

After she survived the ***Titanic*** sinking, socialite **Madeleine Astor**, 19, came here to mourn her newlywed husband, **John Jacob Astor IV**; play a little tennis; and raise their child. Her astonishing Bar Harbor cottage, **La Selva**, is another survivor—yours this summer for \$2.3 million.

# Viva

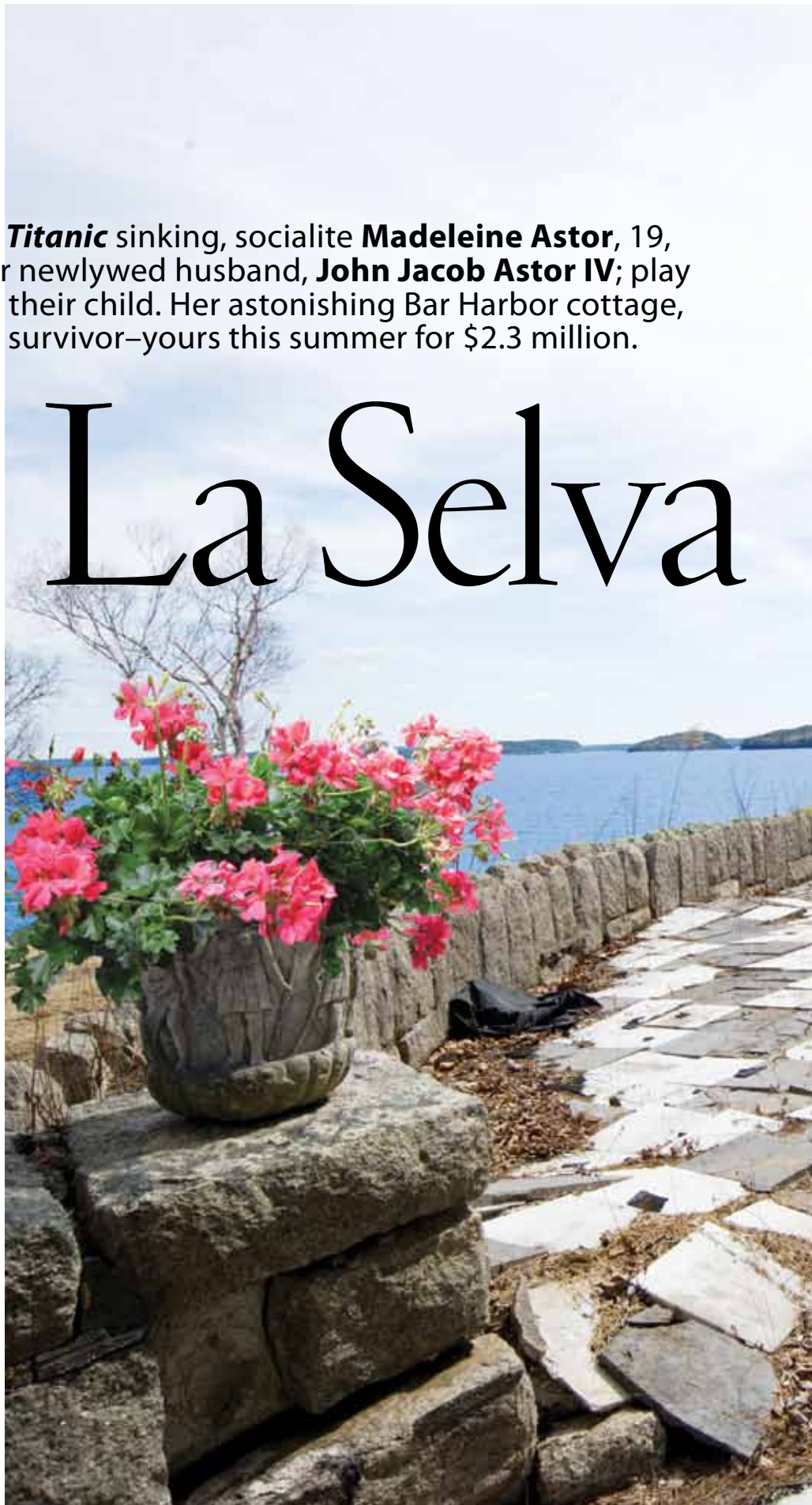
# La Selva

BY BRAD EMERSON

Only a few grand ‘cottages’ of Bar Harbor’s era as a glamorous summer resort survive. One of the most famous, La Selva, is for sale. Its story is quintessentially American, a serial whose installments might have been written by Howells, Wharton, or Fitzgerald.

