PHOTOS BY NANCY-E BATTAGLIA

Michael Frenette has been restoring Great Camp Santanoni for nearly twenty years.

Rebuilding the past

■ *Tupper Lake native Michael Frenette devotes his life and his woodworking skills to meticulously restoring Great Camp Santanoni in Newcomb.*

By Alan Wechsler

On a hot, sunny July day, Michael Frenette had a paintbrush in one hand and a can of stain in the other. He was finishing some new logs he had installed at the Artist's Cabin at Santanoni, the state-owned Great Camp in Newcomb, when a stranger wandered up.

"Want some advice? I'm here," the man said by way of a greeting. He revealed that he was a retired contractor from Syracuse and could fix anything. It was hard to tell if he was joking.

Frenette, who is fifty-nine, turned toward the gentleman. Frenette was nattily dressed (at least by wilderness standards) in slacks, a green long-sleeve shirt and matching cap, and a wool vest covered with wood shavings. He took a moment to consider his response, as if mulling over levels of causticity.

Finally, he said: "I'm not really good at taking advice."

If you go to Santanoni Preserve in the summertime, you stand a good chance of seeing Frenette, the builder-in-residence at one of New York State's most famous Adirondack Great Camps. Last summer marked the master carpenter's nineteenth year helping to restore and preserve the historic site, which contains about forty buildings.

Built before the turn of the last century, Santanoni is one of the few examples of Great Camp-style architecture that is open to the public. Visitors are welcome to bike, walk, or ride horses along the five miles of dirt road from the parking lot to the site, located on the shores of Newcomb Lake, with sterling views of its namesake mountain to the north. The public can camp on the lakeshore, paddle the water on borrowed boats, and tour the multiple buildings of this stately structure on a guided tour.

But don't presume to tell Frenette how to do his job. There is likely no one else alive who knows more about how Santanoni was put together—and how to get it back to the way it was.

In a way, both Santanoni and Frenette are two of a kind. Both have returned from an almost-death to live a second life.

Santanoni was built by Robert Pruyn, a prominent Albany banker, in the late 1890s. It was one of dozens of regal "camps" built in the Adirondacks by people with names like Guggenheim, Lehman, and Carnegie. Even within this small group of magnificent structures, Santanoni stood alone—a Japanese-influenced series of connected structures, built with logs from 1,500 spruce trees, and covered by a single, overhanging roof. From the air, the pagoda-like complex looks like a phoenix.

The property had its own farm, a full complement of support staff, and at one time attracted Theodore Roosevelt and other luminaries of that era. Today, it's recognized as a National Historic Landmark and protected by the state. But its future wasn't always so certain.

In 1972, the thirteen-thousand-acre estate was sold to the Nature Conservancy and then to New York State. But what to do with the buildings? The state wanted the land to revert to wilderness. In that case, the Great Camp would have to come down.

For the next twenty years, the buildings were left to decay while bureaucrats discussed their fate. As more people visited the place, a groundswell of support grew to save Santanoni. By then it was almost too late. Walls had rotted. Ceilings had collapsed. Part of the sweeping lakeside porch—there is about as much veranda as there is interior space—had fallen in. Fortunately, the wide porches and overhanging roof helped protect the buildings themselves from moisture damage. But there was still a lot to do.

In the mid-1990s, the fledgling Adirondack Architectural Heritage (AARCH) began working with the Town of Newcomb and the state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to try to save the site.

"This place was falling apart around the ears," said Steven Engelhart, executive director of AARCH. "The critical part had to do with framing and logwork; we had to find someone who could do that work."

Enter Frenette, a Tupper Lake native. His association with Santanoni began twenty years ago, but he's been interested in the woods all his life. He grew up camping and cross-country skiing and attended Paul Smith's College for its forestry program in the mid-1970s. About that time, he built and lived in a small log cabin on the Raquette River and raised his own sled dogs. His friends called him Rondeau after the famous Adirondack hermit Noah John Rondeau.

In 1976, Frenette had had his own brush with oblivion. When he was nineteen years old, he

In winter, Santanoni is a popular destination for cross-country skiers.

suffered a massive seizure. He was diagnosed with a meningioma, a benign but dangerously located brain tumor that needed immediate removal. Doctors weren't sure he'd survive the operation, and if he did they expected him to lose the use of his legs, perhaps suffer even worse deprivation.

He defied expectations and made a near-complete recovery, though his skull still retains the scar—a hairless, indented crescent along the top of his head—and the surgery left him with some limited arm movement. After his recovery, Frenette decided not to return to Paul Smith's. He took a job running the backcountry interior outpost at Duck Hole for a summer and then moved to the station at Raquette Falls. He worked there for the next twelve years and spent some winters at the Lake Colden ranger outpost as well. He'd use his sled dogs to supply the cabin and patrol the trail from Lake Colden to Marcy Dam.

