

Santanoni

Santanoni – Great Camp of the Adirondacks

The story of Santanoni is of a place that embodies the spirit of the Adirondacks; it is a story that has long held my fascination.

Secluded five miles deep in the woods of the Adirondack Park in the town of Newcomb, NY, Santanoni stands as a testament to a bygone era in American history. The "Great Camps" (as they are now known) had their glory days at the turn of the 20th century, roughly from the 1880's through the 1920's. It was the Gilded Age, when the likes of the Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, Morgans, and other "Robber Barons" amassed their fortunes. And with those fortunes they built retreats deep in the Adirondack wilderness to serve as a refuge from life in the city during the rise of the industrial age. While these "camps" did in fact offer their owners a respite from city life, they also served as a means to showcase their owner's enormous wealth. It could even be argued that some owners built these camps more from a desire to flaunt their wealth rather than from any genuine love of nature. But that was not the case for Robert and Ana Pruyn: they built Santanoni to fulfill their passions.

Robert was a wealthy banker from Albany, the capital of New York. His ambition was to build a gentleman's farm, a playground where he could experiment with the latest agricultural innovations and technologies of the day. His wife Ana was an avid outdoorswoman, keen on engaging in a variety of wilderness activities such as hiking, fishing, and hunting. They built Santanoni as a place to fulfill both their passions. A complex built on 13,000 acres, Santanoni was more akin to a small village than merely a mansion in the woods. And whereas some Adirondack retreats (most notably the Vanderbilt-owned Sagamore) aimed to bring all the luxury and refinement of the modern world with them to the wilderness in order to impress their guests, the Pruyn's approach was much more modest, and in my opinion, more fitting to a wilderness experience. At Sagamore, the rich and famous went to be seen; at Santanoni, the guests were expected to bait their own hooks. But regardless of the owner's penchant for how life was to be lived in the woods, all of the Great Camps were obscenely expensive to build and maintain, requiring a full-time staff of groundskeepers, cooks, farmers, managers, and cleaning help. Only those with enormous wealth could afford the luxury of these playgrounds.

Today, only a handful of the Great Camps still remain standing and those have mostly been re-purposed as modern lodges or museums. Santanoni is unique; it stands empty. It stood abandoned for roughly 20 years from the early 1970's to the 1990's. Today it is under the care of a land conservatory group under a complicated legal arrangement with the state of New York and is slowly being restored. It stands mostly empty of furnishings but open for anyone to wander through its buildings and enjoy the beauty of its premises, and to witness it much in the same way the Pruyn's and their guests did 100 years ago. There is no overnight lodging allowed in the buildings, but the State allows primitive camping in a few designated spots along the shore of the lake that abuts the property. I've camped there numerous times and had the luxury of having the lake and grounds to myself, aside from a few college interns working during the day on the arduous restoration work, and the dozen or so day-trippers arriving by foot, bike, or horse and carriage (thankfully, there is no access for automobiles). But at night one can enjoy the premises in pure solitude, protected from the outside world by nature itself and the 5-mile distance to the nearest road. The lake is pristine, and the area remains essentially suspended in time. And this is much of the allure when visiting, for in today's world it is a rare opportunity to experience a place with such a storied past that has changed so little in the course of a century, with only the ghosts of history's past to keep you company; this is the draw of Santanoni.

The Grounds

The grounds of Santanoni are quite unique among the Great Camps. As a teenager, Robert Pruyn lived in Japan with his father who held the post of US Ambassador to Japan (he was appointed by Abraham Lincoln). This experience left Robert with a strong connection to Japanese culture and architecture. To build his wilderness retreat Robert enlisted the services of a college friend from Rutgers, Robert H. Robertson, who was a distinguished architect of that time. He instructed his friend to incorporate Japanese architectural styles into the design of the estate, and these Japanese influences are seen throughout the structure. One remarkable design element stands out, although not easily seen; when viewed from the air, the buildings of the main complex form the shape of a Phoenix, in flight, pointing west. An intriguing design concept considering the people of that day did not have the advantage of an aerial viewpoint at the time the complex was built in the 1890's. There are numerous Japanese design influences incorporated throughout the complex, and all of the buildings are connected with covered porches; just one example of an eastern design influence on a western log cabin.

The buildings that form the main lodge complex rest on the banks of Newcomb Lake, a 500 acre natural lake that would perfectly satisfy Ana's appetite for boating and fishing adventures. Much of the 13,000 acres leading to the main lodge were cleared for Robert's farm, which included produce, dairy, a creamery, and livestock. Few remnants of the farm exist today, as re-growth of the forest has reclaimed much of the land. But for visitors who witnessed Santanoni in its day, it would have been a uniquely rewarding experience.











A black and white photograph of a rustic wooden structure. The structure features a gabled roof with weathered wooden shingles. A sign with the words "ASH HOUSE" in a serif font is mounted on the wooden frame above a dark, recessed doorway. To the left of the doorway is a wall made of rough-hewn, stacked stones. To the right is a wall of vertical wooden planks. The scene is lit with natural light, creating strong shadows and highlights on the textures of the wood and stone.

