

# Two centuries, one afternoon

## *A visit to the Lake Placid-North Elba Historical Society Museum*

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, June 6, 2003

LAKE PLACID — When you think of Lake Placid, what comes to mind?

The Olympics?

Mirror and Placid lakes?

The High Peaks country?

The Lake Placid Club?

The “Adirondack style” of architecture and houseware design?

There’s one place in the village where you can be introduced to all of it, and where you can see it in its historic context.

That place is the Lake Placid-North Elba Historical Society Museum.

The museum’s home is a piece of Lake Placid history itself: the village’s old railroad station, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year.

The Delaware & Hudson Railroad built the Saranac Lake-Lake Placid spur off the main New York Central line between Utica and Malone in 1893, but it was not until 1903 that a passenger and baggage depot was built in Lake Placid.

Highway construction after World War II undercut the economic foundations of America’s railroads. The last D&H passenger train visited Lake Placid in 1965.

The village’s railroad station seemed doomed until sisters Frances and Louise Brewster bought the building in 1967, giving it to the historical society that summer for use as a museum.

**THE MUSEUM** has had several directors over the last 36 years. The latest is Gary Francois, who took over in March.

“They didn’t hire me for my vast

knowledge of Lake Placid history,” admitted the Lake Placid photographer. “What I had to offer is my energy, my commitment and my artist’s eye.”

With just a couple of months to get the museum ready for its five-month season, Francois went to work right away, cleaning out the restored railroad depot’s overfull Waiting Room.

In years past the walls have been covered — some would say cluttered — with unframed historic photos, while the floor has been packed with display cases stuffed with precious historic artifacts.

Francois has been paring down the numbers of items on display, framing the rarest historic photos and creating enough room around them so that they are accessible. He’s done the same with both the contents of the cabinets and their arrangement, creating simpler, more meaningful displays on different aspects of local history in a



Laura Nardiello studies a photo of the sugar shack at Henry Uihlein's Heaven Hill Farm, on display in the museum's "Waiting Room."



Museum director Gary Francois

series of cases that are easy to move around.

While not himself a historian, Francois seems to understand what makes history significant to museum visitors. He showed our reporter a series of photographs of the Joseph Nash 19th century homestead on the northern edge of Mirror Lake, on the site where the Ramada Inn now stands.

The first photo was shot in 1873 by Seneca Ray Stoddard. It shows the Nash farm complex standing

alone on a rolling green hillside, below it the waters of Mirror Lake — then called Bennet Pond after the village's original settler.

"I appreciate the innocence of this photo," Francois said. "I don't want to lose that sense of things."

The other two Nash farmstead photos, though shot just a few years later, show more and more buildings erected nearby.

Today, that same area is Lake Placid's prime shopping district.

**THE WAITING** Room at the railway depot museum uses all the space at its disposal for displaying historic artifacts. On the floor are cabinets that tell the stories of the Lake Placid Club, radical abolitionist John Brown, Lake Placid's 98-year-old Volunteer Fire Department, and a farm that is nearly as old as North Elba township itself, the late Henry Uihlein's Heaven Hill Farm.

One entire wall in the Waiting Room is devoted to the growth of winter sports in Lake Placid and the village's Olympic history.

Another wall displays farm implements recovered from nearby barns, fields and meadows, evidence of the work done by North Elba's earliest agricultural settlers.

In a loft overlooking the Waiting Room are various 19th century conveyances, including a bicycle with a huge front wheel centered by a pair of tiny foot pedals.

**THE MUSIC** Room, situated just off the Waiting Room, is the smallest display area in the history museum. One wall is dedicated to the memory of legendary singer Kate Smith, most famous for her signature rendition of "God Bless America." Smith summured in Lake Placid, where she was much-beloved. A group called the Kate Smith Society visits the museum every year to maintain "Kate's Wall."

Visitors to the Music Room will also find a working 1890s Edison phonograph, a 1940s Philco radio set and a Victorian organ standing next to a relic of another Placid summer person, conductor Victor Herbert's music stand.

**THE MUSEUM'S** central display room is usually called "The

General Store.” The room serves as a catch-all for the kinds of items one would typically find in a turn-of-the-20th-century sundries store, complete with a pharmacy, a cigar-store Indian and the post-office boxes from the old Newman neighborhood postal station, which used to stand just down the street from the railroad depot.

The General Store has lots of interesting artifacts — perhaps too many. It awaits Francois’ paring skills.

Beyond the store is the museum’s final display area, the Adirondack Room, containing a fine display of typical Adirondack camp furniture, including a dining table set with service from the legendary Camp Underhill, on the north shore of Placid Lake.

On the Adirondack Room’s walls are stuffed samples of a wide variety of Adirondack wildlife, including the supposedly extinct Adirondack mountain lion — “supposedly,” we say, because the cats continue to be spotted once or twice every few years, from the High Peaks to the Champlain Valley.

**THURSDAY EVENING** programs are a regular part of the history museum’s annual calendar, with anywhere from half a dozen to two dozen people attending a given night’s activities. This year’s lecture series, which starts at 8 p.m. each evening, includes:

- July 31, “Why Historic Preservation?” with Steven Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage;
- Aug. 7, Gary Francois shares some of his Adirondack landscape and recreational photography in an audiovisual show;

- Aug. 14, Jay artist Terrance Young talks about his Adirondack etchings and poetry;

- Aug. 21, Doug Wolf, president of the Whiteface Historic Preservation Society, talks about the cultural and natural history of Whiteface Mountain, and

- Aug. 28, a color slide program on the recently completed restoration of the stained-glass windows at Lake Placid’s Adirondack Community Church.

An extra feature on the museum’s calendar is a fund-raising craft fair scheduled for Saturday, Aug. 2.

**THE LAKE** Placid-North Elba Historical Society Museum will be open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. over the next three weekends — June 7 and 8, June 14 and 15, and June 21 and 22.

From Tuesday, June 24, through mid-October the museum will be open Tuesday through Sunday (closed Mondays) from 10 a.m. to

4 p.m.

The railroad depot museum is located on Averyville Road in Lake Placid, a block off South Main Street at the base of Mill Hill. Lisa G’s restaurant, an opera house 100 years ago, stands on the corner of South Main Street and Averyville Road.

This year there is no fixed admission fee to the museum, though a \$2 donation is recommended. Museum supporters are encouraged to join the Lake Placid-North Elba Historical Society. Membership dues are \$15 a year.

The museum also welcomes contributions. Gifts are now being sought to help pay for repairs to the museum’s original slate roof. Work on the roof is scheduled to begin later this month. Nearly \$40,000 has been raised for the project, but another \$10,000 is still needed.

For more information about the Lake Placid-North Elba Historical Society, call (518) 523-1608.



The Lake Placid-North Elba Historical Society Museum is housed in the village’s refurbished 1903 railroad station.