

A tour of three historic Adirondack inns, rescued from oblivion

by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, April 7, 2006

Some of us enjoy visiting the many historic sites the Adirondacks has to offer.

Others are not content, however, merely visiting these sites.

They want to *live* in them, even if it's just for a night.

This tour is for them: a swing through Inlet, Pottersville and Upper Jay to visit three historic inns that have recently been rescued from the brink of disintegration and oblivion by their new, preservation-minded owners.

The hostleries we'll visit are the Woods Inn (Inlet), the Wells House (Pottersville) and Wellscroft Lodge (Upper Jay).

All three have already won or have been slated for stewardship awards from Adirondack Architectural Heritage, the nonprofit regional preservation organization based in Keeseville.

Woods Inn, Inlet

Our first stop will be the Woods Inn, located right in the heart of the hamlet of Inlet on Fourth Lake, one of the Fulton chain of lakes. Inlet is a little more than two hours away from Lake Placid by car, driving through Tupper Lake and Blue Mountain Lake.

The core of today's Woods Inn, built in 1894 by Fred Hess, was known as Hess's Camp. Hess, who built several other hotels in the area, sold the camp in 1898 to its manager, Philo C. Wood, who renamed it the Wood Hotel, the moniker by which the place was known for most of its life. Over the next 20 years,

Wood tripled the size of the hotel.

In 1946, an Army Air Force pilot named William Dunay, returning home to Inlet after World War II, bought the Wood Hotel, bringing his siblings into the business as staff members. The hotel closed in the 1980s, but Dunay continued operating the house tavern until his death in 1989.

The Wood stood vacant and deteriorating for 14 years while Dunay's heirs held out for "just the right buyer," turning down several lucrative offers after it was learned that the prospective owners planned to tear the Wood down and replace it with lakefront condominiums.

"The right buyer" turned out to be a couple of Inlet summer people who'd been seasonal residents for

more than a decade, Joedda McClain and Jay Latterman of Pittsburgh, Pa.

Latterman, an electrical contractor, had been an active partner in the numerous historic-restoration investments undertaken by McClain in the Steel City. Those projects included Victoria Hall, a former Ursuline convent and school built in 1865 that McClain had adapted for re-use as a wedding and banquet hall, and Victoria House, a six-room bed and breakfast.

Though "the property was structurally sound and retained much of its original architectural integrity," according to the 2004 preservation award citation from Adirondack Architectural Heritage, the Wood Hotel was in dire need of attention when McClain and Latterman



The Woods Inn, Inlet.

bought it in 2003.

Work began on July 9 of that year and continued for the next 11 months.

“People said she’d never make it,” recalled Nancy Sehring, a Mohawk transplant who signed on with McClain three months before the opening, “but it opened the next June, just like clockwork.”

In the renovation process, McClain and staff converted the Wood Hotel’s 39 guest rooms and six communal baths into 21 guest rooms, each with its own bathroom.

McClain preserved as much of the antique structure as possible, however, in the process of updating the facility — and where the old Wood Hotel had to be transformed, the adaptation was affected in such a way as to recall the 19th century original.

Guests at the renamed Woods Inn will have the space modern travelers are used to, but they’ll still get the feel of an authentic old Adirondack hotel — and without the distraction of television, telephone or Internet.

“People really do not object to no telephones and no television,” Sehring said as we walked through the facility during its annual spring cleaning last week. “I’ve had couples tell me, ‘I never read so much to

my children in their lives’.”

The Woods Inn has three floors of guest rooms. Each of the first two floors has eight rooms — two of them adjoining (for families), and one with access to a private balcony overlooking Fourth Lake. The top floor has four oversized rooms, all of them with furnishings from McClain’s Pittsburgh B&B.

The hotel has a large game room on the lake level, next door to the tavern.

Upstairs on the ground floor is the “great room” parlor and a large dining room, which seats 96 indoors and 26 on an enclosed patio. A private room adjoining the main dining room seats 10 more — and it has its own private porch.

A barn out front, the old hotel’s casino, is host for the Woods Inn “Marketplace” during the summer, selling coffee, fresh farmers-market veggies and antiques.

An “L” shaped pile of rocks running into Fourth Lake is all that remains, for the present, of the Wood Hotel’s old dock, but Woods Inn business manager Ken Gabler says that an APA permit to allow the dock’s reconstruction has been filed.

“It’s only a matter of time,” Gabler said.

“We hope.”

The APA permit would allow the construction of an 11-foot-wide dock similar to the one that served the Wood Hotel. Even without that permit, Gabler said, the dock would go in — but it would be only 8 feet wide.

The next big innovation at the Woods Inn, Gabler said, will be the introduction of luxury platform tents to the property.

In the meantime, the Woods Inn is continuing with its heavy schedule of weddings throughout the summer.

