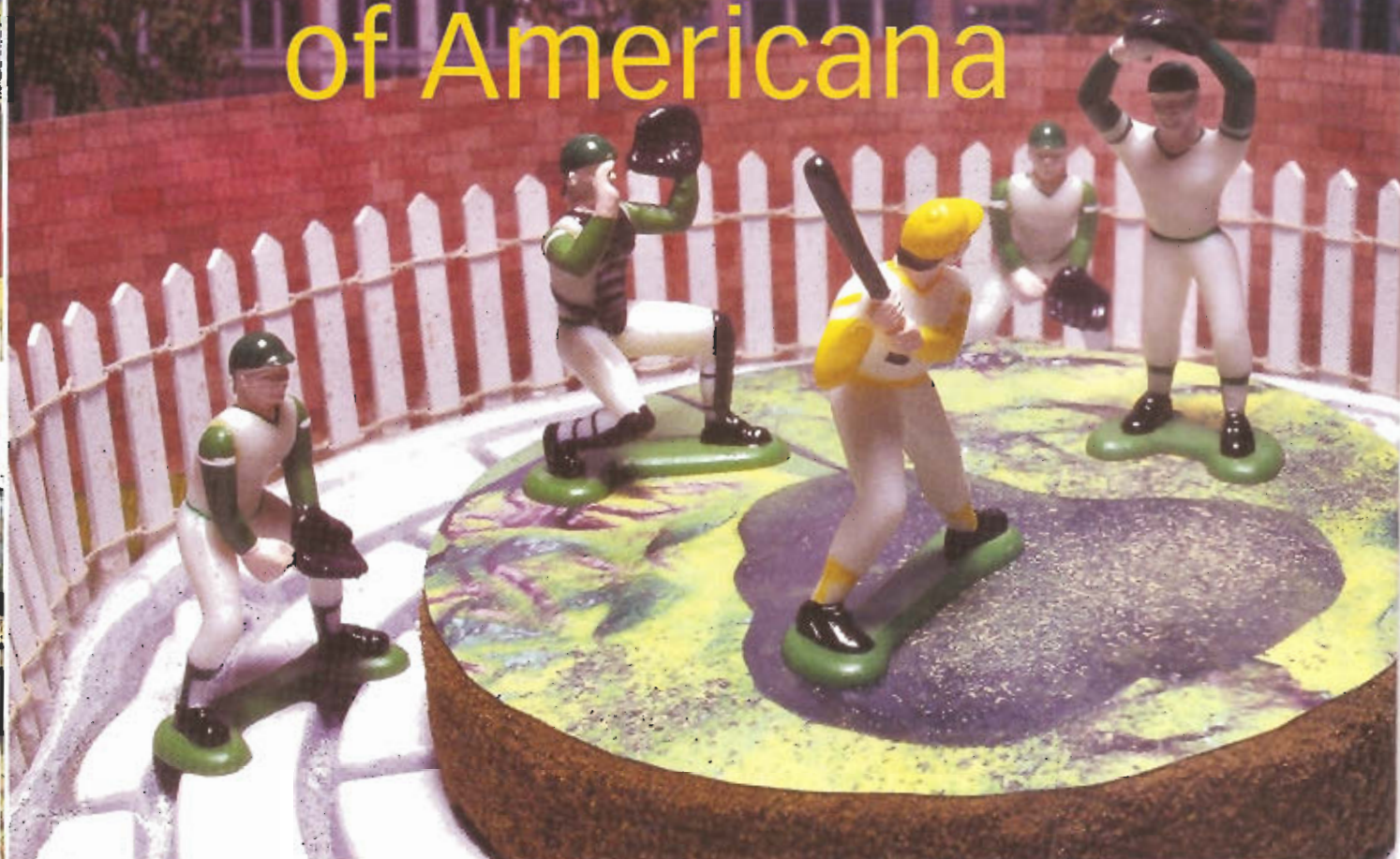


A Permanent Piece of Americana



Cooperstown is much more than the national pastime.

By Tina Traster

Baseball is not and has never been our passion. So friends thought it was odd that we as a family planned a weekend excursion to Cooperstown, N.Y. — best known as the home of the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

“Cooperstown is Americana,” I explained. It’s an intact Colonial village set on a glimmering lake in rural upstate New York. And on this particular weekend, we would see the sweet pastoral life in living color and at the Farmers’ Museum, an authentically recreated 1845 farm village with heritage breeds, a blacksmith, printer, cheesemaker and other artisans who help recreate a bygone era.

Cooperstown, a largely agricultural community, is located in Otsego County, about 65 miles west of Albany, the state capital. This lush region of hills and dales is dotted with dairy farms, streams and lakes. The 400-mile Susquehannah River, flows from the headwaters of Otsego Lake to the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. The eight-mile-long lake has been immor-

talized in James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*.

Otsego County is a rich trove of history, which can be experienced in more than 15 museums, including Historic Hyde Hall, a 19th-century country mansion, the Iroquois Indian Museum and Children’s Museum, the Leatherstocking Railroad Museum, the Science Discovery Center, Howe Caverns and the National Soccer Hall of Fame. Of course, it is the Baseball Hall of Fame on Main Street and Doubleday Field that draw millions of fans year-round.

