

Collection holds hope for village comeback

A year after flooding and other grim news, opening of art museum is giving Canajoharie a boost

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CANAJOHARIE -- After a grim year that seemed almost biblical in its afflictions, the 2,200 beleaguered villagers are wondering if art will once again prove a restorative force that lifts spirits and fortunes.

They have weathered a flood, fire and word that a new Beech-Nut plant is being built elsewhere. Can the beauty of American Impressionist paintings reverse the gloom?

Art was the tonic applied in Canajoharie in the 1920s and '30s by Bartlett Arkell, Beech-Nut founder and noted art collector. Arkell's influence could be seen in the plant's cafeteria, which was filled with museum-quality paintings, hanging ferns, fine oak furniture and a pianist who played classical music during lunch hour.

"He wanted to bring art to the people of Canajoharie because he believed it was good for the mind, body and soul," said Diane Forsberg, deputy director and chief curator of the Arkell Museum. It houses the bounty of Arkell's two-decade buying spree of American art, beginning in 1925.

Arkell amassed a remarkable 500-piece collection that includes 21 oils and watercolors by Winslow Homer, as well as works by John Singer Sargent, Thomas Hart Benton, Edward Hopper, Mary Cassatt, Georgia O'Keefe and Andrew Wyeth.

Since 1927, the collection was a little-known gem seen by just 5,000 visitors a year, tucked away in the Canajoharie Library. Limited space allowed only a tiny fraction of the paintings to be exhibited at a time.

The facility is located in the heart of Canajoharie, just off the Thruway at Exit 29, 55 miles west of Albany.

Saturday there will be a gala grand opening reception in the new \$10.5 million, 30,000-square-foot Arkell Museum. Its completion was delayed by flooding of the Mohawk River after torrential rains in June 2006. A great-grandson of Arkell's, who lives in Pennsylvania, will attend. On Sunday, the new museum will open to the public.

Fortunately, the paintings had already been moved out during construction and none were damaged in the flood.

"The museum opening has been a long time coming, but it's a sign of hope for the future of Canajoharie," said Eric Trahan, the museum's executive director. "We believe we're on the cusp of something great."

On a glorious late-summer afternoon this week, three days before the opening, the airy and expansive new facility resounded with the sound of drills and hammers as the finishing touches were being put on displays.

A few blocks away, the whine of power saws pierced the air outside Church Street storefronts, part of an ambitious downtown facade restoration project paid for through state grants.

"I think we're coming back a little bit," said William Edward Perkins, 87, who sat on his front porch on West Main Street. He's a block from the museum perched at the foot of the white, monolithic Beech-Nut plant that has made Canajoharie its company town for a century.

That will change after Beech-Nut's recent announcement that it will move its baby food packing operation into a larger plant in the town of Florida, about 15 miles away. Construction will begin soon on the \$124 million factory that is expected to open in late 2009, when the 337 jobs at the Canajoharie plant will move.

Despite a run of bad luck the past year, villagers view the museum opening as the start of positive developments.

"We got beat up pretty badly by the flood, but now we're picking ourselves up and we're excited about the museum opening. It's going to be a great thing," said Dorine Solberg, an owner of a framing shop, Picture Perfect, across from the museum. Like several other downtown businesses, she suffered extensive flood damage.

Bartlett Arkell, who died in 1946, continues to bring art to the village. His family's philanthropic foundation kicked in \$7 million of the cost of the new museum. Exhibits tell the story of the company and Arkell family.

The factory opened in 1891 as a packing plant for bacon, ham, dried beef and lard.

Arkell, a Rabelaisian figure with the marketing savvy of P.T. Barnum, began building the Beech-Nut brand with a dizzying array of products: coffee, catsup, peanut butter, figs, chili sauce, dentifrice, black cough drops, preserved prunes, crackers, liver and beef soup. He also dropped some items that never caught on, including ginger ale and fish bait.

He dubbed Canajoharie "Flavor-Town."

Arkell was known as a progressive employer. In addition to the paintings and piano playing in the cafeteria, he paid above-average wages, set aside profits for old-age benefits and a Christmas bonus for all employees.

Arkell resisted buyout offers. "I will not sell out to anyone at any price," he said. "To me, Beech-Nut is more than a business. It is my ideal, my service to the public."

He made his art collection do double-duty, often incorporating paintings into ad campaigns and as props in photo shoots.

"Made with care, in country air, at Flavor-Town" was one of his company's jingles. He sent Beech-Nut circus buses crisscrossing the country with uniformed "gum girls" who passed out millions of free samples of Beech-Nut gum and candy.

Time will tell if Arkell's belief in the power of art once again can lift Canajoharie, which has struggled economically along with other faded industrial towns along the Mohawk Valley.

Trahan hopes to increase visitors fivefold at the new museum, to 25,000 annually.

"We hope to be the reason for people to pull off the Thruway and stay awhile," he said.

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