

BETTE DAVIS
Her Sugar Hill
Getaway

HOME
Country Living
High in Style

CUISINE
A Look Behind
the Copper Door

New Hampshire

Bette Davis.Sugar Hill Inn page 58 **MAGAZINE**

HIDDEN PLACES

a photographer's
journey
to untouched
scenic splendor
(and how he got the shots)

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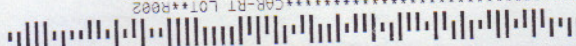
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Bette Davis eyes Sugar Hill

In 1939 Bette Davis wanted an escape
from Hollywood. She found peace in the
north-of-the-notch town of Sugar Hill —
also another husband. She left her cottage,
Butternut, and memories in the hearts of
local residents. Story by **GEORGE KELLY**



Bette Davis is captured
in a relaxed moment by
the fireplace of her
beloved Butternut
cottage in Sugar Hill.

Photo by Walter
Sanders/LIFE©Time Inc.



By 1939 Bette Davis was a Hollywood Star, in the classic sense of the word. She was “owned” by Warner Bros., a contract player in the Studio System. Her clout was her feisty, sometimes ferocious, personality, and her own determination to claw her way to the top.

Warner referred to her as “the little bitch,” but Bette Davis was box office gold and he knew it. She had received two Oscars, the first for “Dangerous” and the second for “Jezebel.” She would eventually garner 10 Academy Award nominations and remain one of Hollywood’s biggest and most enduring stars. It was said that “after they made Bette Davis they stomped on the mold.” The American Film Institute named her #2 on their Greatest Screen Legends List.

In 1939 Davis had completed two films

common with, nor they with me, I went to an Inn in Franconia, New Hampshire. It was called Peckett’s.” Actually it was Peckett’s-on-Sugar-Hill, an elegant hotel that also doubled as the first resort-based ski school in the country. It was here that Bette Davis began two relationships — one with a man who would become her second husband and the other with a swath of land high up on Sugar Hill that was called Butternut.

Arthur Farnsworth, Peckett’s assistant

way of life in between. One of the inn’s activities included excursions on horseback to land owned by the Peckett family near the present Coppermine Road. Once there, hotel patrons could hike a 5.5-mile trail to Bridal Veil Falls. Locals are fond of perpetuating a story that Bette “strayed” from the hiking party, knowing that handsome Farny would be sent to rescue her. While there might be some truth to this, it may have been Farnsworth who was the “smitten” one. What cannot be denied is that



for Warner Bros. She was exhausted and, as she did many times in her career, those Bette Davis eyes looked toward New England for solace and renewal. Davis was a New Englander, a native of Lowell, Mass., and the daughter of a taciturn father who left the family when she was 10, and a mother and sister whom she would support for the rest of their lives. She often attributed her work ethic and her ability to ride through the roughest wind that might blow her way to her Yankee heritage. She was, she said, “The Yankee-est gal who ever came down the pike.” So East she returned. Davis observed in her personal papers that “after two weeks of roaming, seeing old friends whom I no longer had anything in

manager, was a divorced 33-year-old, manly, cultured and refined. He was an accomplished violinist and experienced pilot as well as an aeronautical engineer — a dashing and confident fellow, descended from old-time revered Yankee stock, albeit Vermont Yankee stock. Local legend has it that Davis was “smitten” with Farnsworth, whom she referred to as Farny.

Guests at Peckett’s inn were offered an unparalleled view of the northwestern edge of the White Mountains, Franconia Notch to the south and a simple Yankee



Above: *Life* magazine images of the glamorous Bette Davis shopping with Farny and of the crowd awaiting the premiere of “The Great Lie” at the Jax Theatre in Littleton. Left: A photo from a 1941 article titled “*Life* goes to a birthday party in Littleton, N.H. in honor of Bette Davis.”

Bette and Farny did have a courtship of some sort

while Bette vacationed at Peckett’s. When she returned to Hollywood, the press was buzzing that the couple would announce their wedding vows some day soon. But Farnsworth returned East and Bette went West — to Hawaii for a 10-day vacation.

When she arrived back in Franconia, Farny was waiting and the romance resumed. He proposed marriage three times.

The tabloids reported that Farnsworth was sending wire after wire to her. Davis returned to Hollywood and finished filming "The Letter" and then headed East for a three-month vacation. When she arrived back in Franconia, Farny was waiting and the romance resumed. Farnsworth proposed marriage three times. On New Year's Eve, 1940, they were married — not in New Hampshire, but at a friend's house in Arizona. Bette and a small entourage arrived from the West and Farny flew himself out from the East. There was no honeymoon. Warner Bros. was calling and Davis began her next picture, "The Great Lie."

