

Two camps on Osgood Pond

PART ONE OF TWO

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Last week, Adirondack Architectural Heritage offered tours of two camps on Osgood Pond, in Paul Smiths: White Pine Camp, and Northbrook Lodge.

Architecturally distinct as the two camps are from one another, they nonetheless have a great deal in common.

Both were built by the brilliant but unschooled local contractor-cum-architect, Ben Muncil.

Both were precursors of Muncil's masterpiece, Camp Topridge, considered the archetype of the Adirondack Great Camp.

Both served as summer resorts for two North American politicians. Northbrook Lodge was built in the 1920s for Canadian Senator Wilfred L. McDougald and, despite his several setbacks, served as the senator's retreat until his death in 1942.

White Pine Camp has been around for nearly a century, and nearly every year of its history has contributed to the camp's long story. It is best known, however, for the 10 weeks in 1926 when U.S. President Calvin Coolidge used it as his "Summer White House."

White Pine and Northbrook have at least one more thing in common: Both qualify for the "Great Camp" architectural designation, though neither structure is characterized by the birch-bark highlights and twigwork trim that have become the popular signatures of Adirondack architecture.

OUR TOUR guide last week was Howie Kirschenbaum.

Kirschenbaum retired this spring

from his "day job" as chairman of the Department of Counseling and Human Development at the Warner School of the University of Rochester, where he was known as one of the world's leading authorities on the work of therapist Carl Rogers.

In his off hours, Kirschenbaum has built an equally distinguished career in historic preservation, first as the director of a nonprofit organization headquartered at Great Camp Sagamore (1973-89), then as Adirondack Life's first historic-preservation editor (1985) and founding president of Adirondack Architectural Heritage (1990), and later as author of one book on Sagamore

(1990) and co-author of another on Camp Santanoni (2000).

In 1993, Kirschenbaum purchased White Pine Camp. Along with 22 other partners, he operated the camp first as a museum. Today, White Pine is a combination rustic rental resort and ongoing historic preservation project, one that is likely to keep Kirschenbaum busy for years to come.

White Pine Camp

Our tour started in the Caretaker's Complex at White Pine Camp, where Kirschenbaum explained how the camp had been built, and by whom, and when.

In 1907, Adirondack hotelier Paul Smith was subdividing his vast holdings into camps for the well-to-do. New York banker and businessman Archibald White and his much younger wife, Ziegfield Follies girl Olive Moore White, bought 10 acres from Smith on a point of Osgood Pond.

It was some years before White Pine Camp acquired its current expanse of 35 acres. Throughout the Whites' tenure, they leased the 1-acre plot where their caretaker's lodge was located.

When the camp was bought by Irwin Kirkwood, in 1920, he persuaded



Old piers from the dock at White Pine Camp's "New Boathouse" stick up out of Osgood Pond.

Paul Smith to sell him the Caretaker's Complex and everything in between, thus completing the current camp property.

White Pine Camp was designed for the Whites by two architects. The first group of buildings was conceived in 1907-08 by William Massarene, of Manhattan. Three years later, in 1911, the Whites hired Addison Mizner to design additions and alterations to Massarene's original product. The instructions of both architects were carried out by contractor Ben Muncil.

The initial design

Massarene was fresh out of college and had just returned to the States from a graduation tour of Europe when Archibald White hired him in 1907 to design White Pine Camp.

The complex Massarene envisioned for the Whites was, indeed, one of the Adirondack Great Camps, according to criteria Kirschenbaum has identified in his studies of camps all over the region — but, among that body of Great Camps, White Pine was architecturally unique.

The features that make for a “Great Camp,” Kirschenbaum says, are:

- A multi-building complex with distinct functions housed in separate buildings (kitchen, dining room, sleeping rooms, living room, game room/library, etc.);
- Set on a point of a lake;
- Usually designed for use by a single family;
- Using rustic materials in an artistic fashion, and
- Having a high degree of self-sufficiency.