In his early thirties he developed an interest in woodworking, attending North Bennet Street School in Boston to learn furniture making and other skills. Eventually, he started a contracting business in Tupper Lake, building homes and doing other work, and taking time off to travel to exotic locations like Pakistan and Ecuador to hike and climb. For years, he dated a woman

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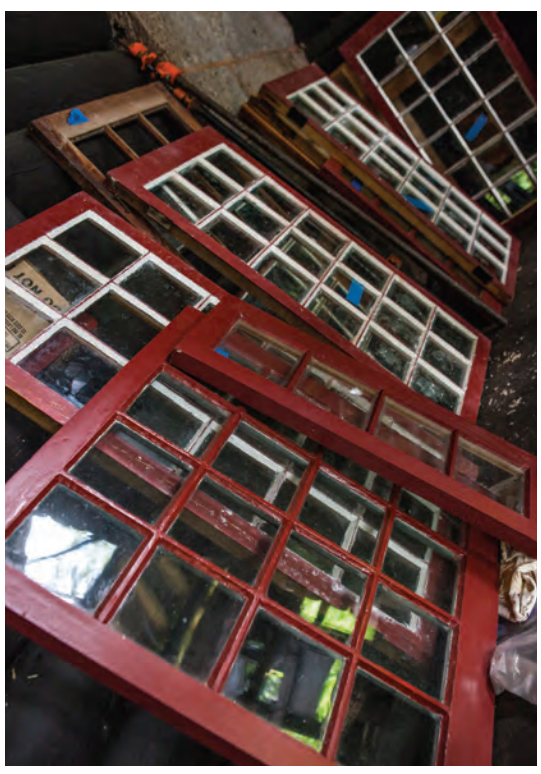
A huge stone fireplace dominates the great room in Santanoni's main building.



Restored windows on the porch.

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from England. In total, he's been to about thirty countries.

"I'm kind of a wandering soul," he said. His license plate says "Gnomadic."

He is also a master of wood. He knows the Latin word for all the trees in the forest. He once traveled to an international wood conference in China. For the past fifteen years, he's taught furniture making and woodworking to St. Lawrence University students out of his shop in Tupper Lake during the school's annual Adirondack Semester.

"I just learned a good, traditional approach about wood," he said. "How to join it, what makes it work, why it works; I can tell a lot about wood just by looking at it."

In 1996, he attended a course in Norway on wood restoration by the International Council of Monuments and Sites, which is dedicated to protect places of cultural heritage around the world. He was the single U.S. fellow, chosen from hundreds, and joining representatives from seventeen other countries. That's when he came to the attention of AARCH: the trip was reported in a local newspaper back home. Engelhart reached out to Frenette and invited him to join a volunteer day at Santanoni to repair the fallen porches. Frenette came but quickly found that it was not something that could be fixed in a day.

"It was literally porcupine s--- and rotten wood," he said. "I remember leaving and going, 'Oh my God, there's not a snowball's chance in hell of this being fixed.' I never thought I'd come back again."

In 1997, Engelhart made Frenette an offer he couldn't refuse: a position he called "builder-in-residence" at Santanoni. It was a chance for Frenette to save an architectural treasure while living in the woods for weeks at a time. Frenette jumped at the chance.

For the next nineteen summers, Frenette spent five days a week at Santanoni. He stayed in the former Artist Cabin, which is set up with a bed and stove, a hundred yards away from the main complex. For many of those years, his two aging border collies, Swix and Buddha, were his only roommates, although several AARCH summer interns stayed at the gatehouse at the preserve entrance and commuted in by bike each morning.

About $2 million has been spent on the restoration efforts, funded by the state and federal governments, plus money from Newcomb and AARCH. A quarter of that has been dedicated to projects worked on by Frenette.

"Michael has been hugely important to our overall successes there," said Engelhart. "In him, we found a person who was extremely talented, who could do the kind of work that was required at Santanoni, and who was willing to work within the unusual work conditions there. The caliber of the work has just been extraordinary."

Frenette's efforts require creativity, especially since he mainly works alone. He's used cables, pulley systems, and prusiks—a friction hitch employed by mountaineers—to lift logs weighing hundreds of pounds. He once upended a picnic table to work as a ramp to raise logs. He has also used hydraulic jacks, a scaffold crane (which he calls "a Michael Frenette secret weapon"), and a notched log "ladder" to raise logs inch by inch. He's used a chainsaw to cut joists, and a portable sawmill to cut lumber to the right size for porch decking. To him, it's less carpentry than it is triage, trying to save the buildings against time and the elements.

"This is some of the least creative work I do," he maintained. "I just put it back the way it was. The creative part is finding ways to put it back."

For his own historical amusement, he's made trips to the Adirondack Museum to look at archives on the construction of Santanoni. He's curious about the names of the anonymous builders who created this masterpiece.

PHOTOS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

ABOVE: A scrapbook at the Santanoni gatehouse includes photos of the Pruyn family.

LEFT: Michael Frenette says he's "basically living history now."

"The workers who built this—their names have been lost to history," he said. "But their skills are incredible. I appreciate it a lot more now."

Of course, Frenette is not the only one who has worked on the place. Over the years, contractors like Jameson General of Salem, Mercer Construction of Albany, the Town of Newcomb's Department of Public Works, and DEC staff have done foundation work, repointed chimneys, installed new roofs, and otherwise helped stabilize the building. Volunteers and interns have also contributed their share of sweat equity, and several architectural firms have provided support.

But much of the work over the years was Frenette's. Working alone or with a crew, he's reconstructed the boathouse (which now stores canoes and kayaks that visitors are welcome to use); restored the porches; added missing roof features, along with railings and steps; restored numerous outbuildings; and repaired the roof of the farm manager's cottage. Many of these projects took years to complete.

So what's next for Frenette and Santanoni? He's not sure how long he'll be there, or even how much is left to do. "Are we half done? That depends on how far the restoration goes," he said. "What's the next worst thing?"

After nineteen years, he is slowing down. In 2015, he suffered a minor stroke. Since then, his balance hasn't been quite the same, and he's had to cut back on his workload. But his passion for Santanoni has not diminished.

"I'm basically living history now," he said. "I've figured out how to put the place together." ■