

*The grounds of the Concord Hotel, one of the largest Borscht Belt establishments located in Kiamasha Lake, NY (personal collection).*



# The Borscht Belt

## New York State's Lost Tourism Icon

When someone says “The Catskills,” thoughts of towering mountains, grand ski slopes, and picturesque scenery may come to mind. This is, indeed, consistent with much of the Catskills in both Ulster and Greene counties, but in nearby Sullivan County, this region was known better as “The Borscht Belt.” Around 1,000 square miles in size, was once New York State’s premier tourist destination featuring over 500 hotels and bungalow colonies. The Borscht Belt ultimately grew out of the intent to foster agriculture within Sullivan County. Unlike the nutrient-rich black dirt and relatively flat terrain that made nearby Orange County a dairy farming mecca, Sullivan County’s land was mountainous and rocky. Seeking to capitalize on the region’s scenery and clean air instead of its soil, many of these farmers turned their homes into boarding houses. Given the Anti-Semitic environment that existed during this era, New York City’s Jewish population was attracted to Sullivan county because this region was largely free of discrimination and also possessed favorable weather compared to the city’s oppressively hot summers. Soon, hundreds of hotels and bungalow colonies sprouted across the countryside catering to this ever-growing population that would make this portion of the Catskills legendary.

From 1900 to 1950, the establishments of the Borscht Belt heavily relied on the surrounding scenery to attract city dwellers looking to escape hot summer temperatures and seek clean air. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, a new phenomenon occurred. Amenities such as swimming pools and skating rinks that were once reserved for only the most luxurious settings could now be seemingly

implemented anywhere. This led to the concept of the “fortress hotel” where the thrill was no longer based upon the surrounding environment but rather contained within the hotel itself. Resorts not only featured hundreds if not thousands of rooms but also boasted indoor and outdoor swimming pools, tennis courts, skating rinks, ski slopes, massive entertainment halls, and cavernous dining rooms. A reoccurring aspect within the growth of these mammoth resorts was their distinct architecture. The Borscht Belt’s earlier hotels featured a design known as “Sullivan County Mission Style” with utilized stucco walls and prominent towers. Later, certain hotels (most prominently Grossinger’s) boasted a Tudor style which retained the stucco features yet added wooden inlays similar to structures seen in England. Finally, certain hotels adopted a strikingly modern design that reflected the flashy beachside resorts of America’s shoreline. The streamlined white buildings of the Concord Hotel, which housed 1,500 people in its day, were designed by famed architect Morris Lapidus who also commissioned Miami’s Fontainebleau Hotel. In addition, the Nevele’s tower building, often considered to be one of the Borscht Belt’s most recognizable structures, was the product of Lapidus’s former employee Herbert D. Phillips.



*The sole remaining structure of the Ambassador Hotel in Fallsburg, NY is a prime example of Sullivan County Mission Style architecture (Alex Prizgintas photograph).*

No story of the Borscht Belt is complete without detailing the people that it brought together. While it largely served New York City’s Jewish population in its early years, the region soon became one of New York’s preeminent tourist destinations and attracted thousands if not millions. Among the most prominent group of individuals who rose to fame within the Borscht Belt were comedians and entertainers. Names such as Jerry Lewis, Buddy Hackett, Eddie Cantor, Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, and George Burns all became prominent largely due to the Borscht Belt’s ability to generate a diverse audience. Sporting was another important facet to the region, with one of the most famous examples being the period during which Rocky Marciano trained at Grossinger’s. Finally, there were other famed individuals ranging from Civil Rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. to American President Lyndon B. Johnson whom all stayed within the Borscht Belt’s illustrious hotels.

The decline of this region can be traced to two separate events, one of which affected the smaller hotels and the other causing larger resorts to decay. While many cite the 1980s and 1990s as the fall of the Borscht Belt, the golden age of Sullivan County tourism was already in swift decline by the mid-1960s. A large reason for this was the 1965 fire of the Prospect Inn at Parksville, NY. While not directly affecting any other hotels, the fire, which killed four and injured ten, resulted in stricter fire safety regulations. Smaller hotels, which were already competing against the more adept fortress resorts, did not have the capital to implement these safety measures. Having spent their money on swimming pools and skating rinks, these establishments swiftly closed their doors and, by 1980, all that remained were the larger fortress hotels. It was at this time when the “three A’s” ultimately brought the Borscht Belt to an end. The three A’s refer to Air Conditioning, Air Travel, and Assimilation. Where the Borscht Belt once catered to a clientele that sought to escape the oppressive city heat, air conditioning resolved this issue in an economical and convenient fashion. Furthermore, air travel allowed individuals to travel further than ever before for fares comparable to a stay at the Borscht Belt. Finally, segregation, which is what the Borscht Belt blossomed from, gave way to the breakdown of cultural and racial divides. In 1986, the famed Grossinger’s Hotel closed, thus sending a bleak message to the few remaining establishments. Out of desperation, these hotels attempted to gain licenses for gambling but came to no avail. By 2000, the only two prominent Borscht Belt hotels still operating were the Nevele and Kutsher’s, both of which closed in 2006 and 2013 respectively. In 2018, the region finally gained a casino with the opening of Resorts World Catskills, but it was too late for the Borscht Belt with the new hotel standing a few miles from the ruins of the former Concord Hotel. Today, the Honor’s Haven Retreat and Conference Center operates in the former structures of the Fallsview Hotel in Ellenville, NY, and the Raleigh Hotel of South Fallsburg, NY remains open under new ownership. The Villa Roma Resort, despite being designated by some as west of the Borscht Belt region in Callicoon, NY, is the only regional hotel that has remained open since the active yet waning days of the Borscht Belt.



*The former Pines Hotel in South Fallsburg, NY sits in a rapidly decaying state much like the other Borscht Belt hotel structures that still survive (Alex Prizgintas photograph).*





## Collecting the Borscht Belt

I found my first interest in the Borscht Belt by investigating abandoned structures in the Hudson Valley over the internet. I am not much of an urban explorer myself but I find the history of abandoned locations to be fascinating. Of interest, I was intrigued by how many artifacts remained at these abandoned hotels from paperwork to architectural details. This began a search for items used in the hotels, ranging from ashtrays to brochures, matchbooks, room keys, silverware, and everything in-between. While I have yet to develop a presentation for the artifacts of the Borscht Belt, I have displayed my location at several venues including for the Sullivan County Historical Society and the Ontario and Western Railroad Historical Society (O&WRHS).

*A selection of items from my Borscht Belt collection.*



*One of the first items from the region I acquired, and one of the more unique, is this streetlamp from Grossinger's. During the waning years of the hotel's operation, these lights could be found lining the property's roadways. Many remained standing until the hotel was demolished recently.*





*While much of the Concord Hotel has been demolished, some of the property's pools, including the main indoor pool, eerily remain surrounded by fertile land once occupied by grand buildings. Pictured is a fragment of blue tile from the Concord's indoor pool (Alex Prizgintas photograph).*



*Assorted ashtrays and lighters from the Borscht Belt hotels.*



*In 2017, I acquired a large collection of paperwork made by Steingart Associates, inc. of South Fallsburg, NY. The company was one of the pre-eminent advertisers for the region and produced brochures, menu cards, receipts, and letterheads for several of the Borscht Belt Hotels.*



*A portion of my Borscht Belt collection on display in 2015 at the Sullivan County Museum.*





*During the time where I shared my collection at the Sullivan County Museum in 2015, I was interviewed by WJFF Radio Catskill from Jeffersonville, NY.*



*Items from the Borscht Belt on display at the 2017 O&WRHS convention in Campbell Hall, NY.*

