



May 4, 6:30 a.m. from the series "Shinnecock," part of the study "spacetime." Size variable, color pigment print by Hope Sandrow.

# Hidden Lodge Brought Out of the Shadows

A walk in the woods brings a welcome surprise for artist

By Mary Cummings

Artist Hope Sandrow had no idea as she walked the woods near her home in Shinnecock Hills on March 28, 2006, that she was on a path to discovery. As she prepared to photograph the rise of that evening's full moon for a series of sunset-moonrise, moonset-sunrise images intended as explorations of the mysteries of creation, she realized that she was not alone. "I came upon this white bird," said Ms. Sandrow during a recent interview.

First the white bird—more like a chicken—followed her home. Then Ms. Sandrow followed the bird, which led her across Montauk Highway and through the woods to where a mysterious Nordic-style lodge—exotic, eccentric and empty—loomed over Shinnecock Bay, unseen from the road and largely unknown to its neighbors.

Since then, life has not been the same for Ms. Sandrow, whose photo-based art, currently on view at P.S. 1 in New York, is in the collections of major museums, including the Metropolitan, the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and

the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. For the past nine months the hidden lodge has consumed the greater part of her time and her energy. She has photographed it, researched its past, pondered its significance, and launched a campaign to save it. (She has also adopted the bird, a Paduan rooster, named him Shinnecock, and provided him with a small harem of hens.)

Now she has gathered the fruits of her labors and created the exhibition, "Recollecting an American Dream," which opens on Saturday at the Southampton Historical Museum. In it she has hung her photographs of



Detail of Shinnecock poised outside window of the Cohu's Estate Glissa Bu.

the site, along with photographs of the lodge taken in the 1930s by the renowned landscape photographer Mattie Edwards.

Also on display are artifacts, many of

which recall the Shinnecock Indians' bonds with the land, where their ancestors had roamed freely for centuries before the arrival of the first European settlers. Others refer to later arrivals, who looked at the same land and saw its potential for profitable investment as a bucolic summer refuge for wealthy New York City residents. Among the latter was Samuel Parrish, Southampton's cultural benefactor, pioneer developer,

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# LODGE: Mysterious Guide Leads the Way

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and former owner of the home which now houses Ms. Sandrow's exhibition.

At first, said Ms. Sandrow, she was only mildly distracted by the strange white bird. "I was interested in him and he followed me home," she said, "but I was more intent on my photography."

She recalled that it was not until the next morning, "when I heard him cock-a-doodle-doo, greeting the morning sun," that she realized how perfectly he fit into her artistic preoccupations. "I was amazed," she said. "I was so fortunate to have him drop in on me like that."

After that, Ms. Sandrow often rose at dawn to follow Shinnecock, who became her guide and sometime subject. (He appears as a ghostly white top-tufted presence in photographs taken during their pre-dawn wanderings.)

Increasingly, the property was dominating Ms. Sandrow's thoughts and, with information gleaned from the internet and from her many visits to the files of local record-keepers, she was able to begin unraveling its mysteries. Because the property had once been owned by Samuel Parrish, it was initially thought that the lodge must have been built for him. But though it was, indeed, Mr. Parrish who sold the land to the man who built it, the lodge was, in fact, commissioned by World War I fighter pilot and aviation icon LaMotte T. Cohu.

As a Time magazine article noted in March 1932, it was to please his wife, who was born in Norway, that Mr. Cohu hired Norwegian architect and artist Thorbjorn Bassoe to design a summer house in Southampton that would look like a Norwegian mountain lodge. Norwegian craftsmen were imported to make the wood carvings and Mrs. Cohu named the house Gissa Bu (mystery house).

Mr. Cohu was not only a war hero and a devoted husband, he was a titan of the aviation industry—his career eventually led him to the position of chairman of Northrop—and one half of a couple with sterling social and cultural credentials. The same Time magazine article describes a man who "plays good golf at Southampton L.I. with his friend Publisher Wilfred John Funk" and is "rarely seen without a pipe between his teeth."

