Don Leavitt

In 1998 an Associated Press article titled “Showcase of the Shakers Reborn” announced the restoration of the Shakers’ Great Stone Dwelling in Enfield, New Hampshire. A photograph showed the six-story granite structure, which was completed in 1841, the centerpiece of a community that existed from the 1790s to the 1920s. Another photo showed forty-year-old Don Leavitt, co-owner of an inn in the building, sitting proudly on a beautifully banistered staircase. “It’s just about the most spectacular, most famous of all Shaker buildings ever constructed and was probably their greatest engineering feat,” he said.

“Rick Miller and Don Leavitt have made a habit of buying down-at-heels estates in order to save them,” began a piece in Old-House Journal in 1998. “Thirteen years ago, they turned to innkeeping to support their first major purchase, a long-vacant 1904 Colonial Revival mansion in New Hampshire’s Lakes region. The Red Hill Inn was up and running in little over a year. Since then, Miller and Leavitt have restored the Shaker Inn in Enfield in partnership with the Enfield Shaker Museum. Still under restoration is Kimball’s Castle in Gilford, a re-creation of a Rhine castle with a 320-degree view of Lake Winnipesaukee and the surrounding countryside.”

Leavitt lives with his life partner, Todd Paine, in Orange, New Hampshire.

I MET RICK, MY BUSINESS PARTNER, many years ago when I stopped to admire his classic 1939 Chris Craft runabout. We’ve been great friends since then and have tackled many preservation projects. We have the affliction of falling in love with derelict old buildings and then convincing ourselves that there is a money-making venture lurking somewhere in the plaster dust.

In 1982 Rick showed me an abandoned sixty-acre summer estate with seven crumbling buildings, including a mansion. He decided it would make a great inn. I thought he was nuts, but the more he pursued it the more it seemed like a great idea. In 1984 we quit our jobs, declined his parents’ offer to pay for therapy to knock this silly idea out of our heads, and somehow convinced investors and a bank to finance the venture. The Red Hill Inn in Center Harbor was launched in 1985. We spent sixteen years slowly renovating room after room, building after building, doing it up right. The place is gorgeous, twenty-six rooms all beautifully decorated in a unique style that we call the Don and Rick touch.
When the Garnet Inn, a local landmark in downtown Center Harbor, came on the market, Rick and I developed and funded a plan to convert the inn into housing. But a sewer moratorium sidelined the deal and probably saved our necks, as the recession came and the housing market collapsed. The original part of the older of the two buildings dated back to about 1820. Apparently Rick and I were the only ones in the world who thought those buildings were beautiful. It was a tough day in 1995 when they were torn down; I felt like I had failed a friend. In the years since, I’ve found myself thinking that if only I’d done this or that differently, I could have saved those buildings.

When a chain of movie theaters in this area was gobbled up by a bigger chain, the Plymouth Theatre, a small-town movie house from 1930, was closed. Of course Rick and I fell in love with its Art Deco lines and decided that we had the smarts to make it a viable business. For once we were right, and since 1990 we’ve operated one of the few small-town theaters left in New England.

If we can ever raise the five million dollars needed, we’ll have in Kimball’s Castle a forty-room inn that will be known throughout the country. This regional landmark was abandoned in 1960 after its owner died. Thirty years later Rick and I gained an option to buy with the idea of creating a first-class country inn and restaurant on the site. Nothing is ever easy in life: after nine years and seven hundred thousand dollars of investors’ money, we still haven’t broken ground. And as part of this project we took ownership of the 1901 Lakeport train station, which was about to be torn down. We moved it to a temporary site, where it sits without its roof, waiting to be moved to Kimball’s Castle and turned into guest rooms.

Rick and I opened the Shaker Inn at the Great Stone Dwelling in 1998. You can imagine how it would have struck you to come along the lake and see this magnificent structure in 1841, when everyone was living in little hovels. Our guests actually stay in the museum. Anywhere else, you would peer at the rooms across red velvet ropes. Here you get to use the drawers and touch everything.

I’ve been in love with old buildings and the stories of the people behind them since I was a kid. We always lived in wonderful big old houses. Being the youngest of four boys, I was always last to pick a bedroom and always got what everyone else considered the worst room in the house, way up in the attic. I would have these fantastic big garret rooms with soaring ceilings and big arch windows, servants’ rooms and old servants’ bathrooms. I had a great time decorating these rooms and playing in them.

While I was majoring in American history at the University of Maryland, I interned with a local preservation group and saved my first building,
the 1909 Montrose Schoolhouse in Rockville. After working for several years as a reporter, I decided to ditch financial security and become my own boss as a partner in Historic Inns of New England. I’ve served on the board of the New Hampshire Preservation League and helped to found a group promoting heritage tourism in the Lakes region of New Hampshire. In 1996, surrounded by friends and family, I married the neatest guy in the world in a ceremony at Kimball’s Castle.