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COMMUNITY

Spillian's eclectic mission in Fleischmanns

by PAUL SMART on Jul 18, 2014 • 6:30 am

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(Photos by Dion Ogust)

The front porch at Spillian, the old Fleischmanns family mansion on the side of the high ridge overlooking the village that took the family's name a century ago, signals a quieter view of the surrounding Catskills. At one time, new owners and hosts of what's now a Retreat Center and Inn, Leigh Melander and Mark Somerfield point out, one could see down into what had once been Griffin's Corners from here. Moreover, the hillside was home to nearly a dozen similar country mansions and cottages for all the members of the Cincinnati-based brewing and yeast-producing family, as well as their many cultured friends and a number of sponsored artists.

Enter the 1880s home and one enters a time when summers were spent with the conductor of the Metropolitan Opera trilling away at a grand piano after having walked down a bridle path from his nearby home. Later, Gertrude Berg



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— one of radio's pioneers as Molly Goldberg — provided skits for the guests in the hotel her parents later made of the mansion.

There's a welcoming fireplace nestled below a grand staircase. Soft breezes blow across the large rooms, including a dining table set for 18 and a breakfast room in the lower part of a rounded tower. The furnishings are period but not fussy. And everywhere one looks the 130 year old wainscoting is subtly painted with flowers and soft mountain vistas.



"We closed on it a year ago September and then spent a lot of time in the winter asking ourselves, 'What have we done?'" says Melander, a Ph.D. in cultural mythology and psychology. "But the place was structurally sound and had been maintained with everything intact from when the Fleischmanns were here. We put in

what was needed, from copper flashing to the right love and care."

An older gentleman plays old standards on the grand as we speak; the 10 bedrooms upstairs are being cleaned from the mythology conference that's just left so the fellows of the Joseph Campbell Institute, based in California, can feel at home when they arrive in a few hours.

Melander explains how she and Somerfield, a theater set designer and lighting expert, had both originated from central Pennsylvania, spent time in California, ended up based in the "Lost Horizon" community of Ojai, but then found themselves drawn to the Catskills because of what she termed its "landscape made up of equal parts memory and imagination." They landed in nearby Andes, where the two still live, and started looking for a large place where they could run retreats and an inn.

Yes, they agree, what they were after was something more akin to what Byrdcliffe was when the Whiteheads moved from California to create a special place where creativity could thrive alongside intellectualism. And yes, they had heard about the great Catskills estates such as the Gould's Furlough Lodge, the 2,000 acre Gerry Estate now being redeveloped by an Asian hotel conglomerate, The Erpf mansion and its Hampton Palace-like maze, and early opera star Amelita Galli-Gurci's, built 40 years after Spillian singular mansion just up the hill.

The talk is an eclectic mix of historical and cultural anecdotes, grand dreams and psychological observations, plus plenty of renovation details as we wander the spectacular mansion. Both owners stress the two directions they're working simultaneously: to appreciate the natural and historically cultural, on the one hand, and provide for creative play on the other. Just as the Fleischmanns did, or the Bergs...or the Talmudic scholars who came to the hotel following the horrors of World War II.

"The place has many layers," Melander says. "The New York New Jersey Trail

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Conference is helping us rebuild the property's trails. We're developing new partnerships and relationships around the region, including the Voice Festival."

Even the Catskill Watershed Corporation, which helped obtain loan funds to allow the couple to get Spillian up and running, came to their rescue and helped push the nearby Fleischmanns sewer system across Route 28 to them, when septic problems reared their head.

"It's been scary and exhausting but also really, really fun, all of this," Melander says to her partner's approval. "We feel honored to be stewards of this site's history. And here we are just starting.

Upstairs, each bedroom has old books appropriate to various themes, along with collections of works about the region...and open notebooks for people to play in. Televisions and electronics are not in sight. Instead, there are rocking chairs on the front porch...and art materials for guests to play with.

Yes, Melander and Somerfeld said, most of their guests come in groups, drawn by the retreat aspects of what Spillian is offering. And yet overnight visitors drawn by nearby Belleayre Mountain also kept them in business all winter.

So what does the home's name mean?

No, it isn't of the Fleischmanns vintage...

"Spillian is an old English word that means 'to play, to jest, or to revel,'" Melander explains. "It's also the root of my mother's maiden name. Given her proclivity for frivolity, it all seems to be in the genes!" ++

For further information, visit www.spillian.com.

Tags: Fleischmanns, Inn, Shandaken, Spillian

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Jul 25, 2014

Thanks so much for such a wonderful article! It was delightful to meet you both, Paul and Dion, and we so appreciate the support from our regional media. Thank you!

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