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# A Lost Land: The Jewish Experience in the Catskills

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A Lost Land: The Jewish Experience in The Catskill Mountains

By  
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**Chapter One:**  
***Secondary Literature Review: The Rise and Fall of the Catskill Resorts***

When thinking of the great resort destinations of the world, New York City's Catskill region may not come immediately to mind. It should. By the early twentieth century, the fruitful farmlands of Sullivan and Ulster Counties became home to hundreds of hotels and bungalow colonies that served the Jews of New York City. Yet these hotels were unlike most in America, for they not only represented an escape from the confines of the ghetto of the Lower East Side, but they also retained a distinct religious nature. The Jewish dietary laws were followed in most of the colonies and resorts, and religious services were also a part of daily life. It was within this cultural context that a summer haven was created in the Catskill Mountains.

This thesis will show that throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews were often faced with barriers when trying to escape the congested urban confines of New York City. Yet in the mountains, Jews were free from the threat of anti-Semitism, as many hotel owners were Jewish, and those that were not quickly realized that it simply did not make economic sense to ban Jews because they represented a potential source of income. The Catskill region therefore represented a place where Jews could partake in the distinctly American concepts of leisure and consumption while still maintaining their religious practices. By the late 1950s, the grand resorts of the area still maintained their devotion to the Jewish faith. As a result, the hotels of the Catskills allowed for

Jews to increasingly assimilate into America while still upholding their own distinct values and traditions.

The Jewish Catskill resorts were established in the early twentieth century. The Golden Age of the hotels ended by the middle 1960s, and by the 1980s, the region was seen as a thing of the past. Although some remained open into the 1990s, and a few even remain open today, they never regained their former glory, and never were able to serve American Jews in the manner in which they had for the previous seventy-five years. The resorts integrated themselves into Jewish culture by providing their guests with distinct forms of entertainment, food, and leisure activities. As a result of this, there exists a substantial amount of literature on the subject. However, a majority of the literature concerns the actual day-to-day activities and events that were taking place within the hotels, and as a result, there is certainly a lack of attention paid towards the downfall of the hotels, as well as the place of the resorts within a larger context of American history.

The literature on the Catskill resorts is frequently filled with nostalgia. Leisure historian Susan Sessions Rugh notes that that many of the secondary sources concerning the region have a “nearly timeless quality that makes it difficult to chart the changes in the resort community.”<sup>1</sup> Often this is because many of the authors who write about the Catskills have a personal connection to the area. Their families owned resorts or bungalow colonies, or they summered in the resorts as children, and as a result they tend to draw on their memories in forming conclusions about the region. For example, in discussing his own book

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<sup>1</sup>Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 169.

*Catskill Culture*, Phil Brown comments that he “poured [his] heart into reliving [his] Catskill memories,” and that while writing the book, which is not a personal memoir but rather an overall history of the Jewish Catskills, he was able to get in touch “with [his] parents’ lives and retrace [his] own personal history.”<sup>2</sup> As a result of many authors like Brown having personal ties to the area, often a nostalgic tone pervades the material. Yet because the authors are so devoted to the area, all aspects of life, such as religious influence, the role of food, the staff, the legendary entertainment, and recreational activities, are included within these accounts. What is often left out of this literature, due to the personal connections of the scholars to the region, is an examination of the resorts and the Catskill region in the broader context of twentieth century American history.

In order to understand the evolution of the Catskills, it is first necessary to evaluate the manner in which Jews acclimated themselves into American society, and thereby adopted American practices and habits. Andrew R. Heinze argues that for Jewish immigrants in America, consumption was a novel notion that would ultimately become an integral part of their lives. If they embraced the concept of consumption, “they could begin to move toward the goal of fitting into American society.”<sup>3</sup> In Europe, where the standard of living was so low that often its citizens “lacked the most basic commodities and conveniences enjoyed by the poor in American cities”, the idea of consumption was simply not as powerful as

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<sup>2</sup> Phil Brown, *Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat’s Memories of the Great Jewish Resort Area* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), xi.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew R. Heinze, *Adopting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 33.

it was in America.<sup>4</sup> For Jews, being able to take part in this culture of consumption reinforced the image of America as both a promise land and a “source of liberation and promise.”<sup>5</sup> Heinze argues that while Jews were immensely grateful and happy in America, the country and its social practices transformed them into the consumers that frequented the Catskill resorts. The vacation “was part of the ‘symbolic consumption’ of American Jews—goods and entertainment that were previously unavailable to these largely immigrant people were now accessible to most of them. This represented an acculturation to American life.”<sup>6</sup> Catskill historians Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer also reiterate this belief when they assert that “the active, conscious, and organized pursuit of pleasure” defined the early Catskill experience.<sup>7</sup>

The resorts also changed the way that Jews spent their free time. In America, “Jews found a looser set of social norms, including freedom for men and women to socialize together in public.”<sup>8</sup> The Catskill hotels presented Jews with a way to embrace these new social practices, but they also represented an important chapter in the history of American leisure. Cindy Aron, a leisure historian, traces the practice of leisure and vacations throughout American history. In the early nineteenth century, she says that many people left their homes for “recuperation and restoration.”<sup>9</sup> Aron claims that the resorts of the nineteenth century had certain routines and rhythms to them, which the Catskill resorts of the

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<sup>4</sup> Heinze, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Heinze, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, 182.

