

Overnight Cabins in Scarborough

By Rodney Laughton

Long established as a popular tourist destination and bisected by U.S Route One, Scarborough was fertile territory for the boom in overnight cabin construction that occurred during the 1920s and 30s.

For generations, the traveling public had planned their trips around train schedules and destinations. With the mass production of the automobile and an ever improving highway system, the motoring public could select their own routes, destinations and schedules. The revolutions in transportation lead to a revolution in the lodging industry as well. Most hotels of that era were in resort areas such as Prouts Neck or in heavily populated downtown districts near railroad stations. With individuals behind the wheel of their own automobiles, outlying areas provided new locations for accommodations. Enterprising business people rushed to take advantage of this opportunity. By 1920 there were 12 million cars on the road and overnight cabins began to spring up everywhere. Cabins provided inexpensive accommodations for the working class. Many cabins rented for \$1.00 per night.



The first cabins were spartan at best. They did not have running water or plumbing of any kind. Most contained a double bed, table, chairs and hooks on the wall from which to hang your clothing. Outhouses and an old fashioned well provided life's necessities. As competition increased, amenities were added and by the 1930s most cabins had indoor plumbing. Cabin operators tried to attract business by providing well maintained grounds, play areas for children and some built dining rooms and filling stations to be operated in conjunction with their cabins.

Scarborough had at least 35 different cabin establishments. The vast majority were on or near the Route One corridor between Saco and South Portland. Some took the names of the family that operated them such as Harlow's or McConnell's. There were Sun Rise, Sun Set, Spick 'n Span, and a high end set of cabins at Pine Point called The Moorings. Seth Jewett built cabins in the Willowdale area naming them Lucky Lindy in honor of aviator Charles Lindbergh. In many cases cabins were built around the family homestead. In Scarborough the number of cabins in a given complex ranged from as few as three to as many as forty. Automobile ownership was a new experience for many people who had grown up using horses for transportation; therefore, cabins were popular with people who did not want to be separated from their cars. Cabin patrons could park by their front door, where they could keep a close eye on their automobile.



Each cabin establishment was unique in its own way. In doing the research for this story I learned that one set of cabins was a "front" for a bootlegging operation in the 1920s. Another was built with government materials that were "liberated" from the South Portland Shipyard during WWII. In this case, the materials were loaded on a southbound train and thrown off as it crossed the Scarborough Marsh. After work the enterprising businessman collected his materials from beside the tracks

and constructed his cabins. On a more positive note, I learned that Calvin Austin was the first in Scarborough to integrate his cabins. He operated Cal's Cabins in conjunction with a service station next to the Bessey School. He started doing business with black patrons in the late 1940s. Discrimination in the lodging industry was common at that time, and Mr. Austin should be commended for his integrity and forethought.

During WWII there was a housing shortage in the Greater Portland area. The government leased entire cabin complexes and shipyard workers from South Portland occupied them year round. This must have been difficult for many people. Cabins were small and designed for a short term stay. They had only been intended for occupation during the warm summer months. After the war, the popularity of cabins began to decline. Many of the cabins were now over twenty years old and falling into disrepair.

Henry Rines set the stage for the next wave of motor court construction when he built the Danish Village in Scarborough. The units in the Danish Village were connecting, a concept that is common today, but novel for its time. As cabins had been the rage in the 1920s, motel-style construction had now caught the fancy of the motoring public.

Cabins have never disappeared from our landscape. We are accustomed to seeing them and they blend in almost unnoticed. If you look you can see many still exist, tucked away behind motel buildings; some have been remodeled into small homes. One of the most well-preserved establishments in this area is the Cascade Lodge and Cabins in Saco.