By Adam Federman

Edward Livingston Trudeau came to Saranac Lake to die, but he helped transform the village into a world-renowned center for TB treatment.

Last fall, Army Chaplains, veterans, healers, and counselors gathered at the former Trudeau Sanatorium in Saranac Lake to talk about helping soldiers recover from the trauma of war. The meeting was sponsored by Homeward Bound Adirondacks (previously named Patriot Hills), which hopes to establish a retreat center in the village for members of the armed services.

Homeward Bound chose Saranac Lake partly because of the community’s reputation as a center for medical treatment and research, dating to the late 1800s, when it began welcoming tuberculosis patients.

“It’s a real working, breathing community that has a healing history,” said Susan Waters, Homeward Bound’s executive director.

Cartoonist Garry Trudeau, the great-grandson of Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau, who founded the sanatorium and pioneered the “fresh-air cure” in the United States, has called Homeward Bound “a return to the healing ethos for which Saranac Lake was once world-renowned.”

Indeed, the TB era transformed Saranac Lake, earning it the title of “The Little City in the Adirondacks,” which referred to more than just its size as the largest settlement in the Park. People from all over the world flocked to this remote outpost seeking a reprieve from the killer disease that was, until then, regarded as a death sentence. Artists, writers, and musicians, world-class athletes, and entertainers all made their way to Saranac Lake. “From the brown-shingled affluence of Park Avenue where the swells lived,” writes Elizabeth Mooney in her memoir of her mother’s cure in the 1920s, In the Shadow of the White Plague, “to the lowest two-bed rooming house calling itself a ‘san,’ the entire social structure of Saranac geared itself to TB. … It was a world center but it was still a small village.”

Today, Saranac Lake retains many of the attributes that made it a destination for hundreds of thousands of patients and their families over a period of seventy-five years. It’s still a small village, roughly two square miles, with just over five thousand people (compared with eight thousand at the peak of the TB era). Even so, it has an extraordinary network of social services, a legacy from its earlier days. There’s the Adirondack Medical Center, the largest private employer in the Adirondack Park, St. Joseph’s Addiction Treatment and Recovery Center, which is poised to add a twenty-five-bed facility for veterans grappling with addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder, and a new Veterans Administration outpatient clinic set to open this year.

Veterans come to heal

This won’t be the first time that veterans have come to the Adirondacks to heal. After World War I, servicemen were disproportionately afflicted with TB; at least 650 came to Saranac Lake seeking the cure, and many of the local “cure cottages” had contracts with the Veterans Administration. The imposing array of buildings in Tupper Lake known as Summount was originally a Veterans Hospital that opened in 1924 and, over the years, accommodated some thirty-five thousand service members.

“It’s sort of like sticking your toe back into the water of civilization after being away, rather than being dropped in the streets of Brooklyn,” Waters said. “So I think that people can come here and get away but still be in civilization.” The village itself is willing and able to accommodate Homeward Bound veterans, she added. “This community has a memory of that civic pride and the inclusion that citizens extended to the TB patients.”

Many local families, including my own, trace their connection with Saranac Lake to the TB era. Originally from a small village in eastern Latvia, my great-grandparents, Aaron and Sarah Weinstock, came to this Adirondack village via New York City in 1908 after Aaron was diagnosed with TB. They raised seven daughters here, including my grandmother, Eva Federman, and ran a small grocery store on Pontiac Bay. Aaron died of a brain tumor in 1927, but Sarah stayed until the last of her daughters, Ida Harr, left Saranac Lake. Coincidentally, it was Ida and her husband, Maks Harr, who rented a cottage on Riverside Drive to the composer Bela Bartok, who spent the last summer of his life in Saranac Lake. (Bartok had TB as a child, but he was sent to Saranac Lake because he was ill with leukemia.)

Parents practice medicine in Trudeau homestead

Though my father visited only twice as a small boy, he returned in the mid-1970s with my mother. Having recently graduated from medical school, my parents joined the medical practice of E.L. Trudeau’s grandson, Dr. Francis Trudeau. Their offices, Medical Associates, are still in Trudeau’s old residence on the corner of Church and Main streets, next door to the Saranac Laboratory where he carried out much of his research.