<sup>7</sup> Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *It Happened in the Catskills* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1991), X.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, 182.

<sup>9</sup> Cindy Aron, *Working at Play* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 23.

twentieth century also had. Aron explains that while guests who wanted a secluded vacation could have one, most did indeed want to “join the throngs” and take part in the group nature of the activities. This attitude is again seen in the later Catskill resorts, where the desire for guests to be among other Jews and partake in group activities was particularly strong.

While the desire of Jews to surround themselves with other Jews impacted the development of the Catskills, the region’s ability to cater to different socio-economic classes also played a role in its popularity. David Stradling, an environmental historian, comments on the fact that the Catskill resorts reflected the “diversity of New York Jews themselves, some resorts catered to particular groups, some based in religious practice or national background. Other groups simply created their own resorts, ensuring that they would find suitable vacation spots.”<sup>10</sup> Though many scholars stress the concept of acclimation to American ways of life through leisure within the mountains, Stradling shows how the resorts were somewhat insular. While the hotel activities may have Americanized Jewish American immigrants, the resorts themselves were an opportunity for Jews to vacation with other Jews in a non-threatening environment, where they did not have to face the exclusions that Aron highlights. It was therefore in this context that the region became associated with Jewish culture.

Many of the authors agree that the resorts allowed Jews to integrate themselves into American society both before and after World War II. Catskill historian Phil Brown commented that by having the monetary means to take a

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<sup>10</sup> David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 189.

vacation, “the immigrant was no longer a greenhorn but a citizen of the world.” Heinze echoes this sentiment, arguing that “the vacation was part of the ‘symbolic consumption’ of American Jews—goods and entertainment that were previously unavailable to these largely immigrant people were now accessible to most of them. This represented an acculturation to American life.”<sup>11</sup> The resorts, therefore, represented a place where Jews could be themselves and express their culture, but they also were a symbol of Jews’ entrance into America, as most of the authors would agree.

Heinze contends that for American Jews, the concept of a vacation “came closer than any other custom to fulfilling the vision of the earthly paradise that Jews carried to America.”<sup>12</sup> Heinze’s characterization of the idea of a vacation represents the external and broad viewpoint that is often missing in other writers’ accounts of the Catskill region’s history. In his description of the overall idea of American vacations, Heinze argues that the Jews who came to America “found the vacation to be the most impressive component of the American lifestyle...the vacation gave newcomers a unique way to pattern the social relationships of men and women and to experience a profound sense of fulfillment about their expectations of American society.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, by taking part in this American tradition of leisure, Jews were able to feel a part of their new homeland. Heinze shows how assimilation therefore was an important factor in Jews embracing the concept of leisure and vacation.

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Heinze, 116.

<sup>13</sup> Heinze, 125.



The Jewish resorts of Sullivan and Ulster counties allowed Jews to feel comfortable while experiencing a distinct brand of Jewish leisure. Heinze explains that the first contact many American Jews had with the concept of leisure were the Yiddish theaters and vaudeville houses that dotted the Lower East Side. In these venues, performers “helped immigrants feel more at home in a multiethnic society, as they poked fun at the stereotyped traits of their own and other groups.”<sup>14</sup> This is a concept that would eventually be carried over to the resorts and larger hotels, which became well known for their entertainment. Heinze agrees with this sentiment, and argues that “the Jewish resort met the demand of immigrants who wanted the comforts of the countryside without the discomforts of a strange environment.”<sup>15</sup> For Jews, the resorts clearly represented something more than leisure. Heinze argues that the vacation as a whole was a way in which Jews were able to gradually acclimate themselves to American ways of life. Heinze’s work is important to the overall study of the Catskill resort region because he does more than describe the everyday activities of the resort. Instead, he shows that American Jews adopted the American concept of leisure, and that this aided their assimilation into American society.