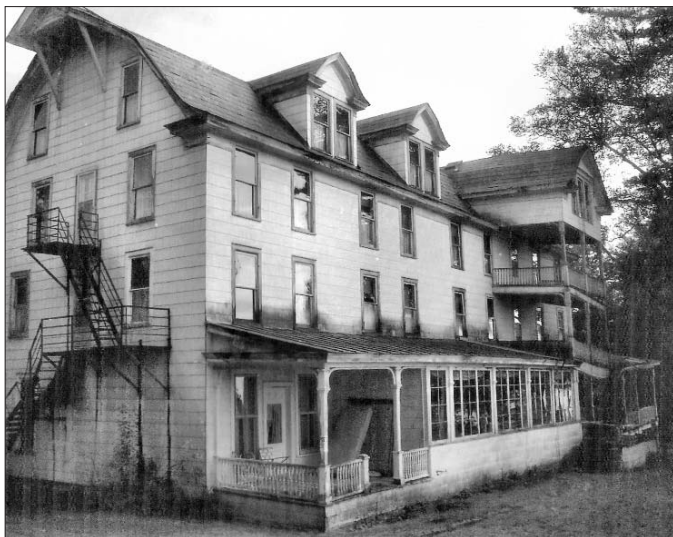
“We had 18 weddings last summer,” Gabler said. “We already have 19 booked for this summer, plus three family reunions.”

The really big event of the season will be the Syracuse Symphony gala, being held this July for the third year in a row at the Woods Inn.

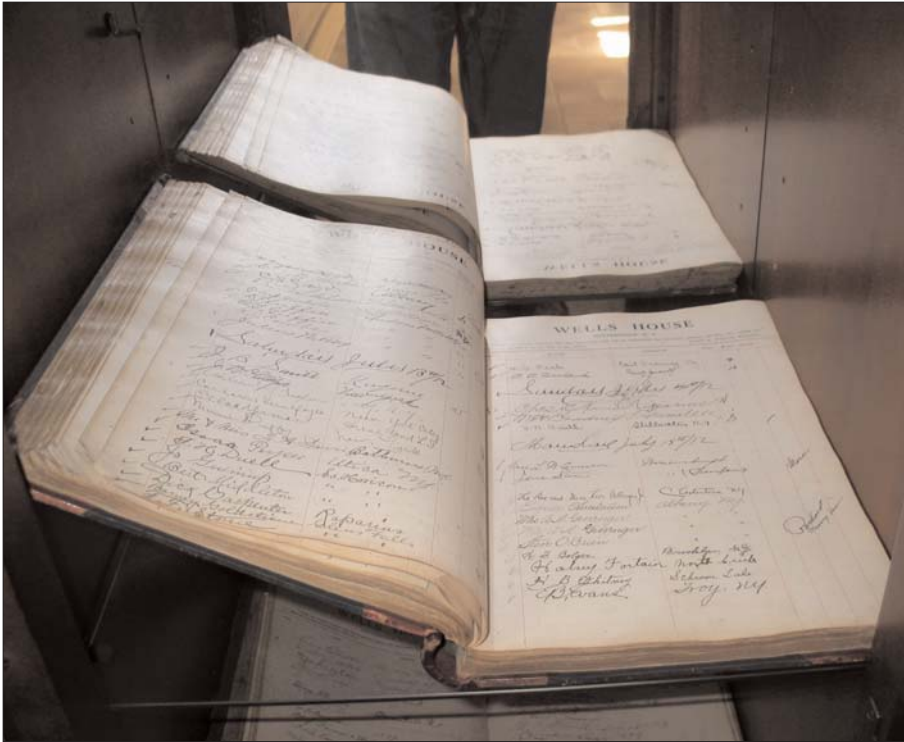
“The kitchen prepares for about five days for that,” said chef Tim Swecker.

Unlike the old Wood Hotel, the Woods Inn is open throughout the winter, but it will be closed until May 12 for spring cleaning and staff vacations.

More information on the Woods Inn, including menus from the dining room and tavern and photo tours of six guest rooms, can be found on its Web site at www.thewoodsinn.com.



At left, the Wood Hotel, 2003, before renovation. At right, the Woods Inn today.



The Wells House register, open to the pages for July 12, 13 and 14, 1912, is on display in a cabinet on the hotel's "history hallway."

Wells House, Pottersville

The second stop on our tour of restored Adirondack hotels is the Wells House, in Pottersville. Pottersville is about an hour and a half away from Inlet by car, and a little over an hour away from Lake Placid.

Originally known as the Pottersville Hotel, the Wells House was built in 1845 by Joseph Hotchkiss and Joshua Collar. Marcus Downs, who owned it from 1860 to 1869, enlarged the hotel to its present size.