The couple's afternoon musicales at Gissa Bu were considered newsworthy by The New York Times, which breathlessly reported the attendance of "many members of the Summer colony and their guests" at one such event featuring the baritone Willard Fry singing French, English and Italian songs, then went on to name each guest and each song. Photographs of Gissa Bu's extraordinary interior accompanied the article.

Ms. Sandrow remembers her amazement when she first entered the lodge. From outside, it had looked to her "kind of odd and unusual" with a "dark foreboding shape." But after gaining permission to enter from the property's current owner, Robert Romeo, and seeing the splendor of its Nordic ornamentation—

tiles bearing images of birds and strange beasts, murals painted with representations of deities, carvings of roosters and other beautiful oddities so unlike the typical Southampton summer house trappings—she had a strong sense that the house was speaking to her. Even the windows bore her name, she laughed—"They were Hope's Lockbar windows."

"It seemed I had to find out about the house and be its advocate," said Ms. Sandrow, who obtained Mr. Romeo's blessing for her efforts to find alternatives to the wrecking ball. She threw herself into the task of identifying the resources on which the architect had drawn to create Gissa Bu.

Meanwhile, she was tracing the development history of the property, which had remained in the domain of the Shinnecock Indians until 1859, when 3,200 acres were deeded to the town under legislation by the state which essentially abrogated a 1703 lease of the whole of Shinnecock Hills to the Shinnecock. History records that shortly thereafter, the Town Trustees sold the land to a group of 23 Southampton men known as the Proprietors, who paid \$6,250 and used it for pasture land.

Then, according to the now familiar story of Southampton's early days as a resort, the Long Island Rail Road arrived and changed everything. With the rigors of eastward travel out from the city substantially reduced, visions of pristine beaches and lush countryside within easy reach attracted a first wave of summer "colonists" and whetted the appetites of speculative developers like Austin Corbin.

President of the Long Island Rail Road at the time, Mr. Corbin was a man with a dream for transforming eastern Long Island into a world-class destination, to use today's parlance, and the hills of Shinnecock were very much part of his plan. (He also had his eye on Montauk, where he was probably the first, but not the last, to campaign, unsuccessfully, for a deep-water transatlantic passenger terminal.)

In 1881, Mr. Corbin's agents paid the Proprietors \$50,000 for the land, which went through various corporate maneuvers before landing in the hands of the Long Island Improvement Company. The Seaside Times (predecessor to The Southampton Press) described the Long Island Improvement Company as "a company of Brooklyn capitalists who propose converting the Hills into a summer resort" and listed Samuel Parrish among its stockholders.

In 1906 the Long Island Improvement Company sold out to a company with no local connection, though Parrish apparently held on to some prize parcels, including the 13 acres overlooking Shinnecock Bay that he later sold to LaMotte Cohu.



Detail of May 6, diptych, from the "Shinnecock" series.

In the years since the Cohus entertained so lavishly at Gissa Bu, the lodge has sometimes been used as a summer rental, though in recent years it has been largely abandoned. Now Ms. Sandrow, along with members of the Shinnecock Nation who have taken a stand for the preservation of the natural landscape, and the current owner, Robert Romeo, seem to be moving toward compatible goals for the property.

After meeting recently with town officials, Mr. Romeo said that the town's purchase, for preservation purposes, of two waterfront lots for \$5.8 million had been confirmed and that he was optimistic about ongoing negotiations on the remaining two lots—including the lodge.

In "Recollecting an American Dream," Ms. Sandrow suggested that she hopes to present a thought-provoking picture of the diversity of residents' dreams for America, and to encourage community discourse on the issues raised when dreams conflict. She cited as inspiration a quote from historian James Truslow Adams, who once defined the American Dream as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone."

"What are the dreams of the Shinnecocks, then and now?" she asked rhetorically. "What were the dreams of Samuel Parrish, the developer? Of an artist like myself? Of town government, the stewards of the land?"

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*A panel discussion, "Saving Sacred Places," has been set for Thursday, February 15, at 10:30 a.m. at the Southampton Historical Museum. The opening of "Recollecting an American Dream" will be celebrated this Saturday, January 20, with a champagne preview and artist talk for supporting members at 4:30 p.m., and a public reception from 5:30 to 7 p.m. The museum is at 17 Meeting House Lane.*