While Phil Brown certainly would agree with the fact that assimilation played a role in the development of the Catskills, he argues that more immediate motives existed. Brown points to the impact of the Lower East Side, New York City’s Jewish ghetto, on the Catskill region. He explains that even as early as the

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<sup>14</sup> Heinze, 119

<sup>15</sup> Heinze, 126

1820s, “Jews had dreams of living in the Catskills as a rural refuge”.<sup>16</sup> Brown’s statement is significant because it shows that not only were Jews, and most likely people of all religions who were living in the cramped quarters of New York City, looking for a way out of the Lower East Side, where so many lived, but they were also searching for a way to experience nature.

Many historians agree that as a result of the terrible conditions of the Lower East Side Jews were looking for a way to live out in the open. Brown highlights the role that the Lower East Side played in the expansion the Catskills when he says that “Jewish overcrowding on the Lower East Side played a big role in the Catskill’s growth. Life was difficult, especially in the heat of summer. Life was also unhealthy. Tuberculosis was rampant, and clean air was the best prescription.”<sup>17</sup> The mountains were therefore a choice location to rid themselves of the disease and crowding that so many had become accustomed to. Alf Evers, a leading historian on the Catskill Mountains who, instead of focusing solely on the Jewish resorts of the area takes a much broader look at the region’s history as a whole dating back to the early eighteenth century, also argues that a prime reason for the expansion of the Catskill Mountains was the conditions on the Lower East Side. He explains how the first generation of Eastern European Jews frequented the Catskills because of both their living and working conditions. Many, upon their arrival to America, “worked in sweatshops crammed into their owners’ flats. There men, women and children worked at cutting tables, sewing machines, and pressing boards, and slept in rows on the floor or, on hot summer

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<sup>16</sup> Brown, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, 27.

nights, on the roof. Tuberculosis and other diseases thrived in the lung blocks of the ghetto. Many ailing Jews were sent by relatives...to recover in the healthy air of Sullivan, which was easily and cheaply reached by train.”<sup>18</sup> Evers concisely shows exactly why there was such a desire to leave the city. The Catskills were easily accessible, and were revered for their clean air and its overall opposite nature of the Lower East Side. David Stradling also examines the Lower East Side explaining that “despite job opportunities, especially in the garment industry, and the strength of the immigrant community as it cohered around synagogues and mutual benefit societies, the Lower East Side became a neighborhood that most residents hoped to leave, by moving out permanently and, in the meantime, by escaping temporarily for lengthy summer trips to the country.”<sup>19</sup> Stradling clearly shows what made the Lower East Side a special yet unpleasant place. The area allowed Jewish immigrants to band together in their own neighborhood, where they were able to freely express their religion and culture. Cindy Aron argues that early twentieth century Jews ventured to the Catskills in the hope that “country air and wholesome dairy products would protect them and their children” from tuberculosis.<sup>20</sup> Aron, Brown, Evers and Stradling, all contend that the history of the Lower East Side is an essential piece to the story of the Catskill mountain resorts. If Jews had come to America and dispersed themselves, and not lived within such urban centers, then perhaps there would never have been a need for the hotels in the mountains.

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<sup>18</sup> Alf Evers, *The Catskills: From Wilderness to Woodstock* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1972), 681.

<sup>19</sup> Stradling, 181.

<sup>20</sup> Aron, 218.

While it is clear that Americans' penchant for leisure allowed Jews to acclimate themselves into a new society, as well as escape the confines of the Lower East Side, it is important to recognize that these were not the sole reasons for Jewish excursions to the mountains. Both Irwin Richman and Cindy Aron point to the impact of Anti-Semitism.<sup>21</sup> Cindy Aron explains that Jews were barred from numerous resorts, and often "hotel managers cooperated in informing each other about Jewish patrons who might attempt to crash their resorts."<sup>22</sup> The anti-Jewish sentiment affected the lives of American Jews, as hotels actively sought to remove Jews as potential guests. Aron therefore concludes that "segregation rather than integration characterized the experience of most early twentieth century vacationers—regardless of race, class, or ethnicity."<sup>23</sup> This concept certainly was the case for American Jews, who were faced with barriers throughout New York State in particular. As a result of this segregation, Jews created their own lands of leisure, whereby they were free to express their religion and culture.

In *First Resorts*, Jon Sterngass also argues that anti-Semitism played a large role in Jews creating their own leisure enclave in the mountains. By the late nineteenth century, "the rejection of Jews in New York resorts [was] so well established that it no longer aroused comment."<sup>24</sup> Jews were barred from the Grand Union hotel in Saratoga Springs, and in late nineteenth century were also

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<sup>21</sup> Irwin Richman, *Borscht Belt Bungalows: Memories of Catskill Summers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Aron, 217.

<sup>23</sup> Aron, 222.

<sup>24</sup> Jon Sterngass, *First Resorts* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 107.

barred from sections of Coney Island beaches and the Manhattan Beach Hotel at Coney Island. This blatant exclusion of Jews from well-established leisure areas logically led to the creation of a distinct Jewish brand of vacation in the Catskill Mountains in the early twentieth century.

