

ADIRONDACK

L I F E

AT **HOME** IN THE
ADIRONDACKS

Priced Out
of Paradise

REALITIES OF THE REAL ESTATE BOOM

Beautiful
Boathouses



US \$5.95 / CAN \$6.95



www.adirondacklife.com

Siding with Tradition

THE REAL STORY BEHIND A STAPLE OF ADIRONDACK STYLE

by Tom Henry and Howard Kirschenbaum



White Pine Camp, in Paul Smiths, the first documented site of brainstorm siding in North America. Photograph by Kelly Hogg

IN 1907 BEN MUNCIL INSTALLED HIS “BRAINSTORM” siding at White Pine, a Great Camp in Paul Smiths owned by Archibald and Olive Moore White. The wide, tapered clapboards weren’t planed—tree bark remained on the wavy exposed edges. Although oral tradition credits the style to master builder Muncil, centuries-old siding in southern England may have been the greater influence, thanks to White Pine Camp’s well-traveled designer, William Massarene. Today, as then, the popular look (also known as waney-edge, wavy-edge, bark-on, pig-pen and Adirondack siding) is not a result of economy or sloppiness:

it’s by design. Regardless of its roots, brainstorm’s uneven tree-lap edge has become signature Adirondack.

According to local folklore, Muncil, a prolific builder of stylish rustic camps and public buildings in the St. Regis Lakes area, was appalled when he saw Massarene’s architectural drawings for the Whites’ new camp on Osgood Pond. The proposed siding looked like ordinary New England clapboards; that would never do for an Adirondack camp. So Muncil and Charles Nichols, the millwright at Paul Smith’s Hotel, invented a rustic, tapered clapboard with untrimmed edges and unplanned surfaces. No two pieces

were alike in shape, configuration of bark and knots, or exposed width. When you would see this siding on a building, it would be obvious that you were looking at cross-sections of trees.

Alas, the legend isn't entirely accurate. Wavy-edge siding actually dates back several centuries in southern England, where it is called waney-edge or weatherboarding. As Tudor buildings aged over the centuries, the half-timbered, stuccoed and plastered structures became drafty. At some point—as early as the sixteenth century—people got tired of replacing the fallen plaster and began covering the facade with overlapping boards. (Their motivation was not unlike that of homeowners today who install weatherproof vinyl siding.) The weatherboards were tapered and rough-cut with untrimmed edges. This style reached its height of popularity in England during the 1800s and is still used there for fencing as well as siding.

Massarene took the grand tour of Europe after graduating from engineering school, extending his knowledge of architecture and, as he revealed in a later interview, gathering ideas for building projects, such as the soaring asymmetrical rooflines he designed for White Pine Camp. According to his great-grandnephew David Landmann, an architect, he surely would have visited the British Isles, not only to see the sights but to visit relatives in Ireland. Massarene clearly detailed waney-edge siding on drawings dated July 12, 1907, of White Pine Camp's living room building and Cabin One. While it's possible that Muncil devised the siding and introduced the idea to Massarene (and that the drawings that still exist today were a second draft), given the dates and other features on the prints it's more likely that Massarene knew exactly what siding he wanted at White Pine Camp. Nevertheless, Muncil and Nichols figured out how to manufacture it—very possibly for the first time in North America.

Indeed, Muncil and Nichols may have experienced a sort of brainstorm,

which was a new term at the time, born from one of the most sensational murder cases of the day. In 1907 Harry Thaw was being tried for killing one of the country's leading architects, Stanford White, atop Madison Square Garden, which White had designed. Thaw suspected him of having enticed his wife, famous Gibson girl model Evelyn Nesbitt, to be his mistress when she was only sixteen (dramatized in the E. L. Doctorow book, movie and Broadway musical *Ragtime*). Thaw's lawyers eventually got him off in the nation's first successful insanity defense. When asked why he shot White, Thaw said he got a "brainstorm," meaning the idea came to him with irresistible force. The term was much in the news and one can imagine Muncil and Nichols feeling they'd had their own brainstorm when they finally solved the mechanical challenges of milling wavy-edge clapboards. Whatever the inspiration, they dubbed their new siding "brainstorm."

Today White Pine Camp's eclectic rustic cabins are open to the public for rentals, and tours of the property are scheduled regularly. Ten cabins and cottages, a dining hall, tennis house, bowling alley, boathouses and support buildings—all but the Japanese tea house—are brainstormed. President Calvin Coolidge chose this retreat for his "summer White House" in 1926.

Muncil went on to use brainstorm on other buildings in the St. Regis-Saranac Lakes area. The siding is found at Topridge, the Great Camp built by Marjorie Merriweather Post on Upper St. Regis Lake. At Cranford Island, on Osgood Pond, an older log structure has been refaced in brainstorm, reminiscent of how the material was first used in England. In time, architects and contractors from other Adirondack regions took notice.

