

Preservation with a mission

Schellinger works toward creating the Avon Hills Folk School

By LIZ VOS
Staff Writer

AVON – On a comfortable summer afternoon, a breeze trickles through the leaves on 64 acres nestled in the heart of the Avon Hills. It's an ideal setting for anyone needing to collect their thoughts, find inspiration or experience something they always dreamed of.

Francis and Karen Schellinger purchased the acreage in 1969 and over time, they raised their family while building structures, traditions and a sense of community.

Being raised on the property for much of his life, Chris Schellinger credits his parents with building those components that have thus influenced his life and his plans for the property. He doesn't live far from the land and stops by often to visit with his mom and work on projects around the property. All the while, keeping a goal of creating a folk school.

While he works, his mind tends to drift to memories of his dad.

"Whether he meant to or not, my dad had his own folk school here," Chris said. "He taught so much to so many people. He was doing stuff he was interested in – sawing lumber, wood working, animals...if you can think of it, he did it or at least thought about

doing it."

Francis Schellinger passed away in 2014, leaving behind an enormous legacy.

When a friend or acquaintance would mention to Francis their plans to hire someone to build something, he would tell them they could do it themselves. The encouragement, Schellinger recalls, was always followed by Francis showing them exactly how they could accomplish the task at hand.

Schellinger recalls his dad sharing an idea he had for the land – saying that he envisioned it as a retreat. As times change and people's lives speed up and worries pile high, Schellinger said that there is no better time to bring his dad's vision into reality.

"People can't or won't quit [their job] to experience something they really want to do," he said. "But maybe they can take a break and come here."

Making his way from the house his father built to one of many structures on the property, Schellinger points out that his goal for the property is in view, but there is quite a bit of ground to cover yet.

"It will take a lot of work and some time, but eventually, this will become a folk school," he said.

The goal of creating the Avon Hills Folk School centers on something that is intrinsically within Schellinger – preservation with a mission.

Preserving this property is so important, he explained. "But not because it is for me. It's important, because it is for other people and for generations to come. It will be an opportunity for them to come, create, learn and leave knowing they did something amazing."



PHOTO BY LIZ VOS
The Spunk Brook Creek is a gem on the Schellinger property in the heart of the Avon Hills. Among plans for the property is the building of a timber frame bridge, which is the style of the rest of the structures on the site of the eventual Avon Hills Folk School.

PHOTO BY LIZ VOS

A shack provides a lodge experience in the midst of the woods. Similar timber-frame cottages are a part of the long-term plan to provide refuge for school attendees.

The mission of the folk school is to offer experiential learning in a non-competitive, inter-generational environment. In so doing, a community will be created.

On the subject of community, Schellinger again refers to his parents who welcomed others from all walks of life to be a part of the rolling hills, babbling creek and shaded point of peace that they called home.

As noted on the school's website (intheavonhills.com), Francis and Karen set the pace for what their son has been carrying forward: Through many years of welcoming visitors, Francis and Karen practiced, unintentionally, the tenets of the folk school. And through meeting these two, many people came away with a newfound confidence that they too could do what Francis and Karen had done.

"It is this beautiful and valued practice of building community through hands-on help and hospitality that we seek to continue through the Avon Hills Folk School," Schellinger said.

Going from "I wish I could" to "I did that!"

"So often you hear people say, 'I wish I could...make syrup...process sausage...make honey...' and so on," Chris said. "I really want to create this place to help people finish that sentence and make it a reality. Where they can leave and say, 'I did that!'"

After making a visit to the North House Folk School in Grand Marais 13 years ago, the idea of creating a folk school seemed to churn even deeper for Schellinger.

"There was something so inspiring there," he recalls. "Serendipitous, really. In such a setting, some of the biggest magic happens after the work is done."

Schellinger hopes to create the Avon Hills Folk School to teach skills of the past. The school would allow visitors to practice firsthand those experiences on their wish list while then being able to take that knowledge away with them and carry on their own personal traditions at home.