Before and during her brief marriage to Arthur Farnsworth, Bette's other love, Butternut, bought from the Peckett family, was transformed from a shotgun shack to a three-sectioned white house. As years passed she added a stable to the property, dismantled a barn in Vermont and had it reassembled a bit higher on her Sugar Hill property. Eventually there were further additions to accommodate guests and her mother Ruthie. Amid all of this activity, and sometimes after it, Davis rented a room at the present-day Sugar Hill Inn, an upscale, charming and elegant

combination of rooms and cottages. The inn's owner, Steve Allen, offers The Bette Davis Room to patrons. Davis loved the room for its perfect views of Mt. Lafayette and Cannon Mountain and because it contained four windows, which provided cool cross ventilation during the hot summer months.

Her box office success had garnered her a \$4,500 per week salary and to the delight of her northern New Hampshire fans and friends, and at her insistence, her now-completed film, "The Great Lie," would have its world premiere in the small town just north of Franconia, at The Jax Jr. Theater in Littleton on Bette Davis' 33rd birthday. Under the auspices of the Warner Bros. publicity machine, Littleton was gussied up and transformed for the gala event. Proceeds from the buttons and banners were donated to the Littleton Hospital. The street signs were changed to reflect Bette Davis films — Dangerous Street intersected with

Dark Victory Avenue. There was a parade through town. The governors of both New Hampshire and Vermont accompanied Bette and Farny, and *Life* magazine chronicled the event in a pictorial essay. A 100-pound cake was rolled out for the birthday girl and Littleton partied until the wee hours. It was an affair to savor and remember. "The Great Lie," however, wasn't. A plaque commemorating the event hangs in the lobby of The Jax Jr. Theater today.

If there was any zenith in Bette Davis' time in New Hampshire, that Littleton premiere was probably it. What lay ahead for her, and for Farny, was adversity and tragedy. A short three years after their New Year's vows, Farnsworth suffered a fractured skull

in a fall down the stairs at Butternut. A rumor persisted that his wife, in a rage, had pushed him down the stairs. It probably isn't true. Farnsworth had other head injuries and collapses that were symptomatic of a neurological problem that eventually



Michael O'Dwyer, former owner of Butternut, looks over his copy of *Life* magazine.

While you're in Sugar Hill ...

Population: 613
Population in 1941: 4,571
Incorporated: 1962
Land area: 17.1 square miles

WHERE TO STAY:

Sugar Hill Inn

Today a romantic getaway, the Sugar Hill Inn is the site of Bette Davis' favorite room to stay while her cottage, Butternut, was being renovated. The dining room offers four-course prix-fixe dinners for \$58.

116 Scenic Route 117
Sugar Hill
(603) 823-5621

Sunset Hill House

Offers top-rated lodging, dining, myriad resort activities and dramatic views.

231 Sunset Hill Rd.
Sugar Hill
(603) 823-5521

WHERE TO EAT:

Polly's Pancake Parlor

Serves pancakes, waffles, French toast, sandwiches and other

Polly's Cheesecake



homemade items. All pancakes are made by your server in two batches to keep them piping hot.

672 Route 117
Sugar Hill
(603) 823-5575

Harmon's Cheese and Country Store

Serves unusual but unusually good products including cheese, maple products and much more.

Route 117
Sugar Hill
(603) 823-8000

WHAT TO DO:

Sugar Hill Sampler

A gift shop and museum, all displayed in a colonial barn. Memorabilia includes newspaper clippings and movie posters.

Sunset Hill Road
Sugar Hill
(603) 823-8478

Sugar Hill Historical Museum

Houses Bette Davis' sleigh as well as many other artifacts from Sugar Hill. Open mid-June through mid-October.

Route 117
Sugar Hill
(603) 823-8431

Lupine Festival

June 2-17 in and around Sugar Hill. Buy a festival tour book to find events and sales.

franconianotch.org/things-to-do/special-events/lupine-festival



Davis' favorite room in the Sugar Hill Inn



One of the most obscure pieces of Hollywood memorabilia is mounted to a boulder on New Hampshire's Coppermine Brook.

caused his untimely death. Later, Bette said of Farny that her marriage to him, had it continued, "would have worked." She added, "He was never jealous of my fame." In his memory, she had installed a plaque on a rock on Coppermine Brook that reads:

