

TOURIST CABINS: ACCOMMODATIONS FOR EARLY AUTOMOBILE TRAVELERS

The invention of the automobile revolutionized American transportation, industry, and leisure at the turn of the 20th century. Before 1900, tourism was predominantly a pastime for the wealthy. Travel was typically done by train and was restricted to destinations accessible by railroad stations. The mass production of the automobile, notably the cost-efficient Ford Model T, and the construction of early highways transformed the tourism industry and opened the possibility of travel to a larger segment of the population. Cars provided middle-class Americans the opportunity to explore areas of the country that were previously inaccessible, and, by 1923, auto-touring was a popular pastime across the nation. The first auto-tourers were motorists who carried their supplies and camped from cars parked in various undesignated areas along the road. As the numbers of auto-tourists—and the litter they left behind—grew, cities and private landowners began to establish free municipal autocamps to regulate and profit from the tourist population. Cities opened campgrounds with bathrooms, camp stores, and recreation activities such as swimming and picnicking to cater to travelers' needs. Growing consumer industries and word-of-mouth advertising increased the number of Americans on the road and created a demand for better accommodations. Camp owners recognized the desire for more semi-permanent lodging that offered a secure, private place to store tourists' belongings and provided amenities resembling the comforts of home.

By the mid-1920s, hundreds of small, locally owned tourist cabin camps sprawled across the country, operated predominantly by families and local entrepreneurs. Farmers and rural businessmen built individual cabins ranging from disheveled, refurbished chicken coops to elaborate cottages complete with amenities such as buckets of hot water and beds with mattresses for travelers. Although many of the early tourist cabins were considered primitive by today's standards, lacking running water or electricity, they provided a taste of home "on the go." The new generation of auto-tourists prioritized their safety and comfort, and the emerging tourist cabin industry offered more protection and relaxation than roadside tents. To stand out among the competition, some cabin owners added personal touches such as delivering flowers to guests, providing tours of the accommodations, and serving home-cooked meals—though these practices varied widely from owner to owner. Cabin owners often promoted their lodgings in regional newspapers to encourage business. The Sanders Court and Café located in Corbin, Kentucky—run by KFC entrepreneur Harland Sanders—advertised "complete accommodations with tile baths, an abundance of hot water, carpeted floors...open all year, serving excellent food." Other tourist cabin operators contracted with oil companies and other local businesses to set up gas pumps, maintenance garages, convenience stores, and restaurants near the cabins. These mutually beneficial partnerships gave cabin owners a wide range of conveniences to offer travelers and an advantage against other accommodations, while local business owners profited from tourist sales. Newspapers in major cities occasionally listed nearby tourist cabins and accommodations. In a 1926 article printed by the *Indianapolis Star*, tourist cabins are listed with a key for conveniences such as a general store, rest house, kitchenette, outdoor ovens, tables and benches,

amusements, firewood, water, showers, swimming pool, playground, electric lights, tent floors, police protection, and airplane landings. By the 1930s, clusters of locally owned tourist cabins, restaurants, and gasoline stations serviced long-distance motorists along the developing highway system and established several small roadside communities.

By 1925, tourist cabins were the preferred choice of respite for auto-travelers. Hotel owners, concerned about the loss of business, launched a salacious public image campaign against the cabin industry and warned travelers of crime and unsanitary conditions awaiting them at tourist camps. These claims were backed by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover who alleged that tourist cabins were hubs of illegal activity and used as hideouts by criminals. However, tourist cabins increased in popularity. The majority of cabin owners operated using a “check-in” registry, requiring the names of travelers staying in the cabins upon arrival and charging a small fee. According to *The Motel in America*, “At the U-Smile Cabin Camp...arriving guests signed the registry and then paid their money. A cabin without a mattress rented for one dollar; a mattress for two people cost an extra twenty-five cents, and blankets, sheets, and pillows another fifty cents. Each guest was given a bucket of warm water from an outside fire hydrant, along with a scuttle of firewood in the winter.” Other operators, mostly located outside of larger cities, often banned locals from renting cabins to attempt to prevent criminal activity and maintain a reputable clientele. Many tourist cabins located on the edge of towns were regulated by the State Secretary of Agriculture, rather than local municipal and police jurisdictions. Owners were required by law to keep a register for public records, post maximum rental rates, maintain safe drinking water, and keep all bedding sanitary. The State Department of Agriculture performed routine inspections and issued fines for any violations in addition to providing verified licenses for a fee. These regulations gave many cabin owners authority to place liens on property to compensate for any unpaid expenses left by tourists. The safety and cleanliness of tourist cabins were seen as essential to the success of the tourism industry. According to a 1932 report in Bismarck, North Dakota’s *Bismarck Tribune*, “The comforts, conveniences, and the general sanitary condition of tourist camps throughout the country are of national consequence. It is to every state’s interest to keep its tourist camps in a condition that is beyond criticism. Reliable tourist camps and reliable hotels are an invaluable contribution to the pleasure and comfort of those people who vacation in cars.” As a result, tourist cabins with modern amenities and sanitary conditions successfully competed in the established hotel industry and established loyal repeat travelers.