While qualifying as a Great Camp, Massarene's architecture departed significantly from the standard set by William West Durant in the Raquette Lake area, typified by Sagamore.

“The buildings [at White Pine Camp] are rarely symmetrical,” Kirschenbaum said. “They go off at all sorts of angles and shapes, and they have unusual roof lines. ... It's a little bit Japanese, a little bit Prairie Style, but not really any of them.”

Massarene's design featured a “pre-

modern architectural style — some now call it Northwest Modern — with soaring roof lines, asymmetrical buildings, and extensive and unusual use of window lighting in corners, clerestories, and unusual window shapes and sizes that captured the natural lighting and revealed the outdoors in delightful patterns,” Kirschenbaum said.

Interviewed in 1926 about his architectural concept for White Pine Camp, Massarene said that he was trying to “create civilization in the abstract.”

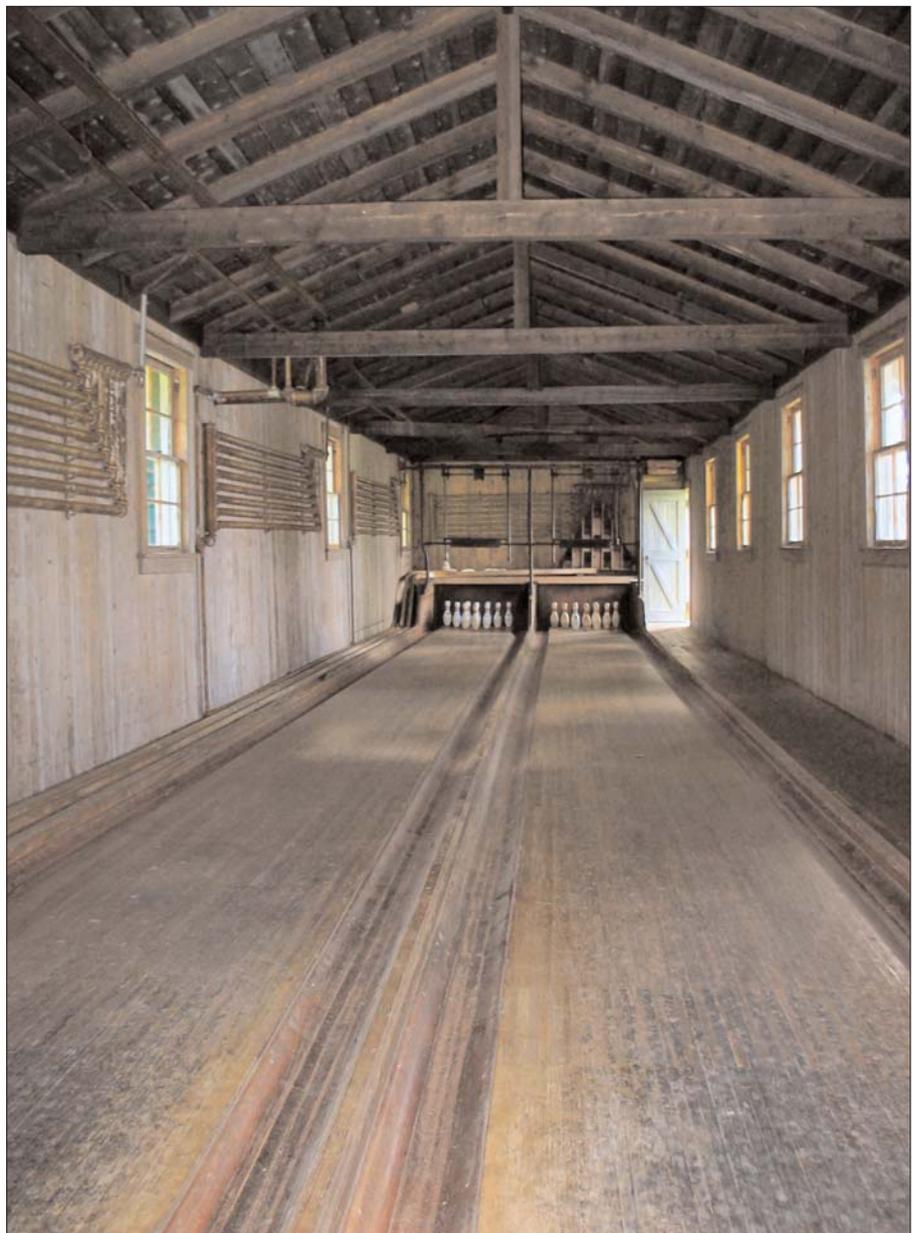
“Using geometrical shapes as an abstraction ‘civilized’ the rustic Adirondack camp,” Kirschenbaum

