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SETH'S COTTAGE

NEW BOOK ON 'FRANK
LLOYD WRIGHT'S
WISCONSIN' REVISITS
HIS LAST COMMISSION
IN THE BADGER STATE

By Kristine Hansen

From the outside, you might think this is a modern glass-walled cottage tucked into the woods along Mirror Lake in Mirror Lake State Park. All of this is true—except there's much more to the story.

Designed in 1958 for a young man named Seth Peterson, it's among Wright's smallest designs, at 880 square feet. An open floor plan and walls of windows easily connect with the outdoors, no matter the season. The space consists of a kitchen, bath, bedroom, living room and dining room that are seamlessly connected. Anchoring the layout is a fireplace crafted from the same buff-colored sandstone as the exterior, sourced from a quarry in nearby Rock Springs. There are only two interior doors: one leading to the bath and the other to the utility closet. A sloped roof at varying heights—from 6 feet, 8 inches to 12 feet—allows sun to pour

into the cottage while also sheltering it from harsh rays. The cottage's high ceilings make the space feel much roomier than it actually is, a concept Wright no doubt intended. In the bedroom, a band of windows invites light in but also provides privacy.

This is considered a variation on Wright's Usonian homes, on a much smaller scale. It also was Wright's final Wisconsin commission, although his design plans for other projects, including the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church, and had been in the works since many years prior, were completed after his 1959 death.

Who was Seth Peterson, the young man who commissioned this cottage?

Peterson grew up in nearby Black Earth. After touring numerous Wright projects in Illinois and Wisconsin, he tried to become a Taliesin apprentice but failed. He worked as a computer

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WRITINGS

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Left: Former Seth Peterson Cottage Conservancy board member Arnie Utzinger stopped by for a tour. He shared his memories of climbing a tall red pine to remove its branches and open up the view of Mirror Lake from the terrace.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

By Kermit Traska

Writing that interest in the Seth Peterson Cottage remains high just might be an understatement. We thank our loyal followers, both those renting the cottage for overnight stays and those that visit us on the open house afternoons the second Sunday of every month.

The cottage is reserved through all of 2024 and the majority of 2025. On Jan. 1, 2025, we will open the reservation calendar for 2026 and expect great interest in reserving those dates.

Some people have gained a year-round experience by staying during each of the seasons.

Our tour guides have been busy this summer during our Sunday afternoon open house and guided tour events. From June through October, we recorded 67, 85, 99, 70 and 95 guests, respectively. This is up 40% from last year. Some have told us they plan vacations around visiting Frank Lloyd Wright sites and plan to be at the cottage on the second Sunday of the month. Very often there will be visitors from three to six other states and an occasional international visitor.

In this issue, we have an excerpt from Kristine Hansen's new book, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Wisconsin," which was published earlier this year. Kristine joined us in October for our open house, where she sold and signed a number of copies. She and her husband then enjoyed an overnight stay.

Please note the Seth Peterson Cottage Conservancy will hold its annual meeting on Dec. 10, 2023, at the cottage. 

MIRROR LAKE ASSOCIATION REPORT

By Marcus Jaeger, President

There is plenty to report on things happening on the lake. As a result of years of hard work by several concerned people, early next year we will begin a significant improvement project. The approved plan includes selective navigational dredging (mainly on the west end). On the east side of the lake, we will remove several deltas that have been forming for many years. These deltas, if not addressed, will eventually cut off a portion of the lake.

There is a third component to the project. Some years ago, the Lake District was formed to address the growing issues threatening the lake. Primary among these issues was the vast amount of phosphorus entering the lake from the upstream farms. Along with the much-needed dredging of Dell Creek, the district was permitted to construct a 75-foot sediment trap. This trap is located just a bit down from the cottage, and this thing is deep! (Ask a fisherman about it, especially an ice fisherman!). The time has arrived to clean out the sediment trap. You can only imagine the tons of sediment the trap has prevented from entering the main body of the lake.

