

Olmsted Camp – A Short History

By Lia Oprea



Many have no idea that just forty minutes south of Buffalo, New York, nestled among the farms and rolling hills of southern Erie County in the town of Sardinia is a private hidden gem of architecture, nature, and history known as the Olmsted Camp.



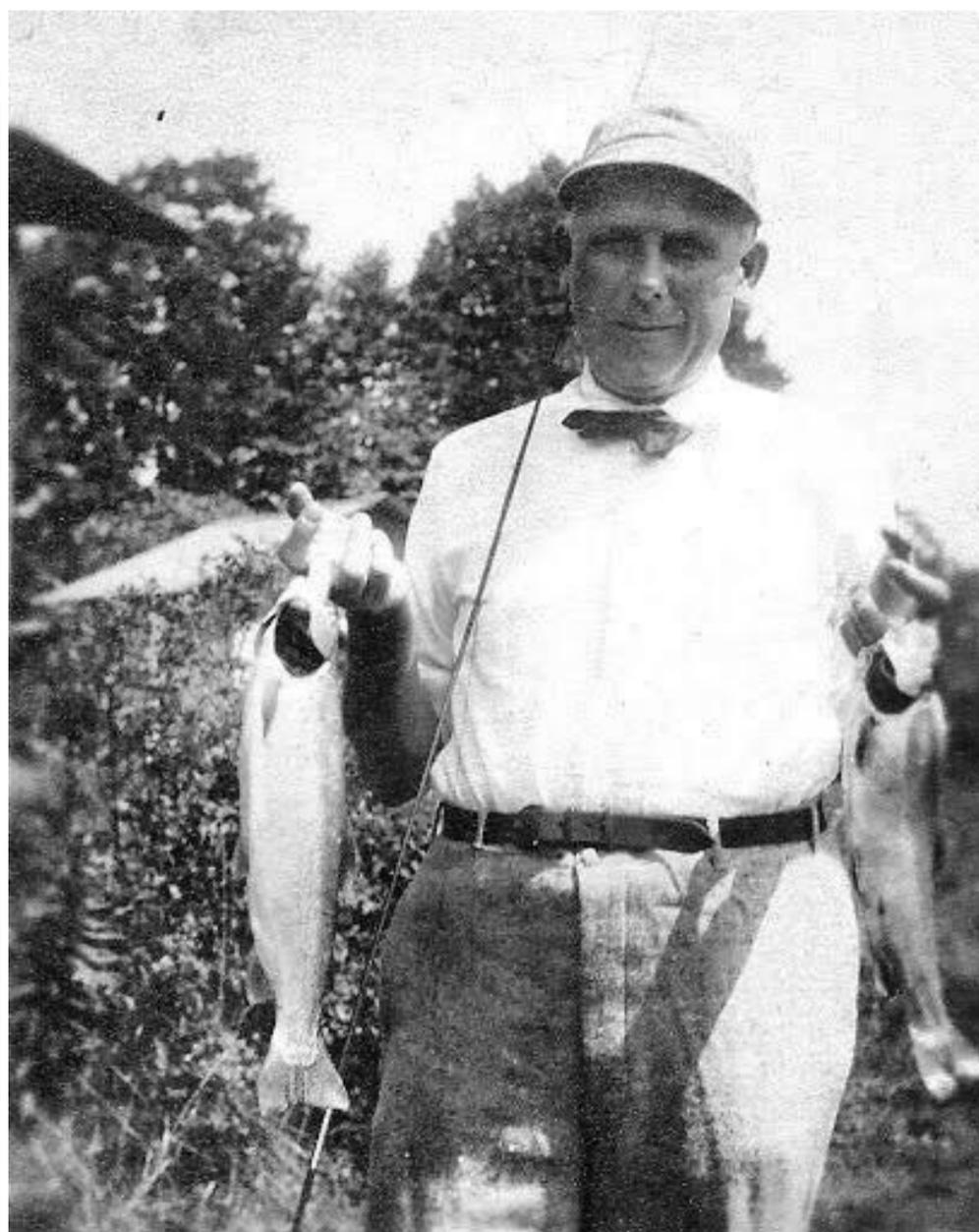
Listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the Olmsted Camp consists of a large Arts & Crafts style rustic lodge, the “Big House,” and three small board and batten cabins set in a landscape of trees, lawn and garden on a forested bluff overlooking the Cattaraugus Creek. Springville resident, artist, and landscape architect, Harold LeRoy “Grampa” Olmsted, designed and built the Big House in 1910.

In the late 1890's, young Harold and his five brothers would travel by train to Sardinia from Buffalo with their father, John Bartow Olmsted, to fly-fish in the trout-rich Hosmer, Elton and Cattaraugus creeks.

In due course, they found a friendly farmer, James Hopkins, who, along with his wife, Eva, and daughter, Maisy, agreed to let them camp on his land, known as the Rider-Hopkins farm, for a small fee. As the years went by, the avid fishermen would come out earlier and stay longer. Eventually, they brought along their wives and children to camp for the entire summer in large tents they put up on wooden platforms in one of the farm fields.



