

Features

# Recalling 'The Great Explorer': Jacques Suzanne



Adirondack Attic  
Andy Flynn

"Great explorer." That's how the world remembers Jacques Suzanne (1880-1967), a Frenchman who called the Adirondack Mountains home for more than 40 years. At least that's what is carved onto his headstone at the North Elba Cemetery in Lake Placid.

Yes, he was a great Arctic explorer, but to merely lump Suzanne into one career category is an injustice to his memory. He was so much more: an artist, painter, sculptor, animal trainer, dog sled driver, movie star, adventurer, world traveler, photographer, author, composer, big game hunter, bull fighter, horseman and celebrity. He was, quite simply, an Adirondack legend.

The Adirondack Museum owns a few photographs of Suzanne at his Movie Ranch, which was located on the Bear Cub Road outside the village of Lake Placid. It was only a mile from the hospital, surrounded by large estates and set against a hillside that was picturesque enough to lure movie producers to film wild scenes among the rustic cabins and forested property. On Jan. 6, 1942, photographer Irving Stedman took one picture that captures the essence of Suzanne. It shows the explorer posing with his sled dogs in front of his log cabin. The photo is P14851 in the museum's Historic Photo Collection and is part of accession No. 1968.226, a series of photos from the Lake Placid Club donated by former director Harry Wade Hicks.

Suzanne was born on April 17, 1880 in Deauville, France, and he studied painting and sculpture during college, according to Terry James Gordon's article on the explorer in the Winter 1974 issue of Adirondack Life. Suzanne loved the outdoors and eventually found Arctic exploration an early career option. He was



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ADIRONDACK MUSEUM  
Arctic explorer and animal trainer Jacques Suzanne poses with some of his sled dogs in 1942 at his Movie Ranch in Lake Placid.

determined to be the first to reach the North Pole and gave up when he found out that Admiral Robert Peary had already beat him there. Still, he eventually took a grueling 20-month, 5,000-mile trip around the Siberian region on a dog sled. This trip made him one of the most experienced dog sled drivers and Arctic explorers in the world, and it captured the attention of motion picture companies.

In 1916, Suzanne played Billy Denny in the movie, "The Spell of the Yukon," directed by Burton King. In 1920, he was Antoine Dufresne in "Out of the Snows," directed by Ralph Ince (source: imdb.com). He would work on other movies for wintry scenes that required dog sleds, and many of the dogs he trained were featured in the films.

By the early 1900s, movie producers were already in the Adirondack Mountains, filming outdoor scenes in places such as Saranac Lake and Lake Placid, scenes they would take back to their production houses and studios in places such as Fort Lee, N.J. This was during the pre-Hollywood days of silent motion pictures. Before heading to California, Lewis Selznick produced movies from his studio in Fort Lee in the late 1910s and early 1920s, with sons Myron and David joining the

family business around this time. Scenes for some of the Selznick Pictures Corporation movies were filmed in the Adirondacks.

Lewis Selznick is listed as a presenter for "Out of the Snows" on the IMDb Web site, possibly linking him to Suzanne. It was this link with movies and the Selznicks that brought Suzanne to Lake Placid, according to Gordon. The Selznick Pictures Corporation was filming on the Bear Club Road around 1921, and the company asked Suzanne to live there. The explorer agreed and settled on the property he eventually called Suzanne's Movie Ranch.

In his color brochure for the ranch, Suzanne stated that the property was "established in 1906 during the silent movie days." The ranch was used for filming, raising animals and the fine arts of painting and sculpture. It was a tourist attraction. Visitors, charged \$1.00 for adults and 25 cents for children, were encouraged to "bring your cameras." Indian and Eskimo costumes were loaned for photos. People could "see the trained wolves, sled dogs, golden Palomino horses, wildcats, coyote and other animals."

The brochure also lists some of the "screen plays from the past," including: "Far from the

Beaten Track," 1912, starring King Baggot; "The Trail of the Upper Yukon," 1915; "American Maid," 1917, with Edna Goodrich; "Darkest Russia," 1917; "The Man from Beyond," 1922, with Harry Houdini, directed by Burton King; and "The Broken Silence," 1922, with Zena Keefe.