In the 1930s, the economic ramifications of the Great Depression disrupted the lives of Americans across the nation. Millions of people found themselves unemployed and took to the road in search of opportunities elsewhere. The growing number of transient populations staying at municipally operated auto-camps often overwhelmed the spatial and sanitary standards, forcing cities to close public campgrounds. The hotel industry suffered greatly during this time, in part due to travelers that chose to forgo expensive and formal hotel accommodations in favor of less costly tourist cabins. Despite the economic downturn, tourist cabins maintained their popularity throughout the 1930s and 1940s because of their affordability and convenience. To earn extra income during the Depression, many homeowners along the highway rented private rooms to travelers while others constructed single cabins on their property. Farmers who could not afford

their livestock found new purposes for their vacant outbuildings: tourist cabins. If an initial cabin was successful, more would be added and updated as money became available. These expanding cabins were grouped in similar but separate buildings, designed to leave space for travelers to park adjacent to their cabins. These cabin camps evolved into an elaborate, more modern alternative to single tourist cabins—known as the tourist court.

Tourist courts, like single cabins, were predominantly owned by local families and varied widely in decoration, amenities, and conveniences. They were more expensive than the standard roadside cabin but were more cost-efficient than most hotels. Many tourist courts boasted a homier atmosphere featuring indoor plumbing, electricity, automobile parking, and air conditioning which appealed to weary tourists traveling across the country. Early tourist court layouts were intended to maximize convenience for the traveler and court owner. The cabins were often configured around a shared public lawn in either a U or L shape. In the center, some cabin owners would designate a communal space with attractions, games, or services for travelers. Each tourist court cabin was designed and decorated according to an overall theme, often inspired by popular builders' journals at the time. As a result, most tourist courts had similar architectural styles and layouts. Cabin designs became more elaborate in the 1930s as Depression-era architects and construction industries found work in tourist accommodations. Although many cabin courts were uniquely furnished according to owner and environment, most structural styles fell into broad categories of architectural design. The Bungalow, Rustic, Modern, Colonial, Southwestern, Western, and Exotic styles were among the most popular tourist cabin styles.

The Bungalow was found across the United States and aimed to create a home-like atmosphere for guests. It featured a gable roof, wood or brick siding, picture windows, and other elements that created a comforting mood. Rustic cabins leaned on the incorporation of natural elements and were popular near forests. They often resembled log cabins and featured gable roofs and porches. Cabins near major cities often utilized the Modern style, typically having flat roofs, smooth walls, large windows, and clean, horizontal lines that resembled the commercial architecture of the period. The prevalent style in the East and Southeast was the Colonial cottage, resembling the popular suburban homes that appeared outside major cities. Often used to convey an association with history and domesticity, Colonial cabins featured gable roofs, clapboard siding, and multi-pane windows with shutters. In the Southwest and Western United States, most tourist courts adopted the adobe architecture of their surroundings. Southwestern styles typically romanticized Indigenous American and Hispanic cultures while Western themes often portrayed symbols of cowboys and Indigenous Americans. Both design styles featured smooth stucco walls, red clay tiles, and flat roofs. Though most tourist courts aimed to convey a familiar, “home away from home” atmosphere, others promoted ideations of exotic places—such as China, Japan, and Mexico—to entice the curiosity of travelers.

