



(Globe photo)

The Boston Globe

Saved from development, a place to dream, dine

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Globe Correspondent / October 16, 2005

GROTON -- Many dreams have risen and set on Gibbet Hill, a steep rise that overlooks hundreds of acres of pastureland dotted with black Angus cattle and clumps of old oak. It's easy to see why this spot has long attracted doers and dreamers: On clear days, anyone willing to hike up the mown strip along the cattle fence can take in views of Boston and Mounts Wachusett and Watatic.

The latest ventures in the property's long history are the Gibbet Hill Grill and a function hall, The Barn at Gibbet Hill. Both opened last year in century-old barns. The grill building has been transformed into a multilevel space with a soaring cathedral ceiling and lots of glass. A sleek silver "silo" houses two intimate dining rooms, each seating six to eight people. The Barn features not only interior space, but also a canopied deck, patio, and spacious lawn.

The grill's moderately priced menu features pasta and seafood dishes, but emphasizes prime cuts of black Angus. Thomas Totman, who manages the grill and the barn, says the Gibbet Hill cattle aren't destined for the dining table, though. They are a breeding herd, with some 40 calves born last spring.

The restaurant enterprise covers only a tiny portion of the property, comprising the 338-acre cattle farm and an adjacent orchard of 188 acres. Owner Steven Webber is something of a hero in town, at least to those who champion the preservation of open space. In 2000, Webber, a Groton native who founded Geotel Communications (a Lowell-based software

company now owned by Cisco Systems), stepped in to purchase the property for \$10 million, preventing an imminent sale to a developer with plans to build 78 homes. Webber has since worked with the state and the town to conserve the land, except for the six acres containing the restaurant buildings and grounds.

"The Webbers feel that this land belongs to the people of Groton, and the restaurant is an extension of that community feeling," says Totman, adding that before Webber's ownership, the land was off limits to the public. An extensive trail system will make public access to the full acreage possible.

"Gibbet" (pronounced JI beht) is an archaic word for gallows. The English settlers who named the place probably did so in honor of a hill in the old country, rather than because they strung up criminals here, Webber says. Other than its name, the land's only relic of Colonial times is a white house built in 1655 by farmer John Lawrence and occupied now by private residents.

Starting in the early 20th century, a string of entrepreneurs laid claim to the hill. In 1906, a Cambridge mayor, who was also an executive at the Boston Elevated Railway, started to build a castle-style country home, called Shawfieldmont. He got as far as a bungalow and observation tower before running out of money. A physician bought the property in 1918, using the bungalow as a private sanitarium. He built a home and clubhouse, also of fieldstone, farther up the hill. In the 1920s, the sanitarium housed TB patients. The following decade saw the doctor's residence converted into a clubhouse for the Groton Hunt Club. A Fourth of July fireworks celebration in 1932 sparked a fire that claimed the original stone bungalow. Marion Campbell, a writer and publishing heiress, bought the property in 1947 and turned it into a breeding farm for black Angus. The operation prospered, with 600 cattle by the 1980s. Campbell's estate was negotiating to sell to the developer when Webber intervened.

The ruined castle anchors the remains of these former enterprises. A pair of stone gateposts marks the entrance to what once must have been a formal approach drive, now just a ribbon of mown meadow. The trail leads to the crest of Gibbet Hill, where the castle bungalow's fieldstone walls stand open to the sky. Upstairs and downstairs fireplaces protrude from a two-story chimney wall. Boston ivy cloaks an adjoining wall and multiflora roses spills over another, making for a romantic ruin.

The tower's roof and floors are long gone, but its walls are intact, thanks to extensive patching. The big cylinder houses two fireplaces. Farther up the hill, old oaks outline the now-erased foundations of the barns. A fragment of fieldstone wall spans two tree trunks, probably the remains of the house burned by careless foxhunters.

With its close family involvement, the support of the community, and luck, Webber's enterprise -- open space, restaurants, cattle, and all -- may be a dream that lasts a little longer. Meanwhile, anyone who hikes up to view the ruins will focus on what the restaurant is serving for dinner.

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