



Byrdcliffe at Dusk

A local writer reflects on his nine summers spent at the famed artist's colony in Woodstock **By Randy Burgess**

Twice a month each summer, a small walking tour comes to a halt on the dirt road outside the cabin where I live at the Byrdcliffe Art Colony in Woodstock. A dozen or so persons with little maps in their hands listen as the guide speaks, gesturing now and then in my direction. I can't quite hear what she's saying, but I'm sure she's mentioning the name of my cabin, Quartette, and adding that like the rest of the colony, this low little building was built in 1903 or thereabouts and is therefore historic.

I am invisible behind my window, I know. And as I sit there, looking at all these people looking back at me but not seeing me, I find myself wondering about this veneration of an official past. I have lived at Byrdcliffe each summer for nine years, and it seems to me that not only myself but my neighbors, who like me have foolishly persisted in trying to be artists and writers, inhabit a reality undocumented by historians. It is a fragile reality, but alive — as beautifully ugly as a chicken-of-the-woods fungus growing on the bole of a tree. And you can't press a fungus into a history book without killing it.

Still, sometimes I wish I could hear what that tour guide is saying;

her audience always looks fascinated. And so recently I went to the library and checked out the only three books I know of on the topic of Byrdcliffe history, with the thought I might compare their views on what is important about this place with my own. Let us start by getting acquainted with, but not memorizing, the following facts:

Byrdcliffe began life in 1903 as an idealized "brotherhood of artists," occupying former farmland on a broad Catskill hilltop. The primary sponsor was an anxious, idle, and philandering Englishman named Ralph Whitehead. His family had gotten rich by making felt during the Industrial Revolution, but Whitehead revolted against the ugliness of the machine age; like many young people, he became a follower of John Ruskin and other idealists who believed that handcrafted weavings, furniture, houses, etc. offered a path to salvation. Today we call this the Arts and Crafts movement, and go to museums to look at furniture and other objects of the period. This includes furniture made at Byrdcliffe.

Whitehead was also controlling, and enough artists got fed up with his ways that the fledgling community soon fell apart. Even so, Whitehead and his wife, Jane Byrd McCall, kept the place open to artists on a seasonal basis for many decades; so did their youngest son, Peter. Upon his death in 1975, Peter bequeathed the property to its current owner, the nonprofit Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild of Craftsmen. And it is the Guild which today operates the main building, the Villetta Inn, as an arts colony during the summer, and which also rents Quartette and a handful of other cabins and houses to artists and writers.

Is there an essence to Byrdcliffe, an enduring connection from then to now? One of the three books in front of me, published in 2004 by Cornell University, asserts there is, in a back-jacket blurb that reads more like advertising than history: "Byrdcliffe was, and remains, a place of haunting beauty."

As a resident, I find this statement not so much untrue, as less than the whole truth. The colony is besieged by the mass industrialization opposed by Whitehead a century ago; he would have been appalled by sights we take for granted: the asphalt road slicing through the colony's heart, the plastic dumpsters like sentinels along that road, the indestructible plastic garbage that in spite of the dumpsters finds its way into the woods. Even below the terraces of Whitehead's mansion, White Pines, you can walk into the woods and find garbage blooming like an invasive species.

But what is most alarming is the decay that threatens Byrdcliffe. Of the 23 or so buildings remaining, many are in disrepair, with ungrouted chimneys, rotted sills, faltering foundations. The building most in need is also the most heavily used, the Villetta Inn. Historic architecture means little to an artist, compared to having a studio whose skylight doesn't leak when it rains. The Guild works nonstop to catch up with repairs and to sell Byrdcliffe to funders — but if it was hard to run a utopia in Whitehead's time, it is no less hard to find the money for an art colony today.

Even so, history preserves buildings better than it does the things that really matter to people. What drove the founders of the colony were ideals meant to remake society, but their attempt at revolution failed; and so what we talk about today is how pretty Byrdcliffe's furniture was. A few times in the winter I have stopped by the Villetta. Outside are snowdrifts, inside are cold rooms with chairs at odd angles. The building feels lonely. That is the feeling of history when all the people

continued on page 163

are gone.

People! There is my point of contact with history. From an essay by the historian Tom Wolf, in the 2004 Cornell collection: "Saturday night dances held in the art studio, where the community dressed up and went to party, were a social highlight of the colony. Metalworker Bertha Thompson wrote about the summer of 1904, 'The days were sacred to work — we did not intrude upon each other, but when late afternoon and evening came our exuberant spirits broke loose!' "

That's still what it's like in the summers today, no matter the problems with lack of funds. The Villetta Inn has a communal kitchen, and each night the artists cook together and gather on the porch to eat and joke and share the audacity of the creative life in a society that seldom rewards it. Bertha Thompson would fit right in, and so might even Whitehead, sitting shyly in a corner smiling to himself.

Those of us on the periphery form a looser community. Out along the rim of cabins, alone with ourselves, composing or writing or painting, we are that much closer to the seclusion, the peace, that Byrdcliffe enjoys in its new, shabbier state. Back in 1903, the hilltop was cleared land, resulting in "spectacular views down the mountain through miles of space," as Tom Wolf puts it. Since then the young woods have pressed in, creating an unkempt, unplanned, and deeply renewing nonarchitecture; a "peaceful living environment both close to and removed from the busy town of Woodstock... the feeling of being in a forest interior."

It is to this forest interior that I turn when my words run dry. Up Guardian Mountain I climb, seeking solitude, seeking something more. Jane Byrd McCall, Whitehead's partner in founding Byrdcliffe, was actually his second wife; his first, Marie, had shared none of his enthusiasms. After their divorce Marie wrote him a letter. In it she described what she thought was his character alone, yet the words she uses apply to all of us who fancy ourselves creative types: "You request too much, you long for something impossible, and therefore, you must be discontented with reality."

Byrdcliffe today is a remnant, a piece of luck. Like a beautiful old china plate, if it is dropped, as it so easily could be, it will be broken — lost not to the morgue of historical record, which has already catalogued it, but as a living refuge to those who stumble upon it and come here in this dying modern day to make art; art which will never be in a museum, never be written about a hundred years after our death, never even get us onto Oprah. The seeking of fame is futile, the desire to make meaning immortal. ●