ASH HOUSE



Interiors

The interiors of the buildings are modest by comparison to the other Great Camps. Guests were expected to hike and fish and hunt, not relax indoors. Guest rooms faced east, to encourage early rising. The main lodge faced west and remained dark until the late afternoon when the main meal was served. This discouraged indoor idleness, for you were expected to be outside enjoying the wilderness. But lest you start feeling sorry for the guests, one should take note that they were treated to farm fresh meals, running water, flush toilets (remember this was the 1890's), and even stored ice from the winter's frozen lake; amenities not enjoyed by a vast majority of people in other parts of the country. Ana may have expected her guests to be physically active, but they were always aware they were living a privileged and charmed life.











Still Lives

Roaming the interiors of the complex conjures up feelings of a past that is both comforting and somber. It is my favorite part of every visit. What stories do these artifacts summon in our imagination? A way of life that was so grand in its day, but now a dim relic of what once was. For today it is difficult for us to detach ourselves from the modern world, it is always intruding close at hand. Was it much different 100 years ago? Was nature experienced on a different level back then? Before electricity, automobiles, and telephones? Is our appreciation of nature determined by how far we are removed from it? Do we experience nature differently based on what we leave behind? A million thoughts are conjured up while exploring such abandoned artifacts, the mind transporting us back to a time and place we can only imagine. I wish I could be transported back in time for just one day, into the world of the Pruyns and the sanctuary they created here in the wilderness of the Adirondacks.















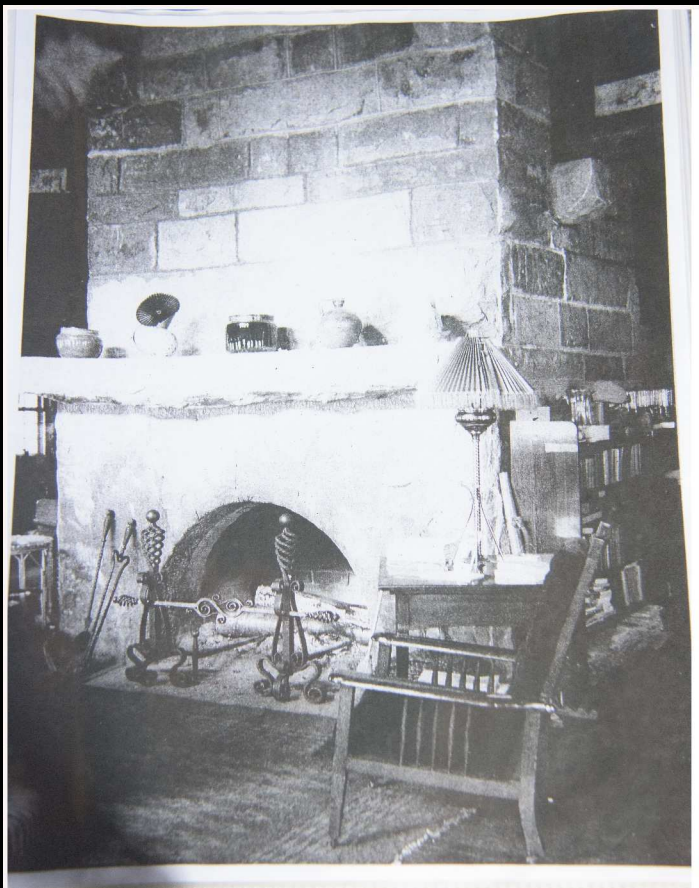
Then and Now

If the Pruyns and their guests could be magically transported to the grounds of Santanoni as it stands today, they would hardly notice the passage of time. Ana maintained meticulous logs of the guests and their activities at Santanoni, documenting in detail not only such things as the fish that were caught, but the time of day, temperature of the water, the lure that was used, and so on. She was also an avid photographer, and hundreds of her photographs survive as a record of how life was lived at Santanoni. While browsing through an album of her pictures I could not help but notice how little the property has changed since the images were taken over one hundred years ago. I could easily recognize the places where she stood while she took many of her pictures because I had taken many of my own images from the same vantage point. Looking at these images I felt as if I was looking at my own images but through the lens of Ana's camera. It seemed that a century of time had collapsed between our lenses: a ghostly warmth of her presence revealed with each image.

It was Robert's wealth and vision that conceived Santanoni, but I sense that it was Ana's heart and soul that brought it to life. These are just a few images of life at Santanoni, taken by two strangers, one hundred years apart; then and now.







Epilogue

Lastly, no account of Santanoni would be complete without the story of Douglas Legg, the eight year old grandson of the second and final owner of Santanoni, Myron Melvin, a banker from Syracuse NY. The Melvin's purchased Santanoni in 1953. In 1971 Dougie Legg tragically disappeared from the property during one of the family's gatherings at the estate. As the story is told, young Dougie was last seen heading back to the lodge for a change of clothes to join his uncle for a hike. Along the way he passed his brother and cousin who were playing down by the lake. That was the last time Dougie was ever seen again. A massive search party combed the woods for weeks in a desperate search for the boy. Thousands of volunteers and rescue groups from all parts of the country joined in the search. But no trace of the boy was ever found. The mystery of his disappearance lives to this day. The Melvins, devastated by this loss and having no desire to ever return to the property, sold the entire property to the state in an effort to distance themselves from this tragedy. That ended private ownership of the Santanoni complex. It stood abandoned until the 1990's when a conservation group was formed to save the property from being torn down and lost forever to history.

I plan on continuing my excursions to Santanoni, but with each visit I fear it may be my last to experience it in such a natural state, empty of crowds and without the influence of the modern world. For I am keenly aware of how the relentless march of progress will ultimately encroach on this sublimely peaceful refuge that is Santanoni.



Images and text
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