Well, that is surely the biggest news on Mirror Lake this year. Special mention must be made to Sauk County, the Mirror Lake Management District, the Mirror Lake Association and the Seth Peterson Cottage Conservancy for committing the majority of the funds required for this important project. The cooperation between these groups has been extraordinary and should serve as an example of how inter-government agencies and groups can work together to accomplish a common goal.

In August, we had a special visitor on the lake as a pelican was discovered swimming in the lake! No one can ever recall seeing a pelican on our lake. I wonder if he or she enjoyed their stay and if next year this pelican returns with the family!

This autumn was magnificent on Mirror Lake. Our ecology is changing as many of our maple trees are getting squeezed out (as are the birch) by the oaks and especially the pine trees. Having said that, there are still many, many maples, and their colors were tremendous. It's my hope that you get to enjoy the beauty of the lake throughout all four seasons. 

Right: A pelican sojourns on Mirror Lake this August. The visit might be the first ever recorded in the area.



Above: Ellen Bendel-Stenzel visits the cottage this summer after winning the 2023 Kristin Visser Historical Preservation Award for her renovation of the John Howe-designed Jack and Gloria Grabow House in Minneapolis.

MIRROR LAKE STATE PARK REPORT

By Patrick Cieslewicz, Park Superintendent

As we look back at the summer and fall at Mirror Lake State Park, it was another great success. In August, Mirror Lake State Park was able to host the Wisconsin Bike Federation event, Ride Across Wisconsin. Ride Across Wisconsin is a bike ride from La Crosse to Milwaukee with some riders making the trip in one day, while others stop overnight in the Wisconsin Dells and continue to Milwaukee the next day. This was a great opportunity for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and Mirror Lake State Park to partner with the Wisconsin Bike Federation and bring a new group of visitors to the park.

In early October, the Friends of Mirror Lake hosted its eighth annual S'more Fun Trail Run. The event had more than 300 participants. In mid-October, the Friends of Mirror Lake hosted its Halloween Hike. This is a family-friendly event where visitors walk along a torchlit trail and read clues to identify the "mystery guest." This year it was our state animal, the badger. During the event, volunteers offer hot chocolate and pastries for visitors to enjoy as they warm up around the campfire after the hike.

Change is occurring this fall in the Cliffwood Campground at Mirror Lake State Park. The 1970s bathroom building has been demolished and removed. The building is expected to be completed and open for visitors by the first week of June 2024. It's great to see progress here at the property, and we look forward to the new building being able to serve the needs of our visitors for many more years to come. 

SETH'S COTTAGE

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operator for the state of Wisconsin's department of motor vehicles, and had been honorably discharged from the army due to his asthma. He bought this site of 1.18 acres in 1958, which included a small cottage at the time. After the cottage burned to the ground shortly thereafter, he resorted to camping on the land.

Still burned from not being accepted into the Taliesin Fellowship program, due to not having the \$1,500 tuition, Peterson asked Wright to design a cottage for him and his fiancée. Surprisingly, Wright said yes. Although he never visited the site, two of his apprentices did: Tom Casey and John Howe. Another apprentice, William Wesley Peters, frequently claimed the cottage features more architecture per square foot than any other Wright-designed building.

Wright's absence didn't indicate a lack of emotional connection to this project. Using a

topographic map, along with plenty of photographs, Wright selected the perfect spot to build the cottage: perched on a bluff and facing the lake sideways.

"The way it's sited is what makes it so special," says Seth Peterson Cottage Conservancy board member Bill Martinelli. A retired architectural draftsman from a Madison engineering firm, Martinelli's involvement connects both his professional career and his personal passion for conserving architecture.

"Wright had no need to build a cottage," says Greg Kliner, a frequent tour guide during the cottage's open houses, held on the second Sunday of each month. "He was working on the Guggenheim. He didn't need to do this."

At 22 years old, Peterson also may have been among the youngest people to commission a design from Wright. His homes were not cheap, but this one fell into a modest price range and was not cookie-cutter, like any of the American System-Built model homes may have been when built between 1912 and 1917.