La Selva (*selva* is Spanish for jungle or forest) was built in 1902 for Andrew Jackson Davis, a successful coal operator from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. His big payday came in 1900, when he sold the mines to the LeHigh Railroad and retired to enjoy his new fortune. The family had summered in Northeast Harbor, but now they set their sights on Bar Harbor, where they felt the scenery was even finer, and where in the company of some of America’s most prominent families—Morgans, Vanderbilts, Pulitzers, McCormicks, and Livingstons—their marriageable daughters would be launched in society.

**LOVE AMONG THE RUINS**—La Selva, looking more than a little bit haunted; harsh elements and neglect are well on their way to reclaiming the jaunty checkerboard tile patio.









## HOUSE OF THE MONTH



**A YEAR TO REMEMBER**—From top: John Jacob Astor IV and second wife Madeleine's honeymoon grand tour made history when the couple's return trip on *Titanic's* maiden voyage ended in tragedy—the pregnant bride was rescued from the foundering ship while her husband perished; the Astors, driving in New York; their film personae (Eric Braeden and Charlotte Chatton) meet fictitious shipboard lovers Rose (Kate Winslet) and Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio) in James Cameron's 1997 Academy Award-winning film; lowering the lifeboats in another scene from the movie; top left, the John Jacob Astor action figure was a tasteless by-product of the blockbuster film phenomenon; the demise of *Titanic's* grand staircase would lead to the opulent comfort of La Selva for grieving young mother Madeleine in 1913 and again as a bride-to-be in 1916.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: EBAY; FILE (2); 20TH CENTURY FOX/PARAMOUNT PICTURES (2); COURTESY BRAD EMERSON (2); TITANIC MUSEUM





Mr. Davis purchased shorefront property on Eden Street and selected noted Boston architects Andrews, Jacques and Rantoul, who'd dreamed up many of Bar Harbor's finest cottages, for the design. Robert Andrews had begun his career in the office of H.H. Richardson and was considered the chief inheritor of the great man's tradition; partner Herbert Jacques maintained a summer home in Bar Harbor, convenient to the firm's clients.

Mansions in an array of styles were rising all along Eden Street. With a slight whiff of Colonial Revival and a *souçon* of French château, La Selva was three stories high and over 100 feet long, with more than 20 rooms. Nevertheless, the cottage was smaller and more intimate than many of its neighbors. At the entrance, a stone porte-cochère provides shelter as one embarked from a carriage. On the ocean side, the main rooms open to a terrace with broad steps sweeping down rolling lawns at the edge of the bluff, anchoring the house to its site. The main rooms—library, dining room, music room, and living room, have fine woodwork—ele-

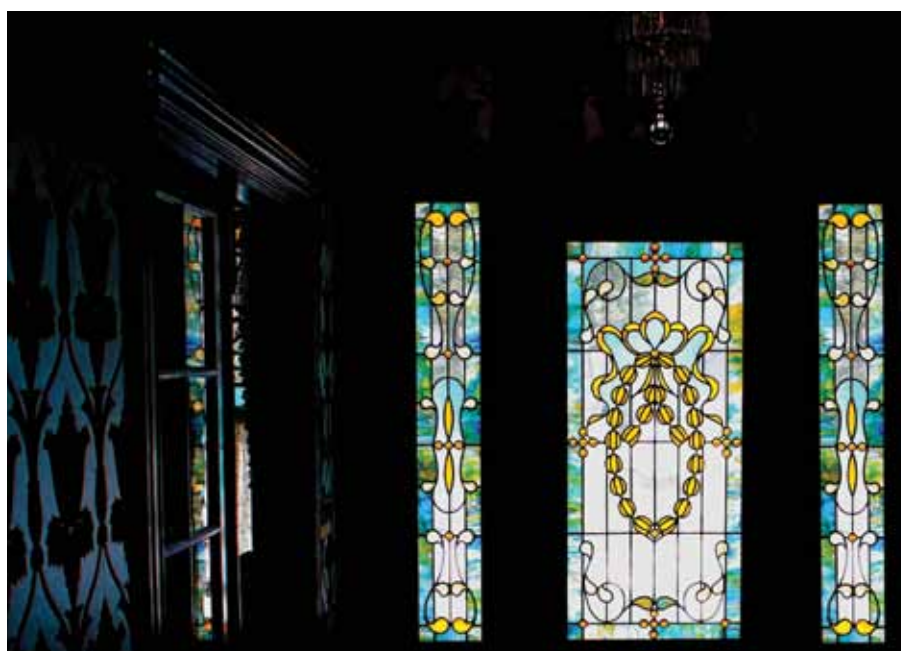
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## KNOW YOUR

