



Valentino and Me

Our Adirondack love affairs



I'LL ADMIT IT—I'm prone to irrational crushes. No, not on people. I fall hard for the places I pass on road trip after road trip, year after year. With a six-million-acre beat, I spend a lot of time on lonely byways, usually a bit lost, my internal GPS calculating the next opportunity for coffee or a tank of gas. And on these solitary journeys—soundtracked by spotty radio reception—I'll develop an infatuation with a certain stretch of woods or carry on a longstanding flirtation with some half-stripped building. I've made eyes at some spots so many times that I start to think of them as mine.

One of the objects of my affection is the J & J Foss Lair Tavern, a rambling roadhouse in Bakers Mills. It looks endearingly rough around the edges, with a dancehall-size pavilion just waiting on a keg.

Foss Lair's rakish name is part of its appeal, a winking suggestion at something hidden and untamed. So I was a bit put out to learn that the handle wasn't chosen by a barkeep with a romantic bent. As so often happens in these hills and hollows, the name is simply a signpost for what has come before.

The tavern sits down the road from Oregon, a ghost town with a familiar Adirondack history. In the 1870s lumber baron Stephen Griffin had his wicked way with this stretch of valley alongside the East Branch of the Sacandaga, only to

abandon it once profits had dried up. Griffin's tannery burned in 1890 and the lumber and leather workers scattered. Then, around the turn of the century, perfume tycoon Richard Hudnut bought up the leavings—1,200 acres worth—to establish a private fiefdom.

Hudnut called his new domain Foxlair, envisioning a haven for the native wildlife. But he didn't trust the local creatures to fully appreci-

ate his benevolence. So he ordered his superintendent Willett Randall—also the breeder behind the region's famous Patch beagles (see "A Breed Apart," February 2014)—to carve out a first-class lair and stock it with one lucky kit. The brick-and-cement den was fit for a king, but its denizen was more like the princess in the tower—its outside run was fenced with iron bars.

Foxlair became a sprawling estate, with barns and pigeon cote, golf course and teahouse, crowned by an ornate "Big House." In *An Adirondack Archive: The Trail to Windover*, Elisabeth "Nan" Hudnut Clarkson—Richard's grandniece—describes the hilltop mansion as "an Adirondack stronghold furnished like a French chateau."

The chateau had an imperious mistress in Evelyn Hudnut, who sported around North Creek in her swanky carriage and harangued estate workers from atop a Sicilian donkey cart. Her haughty manner, along with her salty humor, became the talk of the town.

When Evelyn died in 1917, she was replaced by three-time divorcée Winifred deWolfe. As stylish—and shockingly modern—as the new Mrs. Hudnut was, she wouldn't become the star of the regional rumor mill. That honor went to Winifred's daughter, a Hollywood designer known as Natacha Rambova.

Rambova had made quite an impression in Hollywood, especially on silent-film heartthrob Rudolph Valentino. Valentino was so smitten that he ignored the year-long waiting period prescribed by his recent divorce and eloped with Rambova. They were married in Mexico in May of 1922.

The lovers' lark didn't end well. On their return to California, Valentino was nabbed on bigamy charges—later dismissed—and Rambova was exiled to Foxlair until the ugly chatter died down.

Clarkson writes that ardent telegrams from Valentino to his "babykins" flooded into North Creek (to the great amusement of the locals). And the juicy love letters were followed by the man himself, traveling through the countryside in a beard and dark goggles.

After their Adirondack idyll—swimming, golfing and, according to Rambova, besting an intruder in a thrilling game of cat-and-mouse—the couple

ESTATE PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE JOHNSBURG HISTORICAL SOCIETY. RAMBOVA AND VALENTINO PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Clockwise from above: Foxlair's summer gardens and North Cottage from the main house, in the town of Johnsbury. Natacha Rambova and Rudolph Valentino.

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returned to the spotlight. They were able to remarry the following spring and never returned to Foxlair.

Richard and Winifred also abandoned the place in 1923, trading their wilderness retreat for French Riviera society. In 1938, a decade after Richard's death, Winifred signed Foxlair over to the Police Athletic League of New York City, which ran a boys' camp before selling out to New York State in 1964. The Conservation Department burned the remaining buildings two years later. When guidebook author Barbara McMartin visited in the late 1970s, she saw only "tangled roots and rank new growth ... interwoven across the sweeping staircases and garden walls."

McMartin found more than I did on a field trip I took to Foxlair last fall. My search for the ruins dead-ended at a tumbled-down bridge somewhere on the old grounds. (At least I assume I was on the estate's grounds—I was even more lost than usual.)

But I did luck into a rendezvous with the Foxx Lair tavern, since I spotted the front door propped open as I motored by. Inside, it's your standard-issue neighborhood bar, a dimly lit den fitted out with pool and shuffleboard tables. I found 70-year-old John Monroe there, readying the place for reopening after a short shutdown. "I've been open for 39 years," he said. "I want to make it to 40."

A wall of snapshots chronicles those four decades (and their fashions): a guy in a giant cowboy hat, a crew picking at banjos, a smiling face framed by a toilet seat. But it hit me, looking at all the good times—these will never be my stories. Despite all my drive-by fantasies, I'll always be on the outside looking in.

Romances can have trouble living up to expectations. The daughter of Foxlair's superintendent during the "Valentino summer" once let Nan Clarkson in on a not-so-pretty truth: the lovers were painfully mismatched, with Valentino coming off as "uncouth" beside the chic Rambova. And the movie star's table manners made mealtimes a disaster, as everyone endeavored "not to notice his incredible sound effects." The couple would divorce in 1929. 🍷

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