

History of the Russell/Scott/Stevens Camp on Eagle Lake

Writing up a history of this camp has been no easy feat. Although it is still often referred to as "The Russell Place", the Russell's being long time owners, I have not been able to find many people who are familiar with the history of the camp. (I'm sure that after reading this, someone will come forward who knows a lot more than I have found out. If so, please let me know!) I went up to Elizabethtown in 1990 to research the deeds and discovered much that was new to me, while at the same time, leaving much unanswered. Although I could trace the history of the land tracts back to the 1880's, the property I own today didn't begin to emerge with its' current boundaries until the 1890's.

On August 24, 1898, George Lansing from Albany, NY bought a tract of land along the north shore of Long Pond, as Eagle Lake was then known. The sellers were Charles C. Weaver and William W. Fisher, both were farmers from Glenville, NY, which is near Schenectady. Mr. Lansing had previously (October 5, 1891) bought another tract of land which lay directly to the north of the lake lot. (The sellers in this case were Alexander and Polly Hunter, who were farmers in Crown Point.) Thus the area of property that the camp was built on was formed under one owner.

The Lansing's owned the land until January 2, 1935, when Benjamin Hunter bought it. The deed mentions that, at this time, the land to the east (the area now known as "the beech", and under state ownership) was owned by the Crown Point Iron Company, while the land to the north was owned by the American Steel and Wire Company. It is clear that some sort of mining-related process was practiced on the property at some point, as there are three charcoal pits still visible up behind the house and charcoal can be found everywhere around the house itself.

Ben Hunter didn't hold onto the property for long, as he sold it on March 29, 1935, to Wilbur and Mary Russell of New York City. Mr. Russell came from Crown Point and many of his family members still live there today. He died in 1953 and his wife remarried, becoming Mary Russell Scott. Mary's second husband, Ed Scott, died a few years before she sold the place to me on September 12, 1979. Her failing health was the cause of this sale.

Perhaps the most frustrating part of trying to trace the history of the camp is my inability to discover exactly when the house was built. No one seems to know who built it or when. The most logical assumption would be that the Lansing's built it sometime in the early 1900's, although Louise Russell believes that Ben Hunter built it. If anyone reading this history has any information about this, I would greatly appreciate hearing it in order to accurately complete the record.

As far as I can ascertain, the camp started out as a small, 1 1/2-story non-winterized cabin with two rooms each downstairs (the kitchen and living room) and upstairs (the bedrooms). (See Figure #1) This original section is now the West Side of the house. When going in the front door, the kitchen was on the right. The hole (now covered) where the chimney for the old wood stove went through the ceiling and roof can still be seen today.

At some point, an addition was built on the East Side of the original cabin, which for reasons unknown to me, was offset from the first part. The two sections were joined downstairs by a doorway, and upstairs not at all (See Figure #2). This addition, according to Louise Russell, was built before Mary and Wilbur owned it. The downstairs part of the addition became the kitchen, and the old kitchen became a room that was used to store china and glasses, but was useless for much else because it was such a thoroughfare for foot traffic from the new kitchen to the living room.

According to Bruce Russell, who is Mary and Wilbur's nephew and who currently lives in Crown Point, the layout of the house was quite impractical. First of all, the top floors of the two houses adjoined, but were not open to each other. This meant that to go from the in the addition, to the bedrooms in the original part, one had to go down stairs, cross through the house, and up the stairs in the original section. Not only that, but the staircase in the addition, was located directly in the middle of the rooms, the effectively dividing the room in two. (It should be noted that I don't know when the porch, which wrapped around three sides of the house, was added, although it would probably be safe to assume that it was there from the start.)

Bruce Russell told me that when he bought the place, they moved the staircase over to the West End of the addition so that the rooms were more usable. (See Figure #3) One can still see the fingerprints of the person who closed up the hole in the upstairs floor left by the original staircase.

In later years, Mary and Ed Scott had a bathroom built on to the house in back on the North Side, See Figure #3). The bathroom contains a toilet, bathtub/shower, sink, and hot water heater. The conveniences of modern plumbing must have been a joy for them, for up until that time the only options were the use of the outhouse or chamberpots, which could be found in each bedroom. (In fact, I have been told by former guests of Mary's that even after the bathroom was built it was a rule of the household that once everyone had gone to bed and all the lights had been extinguished, no one could get up and go downstairs to the bathroom. If the need arose, the chamberpots were to be used! The chamberpots, by the way, are still scattered about the house today, and the old potty-chair that used to house one of them is now serving as one of our living room chairs.)