"It is a long-term goal and there is still so much to be done before we can really say we are ready to go," he said, coming to a halt at a pile of lumber. It is one

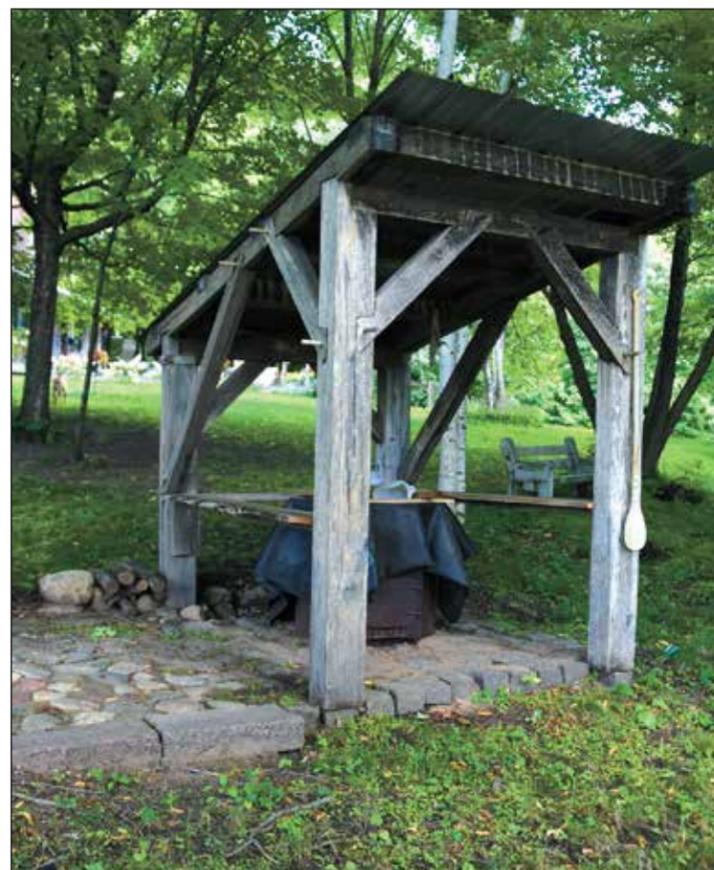


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The bouja shelter is the site of the annual bouja day, which is held on the second Saturday of October.

of many piles carefully stacked in close proximity to a two-level shed.

The lumber is not just any wood. Each piece is really a piece of a puzzle that, when fully put together, originally stood in St. Cloud and was built by Schellinger's great-grandfather,

construction of the Sugar Shack, which is nestled under trees and is the site of the creation of syrup. The parts of the old barn are now serving as sheathing that is visible through the beams of the timber frame structure. Three lintels, or horizontal blocks, were also reused in the structure, holding up the shack at the most critical structural points.

"It's really a neat tie-in to the history," Schellinger said.

Activity on the 64 pristine acres of the Schellinger property is getting deeper and deeper in motion as time passes, with construction of new and existing buildings along with the reintroduction of a community bouja-making day (which will take place the second Saturday of October).

The property is also the site of a Hand Camp, which Schellinger describes as a 'mini-folk school' of sorts during which attendees can stay at the property over the course of a few days and learn trades from area artists and crafters. Hand Camp involves teaching things like weaving, leather making, pottery and woodworking.

"I am excited to see this all come to fruition," Schellinger said. "It's an amazing journey with unending results."

"It will be an opportunity for them to come, create, learn and leave knowing they did something amazing."

- Chris Schellinger

Joseph Schellinger, in 1889.

"It was a 4-bay timber frame barn – one of the last of its kind to be built in the state," Schellinger said. "We will reconstruct it here on the site and use it as part of the school."

Portions of the barn have also been included in the



PHOTO BY LIZ VOS

Chris Schellinger stands in the Sugar Shack on his family's property in the Avon Hills, which is used for making maple syrup and eventually will be used as an instructional space at the Avon Hills Folk School. The sheathing shown beyond the main timbers was pulled from a barn built in 1889 by Schellinger's grandfather.