The Rider-Hopkins Farm. painting by Harold LeRoy Olmsted (c. 1940)



John Bartow Olmsted, the father of six brothers, sets off to fish the Cattaraugus Creek and comes back with quite a haul! Notice the clay tennis court behind him. (c. 1920).



View of Cattaraugus Creek from Olmsted Camp (c. 1915).



John Morgan Olmsted's son Prescott (c. 1915) and the six Olmsted brothers on scaffolding (c. 1909).

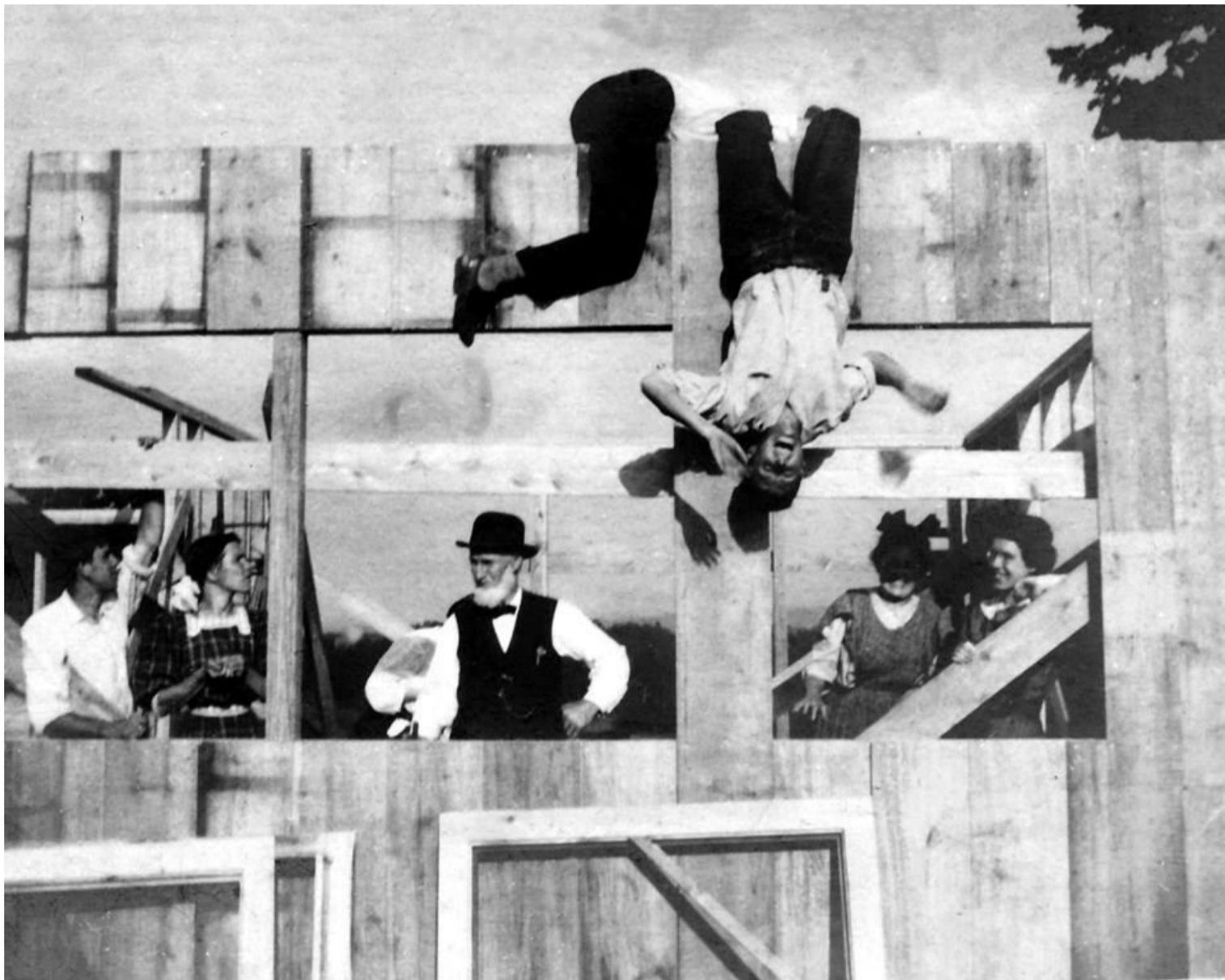
Though their tents were well appointed with carpets, beds and washstands, the women eventually demanded more comfort. To house the growing Olmsted clan of vacationers, the family soon built cabins to augment the tents.



John Morgan Olmsted's wife, Maguerite (Margo), relaxes in one of the tents before her family's "Big House" was designed and built across the field. (pre-1910)



Young sisters Chassie & Betty and (in the window), their cousin Janet Olmsted at one of the original cabins which still stands. One of the tents is visible in the left background (c. 1913).