said, “but in somewhat of an abstract form.”

Rustic building features are still present at White Pine — the rough siding, the stonework, the occasional use of logs — but more subtly than in the stereotypical bark-and-twig Great Camps found elsewhere in the Adirondacks.

‘Brainstorm’ siding

One of the distinguishing features of White Pine Camp is the siding used on nearly all its buildings. “Brainstorm” siding, now ubiquitous throughout the Adirondacks, had its first known U.S.



The bowling alley at White Pine Camp.

application at White Pine.

According to an oft-told but only partly true tale, brainstorm was created as a compromise.

Massarene, the story says, wanted to sheath the White Pine buildings in clapboard siding, but contractor Ben Muncil thought that rustic half-log siding was more appropriate for an Adirondack camp. Splitting the difference, Muncil worked with Paul Smiths millwright Charles Nichols to create a rough-milled siding whose edge showed the natural contour of the log from which it had been cut.

The name of “brainstorm” siding was inspired, according to the story, by a well-publicized murder trial of the day in which the defendant claimed to have been compelled by an irresistible “brainstorm” — the first insanity plea. It was just such a brainstorm, said Muncil and Nichols, that had inspired their innovation.

Much of the “brainstorm” myth is probably true — but, according to Kirschenbaum, not the part about its having been the original creation of Muncil and Nichols.

“We have drawings where Massarene drew this in as early as July 1907,” Kirschenbaum said last week, tracing with his finger the wavy, natural edge of a brainstorm siding board on a building at White Pine Camp.

“Massarene had just [returned from Europe],” he said. “It turns out that in England there is a style of siding called ‘weatherboarding’ that looks exactly like this — and it goes back to the 1600s. Massarene almost surely saw it in England and liked what it did.

“What is probably true is that it had never been done here before. I’ve never found an earlier example in this country.”

Besides Massarene’s abstract building style and White Pine’s brainstorm siding, the camp’s most distinctive feature is its very extensive landscape architecture, including numerous stone masonry walls, built paths, pervasive flower gardens, twin greenhouses, and its bridges — including a small, decorative Japanese bridge and a 300-foot boardwalk built across an inlet.



The owners’ cabin at White Pine Camp — where, for 10 weeks in 1926, President Calvin Coolidge had his Summer White House.

‘Out-Massarened’

In 1911, Archibald White hired a new architect to revise and add on to Massarene’s designs. The architect was 39-year-old Addison Mizner, a native of the San Francisco Bay area.

Though Mizner had no formal training and could not draw blueprints, he was nonetheless a competent, creative architect, as evidenced after he moved to Florida in 1918. The designer of Boca Raton, Mizner’s work is credited today for having launched a “Florida Renaissance” in the 1920s and inspiring architects throughout North America.

At White Pine, Mizner was hired not for his originality, but for his ability to follow up on the work of his predecessor.

“He very faithfully followed Massarene’s original intentions,” Kirschenbaum said outside one of the cottages Mizner designed, “but I think he out-Massarened Massarene on this building.”

Ben Muncil

The third member of the creative team behind White Pine Camp was builder Ben Muncil, who was 40 years old when construction began.