The Baseball Hall of Fame, which opened in 1939, is a shrine to America’s favorite pastime (sometimes I think the newest pastime is real estate, but that’s another story). There’s always something going on at the museum (1-888-halloffame) and at the Doubleday Field stadium, the site where many believe baseball was first dreamed up by Abner Doubleday.

Main Street is lined with too many kitschy baseball paraphernalia stores, but if you look beyond the sweatshirt-filled



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hibits, and a sculpture garden. I visited Cooperstown too late to see this; however, the beautiful library on Main Street has year-round art shows in its gallery.

After touring for a while, Schneider's Bakery provides a good pit stop, especially for the sweet tooth and especially when the treat is accompanied by a cup of tea or java. I recommend Hoffman's Bistro and Nicoletta's Italian Café for heartier fare and Danny's Market for a good sandwich. Farther afield in Cherry Valley is a wonderful husband-and-wife eatery called the Rose & Kettle. It is worth the 20-minute drive to this rustic 200-year-old converted house where the menu features seasonal, local ingredients and a nice assortment of wines.

The jewel on the lake is the Otesaga Resort Hotel, an imposing 1909 Federal-style brick building with a bold portico supported by 30-foot columns. A member of the Historic Hotels of America, this genteel property certainly gives off a whiff of privilege with its formal decor, lakefront patios, swimming pool and boating docks, to say nothing of its manicured golf course. We stayed at the resort's sister property, The Cooper Inn, an 1816 Federal-style manor house in the heart of the village, which was built for Henry Phinney Sr., a pioneer printer and newspaper publisher who established Cooperstown as a major printing center. The 20-room inn is comfortable, friendly and offers breakfast.

After a three-hour drive Friday afternoon, followed by a good meal and a night's rest, my husband, four-year-old daughter and I set out to the Farmer's Museum on Lake Road. The Farmer's Museum, and the Fenimore Art Museum across the road are run by the New York State Historical Association. If you're visiting both, ask for the two-museum discount.

Founded in 1944, the Farmer's Museum has amassed a collection of historical buildings, including a Colonial Revival stone barn listed on the National Register of Historic Places, along with early agricultural tools and equipment. There are more than 23,000 items, including butter molds, carriages, hand planes and plows.

We stopped into the blacksmith's shop first. Dressed in period costume,

artisans actually "work the farm" — in this case, a gentleman was welding curtain rods. Nearby, we dropped in on the printer, who was rolling a pamphlet paper off his Liberty Press, the oldest one in the country. The ladies in the farmhouse were baking bread and making stew for Saturday lunch. On this chill day, the buildings were heated by wood-burning stoves and the "village residents" talked about looking forward to warmer weather. Meanwhile, chickens ran free and the sheep grazed in the field. We enjoyed stroking the docile Devon dairy cows, while the high point for my daughter was a spin on a whimsical carousel, with its bobbing animals and painted murals.

Families can participate in cheese-making, blacksmithing and quilt workshops, but the museum also holds technical workshops for local farmers.

The next day, we visited the Fenimore Cooper Museum, a neo-Georgian mansion that features classic art works by William Sidney Mount, Thomas Cole, Gilbert Stuart and Benjamin West. The museum also has an important folk art collection, masks of historic figures by J.H.I. Browere, and the Eugene and Clare Thaw American Indian Collection.

I discovered that there are many folk artists in the region, and we sought out local painter Ed Johnson, who lives 10 minutes north of Cooperstown in Fly Creek. This self-taught artist, whose works are mostly made of acrylics, water colors and house paint on Masonite and found board, welcomes visitors to his farmhouse "Studio & Gallery of Lillyknoll in the Field" (call first: 607-547-5695). Johnson's vibrantly colorful towns and landscapes are filled with the joy of rural life. His compositions are busy, exuberant and idyllic. Original paintings hang in his studio where he has painted since 1975.

Euphoric by his work, we spent time with the 72-year-old artist. We couldn't afford to purchase originals but sprang for two prints. We left the studio as the day slipped away. A soft drizzle misted the air. We headed down the farm road, enjoying a moment of fleeting beauty, happy to have a permanent piece of Americana to take home with us.

windows, you realize that you are on one of the most intact architecturally preserved streets in the land. The stellar collection of Colonials, Greek Revivals, Gothic, Queen Anne and stone houses are even more apparent when you meander down certain side streets like Pioneer, Church, Fair, Delaware and Elm. Stroll along Pioneer Street to Lake Front Park, a scenic perch to Otsego Lake, which James Fenimore Cooper dubbed "Glimmerglass Lake." (Thousands come to Cooperstown every summer to attend the internationally acclaimed Glimmerglass Opera festival, which takes place at the Alice Busch Opera Theater, located eight miles north of the village.)

During the summer only, the Smithy-Pioneer Gallery on Pioneer Street, Cooperstown's oldest building, displays three floors of local artworks, historical ex-