This was the configuration of the house when I bought it in 1979. Along with the house came many stories not only about Mary, who had survived Ed by a number of years, but also about experiences people had had while guests there. My Uncle Bob Martin, who was born in Crown Point, tells stories of setting up cots and sleeping overnight in the boathouse. The Pelton family spent many happy years as Mary's guest, and apparently did much of the house painting. There are still crayon drawings on the windowsills upstairs, which recall the visits of various children. The chipmunks Mary used to feed by hand while having breakfast on the porch still came around for the first few years I had the place, and the white, dotted Swiss curtains Mary had made and hung in the windows attested to the love she had for it. I was also told that she used to heat the irons on the wood stove in order to iron her cotton sheets, and, in fact, I have never felt sheets so smooth and soft.

I had come up to the lake with my family since I was a baby, since my grandmother (Dorothy Pond Knauss) was a native of Crown Point and she had inherited her father's (Freeman Pond's) camp on the lake. My parents loved the lake so much that when Lily Cowan's place came up for sale, they bought it and we then came to our own place instead of Grandpa and Grandma Knauss's. As children, my siblings and I were not invited often to Mary's house, although I was just as happy to not go over. The reason for this was that the house, although gleaming white on the outside, was incredibly dark on the inside. While relatively small and cozy, this darkness lent it an aspect of scariness that really got to me when I was young. The other thing I remember most about the place was the fact that Mary had an unbelievable collection of Perry Mason murder mysteries in her bookshelves, all of which I wanted to, and none of which I got to read. (One of the first things I did when I bought the place was check out those books! Unfortunately, a large number of them had mildew and had to be thrown out.)

As much of the house was in disrepair when I bought it, I decided to make some major changes when renovating. One of my main goals, was to lighten the rooms, for it really was unbelievably dark inside, due to years of exposure to wood smoke and kerosene smoke from lamps. (That gloominess was not

just a figment of my childhood imagination after all!) Some windows were added, which helped, but the addition of four skylights, (one for each bedroom upstairs and one for the living room downstairs) are what really made the difference. There are very few areas now, which don't receive, allot of light, even on cloudy days.

I also wanted to have a toilet upstairs, but this was impossible with the house configured the way it was (i.e. the fact that the east bedroom did not directly connect with the other two bedrooms). That meant that the two upstairs house halves had to be opened to each other. By doing so, a space for a small bathroom and connecting hallway would be created. The only practical solution to the problem was to raise the roof and incorporate the East Side of the porch into the house, thus providing the floor for the upstairs hallway and new bathroom.

I also decided that since the living room fireplace and floor needed rebuilding, I would enlarge that room at the same by incorporating the west part of the porch into the house itself. A door was cut in the wall at the bottom of the living room stairs in order to provide easier access to them. Additionally, the kitchen staircase was eliminated entirely. The hole left in the ceiling was boarded up, thus providing the foundation for three closets upstairs. One unusual touch was the insertion of a door on the second floor in the east bedroom, which opens out into thin air (i.e. there is no balcony outside it). This door has been the object of much conversation, by visitors over the years. The reason for it was a practical one, however - we couldn't get the large mattress up the stairs, so we needed a door for access! Figure #4 shows the house after all of the renovations were completed.

From the outside, the house looks much like it did when Mary owned it. It still retains its' bright, airy character, although this is now a characteristic of the interior as well. My husband, Gordon Barnhart (whom I met after the renovations were complete), and I decided to repaint the house a light gray. The tool shed was replaced with a new one, with an additional storage shed to the west of the house. The outhouse and wood shed are still standing with no help from us, I'm afraid! In fact, Mary had so much stovewood split and stacked that we are still using the wood to this day. (This, of course is an indication of how little we use the wood stove.)

Other new touches include screening-in on side of the porch, the addition of cupboards in the kitchen, gas lights in the kitchen and bathrooms, and Alladin mantle lamps. We now use liquid paraffin in the lamps instead of kerosene, as it is cleaner burning and has fewer noxious fumes. This, of course means that the new wood in the house will not achieve the dark brown color the old wood has, but in this way the history of the house will still be visible for a long time to come. Perhaps my favorite addition, though, is the small hurdy-gurdies that we have attached to the walls next to the beds and in the upstairs bathroom. When the household goes to bed, we crank our music boxes to each other as a special kind of good-night.

Written by Janie Stevens at Eagle Lake
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