Muncil had been born in Vermontville to a very poor family. Put out to work for his board when he was just 5, he got his first adult job at the age of 14 in a lumber camp. Four years later

he got work guiding at an Upper St. Regis Lake camp, but soon found that he had a special knack for carpentry, which became his primary vocation.

Muncil worked hard and, marrying at age 22, fed a growing family. Stymied from graduating to contracting from carpentry because he couldn’t read, Muncil ordered correspondence courses in blueprint reading and architectural drawing that were read to him by one of his daughters.

Ben Muncil built several landmark buildings in the Gabriels area, including the Brighton Town Hall, the Mount Mercy Convent at Sanatorium Gabriels, and the Catholic churches of the Assumption (Gabriels) and St. Paul’s (Bloomingdale).

But it was his camps for which Muncil is best known, the most famous being Marjorie Merriweather Post’s 68-building complex known as Camp Topridge, situated between St. Regis Lake and Spectacle Ponds.

Interim ownership; restoration

Archibald and Olive Moore White had a stormy marriage. In 1920, the Whites filed for divorce, putting White Pine Camp on the market. It was purchased by Irwin Kirkwood, the head of Kansas City’s leading newspaper family.

Laura Kirkwood, Irwin’s wife, was an old friend of Grace Coolidge, wife of

President Calvin Coolidge. When Mrs. Kirkwood died early in 1926, Mr. Kirkwood offered their camp to the Coolidges for the summer season — and, thus, White Pine became the Adirondack White House for 10 weeks, from July 7 to Sept. 18, 1926. Coolidge set up a business office in Glover Cottage at Paul Smith's Hotel, but the president reportedly spent at least as much time fishing and taking in the nearby sights as he did receiving government officials and visiting dignitaries.

In 1930, Irwin Kirkwood sold White Pine to the families of Edith Stern and Adelle Levy, two daughters of Sears Roebuck chief Julius Rosenwald. For 18 years they used the camp as their family resort before donating it to the newly established Paul Smith's College.

From 1948 to 1976, White Pine Camp was used more heavily than ever before, and nearly year-round, providing dormitory, staff housing and summer-program space.

Then, in 1976, all that stopped.

Paul Smith's College effectively abandoned White Pine Camp, according to Kirschenbaum, until the property

was sold to a local man, Warren Stephen, in 1983.

"They were practically giving those places away," said Kirschenbaum, referring to the many camp properties then being disposed of by the college.

Stephen was able to hold the line against the decay creeping through the camp, Kirschenbaum said, "stabilizing some buildings while others fell further into disrepair." After five years at White Pine, however, Stephen "lost his money" and the camp's condition plunged toward total disintegration.

By 1993, White Pine was in such bad shape that "it scared people off," Kirschenbaum said. For starters, "there were 200 missing windows, rain pouring into buildings through the roofs, debris everywhere — it was really depressing.

"I came to look at the place just because I was curious. I had heard about this camp, and it just haunted me."

Shortly after Kirschenbaum bought White Pine Camp, in 1993, he began enlisting partners to help bear the burden of restoring the historic property. By 1995, the partners had White Pine in sufficient shape to open it as a museum,

offering self-guided tours.

"We got very good feedback," Kirschenbaum said, "but it just didn't work economically.

"All the visitors who came said, 'If you ever want to rent out this cabin, let us know.' We saw the writing on the wall, and that was very successful."

In 1997, White Pine Partners opened the camp for vacation rentals, which subsidize its ongoing restoration.

"A lot of people who buy an old, historic place like this hire a huge crew and spend millions of dollars and get it all done, perfect, in a year or two," Kirschenbaum said.

"My approach, for lack of that kind of funding, is that if it takes 10 or 20 years, that's okay. It's good work."

THAT'S ALL the time we have for this week's installment in our two-part visit to two Great Camps on Osgood Pond. When we pick up next week, we'll visit the wonderfully restored buildings at White Pine Camp before heading down the road to Northbrook Lodge, perhaps the first private camp on Osgood Pond.



A Japanese teahouse, built on an artificial island with its own matching bridge, at White Pine Camp.