

OPINION

At 150 years: Night to remember at Plainville Campgrounds

By Olivia L. Lawrence
The Cheshire Citizen

We'd gone down the rabbit hole. Landed in Oz. We were on the July 11 tour of the Plainville Campgrounds. What we saw was an almost unbelievable sight.

The tour drew big numbers, exceeding the organizers' expectations. The group I traveled with, as we visited 16 cottages, all seemed mesmerized, delighted and surprised at this unexpected architectural and historic gem of a community originally created by area churches as a summer retreat for congregants.

It may sound like hyperbole, but this hidden community has got to be placed right in the single-digits of my top 10 amazing places to see in Connecticut. Make that New England. And beyond. Different than, but in league with Harkness, Hillstead, Gillette Castle and other revered landmarks. Except this one is very much alive and occupied.

Think Sturbridge Village. Only residents aren't actors, they wear modern clothes, have laptops and live here. It's the spirit of the place, the idea of it, that they preserve along with the properties.

Whatever can be glimpsed from Camp Street and Northwest Drive doesn't even begin to hint at the beautiful grounds and magical housing sited on these 17 acres. Sheltered by grand, soaring trees, dotted with whimsical gardens and other unique landscaping, the site welcomes visitors to a singular experience.

The property is on the National Registry of Historic Places.

The campgrounds is celebrating its 150 anniversary and more than 80 cottages were decked out for the oc-

casion. In the evening, the community hosted an illumination along with music, dancing and eats.

The 16 cottages which were open to the public showed off the artistry, innovation, sense of humor and of history the owners possess. Several were as small as 400 square feet - the tiny house movement circa late 1800s to early 1900s.

All exterior renovations must adhere to historic register rules and not change the lines of the structures - many with post and beam construction - inside, owners can, for the most part, do as they wish.

When you walk through the chapel into the central square (in fact, a circle), surrounded by the "painted lady" cottages, it takes your breath away with the sensation you've been teleported to another time and place. Most of these larger cottages still bear the names of the towns with participating churches. The Berlin cottage once belonged to the East Berlin Methodist Church; Southington to the Southington Methodist Church. There's a Cheshire cottage, Granby, Bristol, Middletown and more. All painted in elaborate color schemes, the fancy trim contrasting with the pastels, brights and other cheerful hues of the main house.

In the center of this circle is a large open-air, wood frame auditorium where preachers come to speak or where community events are held.

Many of the larger cottages were designed as dormitories to hold the overflow of visitors from their respective church groups. Others were administrative or recreational facilities. All are now private residences, one on the tour boasted 11 little bedrooms.

Run as an association, it's



Photos submitted by Plainville Campgrounds

clear that community is a big part of the joy of living here with weekly pot luck

suppers, pizza nights, games See Campgrounds / Page 11



Campgrounds

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and gatherings of all sorts. Every Sunday, in the summer, a guest minister preaches at the chapel.

One woman in my tour group owns a cottage that had been her parents. Like many here, family ties to the campground go back generations. She hadn't been inside some of the cottages and wanted to check them out. Along the way, she shared tales of what it had been like as a kid to have the run of the place.

Occupied from May to October (except for five year-round residences), the land is owned by the association and residents own the houses. There is a small annual membership fee, town taxes are low. About 15 cottages are currently for sale and prices start around \$20,000 and go to \$60,000. Prospective members get background checks for criminal convictions and bankruptcy.

As one homeowner explained, the campgrounds fell into disuse and disrepair in the middle of the last century. Cars, television and other modern distractions preempted interest in a quiet summer retreat.

The campgrounds, after all, were designed to get families out of the city for the summer with many Dads, the breadwinners at the time, making the commute from local towns.

But the property and residences have had a renaissance. As one owner put it, "It took us three years to renovate the cottage, but it was all worth it. We are so lucky. We have the best life ever...we can't say enough about the campground."

As do many others here, this resident lives in Florida for six months to balance out the year. A few, however, live nearby and most at one time or another were residents of area towns.

While proud of their homes and eager to share these labors of love with the public, it was incredibly generous of owners to allow a look into a lifestyle that few experience.

Living in a doll house, knowing all your neighbors, hiding in plain sight in a little slice of paradise.

The tour is over, but there were rumblings about perhaps hosting one again next year. If they do - and I hope it happens - you don't want to miss it.

To learn more visit <http://plainvillecampgrounds.org/>.



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