Direct descendants of the original "Four Hundred," Nick and Jackie Drexel are active in New York's society scene. She's the daughter of John Jacob Astor VI (Jakey), and he's the descendant of Philadelphia banker A.J. Drexel, who hired a young J. Pierpont Morgan—leading to the firm known as Drexel, Morgan, and later J.P. Morgan Chase. Consistent with their families' historic wealth in real estate and banking, Jackie, formerly with Sotheby Parke Bernet real estate, is a broker at Manhattan's Stribling Associates, and Nick is an investment banker.

John "Nick" R Drexel IV (b. 1945) married Mary Jacqueline "Jackie" Astor (b. 1949)



Gertrude Gretsches (b. 1923), Jakey's third wife.



Enzo Fiermonte (1908-1993), Madeleine's third husband



Enzo Fiermonte was a professional boxer (45w-131) who became an actor in American film under the screen name William Bird.

Madeleine Force (1893-1940) married Astor already pregnant with J.J. VI.



FROM TOP: PANACHEPRIVEE LUXURY REAL ESTATE; EBAY; COURTESY JENNIFER KEARNS; DAILYEXPRESS.CO.UK; FILE

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# ASTOR FAMILY HOUSE OF THE MONTH



The WALDORF-ASTORIA's original location (on the Fifth Avenue site of the Empire State Building) began as two hotels: one owned by William Waldorf Astor, whose 13-story Waldorf Hotel was opened in 1893, and the other by his cousin JOHN JACOB ASTOR IV, who opened the Astoria Hotel four years later and four stories higher; both were demolished for the 1930 erection of the Empire State Building. The present building at 301 Park Avenue in Manhattan is a 1931, 47-story Art Deco landmark designed by architects Schultze and Weaver.

Asta (1931-1959), faithful fox terrier of high society's Nick & Nora Charles in Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man* film and TV series.

Why even bring him up?



While no blood relation to the Astors, Tony Marshall was accused of mismanaging his aged, ailing mother Brooke Astor's finances, including millions in cash, property, and stocks. Marshall's son Philip filed suit to remove him as guardian of Brooke's estate, alleging mistreatment and financial improprieties. J.P. Morgan Chase questioned Brooke's mental capacity and a transfer of \$3.4M and Cove End, her Northeast Harbor estate, to Tony. Marshall was tried, convicted, and sentenced to 1 to 3 years in 2009; he remains free on appeal.

Anthony "Tony" Dryden Marshall (b. 1924), is the son of Brooke and John Dryden Kuser of New Jersey. Tony became stepson of Brooke's second husband Charles H. "Buddy" Marshall, whose last name he adopted at age 18.



John Jacob "Jakey" Astor VI (1912-1992), *Titanic* survivor (in utero)



Vincent quit Harvard to take over the family business at 20. A year older than Madeleine, he blamed her for his father's death and did not acknowledge his half brother.

Jakey sued the late Vincent's estate, and angered Brooke. He settled for \$250,000.

Vincent Astor (1891-1959), Col. Jack's first-born son.



Roberta Brooke Russell (1902-2007), Vincent's third wife.



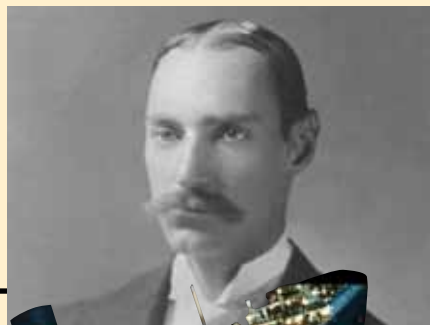
John Dryden Kuser (1897-1964), Brooke Astor's first husband.

