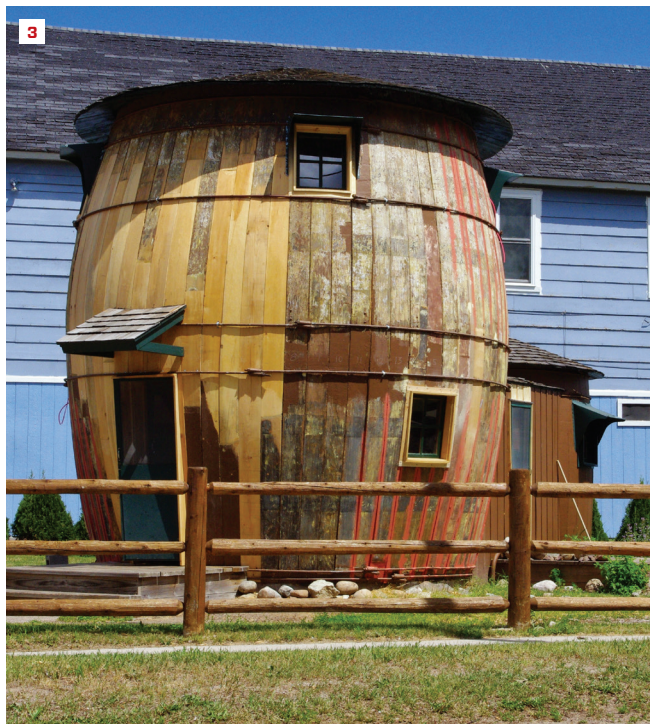


BY JON VARA

1. Throngs of curious visitors reportedly flocked to the structure during its 11-year tenure as a lakeside camp.

2. Boatbuilder George Powell cuts a scarf joint in an existing stave in an steam-bent replacement.

3. Restored to a semblance of its former glory, the Pickle Barrel House—now a museum—awaits the arrival of the painting crew.



Roll Out the Barrel House

William Donahey was a Chicago illustrator and cartoonist best known for the long-running comic strip “The Teenie Weenies,” which chronicled the adventures of a community of 2-inch people, some of whom lived in a discarded pickle barrel under a rosebush.

In 1926, in a case of life imitating art, Donahey commissioned the Pioneer Cooperage Co. to build an enormous barrel on Grand Sable Lake in the Upper Peninsula for use as a summer cabin. The 16-foot container was shipped to the site as a pile of staves and iron tension bands, where it was assembled by workers from the company. The lower half was outfitted as a sitting room and the second story as a bedroom. A smaller, 8-foot barrel was joined to the large one by a passageway to serve as a kitchen. Both barrels were fitted with shallow conical roofs.

Eleven years later, the romance of living in a barrel having worn off (mental exhaustion may also have played a part; the unusual abode reportedly attracted up

to 200 inquisitive visitors a day), Donahey and his wife Mary sold the camp to a local man who moved it to the nearby town of Grand Marais, where it was successively used as a visitor information booth, an ice cream stand, and a gift shop.

By 2003, when it was acquired by the local historical society, the structure was losing its shape, leaking badly, and showing extensive rot. After almost an additional decade of piecemeal repairs, Traverse City boatbuilder George Powell was called in to replace all or part of about 30 staves in the larger barrel.

As a restorer of historic wooden boats, Powell is unfazed by compound curves or wood rot. “One of the biggest challenges was raking out all the old caulk and older repairs that had been toenailed in place,” he recalls. “Once I could see what I had to work with, it got easier.”

Jon Vara is a JLC contributing editor who lives in Cabot, Vt.

Photos: courtesy Grand Marais Historical Society