In the 1930s rustic-resort developer Earl Woodward copied the style at the first Adirondack dude ranch, Northwoods, in Lake Luzerne. Paula Dennis, of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, notes, "From an architectural-history perspective it is fascinating that Earl took up this application and

MATERIALS

used it in combination with log structures." But Woodward, and others, may not have noticed that Muncil's brainstorm is tapered—thick at the bottom and thin at the top—a characteristic that is sometimes difficult to discern once applied. Tapered wavy-edge siding is tricky to mill, so perhaps Woodward just didn't want to bother. His sawmills produced a simpler untapered version, which is now commonly called Adirondack siding.

"When he received four hundred replies [to a for-sale ad for a cabin] he knew he was on to something," says Woodward's niece, Deanne Rehm, of Bolton. "He quickly organized a crew of sixty men to build cabins from lumber he cut at his own sawmill."

Mike Griffin, who owns a Woodward log cabin on Lake Vanare, between Lakes Luzerne and George, says Adirondack siding "became a feature on porches, kitchen wings, gable ends and outbuildings on many of Woodward's log cabins." Dick Cook,

who lives nearby in a new Woodward-style cabin, has counted nine original Woodward frame cottages sided entirely with untapered waney-edge.

(In the small-world department, Woodward purchased Villa Marie Antoinette, a mansion on Lake George, from the estate of Harry Thaw in 1948 and sold it to another buyer, who eventually dynamited it. Woodward built rustic cabins on the balance of the property. Muncil had hijacked Thaw's term, "brainstorm," then Woodward hijacked and corrupted Muncil's siding. However, there is no evidence of the boards that link the three men at the site today.)

As Muncil's brainstorm spread in the northern Adirondack Park, Adirondack siding became the norm in the east, south and west. Two types of waney-edge are still manufactured in the park to meet each region's replacement and new-construction demands. Homeowners, builders and even sawmill operators in one region are often unaware

of the variation in the other.

Ollie Burgess, owner of Specialty Wood Products, in Bloomingdale, sells both types. "This area is the mecca for brainstorm," says Burgess, who believes his company may be the country's largest producer. His mill has specially designed jigs to cant logs back and forth to cut wide clapboards without having to square the exposed lap edge or remove the bark. The business produces the traditional profile, which tapers from about three-quarters of an inch or more on the bottom to an eighth-inch or so at the top. Widths range from eleven to fifteen inches, generally installed with eight to ten inches to the weather. Burgess believes some early mills may have manufactured it in the twenty-inch range when wider-diameter logs were available. Ninety-nine percent of Specialty Wood Products' brainstorm is eastern white pine; the other one percent reflects a demand for naturally rot- and insect-resistant eastern white cedar, specified by designers

MATERIALS

of upscale Adirondack vacation homes. (Cedar brainstorm is narrower due to smaller available trees, and two to three times the cost.)

But Burgess's market is not bound by the Adirondack Park's Blue Line. The occasional use of waney-edge siding on campground and park cabins built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s and early 1940s helped spread the style across the country. In a recent month Burgess shipped brainstorm to customers in seven states, including forty thousand linear feet to Tennessee. A ski resort south of Syracuse requested a bid on 180,000 feet. During the early 1990s his brainstorm sales averaged about thirty-five thousand feet annually; now he ships more than a quarter-million board feet a year. Ward Lumber, in Jay, also manufactures brainstorm. Typical of northern Adirondack mills, Specialty Wood Products and Ward get little call for untapered Adirondack siding since it compromises

brainstorm's trim lines: the heavier lap of Adirondack siding usually requires thicker casings and the use of bulky corner boards; it cannot be lapped around outside corners as neatly as thinner brainstorm. "Today most customers I deal with want authentic brainstorm," says Burgess.

Beebe's Mill, in Port Henry, on the other hand, has supplied untapered waney-edge siding to eastern and southern Adirondack homeowners, builders and retailers since the 1950s. Much of the Adirondack siding on houses and camps in the Westport, Moriah, Crown Point and northern Lake George regions was manufactured at Beebe's. In the 1960s and 1970s demand was so great that customers were hauling it from mills green off the saw. Widths ranged a bit smaller here (from nine to thirteen inches) and thickness was sometimes as little as a half-inch. Some builders promote Adirondack siding as an option in their archetypal vacation-home packages. Do-it-your-

selves can buy waney-edge siding from a mill or lumber retailer, usually in even lengths between eight and sixteen feet. Experts recommend buying it kiln dried or letting it cure thoroughly before installing and sealing both sides with preservative to minimize splitting, warping and end shrink.

Look for wavy edges on backwoods cabins, lakeside cottages, barns, year-round homes, motels and even downtown businesses. The Old Forge Visitor Center is a great example of Adirondack siding, while wings of the Adirondack Park Agency feature brainstorm.

Left untreated, it weathers gray. Clear finishes yield vivid, natural wood tones. Through the 1940s it was often stained or painted in earthy shades, or soaked with black creosote, which softened over time to display a rich dark wood-grain. Since then, modern linseed-oil and acrylic-latex stains have added broad dimensions of color to this homegrown-Adirondack (thank-goodness-not-yet-in-vinyl) tradition. 3