Brooke divorced Kuser in 1930, shortly after he was elected to the New Jersey state senate, and married Charles Marshall two years later.

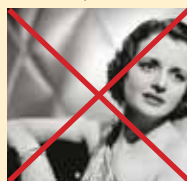
As a widow, Madeleine and her newborn son retreated to La Selva (left) in Bar Harbor the summer of 1913. She returned for her second wedding to William Karl Dick in 1916.

The Astor mansion on Fifth Avenue was the New York home of John Jacob Astor IV. When he died, it was inherited by his wife Madeleine and newborn son Jakey. Per a provision in her late husband's will, the mansion reverted to Col. J.J.'s first-born son, Vincent, when she remarried.

John Jacob "Col. Jack" Astor IV (1864-1912), considered the richest man in the world.



Mary Astor (1906-1987), born Lucile Vasconcellos Langanke in Quincy, IL—**No relation**



Ava Lowle Willing (1868-1958), John Jacob IV's first wife.



Ava Astor divorced John Jacob IV in 1909 and remarried as second wife to England's Lord Ribblesdale, returning to New York as a widow in 1925. After her son Vincent inherited the bulk of Col. Jack's wealth (\$100 million, \$2.4 billion in today's currency) to become the richest man in America, Ava left most of her estate to her four grandchildren by her daughter, Ava Alice Astor (Muriel).

Dave Astor (1919-2011), host of *The Dave Astor Show (For Teenagers Only)*, Maine television's version of *American Bandstand*. **No known relation...**



John Jacob Astor IV escaped on a European honeymoon with his second wife, the former Madeleine Force, to avoid the scandalous exposure that his 19-year-old bride was already with child. He perished on the *Titanic*, but not before securing Madeleine, five months pregnant, in a lifeboat that was rescued by the RMS *Carpathia*. With his death, the newlywed widow inherited the Fifth Avenue mansion and a widow's trust of \$5M.

—Robert Witkowski

## HOUSE OF THE MONTH



### To Buy or Not to Buy...

#### PROS

- Talk about a palace with a backstory!
- Great bones and the flair of a French chateau, courtesy of Andrews, Jacques & Rantoul.
- 20 rooms, 5 bedrooms, 8,677 square feet
- 7 Fireplaces
- Patio's gorgeous

#### CONS

- Structural condition suspect
- Not even an Astor could afford to keep this place up!
- In need of paint
- No A/C
- Patio's a disaster

gant, not ostentatious. There are also kitchen, pantries, and servants' hall. Upstairs, five of the master bedrooms open to balconies overlooking the bay. On the third floor, more master bedrooms and five maids' rooms give scope for one's innermost *Downton* fantasies.

Mr. Davis died in 1910, and La Selva was leased for several seasons. We forget that society figures commanded media attention 100 years ago just as they do today, only with less dilution by pseudo-celebrities, *Real Housewives*, and smart phones. La Selva's next occupant was such a celebrity.

Madeleine Force had summered in Bar Harbor since childhood. In 1910, her debutante year, she caught the eye of John Jacob Astor IV, twice her age and recently divorced, visiting Bar Harbor on his yacht. Courtship followed, and in 1911, they were married. The honeymoon was spent aboard Astor's yacht *Noma*, with the press in hot pursuit all the way to Bar Harbor. Less than a year later, the Astors were aboard the *Titanic*, returning from Europe. John Jacob Astor went down with the ship, and Madeleine



JENNIFER KEARNS





**JUNGLE LOVE**—The Bar Harbor of the Davises, Astors, and Thomases is just a memory. La Selva is now sagging and peeling, but her majesty is unmistakable. Above, life imitates art: a derelict room evokes the regret and dignity of an Andrew Wyeth painting.

Astor, not quite 20 years old and pregnant with her first child, became one of the most famous women in the world. That summer she paid a quiet visit to Bar Harbor as the houseguest of Mrs. Alexander Cassatt (sister-in-law of the painter Mary) and made arrangements to lease La Selva. Mrs. Astor arrived for the next season with her sister, young son, her maid, and eight trunks of luggage, and resumed normal life despite the press lurking beyond the high stone wall of the estate. She dined out, played tennis—handily winning several tournaments—and a *New York Times* social column gushed over her costumed depiction of a Gainsborough portrait for a charity *tableau vivant*.