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FROM THE GUESTBOOK

Thank you to all of the folks that look after this place and take care of it. You sure know how to set up a fire. We especially enjoyed our time around the fire. There are all kinds of amazing spaces and views, but I think my favorite space was the cozy bedroom. You even get a 90-degree glass corner for good measure.

Ben & Kara
Appleton, Wisc.

This was our second visit. We love the beauty and peace and will surely return again. The views and natural beauty are incredible. We are grateful for the restoration and upkeep that have allowed us to visit this wonderful location. Thank you to those who manage this site and care for the cottage!

T.J. & Anna
Dixon, Ill.

First visit to this state treasure with a good friend who has been here several times. Thanks Laurie! Frank Lloyd Wright had the vision for this natural cabin, but so many others have worked to keep this available to all. Thank you to those folks.

M. McCarthy & L. Boyden
Mt. Horeb, Wisc.

Our stay has been wonderful. The car has not moved since we arrived, and the fire has been crackling for most of that time. We are lucky to have seen the sun set, snow fall, Bluejays and lots of sun draping through the cottage. Time here is truly a blessing. We have enjoyed spending it together on the chairs in front of the fire.

Mark & Krystyna
Oak Park, Ill.

Always wanted to visit this cottage and so glad we finally did. What a special, relaxing retreat. The coziness is spot on. The fireplace and all of the windows make this cottage. 



Seth Peterson and his sister Carolyn Royster

© Seth Peterson Cottage Conservancy

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This one stood out on its own, however. To save money on the overall budget, a garage was nixed, as was a basement or attic. The walls were not painted or plastered, another money-saving tactic.

Peterson died by his own hand before the cottage was completed. His engagement with his fiancée had ended, and he was experiencing financial hurdles in paying off the cottage. It all proved to be too much for Peterson, and he took his own life in April 1960.

Owen Pritchard lived here from 1962 to 1966. He raised Afghan hounds and later sold the cottage to the state of Wisconsin for inclusion in the new Mirror Lake State Park.

It was unoccupied until 1992, boarded up all those years until state officials, as well as members of the Mirror Lake Association, realized its pedigree.

As is the case when a house is aban-

doned, it led to derelict conditions. The roof was rotting, water had infiltrated the ceiling, and the plumbing, electrical and mechanicals needed replacing. Restoring the cottage by new owners would take some heavy lifting.

It wasn't until Audrey Laatsch was paddling along Mirror Lake—a body of water so named for its mirror-like surface—and noticed a sweet little cottage up the hill that this cottage was rescued. In March 1989, a group of about 50 people, including Laatsch, Martinelli, the Mirror Lake Association, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, met in nearby Wisconsin Dells to plot out a path to save it, forming the Seth Peterson Cottage Conservancy.

“(Audrey) was the woman that got this whole thing started,” Martinelli says of Laatsch, who died in 2002. “She was the one that pushed it through. You don't always realize until someone's gone what all they were doing.

“I grew up in the Westmoreland



Above: *The Seth Peterson Cottage as it was decorated in the early 1960s.*

© Seth Peterson Cottage Conservancy

Top right: *Audrey Laatsch*
Lower right: *Bert Goderstad*



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neighborhood,” Martinelli recalls, “not too far from the Jacobs I House. I was interested in architecture ever since I was a kid. I've been to every Wright building in the U.S.”

Architect John Eifler, who by then had worked on many Wright projects, offered his services to restore this home back to what it should have been. During the rehabilitation, which cost around \$350,000, everything but the masonry was addressed. Furnishings designed by Wright, but never built, were finally constructed. Wright-like furnishings, including two plywood chairs facing the fireplace, were designed by Eifler.