The Wells House was best known during the 19th century as a midday rest stop for travelers on their way to Schroon Lake. Pottersville, situated at the south end of the lake, was just six miles north of the Riverside train station, the end of the line for the Adirondack Railroad from Saratoga.

Stagecoaches would pick up travelers at the Riverside station and bring them to Pottersville, where the hotel was "especially noted for the excellent dinners furnished during the summer season," according to

regional travel writer Seneca Ray Stoddard.

"After surrounding a good square meal," in Stoddard's words, travelers would be taken to the steamboat landing, about a mile away, for the final stage of their journey up Schroon Lake.

In the latter 19th century, Pottersville itself was considered an attractive destination. "The little village of Pottersville has picturesque enviroing," wrote E.R. Wallace in his famous "Descriptive Guide to the Adirondacks," while Stoddard noted that the Pottersville Hotel "affords pleasant accommodations to those who may prefer this to the northern extremity of [Schroon] lake."

The times, however, were a'changing.

When the Adirondack Northway plowed through the edge of the hamlet of Pottersville in 1967, just a few hundred feet from the hotel, its oddly engineered exit and entrance ramps nearly cut the community off from the outside world that was passing it by on the freeway.

Like Pottersville itself, the hotel standing at its central crossroads went into a decline. The last owner allowed the hotel's state licenses for lodging and meal preparation to lapse, leaving only the bar in operation while the neglected structure decayed around it.

The last straw for Paul and Shirley Bubar, who lived just down the road on the other side of the Northway underpass, was an Independence Day party thrown at the Wells House for a group of rowdy motorcycle enthusiasts.

"Don't get me wrong: I like bikes. In fact, I've had a few of my own," said Paul Bubar, 72, last Friday, "but when we drove by the Wells House that day, we saw one fellow doing something in public that should have been kept private.

"That was when I decided that something had to change."

William Morrissey, the last owner of the Wells House, died in a motorcycle accident in 1998 at the age of 50. The building stood empty for about five years until, in 2003, the Bubars mortgaged their restored 19th century home and bought the hotel.

"That was the cheapest part of this whole thing, I can tell you now," Bubar said.

The time and expense involved in renovating a three-story 19th century hotel and dance hall were far greater than the Bubars had anticipated, even though they had substantial experience in the restoration of historic structures.

"I worked at Word of Life for 40 years," Bubar said, referring to a large, residential retreat center in nearby Schroon Lake. "We had kids to put through college, and you don't get rich working at WOL, so we got into buying and renovating old houses to resell."

Besides their hands-on familiarity with historic home restoration, Shirley Bubar brought a dozen



Wells House, 1907.

years' experience working at the Sagamore, a historic resort on Lake George.

The Bubars were ready for the task of turning their old wreck of a hotel into a 21st century hostelry — but that didn't make it any less of a challenge.

"Shirley VanDerwarker, one of the daughters of the A.B. Barlettas, who owned the hotel in the 1950s, lives just across the street," Shirley Bubar said.

"We invited Shirley to walk through the hotel with us shortly after we bought it. She had watched it go down, down, down, but when she saw it that day, she just cried.

"I didn't know it had gotten so bad," she said," according to Mrs. Bubar.

An enormous amount of work had to go into restoring and re-opening the Wells House as a modern hotel.

The first step was to repair and insulate the roof to prevent further interior water damage and to cut down on the enormous heating bills.

"We had my brother living in the building during the renovation, part-

ly to keep it secure," Shirley Bubar said. "As soon as we got that insulation in, my brother said, the furnace started running a third as much as it had before."

The Bubars faced many decisions along the way about maintaining the historic authenticity of the Wells House while also transforming it into

a hotel in which modern-day travelers would want to spend the night.

The hotel's 16 original rooms had to be cut down to 10, and each enlarged room had to have a bathroom of its own. That reconfiguration eliminated the Wells House from its eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places, said Paul Bubar.

"But could you imagine a modern-day hotel guest sitting in the bathroom while another guest was pounding on the door from the hallway to get in?" he asked rhetorically.

All 10 guest rooms were individually decorated by Shirley Bubar, with help from her daughter- and every one of them has its own unique touch.

"You can do that sort of thing when you only have 10 rooms," Shirley Bubar said.

Every bed has a 15-inch memory-foam mattress, along with a footstool to help "height-challenged" guests climb into it.

Each room also has a telephone and flat-screen cable television, and the entire hotel building has wire-



The Wells House today.



Wellscroft under construction, 1903.

less, high-speed Internet access.

The addition of modern conveniences, however, did not keep the Bubars from preserving much of the appearance and atmosphere of the historic Wells House in the course of their renovation.

A 40-seat restaurant, Brookside Place, serves a full menu to Wells House guests, just as the Pottersville Hotel did more than a century ago.

In the Wells House reception lobby, now housed in the revamped front billiard room, a huge moose head named Mortimer hangs on the wall, as it has for more than 70 years.

