As I skied south and uphill, away from Santanoni Great Camp, I was asked – “on the record” – for my reactions. It was family weekend recently at Santanoni, with plenty of skiers in family groups including dogs. I said something like “this ski has become an annual ritual.” After all everyone knows that Newcomb has the best Adirondack snow come late winter. I looked forward to seeing and listening again to the camp’s master carpenter, Michael Frenette, over a hot drink.

The chance to see Santanoni and Moose Mountains rising into the blue sky above the winter glare of Newcomb Lake is also very attractive. The Japanese influence on the camp’s layout, the impact the architecture makes, the history there – it does set your mind going. After talking into the reporter’s microphone, I had to admit that my attitude towards the restoration of the Santanoni had changed over the years.

I had sat through many meetings, heard and had many arguments about Santanoni while working for the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks. Adirondack wilderness campaigner Paul Schaefer gave me a report which included this February 15, 1972 letter from then DEC Commissioner Henry L. Diamond, writing to Arthur V. Savage of the
Adirondack Conservancy Committee to thank him for the Conservancy’s action in acquiring Santanoni from its private owners and to assure him that the state would accept Santanoni from the Conservancy, and place it within the Adirondack Forest Preserve. This is an excerpt from that letter:

"I can further assure you that the Department’s intention to take appropriate action, when deemed necessary to protect and preserve the environment and natural resources of the Santanoni Preserve. This may be accomplished through 1. The abandonment and/or demolition of the various improvements, including structures and roads presently on the property; 2. The restriction or limitation of public access to the property by the permit system outlined in the management and use plan; 3. The restriction and limitation of the taking of various species of fish and wildlife from the property when such action is warranted" – Henry L. Diamond, Environmental Conservation Commissioner.

Tracks to Santanoni. Photo c Dave Gibson

While the buildings collapsed into themselves in ensuing years and some buildings were torn down by the DEC, NYS Assembly Environmental Chairman Maurice Hinchey’s staff drafted and the Legislature then passed historic preservation legislation (ECL 9-0109) that would allow the main camp and the remainder of Santanoni’s structures to remain on the Forest Preserve. That was in 1983. Judging from the reports Paul Schaefer gave me several years later, the law was hotly debated, before and after. An entire conference at Union College was devoted to debate its rationale, provisions and implications. Santanoni’s buildings and ruins were on the Forest Preserve, after all. Some rightly criticized the bill as “histo, presto” law, as in one day Santanoni’s structures were unconstitutional, a violation of Article 14’s “forever wild” provision, and the next, magically, made legal.

For his part, conservationist Paul Schaefer did not urge the the structures’ demolition. In 1983, he had completed restoration of parts of Camp Knollwood
on Lower Saranac Lake. Also, he and others were in the midst of a campaign for an Article 14 land exchange to preserve all of Great Camp Sagamore’s community of buildings near Raquette Lake. As a builder and restorer of early American homes, Paul appreciated great architecture, and great tracts of wilderness. In his mind, a land older than history, the wilderness, was not incompatible – at least very selectively and in the right places – with an appreciation of human history, with local cultural history, where human ambition and hubris were revealed through ruins within a larger matrix of surrounding wilderness, or when possible, through architectural restoration. As “Mr. Forest Preserve,” Paul’s standing and ability to reconcile these viewpoints were sought after. Further, Maurice Hinchey’s bill was limited to preserving registered historic structures on those state lands acquired prior to the date of the law in 1983, thus eliminating its application to structures on Forest Preserve acquired after 1983.

Why was a constitutional amendment not proposed for Santanoni, as it was for Sagamore? In 1972, the intent of the parties to the Santanoni transaction, most critically the NYS DEC, was as expressed in Henry Diamond’s letter – “the abandonment and demolition of the various improvements.” The land was to revert to wild forest conditions, eventually. Also, unlike Sagamore in 1983, at Santanoni during 1972 there were no obvious private owners or managers with whom the state could undertake a land exchange, or negotiate a conservation easement that would allow the buildings to remain under certain conditions and the land under them not revert to state ownership. It was not until 1984 that legislation authorized the state to acquire conservation easements anywhere in the state, and to share the tax burden on those lands on a pro rata basis. Prior to 1984, the state could only accept donation of “common law” easements appurtenant to existing state land that did not include (at the time) tax-sharing.
By 1990, Howard Kirschenbaum and others had formed Adirondack Architectural Heritage (AARCH), and meetings about Santanoni’s future accelerated. In 1995, a Santanoni unit management planning team had been formed and I was among those who met frequently with DEC at Newcomb Town Hall as a guest of team member George Canon, Town Supervisor.

There were vigorous debates, including how much land outside of the building footprints themselves should be incorporated within the State Land Master Plan classification of Historic Area. Some in AARCH felt that all or most of the former agricultural lands of Santanoni, amounting to more than three thousand acres now reverted to forest, should be incorporated as Historic Area and allowed to be actively restored and permanently maintained as field or pasture as it was during the 1890s-1900s under the Pruyn family ownership. I and others argued strongly that this land had reverted long ago to wild forest conditions and under Article 14 and the Master Plan could not be so designated. Ultimately, a compromise was reached limiting a Camp Santanoni Historic Area to 75 acres, later reduced by DEC in the unit management plan to just over 32 acres of land previously classified as Vanderwhacker Wild Forest.

For AARCH and the Town of Newcomb, it must have been an agonizing period to watch Santanoni’s main camp and farm complex buildings deteriorate to the point of collapse. Finally, a unit management plan was in place during the year 2000, camp building restoration efforts began under the direction of master carpenter Michael Frenette, and that same year, as the result of tremendous efforts by historians, Santanoni was designated by the National Park Service (NPS) as a National Landmark.

I was proud to attend that ceremony, listen to the speeches, and stand for a photo beside NPS representatives, the men and women with the Stetson hats, badge and tan shirts, and Town Supervisor George Canon. I hope for many winters to come I will continue to ski in and salute AARCH and its Santanoni restorers, as well as wilderness advocates who, in addition to marveling at those connected porches, also come to watch the sun rise above the Santanonis, or set behind Moose Mountain.