

The Illuminasts of the Adirondacks

by Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.
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♪ *"That old master painter from the faraway hills
Painted the violets and the daffodils. He put the purple in the twilight haze,
Then did a rainbow for the rainy days."* ♪

–Lyrics by Haven Gillespie, Music by Beasley Smith

This essay is about both a master oil painter, Leonard Tantillo, and a master builder and conservationist, Paul Schaefer. Paul was never "old" to the day he died 12 years ago at age 87, and to me, Len is still a young man in his early 60s. Lyrics, smyrics. But I do like the song.

I write today of the delightful Friday evening of October 17 that Jean and I enjoyed at the invitation of David Gibson and Ken Rimany of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks (www.protectadks.org .) They are, respectively, the executive director and operations manager of the association. The venue was Paul Schaefer's former home on St. David's Lane in Niskayuna, AFPA headquarters since 2005. The occasion was the guest lecture of Leonard Tantillo before an assembled crowd of people who in some way had helped in the conversion of the Schaefer home to serve as AFPA headquarters. Paul built his house by hand in 1934 with cobblestones that he hauled from his beloved Helderbergs in his 1928 Ford Roadster. It was built on land given to him by Henry Gerber Reist (1862-1942), a GE electrical engineer and member of the Union College faculty, in return for Paul's having renovated his nearby Pearse home, one of the oldest in our county. Reist was both the third and the eighth president of the Schenectady County Historical Society. After his death, his widow donated 107 acres of Reist property near their home to the Hudson Mohawk Bird Club for use as a bird sanctuary.

AFPA was chartered in 1901 and celebrated its centennial seven years ago, four years before that of the Schenectady County Historical Society in 1905. Our institutions are kindred spirits. The mission of the Association is to sustain the ecological integrity and well-being of the natural and human habitat of the Adirondack State Park. The park in northeast New York is all of these: the largest park in the United States, the largest national historic landmark, and the largest area protected by any U.S. state. The park covers 6.1 million acres, a land area greater than that of the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Glacier and Great Smoky Mountains national parks combined. More than half the land within the Adirondack Park is privately owned, including several villages and hamlets. In contrast, New York's forest preserve is all the land owned by the state within the Adirondack and Catskill parks, "forever wild" land managed by its Department of Environmental Conservation. There are more than 2.6 million acres of forest preserve in the Adirondacks and 287,514 acres in the Catskills.

The Adirondack Research Library at the AFPA Center owns the largest collection of Adirondack informational materials outside of the park boundaries. It has maps, periodicals, technical reports, photos, slides, video and audio tapes and archival materials from prominent Adirondack conservationists of the 19th and 20th centuries. The library is open to the public on Monday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and Thursday from noon to 4 p.m.

Len Tantillo, the honored guest at the Oct. 17 gathering, was born and raised in upstate New York, and attended the Rhode Island School of Design. From 1969 to 1976, he worked as an architectural designer and, like Paul Schaefer, acquired a working knowledge of building design and construction. During his apprenticeship, the focus of his work shifted to visual presentation, and in 1976 he began working as a free-lance architectural illustrator. Over the past 25 years, he has created numerous historical and marine paintings that continue to draw a wide audience. His studio is in southern Rensselaer County.

Meticulous artistry

Both Tantillo's painstaking research into Colonial history and his brush strokes that bring historic scenes to life are meticulous. His detailed observations are translated directly onto canvas and the images are brought to life with his ability to create a magical sense of time and place. For a painting of a 17th century Dutch ship in New York harbor with the Manhattan skyline of that era in the distance, Tantillo spent hours poring over maps and drawings in Albany and New York City that gave him a good idea of the size and appearance of Peter Stuyvesant's house, the largest in the town. Unlike his sister's, it had five pilasters (ornamental columns) and other distinguishing features, all duly rendered with dimensions in the fractions of an inch.

The October AFPA event at which he spoke marked the end of a five-week exhibit titled "Preserving a Legacy: A Celebration of the work of Paul Schaefer and L.F. Tantillo."

The exhibit showcased the life work of two people who loved New York State: Schaefer – conservationist, designer, and builder of Dutch style homes, and Tantillo – lover of our Dutch, English and Native American heritage and a spellbinding expositor of its influence on his work.

One of the 27 paintings lent for the exhibit was Tantillo's "Schenectady Town," commissioned for our Historical Society's centennial of 2005. Len abhors depicting violence, so it shows a very peaceful snow-bound Stockade on the eve of the Massacre of February 8, 1690. It will be loaned out again next year for a Tantillo exhibit in the Netherlands and be back for part of the county bicentennial year.

Tantillo paintings are close to photographic in detail. Each evokes the feeling that the sun or the moon conspired with the artist to bathe the work in progress with evanescent light, solely for the benefit of those of us privileged to view the finished product. His ability to do this has earned him the title of *illuminast*, one who is expert in emulating the style of the 19th-century American painters who were concerned with the precise, realistic rendering of atmospheric light and the perceived effects of that light on depicted objects.

Taking a look

So now it's time to look at some of Tantillo's masterpieces. Put down the paper, go to your computer, and go to www.lftantillo.com. Note the beautiful rendition of Peter Stuyvesant's Manhattan. Click on some of the categorical links and their small photos, one by one, to bring up the larger views needed for maximum esthetic pleasure. I'll wait for you . . .

Good, you're back, just in time to read of Len's closing remarks, a rare tribute to our beleaguered state. He said:

"What I love best about our state is wilderness. My paintings are about New York. When all is said and done, they are the story of my life."

Edwin D. Reilly Jr. is president of the [Schenectady County Historical Society](#) and a regular contributor to the Sunday opinion page.