The 19th century Wells House dance hall, now outfitted with the antique bar from the hotel's old tavern, has the distinct feel of Adirondack frontier hospitality to it. Though no alcohol is served, the converted coffee house still offers live entertainment to travelers and locals alike on the weekends.

Topping off the historic restoration, the Bubars have even managed to staff the hotel in a historic manner. Manning the coffeehouse bar ever since it re-opened on Oct. 16 is Victoria VanDerwarker, great-granddaughter of 1950s-era Wells House

owners the A.B. Barlettas.

Capping off the hotel's success, its upgrading of the environment at Pottersville's historic crossroads has encouraged the renovation and adaptive re-use of another vacant business building just across the street, where 11 different antique and home decor dealers have opened a joint venture called The Stagecoach.

"Things are looking up for Pottersville," said Paul Bubar, "just like we'd hoped. You'll see more of the same in the next few years, I guarantee it."

The Wells House Web site at www.thewellshouseny.com offers more information on the historic inn, rescued from the brink of oblivion by the Bubars, including individual looks at all 10 of its guest rooms.

Wellscroft Lodge, Upper Jay

The third and final stop on our tour of restored Adirondack hostleries is storied Wellscroft Lodge, in Upper Jay. Upper Jay is a little over an hour away from Pottersville by car, or about half an hour from Lake Placid.

Wellscroft was built in 1903 by a wealthy young Saginaw, Mich. couple whose parents hailed from Keeseville and Upper Jay. It was planned as a self-sufficient summer retreat, complete with two reservoirs, a small boating pond, a hydro-electric generator, and its own fire engine.

Not only did the caretaker have his own two-story house on the prop-



Wellscroft's recovery begins, 1999

erty — so did the kids. Wellscroft artisans assembled a small-scale, six-room playhouse for the owners' children, built from a mail-order kit, after the couple's two daughters were born.

The exteriors of all the buildings on the Wellscroft property were designed in the Tudor Revival style, typified by its massive chimneys, its steep-pitched, cross-gabled roofs, the stone and decorative half-timbering on its facades, and its narrow, diamond-paned windows. According to Adirondack Architectural Heritage, Wellscroft represents a kind of high water mark for the Tudor Revival style in America.

The interior of the main house was built along the lines encouraged by the Arts and Crafts movement, which was given currency in America by Gustav Stickley's influential design magazine, *The Craftsman*. Typical Arts and Crafts elements of Wellscroft's interior construction include the liberal use of wood in floors and decorative trim, beamed ceilings, wainscoting, fireside nooks, window seats, and built-in cabinets.

Wallis Craig Smith and his wife, Jean Wadham Wells Smith, summered at Wellscroft until the beginning of World War II, when Lake Placid's Lamb Lumber Company purchased the estate.

In the 1950s and early Sixties, Wellscroft was operated by a New Jersey duo as a mountain resort.

In 1963, Hovercraft inventor Charles Fletcher bought Wellscroft, but did little with it.

The brief tenure of Diane Saracino, owner from July 1993 until the fall of 1997, marked the beginning of what was nearly the end of Wellscroft. Having mortgaged the property beyond her ability to pay, Saracino abruptly fled one night, leaving behind not only busi-



Wellscroft today.

ness papers and children's effects, but food in the refrigerator and supper on the table.

Between late 1997 and April 1999, when Wellscroft was finally rescued by its new owners, the main house was systematically looted and vandalized.

That did not, however, deter Randy and Linda Stanley, of Saranac Inn, from buying the place.

"Our families, our friends, they all tried to persuade us not to do it," Linda Stanley said in 2002, three years after Wellscroft's renovation had begun, "but it's well worth it — it's an amazing old home. To really appreciate it, you had to see what was *here*, and not what *wasn't* here."

Today, the restoration of Wellscroft's interior is complete. From the Stickley furnishings in the parlor, to the hand-painted mural surrounding the game room's billiard table, to the authentic William Morris wallpaper in the seven guest rooms, the Stanleys have done an amazing job of bringing back to life

a genuine historic treasure on the slope of Ebenezer Mountain — and the view from Wellscroft across the Au Sable River valley to the Jay Range is something that just has to be experienced.

Out on the grounds, the Stanleys have rebuilt the old caretaker's house, burned in a fire during the Saracino tenure. The gazebo overlooking Wellscroft's private little lake has been given a new roof, and one of the Stanley sons has been busy building a new dam to restore the lake itself.

Linda Stanley has constructed a new formal garden around the spot where Jean Wells' fountain once watered the estate's historic garden.

"When this comes into bloom," Stanley said last week, "this is going to be the best spot on the property."

For more information about Wellscroft, visit the B&B's Web site at www.wellscroftlodge.com. There you will find photos of the entire house, as well as information about booking your stay at this historic Adirondack retreat.