E.L. Trudeau’s legacy lives on in the Trudeau Institute, a research facility overlooking Lower Saranac Lake, devoted to the study of immunology and infectious diseases. Though tucked away near the edge of...
town, the institute looms large as part of Saranac Lake’s identity. Earlier this year, amid speculation that it might be relocated to North Carolina or Florida, an uproar ensued. Everyone from U.S. Senator Charles Schumer to newly elected Governor Andrew Cuomo advocated keeping the facility in Saranac Lake, touting its economic and symbolic importance. The institute has a $17 million budget and roughly 120 employees, including close to forty faculty and post-doctoral fellows—a very big deal for a little mountain village.

This spring, Trudeau’s board of directors voted overwhelmingly to stay in Saranac Lake, although the Adirondack Daily Enterprise recently reported that the institute’s director and several scientists would soon be leaving. The same article said that, because of the departures, the facility may lose some of its research funds. Though the institute is still intimately tied to the village, few are left who remember the TB era. The development of drugs to treat TB marked the end of the sanatorium era, and the last of the patients treated in Saranac Lake came in the early 1950s (New York Giants second baseman Larry Doyle was the last one to leave the sanatorium). E. L. Trudeau, who is rightfully credited with establishing Saranac Lake’s reputation as the first and foremost TB treatment center in the United States, died nearly a hundred years ago. His autobiography, first published in 1915, has been out of print for more than half a century (see sidebar on page 65). Garry Trudeau, who serves on the board of Homeward Bound and has focused attention on the plight of returning veterans through his Doonesbury comic strip, reflected not long ago on his great grandfather’s legacy.

Garry Trudeau recalls childhood

In the introduction to Victoria E. Rinehart’s Portrait of Healing: Curing in the Woods, he writes of his childhood: “the young boy who bicycled down Trudeau road into the warren of graceful buildings … could scarcely comprehend why his ubiquitous name had come to stand for so much for so many. There was the beautiful statue of the great healer situated on the hillside just below the main road, but surrounded as it was by forlorn, decommissioned cottages, his legacy was not obvious to me. ELT was a general in a war that had been largely forgotten.”

Historic Saranac Lake, a preservation group founded in 1980, was in part created to ensure that E.L. Trudeau’s legacy is not forgotten. The nonprofit organization helped restore the village’s train station, where legions of TB sufferers arrived over the decades, and also reclaimed Trudeau’s laboratory on Church Street, the first in the United States built exclusively for the study of tuberculosis, which is now a small museum. And they spearheaded the efforts to put nearly two hundred cure cottages on the National Register of Historic Places to preserve Saranac Lake’s distinctive architectural past. Its most telling structural feature, the ubiquitous “cure porch,” is a simple room with large glass windows that were often kept open even during the coldest days of winter. There the patients would recline for hours at a time in their “cure chairs,” resting and taking in the fresh air. During the TB days, some two thousand buildings were adapted for this purpose.

Moreover, between the founding of the sanatorium in 1884 and E.L. Trudeau’s death in 1915, Saranac Lake’s population increased nearly fivefold. “The Adirondacks were then visited only by hunters and fishermen,” E.L. Trudeau wrote of the pre-sanatorium days in An Autobiography, “and it was looked upon as a rough, inaccessible region and considered a most inclement and trying climate.” In just a few decades the town went from a settlement of about fifteen families along the Saranac River, with little more than a lumber mill, schoolhouse, and general store, to a bustling, cosmopolitan village. And because the town was devoted to caring for sick patients with a deadly and communicable disease, hygiene and modern sanitation were paramount. In a very short period of time a public water supply, sewer system, and incinerator were installed. Paved streets followed soon after. A health code that barred spitting in public places was rigorously enforced.

Trudeau, who had been elected the town’s first president (the equivalent of mayor) in 1892, was instrumental in the town’s rapid development. Stephen Chalmers, a journalist and friend of Trudeau, noted in a 1912 article that Saranac Lake “has been a pioneer in the practice of a scientific sanitary code” whose “example was not lost upon New York City when the latter came to make...
its general code.” The Village Improvement Society, one of whose founding members came to Saranac Lake because her husband had TB, oversaw the design and construction of an impressive number of parks, many of which still define the town’s physical character. “You can look at just about anything and credit Trudeau and the health industry,” says Amy Catania, executive director of Historic Saranac Lake.