Despite the variety in thematic styles and architectural features from court to court, the blueprint for individual cabin construction was largely similar across the nation. The rectangular plan and L-shaped plan were the most common cabin layouts, providing a

compact unit that could be easily updated with the addition of a carport. Cabin court design, however, was largely chosen by the owner and could incorporate more unorthodox designs such as wigwams or tipis. These unique lodgings were frequently the result of advertising tactics used to attract travelers passing through the area. As automobiles began moving through towns at higher speeds, tourist courts and camps saw the need to attract travelers from the road without being passed by. Some owners moved their courts closer to the highway and utilized large billboards to become more visible. Others rebranded using memorable names or catchphrases to attract the attention of potential customers. Names derived from local geography and promises of comfort were popular choices for court owners, especially in areas with notable geographic tourist locations such as forests, parks, and lakes. However, many cabin courts adopted the owner's name to promote a sense of familiarity and were successful in establishing an early form of brand recognition.

As the auto-tourism industry prospered, many cabin court owners provided additional events, tours, and accommodations for patrons to set themselves apart from competing hotel, motel, and other tourist accommodations. Free guides, maps, and games were often supplied to nearby gas stations and convenience stores that were partnered with tourist courts to provide travelers with information and foster customer loyalty. In areas near popular remote destinations—such as national parks and forests—tourist cabins were information centers for individuals seeking to explore the area. Many cabins offered trail guides and horse tours for patrons. In Hill City, South Dakota, the Pine Crest tourist court served as a base camp for hikers exploring the Black Hills area. The court also featured a “Kids Korral” playground area complete with a jail, house, post office, and imitation grocery store. For locations along Route 66, specifically those in parts of New Mexico, many tourist courts offered guided excursions into Indigenous lands for tourists to observe Indigenous and Hispanic cultures and purchase travel keepsakes. The first popular tourist souvenirs were predominantly Navajo weavings and silverwork. In the Western United States, travelers could often ride horses and join guided hikes through popular trails and attractions. According to a 1936 advertisement in Eureka, Montana's *Eureka Mirror*, tourist cabins at Stillwater Lake Park offered 24-hour meals, beer on draught, and dances every Saturday night. These tourist programs were unique and varied from owner to owner. Some courts featured shared amenities such as communal fire pits, picnic areas, and playgrounds where travelers could congregate, while others offered games such as horseshoe pitches, dances, and horse rides.

Although auto-tourism was a popular pastime for many Americans, it was not always accessible or safe for all citizens. Systemic economic and racial barriers hindered many Black individuals' ability to purchase an automobile. However, by the 1920s, several Black individuals owned automobiles and were able to travel for leisure. For many Black people, traveling by car during the era of segregation was often a dangerous challenge. They frequently faced racist, discriminatory practices from hotels, tourist cabins, convenience stores, and restaurants that refused to accommodate them. Additionally, Black tourists traveling at night were forced to navigate around “sundown towns,” where signage and blatant racism indicated they were banned and would be met with violence after nightfall. Many Black travelers spent dangerous nights parked at service stations or beside highways when commercial establishments could not be found. Several Black

individuals owned and operated tourist accommodations across the United States, but many destinations were without friendly lodging options. Most Black travelers sought out Black-owned establishments through word of mouth or frequently stayed with friends or family. Victor H. Green, a Black postal carrier from Harlem, compiled recommendations for Black travelers in his guide *The Negro Motorist Green-Book*, published in 1937. The directory initially covered the New York metropolitan area, listing accommodations that welcomed Black travelers without embarrassment or danger. By the final edition of the Green-Book, published in 1966-67, ninety-nine pages covered Black-owned or accepting accommodations across the United States and certain international cities. The guide directed Black travelers to businesses including hotels, restaurants, service stations, beauty parlors, nightclubs, and state parks that were safe and accessible. In another effort to empower Black travelers, Green established an early system of residential lodging networks across the nation that listed private residences where Black travelers could stay safely. During this period of early automotive travel, Black Americans faced discrimination, violence, and price gouging while navigating the open road. The *Negro Motorist Green-Book* helped increase their safety and empowered Black individuals to freely travel across the country.