“We had all the furniture built as part of the restoration,” says Martinelli. Built-in banquette seating was also built according to Wright's plans. Radiant floor heating, expensive in 1958 but part of the original design, was finally added. In order to do this, each large, heavy rock in the flagstone flooring had to be removed and reassembled, a huge undertaking. Members of the Wisconsin

Youth Conservation Corps numbered each rock before it was placed back into the floor. The Andy Warhol Foundation was among the donors to help finance the restoration. Pella Windows & Doors donated custom windows, and Kohler, a Wisconsin plumbing manufacturer, donated fixtures similar to Wright's intended “desert sand” hue.

Two other important people were part of the process: Seth's sister, Carolyn Royster; and his close friend, Bert Goderstad. They helped guide the team with their anecdotes and letters about Peterson's intended use of the cottage.

When the cottage was first built, the area was not yet in Mirror Lake State Park. And even if it had been, Wisconsin state parks did not host overnight structures like they do today. Your only option was to pitch a tent. When this cottage hosted its first overnight guests in 1992—as both a source of revenue to fund the restoration and a way to introduce people to Wright's designs—it was the only Wright-designed structure in

the U.S. where you could stay overnight.

“What better way for people to learn about Frank Lloyd Wright than to stay here? That was genius on her part,” says Martinelli, referring to Audrey's commitment to restore this cottage. “We have a good group of volunteers that come up every year (to thoroughly clean and maintain the property during our spring work week).”

On many days, whether it's snowing, rainy or sunny, the only sound you can hear is that of birds chirping. If it's a nice day, the terrace overlooking the lake is wide enough to practice yoga or eat dinner. A canoe tied up on the cottage's dock down the hill encourages guests to further explore the area, discovering for themselves what Peterson found so magical about this little spot.

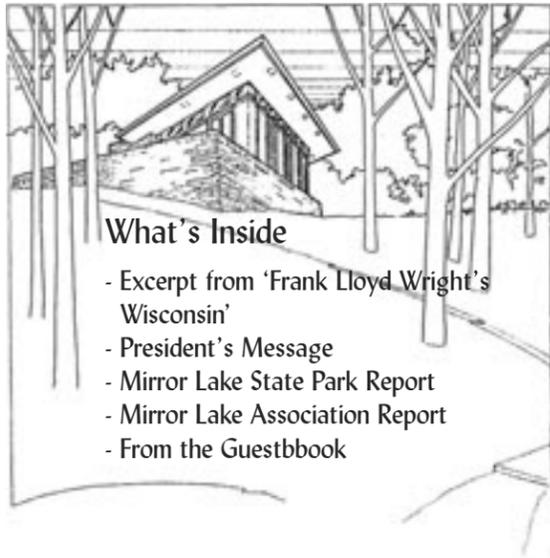
“Seth's name lives on now,” says Martinelli. “His name is now associated with a piece of famous architecture.”

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WRITINGS

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Note: Cottage location appears in the map below.



What's Inside

- Excerpt from 'Frank Lloyd Wright's Wisconsin'
- President's Message
- Mirror Lake State Park Report
- Mirror Lake Association Report
- From the Guestbook

Want to learn more about Frank Lloyd Wright's work in Wisconsin? Visit WrightInWisconsin.org.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Seth Peterson Cottage Open House and Guided Tours

- Dec. 10 1 to 4 p.m. \$5
- Jan. 14 1 to 4 p.m. \$5
- Feb. 11 1 to 4 p.m. \$5
- March 10 1 to 4 p.m. \$5
- April 14 1 to 4 p.m. \$5
- May 12 1 to 4 p.m. \$5

Notice of annual meeting

The annual meeting of the Seth Peterson Cottage Conservancy will be held at 4:15 p.m. on Dec. 10, 2023, at the cottage. The meeting will include reports on annual operations, 2023 financial reports, the proposed 2024 budget, election of board members and volunteer recognition. Please RSVP at sethpetersoncottage@gmail.com.

Visitors find touring the cottage a great way to spend a Sunday afternoon. Take a scenic drive and experience firsthand this restored Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home

during the open house tours held on the second Sunday of each month. For more information about the cottage, visit us online at SethPeterson.org.

Seth Peterson Cottage
E9982 Fern Dell Road
Lake Delton, Wisconsin

