

Fire destroys Santanoni barn; arson possible

By LEE MANCHESTER, Adirondack Daily Enterprise, July 15, 2004

NEWCOMB — A fire Tuesday in the experimental farm complex at the historic Santanoni Great Camp, just outside Newcomb hamlet, completely destroyed a restored dairy barn built more than a century ago.

Firefighters were able to keep the blaze from damaging any other buildings in the state-owned historic district.

No one was injured.

“We received a call at about 1:45 p.m. from a resident who had spotted smoke that looked like it was coming from Santanoni,” said

Newcomb Fire Chief Mark Yandon. “Before we went on full alarm, I sent in one of our men, Eugene Bush, to check it out.

“Upon his arrival, he found the west end of the barn completely involved. That’s when we put out the alarm.”

“When I got there,” Bush added, “it was blazing. Flames were rising 150, 200 feet into the air.”

For the first couple of hours, Yandon said, the order of the day was keeping the fire from spreading any farther.

The farm complex contains sev-

eral buildings. One of them, a stone-built creamery — also called “the milk parlor” — stands directly across the road from the dairy barn.

“The first thing we did was hose down the roof of the milk parlor,” Yandon said. “The shingles were so hot, you couldn’t touch them.”

Firefighters also had to worry about flames spreading into the neighboring woods.

“There was a nice south wind that pushed the fire about 20 feet into the woods,” Yandon said, “but it was wet, so the fire didn’t crown.”

Firefighters were able to keep



PHOTO BY GEORGE CANON

Firefighters monitor the barn fire at Camp Santanoni Tuesday, July 13, hoping to keep it from spreading to nearby structures or travelling into the adjoining woods.

the blaze from moving farther into the forest.

Two tankers — one from Schroon Lake, another from Long Lake — came to assist the Newcomb fire truck and the 20 local firefighters on the scene.

Initially, Yandon said, the crews had difficulty getting in to the farm complex, which stands about a mile back in the woods on a one-lane, dirt road.

“There was no place for us to turn around, so we had to back in all the way from the gatehouse,” Yandon said.

“If we could have gotten in past the barn on the road, we could have turned around on the lawn there,” Bush added, “but the fire was so hot it would have melted the paint off the trucks.”

It wasn't until about 4 o'clock that firefighters were able to attack the fire itself, so fierce was the blaze. By then, the restored barn was a total loss.

Yandon said that the fire was contained, though not extinguished, by about 6 p.m.

STATE POLICE and Essex County officials are still investigating the cause of the fire.

“It's a little early to say what caused it,” said Captain David Dennin from the state police barracks in Ray Brook. “We're interviewing everyone who signed in at the trailhead, as well as others who were on the site.”

Several sources close to the fire-fighting operation say that a group of three youngsters — two 16-year-olds, one 19 — who passed through the farm complex earlier Tuesday were questioned at length by police and Essex County fire investigators.

“Discussions have been taking place with some individuals who

may have accidentally or deliberately contributed to the fire,” confirmed Newcomb Supervisor George Canon, who is also a director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

“One of them has admitted to smoking in the building,” said

Steven Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, an organization that helps manage the site. “This suggests either negligence or arson.”

Capt. Dennin confirmed that one of the three youngsters admitted to smoking in the barn earlier, but he



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

Steve Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, shows off features of the Santanoni barn's cow stable to a tour group in October 2003.

added, “We want to interview everyone before we start arriving at conclusions.”

Dennin emphasized that the three youngsters in question have fully cooperated with the investigation.

“I understand the property is of historic value and of great concern to many people,” Dennin said. “We are giving the investigation our full attention.”

SANTANONI Great Camp was built in the 1890s as the summer retreat of Robert C. Pruyn, president of the National Commercial Bank in Albany.

In addition to a lakeside camp

complex, Pruyn built an experimental farm on his Newcomb preserve with the idea of making it a self-sufficient retreat in the depths of the Adirondack forest. This “self-sufficient” farm, however, cost Pruyn anywhere between \$15,000 and \$20,000 a year to operate, above and beyond the value of the goods it produced for the Pruyn family and the produce sold on the local market.

Along with the rest of Santanoni’s experimental farm complex, the dairy barn that burned on Tuesday was built in 1895. In addition to the large, shingled, three-level barn on one side of the road, the farm complex contained a stone creamery on the other side

and three houses for Santanoni’s farmworkers, all located on the hill behind the creamery.

The barn, though built to be used as a working farm building, was also a thing of architectural beauty. In the lowest level of the barn, looking out to the rear at ground level, could be found 15 small stalls designed for tiny Jersey dairy cattle, each equipped for cleanliness as well as the animals’ comfort. The small cows stood not on concrete, but on beds made from cork bricks.

Eight decades after Santanoni’s construction, the preserve was given as a gift to the state in 1972. After another 20 years of wrangling



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

The 1895 shingle-style dairy barn in the Santanoni experimental farm complex, photographed in October 2003.

between environmental watchdogs, historic preservationists and state authorities, the areas around the Great Camp's architectural core and experimental farm were designated as a historic district within the state Forest Preserve, thus allowing for their preservation. Adirondack Architectural Heritage, a preservation group based in Keeseville, has taken on the task of restoring and interpreting the camp for visitors in partnership with the town of Newcomb and the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

"The farm and the barn are integral parts of the Santanoni picture," said Canon. "The loss of the barn is devastating, but there are those of

us who hope to generate interest in putting it back up. There is enough historic and architectural documentation on hand to do it."

Canon estimated the cost for such an undertaking at \$800,000.

"There are those who say the state would never support such a venture," Canon said, "but when the Lake Colden cabin burned, this is exactly what they did."

The interior outpost cabin at Lake Colden, a former ranger's cabin owned by the DEC, burned in March 1998. It was rebuilt that summer.

According to Charles Vandrei, Historic Preservation Officer for the DEC, rebuilding the Santanoni

barn is a possibility — but probably a remote one.

"I've broached the subject here at DEC and gotten rolling eyes ... as a response," Vandrei said. "This will be a tall order, maybe taller than the actual saving of the place [Santanoni] in the first instance.

"If the \$800,000 number is real — that's Steve [Englehart]'s estimate; it may be as high as \$1 million — that will be more than twice as much money as the total amount spent on the entire site so far."

For more information about Santanoni Great Camp, call Adirondack Architectural Heritage at (518) 834-9328, or visit their Web site at www.aarch.org.



PHOTO BY ROBIN DeLORIA

Very little remained on Wednesday morning of the Santanoni dairy barn but charred timbers and iron bars from the cow pens.