In 1916, Mrs. Astor renounced her \$5 million widow's trust (\$103 million in today's money) to marry banker William Dick, a childhood friend. The press went wild and each day stood by the stone lions guarding the gates, dispatching announcements that the wedding was nigh, that the wedding had been delayed, that the wedding would be at "La Selva, Mrs. Astor's palatial estate at Bar Harbor." It was almost an anticlimax when 20 guests gathered for the event at the little Episcopal church nearby.



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## HOUSE OF THE MONTH

After the new Mrs. Dick departed, banker-diplomat Leonard Thomas leased La Selva. His wife, the former Blanche Oelrichs of Newport, wrote under the *nom de plume* 'Michael Strange' and was considered by painter Paul Helleu to be "the most beautiful woman in America." Headstrong, given to dramatic gesture, self-absorbed, and restless with her life as a society wife, Strange embarked on a career as an actress. When she was cast opposite John Barrymore in a production, sparks flew and the two embarked on an

## LA SELVA TODAY



## *Can a house die of loneliness?*

Visit La Selva and you'll find noble rot and eternal magic from the piazza to the Juliet balcony.

"Jack Pelletier of The Anchorage Motel in Bar Harbor owned the house since l'Ecole Arcadie closed," says listing agent Veena Gaines of Acadia Cornerstone Real Estate. He died January 18, at age 75. "Two of his sons, Jay and Evan, live in Bar Harbor, and his daughter, Jill, lives in Portland. The Pelletiers stopped staying here four or five years ago."

Inside the entertaining spaces, the lid of a Rose Medallion tureen rests atop a faded directory of long-disconnected Bar Harbor land lines. Off the kitchen, a big wicker basket labeled "Hermitage" in brushy black summons memories of the French School, still pervasive in its absence. Poignantly, the principal residents of La Selva are some lovely ghosts and a recently relocated "raccoon."

But it wasn't always this way. Gaines pulls out a 1970 yearbook showing The French School in its heyday. Because it isn't just about the Astors and the Gilded Age here. From 1959 to the mid-1970s, this internationally famous retreat immersed 13- to 19-year-old summer students in continental French. Flipping through the pages, we stop at photos of a literary conference featuring novelist Marguerite Yourcenar (*Memoirs of Hadrian*, widely considered



affair. This was still a secret that summer at Bar Harbor, but it would become scandal when she left her very proper husband for Barrymore, with whom she had a daughter out of wedlock. But that was still in the future.

1917 was the summer of suffrage. Carrie Chapman Catt, the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and later the founder of the League of Women Voters, came to town to fan flames for women's voting rights. The grand ladies of Bar Harbor society organized a parade, with suf-

frage banners waving as their limousines glided down Main Street. After the public rally, Mrs. Thomas hosted a private rally for *le haut monde* at La Selva. Mrs. Catt spoke on "Woman Suffrage and Democracy," and celebrated checkbooks flew open for the cause.

As her marriage unraveled that summer of 1917, Blanche Oelrichs Davis blamed her poetry, not her affair. Years later, in her memoir, *Who Tells Me True* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1940), she looked back on that summer:

ting. I was a horrible French student, so the immersion part was a little uncomfortable for me. That's why my mom sent me there; I'd taken it four or five years and it didn't really take.

"They told us if they caught us speaking English, we'd be dismissed." The administration icily bragged that two voluble offenders had already been shown the door.

"Boys stayed overnight in [La Selva], while the girls stayed next door in [the Italianate mansion now owned by firearms magnate William Ruger]. But what I really remember is... There was this girl named Ori Harris, who I had a terrible crush on. She lived in New Rochelle, the next town over, so I had this fantasy of seeing her over the winter. She was a couple years older than me."

While Karnofsky, now a residential construction expert, doesn't remember seeing Marguerite Yourcenar, he's since become a fan. "*Memoirs of Hadrian* is one of the best books I've ever read in my life. You feel her talent with every sentence, every line."

