Carolina on the east shore. Bliss and Hotaling gave the group from Adirondack Architectural Heritage — or AARCH (pronounced like "Arch"), as it is known for short — an overview of the entire lake as they traveled all around it.

North Elba township, home of Lake Placid Village, had been settled first as the site of an iron forge, then as an agricultural settlement. The North Elba Works were gone before 1850, and farming was problematic because it was so difficult to get produce out of the Adirondacks to market.

"But at some time in the mid-1800s, people started coming to the mountains for the view," Hotaling said. "1870 was a break point, I think. That's when Mary Monell, a lodger at Joseph Nash's farm house, signed in the guest register her suggestion that Bennet Pond's name be changed to Mirror Lake."

With the influx of sightseers came a demand for more hotels on scenic spots, leading to development around Placid Lake. Many of the campsites bought and built up in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were originally places visited by hotel guests taking canoes out for day trips.

Over 100 of Placid Lake's 225 camp sites were built before 1900. Some, like Camp Grenwolde (c.1896; now Camp Solitude, a B&B) on the central West Lake shore, were smaller versions of the rustic Great Camps typical of the Saranac River lakes.

Others, like **GULL ROCK CAMP** (c. 1902), “were built on the older model,” Hotaling explained, with separate cabins erected for the different purposes served in houses by separate rooms. Theodore Ely, the first owner, had Saranac Lake architect Max Westhoff design a camp in 1906 with distinct structures for “a living cabin, guest cabin, family cabin, guide house in logs, dining room cabin, shop, maid’s cabin, ice house and wood shed, covered arbor, boat house and pier.”

Ely, an engineer and “chief of motive power of the Pennsylvania Railroad,” retired in 1911 and died in 1916.

The next owner of Gull Rock Camp was New York City socialite Carle Cotter Conway, who came to Placid Lake in 1922. Conway had a seven-room structure added on to the site in 1926, along with a tennis court.

Conway was notorious on the lake for his love of very fast, very noisy speedboats. By the end of the summer of 1923, the secretary of the Shore Owners Association had been instructed to write to Conway about “the number of complaints in regard to a motor boat that was not being operated in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Association.”

Conway sold Gull Rock in 1959 to Francisco Blanco, of Havana, Cuba. Eight years later, the camp was bought by New York City attorney Otto C. Doering Jr. In 1994 it was acquired by Sara Jane DeHoff, heir to Calphalon cookware manufacturer Ronald Kasperzak.

“There are 11 buildings on the property now,” said caretaker Sam Pitcher, who has overseen a complete restoration of the camp. “We’ve replaced virtually every log on every building, from the third log up.”

Gull Rock Camp is in such incredible shape today, in fact, that visitors might have a hard time believing that it is actually a century old, but several AARCH visitors on last Friday’s tour remarked on the quality of the camp’s restoration and its faithfulness to its origins.

The next stop on the “Historic Placid Lake” tour was all the way around on the east shore of the lake at **CAMP CAROLINA**. Two of the three primary structures on the property — the main house and the boat house — date from around 1913, when North Carolina textile manufacturer Caesar Cone secured a contract with Max Westhoff, then of New York City, to design his lakeside retreat.

In 1915, Cone helped extend the trail that would eventually run all the way around Placid Lake. He cleared two sections, one from Whiteface Landing to McLenathan Bay, the second from McLenathan Bay over Pulpit Rock and along his own property to the Ruisseaumont colony.

Cone died in 1917 at age 58. His widow continued to summer at Camp Carolina. When she reached her 90s, according to current owner Dr. Howard Smith, Mrs. Cone had a narrow-gauge railroad built up the steep hill connecting the lakeside dock to the main house.

Smith bought the property from Robert Hunsicker, who now summers on Hawk Island in Placid Lake. Smith had already owned the land between Camp Carolina and the nearest road when Hunsicker approached him, asking to buy his property so that he could build a road out to the village.

“I wouldn’t sell,” Smith said Friday, “but I offered to buy.”

Smith proceeded to build the private road envisioned by Hunsicker.

The doctor has faithfully maintained the camp, even holding on to its period furnishings, many of them designed by Arts & Crafts movement popularizer Gustav Stickley. At one point, Smith says, he was approached by a man who wanted to buy the furnishings — all of them — offering to pay more than the entire camp was worth.

“But what would I do for furniture?” Smith says he replied.

Adirondack Architectural Heritage included a description of Camp Carolina’s historic buildings in the brochure prepared for last Friday’s tour guests:

The camp is dominated by a main building, which is an elongated two-story shingled lodge with 18 rooms. ... The main building’s interiors are beautifully designed and detailed. The 33-foot-long living room has log walls, a beamed ceiling and a huge stone fireplace. On the first floor, the sophisticated mission-style furnishings were designed by Stickley, and the rustic furnishings were those of “Boss” Smith of Lake Placid. A cantilevered staircase of peeled split logs rises to the second story. There are nine double bedrooms for the family upstairs, and a four-bedroom servants’ wing. The fine oak furniture upstairs was by the White Furniture Company and Heywood & Wakefield.

In addition to maintaining as much of the original retreat as possible, Smith has built a new guest house to replace an older, decaying structure. The new house was designed very much in character with Westhoff’s originals of nearly a century ago, with Smith building much of the furniture himself for the new structure and decorating it with his own paintings.