

A visit to Chazy's Alice T.

# Miner Museum

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Until this week, the temperature hadn't risen above freezing for more than a month.

Not once.

In fact, there were several strings of days during that period when the thermometer never broke the Fahrenheit zero mark.

When it's just too cold for all but the hardiest souls to do much outdoors, it's time to explore indoor attractions in the North Country.

Though most of the museums in the Adirondacks — including the superb Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake — are closed for the winter, we found several that are not only open but well worth visiting.

One of them is the Alice T. Miner Museum, in Chazy, where we dropped in last weekend.

Later this winter, perhaps, we'll go on more such trips in different directions, looking for ways to enjoy the North Country's cultural and historic resources without freezing to death.

**IT'S NEARLY** impossible to

tell the story of the Miner Museum without first telling the story of the Miners themselves.

William H. Miner was born in 1862 in the small town of Juneau, in southeastern Wisconsin. Will's mother died when he was 4 years old, and his father passed 7 years later. The 11-year-old orphan went to live on a Chazy farm with his father's brother, John, and his aunt Huldah.

Will left Chazy when he turned 18, taking an apprenticeship as a railroad machinist in

Indiana. He advanced rapidly. Eleven years after entering his trade, in 1891, Miner perfected an automatic train-car coupler from a version invented 4 years earlier by Eli Janney. Within 3 years Miner was manufacturing the coupler himself in Chicago. By 1898 Miner's device was in use on 15,000 railway cars, and his fortune was made.

While building his business, Will Miner met and married Alice Trainer, a Chicago waitress less than a year younger than he was.

Like Miner, Trainer was an orphan. She had come to Chicago in 1882 at the age of 19 from her native Goderich, a small town on the shore of Lake Huron in southern Ontario. Thirteen years later, at the age of 31, she became Alice T. Miner.

The couple lived in Chicago for 8 years. Will and Alice had only one child, born during that



period; Will Jr. died when he was just 14 days old. Frederick G. Smith, curator of the museum Alice Miner created in later years, speculates that the couple's 1903 move to Chazy, hometown of Will's youth, may have been driven in some way by the infant's death.

**WHEN THE** Miners came to Chazy they were already wealthy — and they had already established a habit of philanthropy. In Chicago, the Miners had funded the construction of a hall at the city's Art Institute. In Chazy they focused on more humble levels of education, building the Chazy Rural Central School in 1916 at their personal expense for about \$2 million — in 2003 dollars, close to \$34 million.

Along with a basic education, “that school gave many local farm boys and girls their first exposure to electricity and indoor plumbing,” Smith said.

The Miners became known for their generosity throughout Chazy and the North Country. Miner money paid for the original Physicians Hospital in Plattsburgh, built housing for local workers and constructed sidewalks throughout Chazy.

The Miners even had their own electric power system constructed — and until 1947 Chazy residents could plug into that grid free of charge (no pun intended).

**THE MINERS'** mansion in



Frederick G. Smith, director and curator of the Alice T. Miner Museum in Chazy, shows a corner cabinet in the museum's kitchen, filled with collectible bottles.

Chicago had been large and tastefully furnished, and so was their North Country home, Heart's Delight, a 47-room “cottage” in Chazy. According to Smith, friends noted that the home reflected Alice Miner's excellent taste in household furnishings.

That sensibility may have led several of Miner's friends from Chicago to bring her a box of china and porcelain collectibles on a 1911 visit to Chazy. That gift, the contents of which are now housed in the ballroom of the Miner Museum, may have been the spark that lit Alice's fire for collecting Colonial Revival furniture and housewares, to which the museum bearing her name was later dedicated.

Another source of Alice's

inspiration may have come from her waitressing days in Chicago. In 1893, two years before the Miners' wedding, the famous Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago. One of its prominent features was its Colonial Revival emphasis, later seen as a turning point in the style's popularity.

Whatever the source of Alice Miner's inspiration, in 1916 the couple bought a three-story house at 9618 Main Street, Chazy, that would eventually become the home for her Colonial Revival collection.

Originally built in 1810, a third floor had been added to the stone structure in 1824 to accommodate the local Masonic lodge.

