

# HISTORY AND HEALING

*Continuing tradition in the house Bill Sewall built*

Text and photos by Kathryn Olmstead

As Donna Davidge and Kent Bonham give new life to the home her great-grandfather built in Island Falls, they are not only preserving a building but a tradition of healing that has lived in the house since Theodore Roosevelt first came to visit as a teenager.

Built in the 1860s by William Sewall, who became Roosevelt's Maine guide and lifelong friend, the house that opened its doors to woodsmen and railroad workers at the turn of the century now welcomes visitors from around the world seeking the renewal provided by yoga in a setting of natural beauty.

When people leave yoga retreats at Sewall House, they comment in the guest book not only about their physical and spiritual revitalization, but also on the family feeling they experience during their stay. What they might not realize is that their remarks echo those of Roosevelt, and perhaps many others, for whom the house was a haven.

"The bodily benefit was not the largest part of the good done me," Roosevelt wrote in 1919. "I was accepted as part of the household." Sewall described him as "a pale, thin boy with bad eyes and a weak heart," when he first arrived in 1877 to be strengthened by outdoor activities and closeness to nature. (See *Echoes* No. 6, pp 32-36)

Continuing this tradition, Davidge and Bonham give their guests various opportunities to restore their bodies and spirits in a beautiful place with wholesome vegetarian meals, medita-



*Kent Bonham hangs the sign identifying historic Sewall House in Island Falls beginning its 10th season as a summer retreat for yoga and meditation.*

tion, massage therapy, hikes, boating, biking and, of course, yoga.

"This house embraced me," said Bonham, almost 100 years after Roosevelt first passed through its doors. "This house has some kind of healing . . . something special." Bonham entered as a work-study guest, working in exchange for the opportunity to participate in retreat activities. He offered to paint the house — an offer that changed his life.

"Everything started to shift. I started to heal so fast — through yoga, good food — even the staff members noticed." Having lost his father and his family home in Sweden, he felt he had returned to his roots, to nature, at a time when he needed stability. "I wanted to work with my hands. This place was perfect." And he was perfect

for the place.

"Every corner of this house needed attention," he said, and as he and Davidge worked together to attend to its needs, they grew to appreciate each other, as well as their accomplishments. They were married June 28, 2003, in the back yard, and the wedding was like a family reunion.

"They kept a certain vibe in this house," Davidge said of her relatives, the most recent residents being William Sewall's daughter, Nancy, and her husband Maurice Cunningham, both of whom died in the 1990s. (See "This House Was Built on Honor" in *Echoes* No. 5, Spring into Summer 1989) The house stood empty for a year after Nancy's death in 1996 at age 102. When the family members who inherited it were ready to sell and those who acquired

its contents were about to put them up for auction, Davidge, with the help of her parents, Harriett and Wilbur Miller, committed herself to keeping the house and the treasures it contained in the family for at least another generation.

Davidge had taught yoga in New York City for 12 years before deciding to extend her work to Maine. She also worked as a nutritionist, model and actress, while studying acting. A native of Stamford, Conn., she had spent summers in Island Falls with her mother since she was six months old, living at a rustic camp on Mattawamkeag Lake that the Sewalls gave her mother as a wedding gift. Her father, a chemist who commuted from Stamford to New York City, joined them for two weeks.

"We always stopped at the house first to see Aunt Nancy, who my sister is named after and was my great aunt," Davidge recalled. "I never thought of the house as anything other than hers. Aunt Nancy was very special to all of us as well as her husband, Uncle Maurice.

"She told stories about Theodore Roosevelt and her father, going to TR's inauguration and shaking Geronimo's hand when she was 10 years old. She said for all the battles he



*Nancy and Maurice Cunningham in the 1950s at Sewall House where she grew up.*



*Among the memorabilia Donna Davidge and Kent Bonham found in the Sewall House is a newspaper marking the death of Theodore Roosevelt, who regained health there and returned to visit William and Mary Sewall.*

had been in his hand was like a soft glove."

Davidge's mother was in her 80s when her daughter bought the house and she lived in it for two months in 1997, helping to sort through all the belongings, sleeping on a cot on the third floor.

"When I bought the house, I really didn't know how I would do it," Davidge said, "but there have been many steps along the way, especially getting together with my husband who had done yoga with me at an acting school in New York City for three years. With his help, the house has really been lovingly brought back to life, while maintaining the integrity of its history. He has worked very hard to make it a place people will appreciate when they visit."

The work has included wall-papering, creating new bathrooms, sanding floors, installing new paneling, insulating, painting and a multitude of details, such as ordering hand-carved wooden signs from Sweden that identify the name of each room: "Sibyl" (Davidge's dear friend), "Harriett" and "Wilbur" (her parents), the "Sewall Suite"

(where Nancy last slept), as well as the "W.C.," the library, the linen closet and the attic, labeled "Ghosts." The library is a museum of Sewall family treasures, including a newspaper headlined with Teddy Roosevelt's death, a favorite portrait of Nancy Sewall Cunningham, canoe paddles, books, period souvenirs and furniture. Each room contains the figurines and teacups that decorated the house for years, but family photographs are relegated to the library and hallways, as they make some guests feel uncomfortable when placed on dressers and bedroom mantels.

Bonham's mother has also helped with the restoration during two long visits, one the month before they were married in 2003. This summer she will stay three months and her son will serve as the chef.

"So, as my family passes on," says Davidge, "— my mother (in 2003) and my uncle (Don), who I was named after (in 2005) — Kent's family has helped us continue the vision of offering the home as a place of history and healing.

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# SEWALL HOUSE

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Now in its 10th season, Sewall House attracts men, women and children ranging in age from 8 to 80. They come from France, Italy, England, Finland, Sweden, Puerto Rico and all parts of the United States. They come as mothers and daughters, sisters, friends, partners, honeymooners and individuals to learn beginning to intermediate Ashtanga, Kundalini, Hatha and Vinyasa yoga. With space for between 10 and 12 guests, the house is open between June 15 and October 15 and during the Christmas holiday.



*Donna Davidge in one of the redecorated Sewall House guest rooms.*

## **The Daily Schedule**

A typical retreat is five days, but stays may vary in length, and the daily schedule includes:

**8 a.m.** Meditation

**8:30 a.m.** Yoga

**10 a.m.** Breakfast, a time to discuss plans for the day

**11 a.m. — 5 p.m.** Time for hiking, biking, boating, kayaking, and other outdoor activities, as well as massage, individual yoga sessions and relaxation in the jacuzzi, the sauna and around the house.

**5 - 6:30 p.m.** Yoga

**7:15 p.m.** Dinner - A two-hour, sit-down family affair

**10 p.m.** Quiet time, also sauna and massage □

<http://www.sewallhouse.com>