Movie work wasn't always easy or safe. The Lake Placid News reported in its Jan. 20, 1922 issue that Suzanne would be entering a 120-mile Eastern International dog team race in New Hampshire, "provided he sufficiently recovers from the injuries to his hip which Mr. Suzanne states he sustained while attempting to drive a team, harnessed to a sled, down the John Brown ski jump recently, during the production of a motion picture." The brakes failed, and Suzanne, the dogs, the sled and the passenger, actress Dorothy Gwynne, tumbled down the ski jump.

Suzanne was a popular friend of the Lake Placid Club. He drove dog sleds for guests and members of the Lake Placid Club, and he gave free rides to servicemen during World War II.

Suzanne also attended sports-

men's shows throughout New York state with people like his friend, Noah John Rondeau (1883-1967), the hermit of Cold River.

At age 87, Suzanne died on Aug. 12, 1967 at the Essex County Infirmary in

Whallonsburg. He was buried at the North Elba Cemetery in Lake Placid. Less than two weeks later, on Aug. 24, 1967, Rondeau died at the Lake Placid Memorial Hospital and was buried several feet away from the "Great Explorer."

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## There's a thin line between food and wine

Here we were, sitting in the kitchen. Matt's back was to me as he washed the dishes and tried to give me ideas for writing this column.

"Bets, what about those two wines I brought back from Italy," my boyfriend Matt said.

Uninspired. The wines were from France anyway, and they were good enough, but nothing was coming to me in particular; no experience attached that made writing this darn column easier.

Matt is gentle, has really good ideas and doesn't usually offer them until he sees that I am at a loss and am beginning to frown and pull out my hair. As he happily plugged along at the dishes, I phoned the Enterprise and asked to talk to the publisher, Cathy, to see if I could review a local restaurant that we ate at last night, where we had a wonderful meal and a killer bottle of wine to boot.

"Hi, Cathy, HELP," I said. "Could I use the name of a local restaurant and start being a food critic instead of a wine columnist?" The two go hand in hand, and maybe I could put together a



Uncorked:  
Wine  
Betsy Jensen

proposal for a budget in which I dine out with friends, drink expensive wine and you guys pay for it?"

Pause.  
"Well, Betsy, I would have to talk about this at our next meeting," she said.

Inside her head, I know she is thinking how lucky I am that they like me as much as they do, but there is no way this would ever happen, and I should just keep on buying my little \$10-and-under wine and writing my little column in silence, or move to a city and get a job at a major paper where a restaurant critic wouldn't ruin the delicate fabric of an entire region if the soup wasn't hot enough or the glass rims were still smudged.

Matt is still talking to me right now. See how distracted I am right now.

"See Bets, I think that is where we are both a lot alike," he said. "Both of us need to come up with our own authentic ideas, like we can't have someone else inspire us; we need to come up with our own creative thoughts and ideas."

Translation: I am dating a total bullhead just like myself. I can't take criticism at all. Bob Seidenstein reminds me of that every day.

"Betsy, you are hypersensitive," he said.

I would like to remind him that anyone who loses his keys and writes three columns about it might be the hypersensitive one. But who am I to pass judgement? He is a local, and that means he is always right.

Matt keeps talking, "What if you write a column about the dinner last night, but say it was somewhere else, so nobody will know which restaurant you were talking about?"

Brilliant, except even I can't fudge a totally unrealistic evening where I work all day and into the early evening, on a Sunday night, then we pack up the car in a snowstorm to drive out of the area to the closest place where there would even be an Italian place this good, which would be Burlington, and then drive back to Saranac Lake after a bottle of wine and a dessert Moscato that was divine with the Canoli.

If I keep going, I may start to review this place and I would get in trouble. I know how it is around here. Anyone have a great wine that goes well with breakfast? I could sure use a glass right now.

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