With the United States' entrance into World War II in 1941, most tourism-related necessities—such as tires, gasoline, and free time—were drastically limited. After the war, President Dwight Eisenhower promoted a transportation plan that was modeled after the German autobahn—the Federal Interstate Highway System. The expansive interstate system revolutionized transportation and provided new opportunities for the average American to reach new corners of the nation. As incomes rose throughout the 1950s, the tourism industry exploded with a new influx of profits and growing numbers of tourists. Tourists were able to easily travel to landmarks, and vacation spots while enjoying the newfound security of growing consumer commodity chains along the way. By the 1950s, most tourist courts offered in-room telephones, cafés, swimming pools, and air conditioning. Cabin and court owners continued to upgrade their establishments in attempts to maintain their place in the lodging competition. These improvements—such as redecorating, laying sidewalks, and upgrading signage—were largely done by, and at the expense of, tourist court owners themselves. Across the 1950s and 1960s, costly maintenance and increased competition from hotels and newly established “motels”—a term coined by the Milestone Mo-Tel (motor hotel) in San Luis Obispo, California—forced many tourist cabin owners to close.

No longer single cabins, large motor courts illuminated by neon signs and combined under a single roof quickly replaced smaller roadside accommodations as the new preferred choice among travelers. Motel chains such as Holiday Inn, Howard Johnson, and Best Western set new standards for tourist accommodations. Their uniformity provided tourists with a consistent experience at each location across the country while abandoning local flair and personal touches. As chain developers standardized their amenities, small roadside accommodations and family-owned businesses were replaced by chain motels, restaurants, and convenience stores. The interstate highway system ushered in economic booms for some towns, while others were cut off from traffic on their way to accommodations located at newly established interstate interchanges. Although the interstate and newly centralized highway system allowed

more Americans than ever to travel, large chain operations and postwar affluence stifled the tourist cabin industry. By the 1960s, the term “tourist court” was largely abandoned by business owners and the general public.

Sources:

- “77 N.D. Tourist Camps Were Licensed Last Year.” *The Bismarck Tribune* [Bismarck, North Dakota], 20 May 1932, p. 2. *Newspapers.com*.
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/851872478/?terms=%22tourist%20camp%22&match=1>
- Carnegie Library for Local History. *Al Parks Family Photograph Collection*. Boulder Public Library.
<https://localhistory.boulderlibrary.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A18203>
- Curran, J. *Tourist Camps, Tourist Courts, and Early Motels*. Encyclopedia of Arkansas.
<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/tourist-camps-tourist-courts-and-early-motels-2700/>
- “Heber Rates High in Tourist Cabin Service.” *The Wasatch Wave* [Wasatch County, Utah], 01 November 1940, p. 5. *Newspapers.com*.
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/544868993/?terms=%22tourist%20cabins%22&match=1>
- Henderson, L. (n.d.). *America’s Roadside Lodging: The Rise and Fall of the Motel*.
<https://www.eiu.edu/historia/2010Henderson.pdf>
- Kelly, S., & Landrigan, L. (2022, July 9). *The Rise and Fall of the New England Motel*. New England Historical Society.
<https://newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/rise-fall-new-englands-motels/>
- Mariner, C. (2018, August 2). *From Motor Camping to Tourist Cabins Historical Marker*. The Historical Marker Database. <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=120992>
- Nelson, C. B. (2018, July 2). *Life Along the Road: The Tourist Camp in South Dakota*. South Dakota Historical Society Press.
<https://www.sdhspress.com/journal/south-dakota-history-35-4/life-along-the-road-the-tourist-camp-in-south-dakota>
- Rapid City Historic Preservation Commission. (May 2021). *Post-War Rapid City Tourist Cabins, Tourist Courts, and Motels, 1945-1972*. Rapid City Historic Preservation Commission.
<https://www.rapidcityhpc.com/images/docs/Postwar-Commercial-Development-Final.pdf>

Smithsonian Institution. (2019, July 3). *America on the Move*. National Museum of American History. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/america-on-the-move>

Smithsonian Institution. *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center. <https://transcription.si.edu/project/7955>

“Stillwater Lake Park.” *The Eureka Mirror* [Eureka, Montana], 17 July 1936, p. 6. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85053106/1936-07-17/ed-1/seq-6/>

“Tourist Camps Given Approval.” *The Indianapolis Star* [Indianapolis, Indiana], 10 June 1926, p. 41. *Newspapers.com*. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/104883931/?terms=%22tourist%20camp%22&match=1>

Townsend, J. (2016, April 1). *How the Green Book Helped African-American Tourists Navigate a Segregated Nation*. Smithsonian.com. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/history-green-book-african-american-travelers-180958506/>

Wood, A. (2017, June 30). *The Rise and Fall of the Great American Motel*. Smithsonian.com. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/twilight-mom-and-pop-motel-180963895/>