A stroll through town reveals just how much of the built environment reflects Saranac Lake’s unusual history. The Currier Block, now the Little Italy restaurant, was a private sanatorium from 1911 to 1930. The enclosed porches are still visible on the backside, overlooking the river. The house I grew up in on Rockledge Road has two south-facing cure porches and was built in 1915 by a civil engineer whose wife had TB. The towering Cluett House, just up the road, was also a cure cottage. The offices of the Adirondack Explorer occupy the former dining room, which still define the town’s physical character. “You can look at just about anything and credit Trudeau and the health industry,” says Amy Catania, executive director of Historic Saranac Lake.

Even buildings not designed for TB treatment owe their existence to patients who came for the cure, including the Haase Block (Adirondack Bank) and Donaldson Block (China Jade and The Fringe). William Haase, an Episcopal clergyman, had been in line to become chancellor of the St. Louis diocese, but he contracted TB and settled in Saranac Lake instead. Alfred Donaldson, who came from a family of bankers, suffered the same fate and moved to the village in 1895. Two years later he recovered sufficiently to found the First National Bank and went on to write a multi-volume history of the Adirondacks.

A special place for theater people

The Will Rogers Hospital (originally the National Variety Artists Lodge) was created largely through the efforts of theatrical agent William Morris, who also came to Saranac Lake to cure and then constructed a summer home, Camp Intermezzo, on nearby Lake Colby. Will Rogers (now a retirement home) was built specifically for vaudeville artists and theatrical personnel, from ticket-takers on up. Celebrities and entertainers were drawn to this bustling village, and many performed at the 1,200-seat Pontiac Theater in the center of town.

“Every night the Pontiac played to a full house with a waiting line,” writes Elizabeth Mooney. In a bid to raise funds for the hospital, Morris brought luminaries such as Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, and Sir Harry Lauder to perform as the City of the Sick, considered by some to be a kind of American Siberia. Helen Hill, where dozens of cure cottages were built, was referred to locally as “Hemorrhage Hill.” According to the late Clarence Petty, one of Lake Placid’s high-school chiefs when competing with archival Saranac Lake was “Hack, Hack, Saranac!” There are stories of travelers driving hastily through town with bandanas covering their faces, for fear of contracting the disease. (In fact, infection rates in Saranac Lake were remarkably low.)

Many patients were far from home and from their families. An early TB sufferer writing in Harper’s magazine in 1879 noted that “days will come when the monotony of this manner of life will doubtless oppress the invalid—when the grandeur of the scene about him will fail utterly to compensate for the absence of familiar faces and accustomed pursuits.” Others came knowing that they would probably spend the last days of their lives here. Mary Hotaling, former executive director of Historic Saranac Lake, said at least fifteen TB patients had died in her home, a former cure cottage, in the 1920s. To avoid a daily parade of coffins, corpses were loaded onto freight cars late at night and sent back to where they had come from. To this day it remains unclear just how many TB patients died in the village.

But for those who did recover, and many did, their time in Saranac Lake often marked a turning point. In 1977, American novelist Walker Percy, author of The Moviegoer and The Last Gentleman, who spent two years in Saranac Lake, told the New York Times that “I was in bed so much, alone so much, that I had nothing to do but read and think. I began to question everything I once believed. Then I gradually began to realize that as a scientist—a doctor, a pathologist—I knew a good deal about man but had little idea what man is.”

“A higher type of courage”

E.L. Trudeau himself endured long years of illness and isolation. He lived with TB for more than four decades and lost his brother and one of his children to the same disease. Indeed, his personal experience shaped his approach to care and treatment. In his autobiography, he describes tuberculosis as “an ever-present and relentless foe” that robbed him of his youth, drove him to seek refuge in the mountains, and took the lives of many people whom he loved.

But those experiences, he wrote, echoing Percy, “have shown me glimpses of the spiritual in man, and brought me a larger and more precious message than even the gratitude and affection of those who have recovered.
A full life remembered

By Neal Burdick

Occupying a place of honor in my collection of historic Adirondack books is a well-worn volume with yellowing pages and a frayed binding. A forest-green cover reads simply, “An Autobiography by Edward Livingston Trudeau M.D.”

Inside is the inscription of my grandfather, Charles M. Burdick, also a North Country physician, who may have known Trudeau. Following a portrait of “The Beloved Physician” looking gaunt in a tweed jacket but intensely studying a newspaper through pince-nez (one of several illustrations in the book) is the publication information: Garden City, New York / Doubleday Page & Company / 1916.