Young architect and designer of the Olmsted Camp, Harold Leroy Olmsted (far left) with his wife, Grace Legate, oversees the building of one of the cabins which preceded his plans for the “Big House”. His brothers, Allen (shown hanging from the rafter) and Seymour (leg only) seem to have other plans. (c. 1907)



The original cabins can be seen in this watercolor “Sardinia Wind” by Harold LeRoy Olmsted (1908).

Around 1909, John Morgan Olmsted approached his younger brother Harold, now twenty-one and newly graduated from Harvard and a budding architect and landscape architect, to plan the large summer home that his wife Marguerite had wanted for their family of six. John was flush with money as manager of Buffalo-Pitts farm and tractor supply business. Harold complied and designed the “Big House” for them that would be separate from the rowdy family compound of cabins. His artist’s eye led him to choose a site that commanded a splendid view of the winding creek and distant Blue Hill. Harold’s extended board-and-batten holiday lodge (possibly dually inspired by a bungalow that appeared in *The Craftsman* magazine and Greene & Greene’s 1903 Arturo Bandini house in Pasadena) featured a generous, informal living room with a high-pitched ceiling and cozy brick fireplace beyond which were several bedrooms and a kitchen. The congeniality of the living room overflowed to the out-of-doors by means of a spacious porch that bordered two sides of the building.



The “Big House” (c. 1918) designed by Harold Olmsted for his brother John. Shown are the family’s summer vegetable garden, the one-story garage, and one of the tents. Later, behind the Big House, they would put in a tennis court made of clay hauled up from the Cattaraugus Creek.



Clara Morgan and her husband John Bartow Olmsted (second row) with their six sons on the Big House veranda. Left to right: Seymour, Allen, Harold, Charles, Remington, John Morgan Olmsted. (c. 1915).



John Morgan Olmsted and wife Marguerite on the tennis court constructed of clay brought up from Cattaraugus Creek (c.1920).

“The Camp,” as we call the compound of Big House, cabins, barn, and tennis court, has been our Olmsted family’s summer retreat for over one hundred years. Once, the Big House stood alone in a field bordered by cow paths. Now fine old trees, lush lawns, and a pretty flower garden occupy the property, and footpaths ramble down through the dense woods to the lovely Cattaraugus Creek.

In 1947, the family acquired the entire 188-acre Rider-Hopkins Farm (also listed in the National Historic Register of Historic Places). In addition to the Olmsted Camp, the property includes the 1840s Greek Revival farmhouse, the big red horse barn, several out-buildings, the sugar-bush maple woods and leased fields planted with rotating crops of corn, alfalfa and beans.

In 1984, Emily Roderick Oprea (Lee), Harold's granddaughter, moved into the red-brick farmhouse in order to live in Sardinia year-round and manage the family camp and farm. Over the next four decades, before she passed away in 2017, and with the help of the family, the advice of the late Olaf William ("Bill") Shelgren Jr, architect and family friend, and a gett'er-done, hands-on management style, Lee brought the Olmsted Camp buildings back to their original soundness and attractiveness and revived the charming summer flower gardens of her great aunt Marguerite and grandfather Harold. To these she added a Spring Garden of stunning ornamentals, specimen trees, and bird-bee-and-butterfly-friendly flowering shrubs.



The restored Marguerite and Harold Olmsted Summer Garden and Olmsted Camp "Big House."



Watercolor by Harold's granddaughter, the late Susan Maxfield (c. 1995)



Around the grounds in the spring; gardens, Olmsted Camp and horse barn. (Photos by Lia Oprea)

The six original brothers who started the place, John, Charles, Remington, Harold, Allen and Seymour, are long gone. Yet the many members of the Olmsted family and their friends continue to return to the Olmsted Camp, summer after summer.



Left to right: the Olmsted brothers from youngest to oldest – Seymour, Allen, Harold, Remington, Charles, John. (c. 1910).



The Olmsteds in Cattaraugus Creek: The Olmsted Camp and cabins can be seen high on the bluff above the clay-banks behind them at the right (c. 1917).



On the Big House wrap-around porch overlooking Cattaraugus Creek: The Captain's Hammock, above, c. 1918, and, below, one hundred years later.





Harold Olmsted planned the main window in the Big House living room to command the panoramic view of the Cattaraugus Creek, Blue Hill, and Bread Loaf Hill. Harold also designed the large round dining table. (Photo by Lia Oprea, c. 2017).



We hope you'll join us at the Olmsted Camp throughout the summer months as we host special events, such as "Friend-Raising" concerts, dinners, seminars and retreats supporting local environmental, preservation, conservancy and community causes. We also are pleased to have gatherings and celebrations of family and friends.

Come by and see us!

There's always an extra seat at the table. We'll leave a light on.

Lia Oprea and the Olmsted Family

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We're on [Facebook](#) and www.OlmstedCamp.com

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