The Miners completely reconstructed the interior of the

house around 1920, nearly doubling the square footage with an extension to the rear. Concrete floors and walls two feet thick were incorporated into all three stories, hallmarks of Miner buildings in the area, which were designed to be fireproof.

By 1924 the building was ready to open as Alice's very own museum. She is said to have placed every display in the

museum herself, starting with the kitchen, which was originally called the Plymouth Room.

"The quintessential Colonial Revival kitchen (of the 1860s) followed a formula," Smith wrote in a 1996 article on Alice for *The Antiquarian*. "All 'correct' restorations shared five common pieces: a table in the center of the room, some kind

of spinning wheel, a firearm at the fireplace, a cradle, and a corner cupboard.

"Alice Miner's Plymouth Room fits that formula."

The Colonial Revival movement, Smith tells visitors to the Miner Museum, was an after-product of the turmoil of the Civil War.

"It was a hearkening back to simpler, pre-industrial times," Smith explained.

The "Colonial" part of the Colonial Revival movement, Smith says, wasn't restricted to the pre-Revolutionary period.

"It was thought of as, really, anything predating that time," he said — that is, anything from the 1860s and before.

That eclecticism is reflected in both the architecture of the Miner Museum and in its collections — all 15 rooms' worth.

**THE TOUR** starts in the low-ceilinged kitchen, where curator Smith gives visitors a 15-minute history of the Miners, the building and the creation of Alice's collection.

Smith pays particular attention to the person of Alice Miner herself, pointing out how remarkable it was for someone like her, in the mid-1920s, to start her own museum.

"When the museum opened in 1924, it was very much a man's world," Smith said when we visited last weekend. "Women had just won the vote four years before.

"On top of that, Alice was 61



Smith displays a reversible Cortland jacquard coverlet, one of the household collectibles gathered by Alice T. Miner for her Chazy museum.

that year, which was considered 'old' for the time.

"Add to that the fact that what you see in the museum is essentially what she collected herself," Smith said, "and you see that Alice must have been quite an extraordinary person."

Smith, 62, has immersed himself in the Miner Collection since taking over as curator in 1994. Formerly a college administrator — his last position was as vice president for academic affairs at Clinton Community College — he was hired by the Miner Museum board as part of the institution's efforts to professionalize the management of "Alice's little thing," as some called it.

Will Miner died in 1930, the eighth wealthiest man in the country at the time, according to Smith, leaving Alice a widow. She devoted the next 20 years of her life to building and maintaining her museum's collections. At 86, she had created a fabulous cultural legacy to leave to Chazy.

"One of the terrible things about this place is that they never did anything with it," Smith remarked on the way the museum was kept between Alice's death in 1950 and his hiring 44 years later.

"And one of the wonderful things is, they never did anything with it," he added, smiling.

After Alice's death the Miner Museum was maintained, as it was, without any damaging

"renovation" projects being inflicted upon it. The collections housed in the museum today are still, essentially, those built up by Alice Miner, and most of them are still placed as she herself placed them during the quarter century she devoted to the institution.

**A VISIT** to the Alice T. Miner Museum is well worth the trip.

The museum is closed from Dec. 23 through the end of January each winter, and on public holidays, but for the rest of the year it is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. for guided tours.

"We only admit guests for guided tours," Smith emphasized. "With such a large place, and the collection scattered over three floors, that's really necessary, for security rea-

sons."

Smith's 1-1/2 hour guided tours start at 10 a.m., 11:30 a.m., 1 p.m. and 2:30 p.m.

Admission is \$3 for adults, \$2 for those 62 years and older, \$1 for students, and free for school groups.

Groups who want to take the tour should call Smith at (518) 846-7336 or e-mail him at [minermuseum@westelcom.com](mailto:minermuseum@westelcom.com).

Visitors to the museum traveling on the Adirondack Northway (I-87) should take exit 41, going east to Chazy. At Route 9 turn right onto Main Street and travel half a mile to the museum, on your left, across from the Stewart's Shops convenience market. Parking is available on the street.



Alice Miner's "curiosity" collection, on display in a corner of the attic, features this box full of Egyptian tomb relics, including a mummified falcon (left), a mummified hand (upper left) and a mummified foot (upper right).