Much of Trudeau’s story is revealed in this remarkable and highly readable book that he completed in 1915, the year of his death. It is one of the better-known aspects of his extraordinary life, including:

- His 1873 arrival, virtually on his deathbed, at Paul Smith’s, upon which he was carried to his room in the arms of the Trudeau family guide, Fred Martin, who exclaimed, “Why, Doctor, you don’t weigh no more than a dried lamb-skin.”
- His description of a harrowing, blizzard-racked, three-day ride, with his family, from Malone to Paul Smith’s.
- The devastating deaths of three of his four children.
- His rabbit experiments, through which he helped prove germ theories and change the way the world attacked a horrific disease.
- His friendships with standoffish Robert Louis Stevenson—who spent a rugged winter in Saranac Lake for his health, morbidly measuring the growing length of an icicle on his rented cottage—and jovial innkeeper Paul Smith.
- His vision that led to construction of the famed Little Red, his first “cure cottage,” and the founding of the Adirondack Cottage Sanitarium, which Fitz Greene Hallock, his close friend and favorite guide, complained was the ruination of perfectly good hunting ground, even as Hallock joined with other guides to purchase the site for the doctor.
- Beyond anecdotes, the book mirrors a man who blended modesty with pride, who was charming, stubborn, articulate, plainspoken, warm and caring, slightly irritable, well-connected, often lucky, religious, determined, optimistic, given to rapid mood swings, witty, incisive, opinionated. It reveals a man who sometimes could not raise himself from his bed and yet was able to summon the energy to publish his research and found and serve as first president of the National Tuberculosis Association. Early on, Trudeau forged in the past two months,” He was also a good marksman. Not possessing the strength to sit up, Trudeau rested his rifle on the side of the boat and landed a buck two hundred yards away.
- The wilderness and natural beauty—what brought Trudeau to Paul Smith’s is still what distinguishes the region, along with its friendly, small-town atmosphere. According to Waters, “The healing history of our area was based on the environment around us and the fresh-air cure. It is one of the primary reasons Saranac Lake is an ideal location for Homeward Bound.” The group plans to integrate hiking, camping, and fishing trips into the training programs and is already working with local guides and outfitters. “It could be anything from a pleasant experience to an adventure,” she said.

In Trudeau’s day there were no drugs to treat the disease. Before the sanatorium era, patients were isolated and told to stay indoors with the windows shut. When Trudeau himself contracted TB he made the fortunate decision to retreat to the Adirondacks and spend what he believed were his waning days in a place he had come to love. “I had been to Paul Smith’s in the summer on two occasions,” he wrote, “and had been greatly attracted by the beautiful lakes, the great forest, the hunting and fishing, and the novelty of the free and wild life there. If I had but a short time to live I yearned for surroundings rich in step, a man who loathed fund raising, was yet so good at it that he succeeded in attracting support not only for his growing sanatorium but also for two churches, a library, and numerous other civic causes in his adopted community. Indeed, paralleling his own story, Trudeau also describes Saranac Lake’s emergence as a regional hub and world leader in medicine, roles it still plays.

Without calling undue attention to the fact, Trudeau reminds readers that his philosophy was never to refuse treatment to anyone, regardless of financial means—indeed, he opened his sanatorium expressly for those who were not wealthy—and to welcome all comers in an era when establishments such as the Lake Placid Club, a dozen miles away, posted notices that “Jews and Consumptives Need Not Apply.” He had lost a brother to the disease and would see it claim his only daughter, episodes he relates in wrenching terms in his book. And, as he was not reticent about noting, he was a sufferer himself. He did not have to contrive empathy for his patients.

Trudeau states that the writing of his life’s story would likely be his last act of consequence. In his sixty-seventh year in the summer of 1915, a virtual invalid since 1905, he felt his health ebbing. Indeed, he found it necessary to dictate much of the manuscript, which makes its generally upbeat tone all the more impressive.

The book did prove to be his final accomplishment, for he died that fall at his home in Saranac Lake before it came out. Brought several months later, it was last published in 1944. This long out-of-print classic deserves to be brought forth again as the centennial of the famous doctor’s passing approaches.