The school nurtured Karnofsky's yen and zen for the arts. "I lived for a couple of winters in San Francisco, where I studied with Ruth Ziporah. That's where I studied theater improv. I haven't had a whole lot of time for that for a couple of years. When the television show *America's Funniest People* came to Maine, I was one of three people selected for that, in 1991, 1992. Or was it 1992, 1993?"

As for who the potential buyer for La Selva might be, Gaines says, "It will take somebody with unlimited vision and deep pockets. Mr. Ruger next door has a first right of refusal." Will he who performed such a spectacular resurrection of his mansion "East of Eden" give "La Selva" a shot? Or, wouldn't La Selva be the most booked-into-the-next-century bed and breakfast ever, right on Frenchman Bay? Think of the theme restaurant as you let your mind slip into a cool tiffin of vichyssoise and a glass of wine on the piazza.

"Somebody wanted to make a B & B out of it but got a full 'No!' from the town," Gaines says. "The right buyer is out there but just hasn't shown up yet. The raccoon said, 'If you guys are not going to love it, I will.'"

—Colin W. Sargent



one of the top 100 books in any language in the world), the first woman ever elected into the French Academie. Beside her on the divan is Michel Butor, the French structuralist genius who inspired Roland Barthes; and Edouard Morot-Sir, who brought the *Mona Lisa* to The Met in 1963. La Selva also hosted Parisian concert pianist Mme. de Sanzëwitch and novelist Helen Hull (1888-1971), an honorary trustee of the school whose 17 books about hidden lives and young women daring to express themselves in the early Modern Age are in vogue again.

The summer faces of students above the Madras sport coats and Mary Jane collars framed in page-boy haircuts evoke a melancholy wistfulness. La Selva cries out, "Where are my charges now?"

The most eminently Googable name we find is Tom Karnofsky, 57, whose residence is listed in the yearbook as exclusive Larchmont, New York. Turns out, he's been in Bar Harbor all along.

"Yes, I went to the French School," Karnofsky says at the other end of the receiver. Then there's a pause. Karnofsky departs regular time and enters what M. M. Bakhtin calls "great time," where past, future, and present flow into each other. Shangri La and La Selva flourish in great time.

"I haven't been down that hill in 30 or 40 years, though I drive by it every day." Maybe he's afraid it's changed? "I was 13 or 14. Or was it 16 or 17? I went there for a summer or two. My dad was assigned nearby, to the biological lab on Salisbury Cove, so we stayed in a cottage there. I used to drive my Boston Whaler to school every day, weather permit-

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## HOUSE OF THE MONTH

"I remember one night in Bar Harbor before I was to have an operation for appendicitis, that I had a pianist come in to play modern French music. I wasn't particularly interested in the operation, but still, if anything should happen, I did not want to miss out on that evening. We were living then in a lovely house, 'La Selva,' with its rose garden by the Inland sea [Frenchman Bay], and in every window a flower box of geraniums and petunias over which the hummingbirds hung at noon..."

After their return to La Selva, the house was shared by the Davis family until the 1930s, when a granddaughter, Mrs. Charles Chaplin (a wealthy, blue-blazered, society Chaplin, not the Little Tramp), daughter of the very rich Daniel B.C. Catherwood (who had been married in succession to two of the Davis daughters), bought out her cousins. The Chaplins sailed—literally—through the Depression (they played tennis, too). The estate escaped the flames of 1947 by only a few hundred feet, but the Bar Harbor the Davis family had enjoyed was gone. In 1954, La Selva was sold to Richard Gott, who used it as part of L'Ecole Arcadie, an elegant sum-



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A literary conference at L'Ecole Arcadie in the 1960s included, from left: M. Michel Butor, Mme. Marguerite Yourcenar and M. Edouard Morot-Sir.

mer school offering immersion in French language and culture, complete with a butler on staff and sailboats at the dock. The school closed in the mid-'70s, and La Selva again became a private home. Today, lovely La Selva is 'in need of restoration,' which is so much prettier than 'timeworn.'

La Selva, on 2.11 acres with 360 feet of shore frontage, is listed by Veena Gaines of Acadia Cornerstone Real Estate in Bar Harbor for \$2.3 million. Taxes are \$17,656. ■

For more, visit [portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2013/04/laselva-extras](http://portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2013/04/laselva-extras)

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