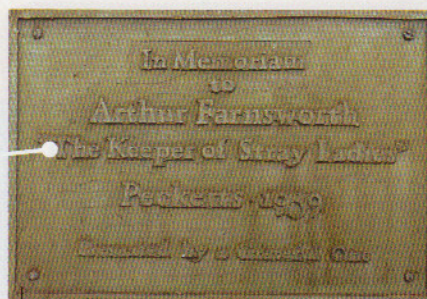
"In Memoriam to Arthur Farnsworth
The Keeper of Stray Ladies"
Pecketts 1939
Presented by a Grateful One

After Farny's death Bette continued to come to Sugar Hill, but her trips became less frequent. She finally sold Butternut and, after a succession of owners and neglect, it fell into disrepair. Its only occupants were squirrels and raccoons that had made homes in the leaky roof. Butternut was abandoned and close to unsalvageable. But if Farny was immortalized up on Coppermine Brook as the "keeper of stray ladies," another man has to be given credit for being the keeper of the stray lady's estate.

Michael O'Dwyer, a real estate broker from Stony Brook, N.Y., had heard about Butternut and after some cursory inquiry bought it sight unseen. He acquired Butternut as the winner of a bidding war for a price that was, according to him, "much more than it was worth." He adds with a smile, "I was probably bidding against myself, but I had to have it." For his winning bid of \$180,000 what he got was a 150-year-old farmhouse that needed a roof, a new foundation, central heat and electricity. O'Dwyer became a man obsessed. He

scoured eBay in particular and the Internet in general for information and memorabilia on Bette Davis. When he obtained a copy of the *Life* magazine (April 28, 1941) that featured Bette's 33rd birthday bash in Littleton and caught a glimpse of her in front of one of Butternut's five fireplaces, he was spurred on to find local treasures she had left in and around Franconia/Sugar Hill. "I had a vision," he says. The result was a painstaking and loving restoration of Butternut. O'Dwyer is an affable man who waxes intently about his love affair with the house. His conversation is peppered with tidbits of information about its history. Butternut crowned the famous 100-pound birthday cake created in Bette's honor; a contractor Davis hired, named Trahan, may have come from California and brought some very un-Yankee construction techniques with him — to the chagrin of some locals. He's not quite sure of that, but he is sure of one thing — Butternut was a labor of love.

Reluctantly, O'Dwyer sold Butternut. "I never really thought I'd sell it, but circumstances change." He still keeps an eye on the place. He purchased the stable adjacent to it, which has its own colorful history. It housed Bette Davis's horse and provided living quarters for a stable hand. For a brief period it was renovated and became The Butternut Steakhouse. By the time O'Dwyer purchased it, it was, like Butternut before it, in disastrous shape. "It had been abandoned. I found a wedge of cheese in the refrigerator that was just ..." and his voice trails off. The stable is now a lovely and homey cottage. O'Dwyer has some Bette Davis reminders on the walls and on bookshelves, but he left other pieces of Bette Davis' belongings with Butternut.



Finding the Plaque on Coppermine Brook:

Take Exit 38 off I-93 and enter Franconia Village. Take Rte. 116 for about 3.4 miles and look for Coppermine Road on the left. Park and walk along a dirt road to the Coppermine Trailhead. After about 20 minutes of easy walking, you will begin to ascend a moderately steep hill. To your right, you will see an amply spaced grove of cottonwoods. When you see Coppermine Brook, walk among the nicely spaced trees to the far end. If you were standing in the brook (not recommended), the plaque would be on your left, just below a small waterfall. Don't get discouraged; it's there.

... and Finding Butternut Cottage:

At the north end of Franconia, take a left toward the village of Sugar Hill. As you ascend the hill, you will see the Sugar Hill Inn on your right. Continue to Blake Road on your right. About one mile down Blake take a left on Butternut Lane. At its end, on the right, is Butternut. Note: It is wise to contact Stephen Gorman of Peabody & Smith (603-444-1294) for information before you go.

He says, "I felt that they belonged with the house." O'Dwyer continues to seek reminders of Bette Davis' time in the Franconia/Sugar Hill/Littleton area. As Steve Healy, a friend of O'Dwyer's, says, "If you want to know about Bette Davis, you've come to the right place." At present, Butternut is available as a vacation rental and is managed by Stephen Gorman of Peabody & Smith of Littleton.

The Sugar Hill Sampler, at the top of Sugar Hill, has a dedicated space devoted to "things" that belonged to her. The Sugar Hill Historical Society is also in possession of memorabilia. Occasionally, something belonging to or connected with Bette Davis pops up, all of which serves as a reminder of a time when the once-reigning female star of the American Cinema, at the pinnacle of her fame, the great Bette Davis, graced the little village of Sugar Hill. **■**