The barring of Jews from many of New York's most popular vacation haunts propelled them to create their own land of leisure. The "Jewish Alps", as the Catskills were referred to, certainly were unique. In discussing the grand hotels that came into being by the 1920s, Alf Evers explains that, while initially the hotels may have been appealing to "tired and ailing people eager for fresh clean air and sunshine", by the 1930s, this was no longer the case. The resorts themselves had become the main attraction. The desire to experience a vacation in the mountains was now greater than the desire to leave the city. Social directors became the norm at all the major hotels, theaters were built to accommodate the distinct brand of entertainment, which was tailor made for its Jewish audience, and, after World War II, glistening sports facilities, which hosted such athletes as Max Baer and Joe Frazier, were quickly built. Most all of the authors who study the Catskill resorts comment on the all-encompassing nature of the postwar resorts, explaining that at the largest resorts, there was hardly ever a reason to leave the hotel. Everything a guest could possibly want was located within these insular non-threatening societies.

The Catskills, along with the rest of the nation, experienced immense changes in the postwar era. Susan Sessions Rugh therefore examines the pursuit of leisure with a particular focus on postwar America. In *Are We There Yet?* Rugh

examines the ‘Golden Age’ of American family vacations, which started when World War II ended in 1945, and lasted until the 1970s, at which point family road trips declined in popularity due to the increasing availability of air travel. Rugh argues that family vacations in America were facilitated by three main factors: “unprecedented prosperity and widespread vacation benefits...rising rates of automobile ownership and construction of new highways...and an ideal of family togetherness in the baby boom justified spending money on a vacation.”<sup>25</sup> Although Rugh refers to the ‘Golden Age’ of family vacations, she also admits that African Americans and Jews both faced barriers that stopped them from fully partaking in the American leisure experience in the manner that many other Americans did. Their experiences were not that different as blacks were barred from many establishments, and Jews were greeted with signs at hotels that read ‘Gentiles Only’, or ‘Clientele Carefully Selected’.<sup>26</sup> Rugh therefore also champions the notion that anti-Semitism was a prime factor in the creation of a resort land in the mountains.

Rugh claims that the Golden Age of the Catskills began right after World War II, where younger couples eagerly awaited summering in the Catskills because it was “the only time to escape living with the in-laws” during the housing shortage that developed in the country after the war.<sup>27</sup> Commenting on the class distinctions that existed in the mountains, Rugh explains that the bungalow colonies were home to the working and lower classes, while the resorts attracted the “cream of Jewish families, who came not only for the summer, but

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<sup>25</sup> Rugh, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Rugh, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Rugh, 170.

also the Jewish holidays of Passover, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.” Rugh comments that if going to the bungalow colonies meant that you were upwardly mobile, going to a resort such as Grossinger’s “meant that you had arrived.”<sup>28</sup> Vacationing in the Catskills therefore meant something in the social world of New York Jewry. To be able to vacation at the larger resorts meant an entrance not only into the upper social classes, but also to American society.

Rugh argues that the hotels began to lose their clientele in the early 1960s, partly because the blatant anti-Semitism that greeted them at other hotels was beginning to fade, which meant that there was no longer such a great need for Jews to surround themselves with other Jews. Rising costs of the bungalows also factored into their decline, as well as the fact that the children of the Catskill guests simply “did not want the same kind of vacation their parents and grandparents had wanted in the Catskills, where being Jewish meant eating gefilte fish or kreplach while listening to Milton Berle crack jokes about his mother-in-law.”<sup>29</sup> David Stradling echoes this statement when he claims that the collapse of the area was directly related to the notion that the “Catskills had become a recognizable brand, conjuring images of a distinct hotel style, forms of entertainment, and even stereotypical guests.”<sup>30</sup> The very thing that made the hotels popular, Stradling argues, eventually led to their decline. Stradling comments that the images conjured of Catskill resorts were remarkably powerful, and they retarded the region’s efforts to modernize for future generations. Because of the stereotypes of the resorts, potential guests had preconceived

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<sup>28</sup> Rugh, 171.

<sup>29</sup> Rugh, 176.

<sup>30</sup> Stradling, 204.

notions about the type of experience that would receive if they vacationed in the Catskill hotels. Tastes were changing, and children of the last generation of resort goers simply had different expectations of what a vacation was meant to be. Stradling also focuses on the increasingly cosmopolitan nature that flourished in New York City. He explains that “changing metropolitan culture, especially, reshaped tourists’ expectations and experiences in the mountains, which in turn reshaped conceptions of the countryside and the value of nature.”<sup>31</sup> Stradling therefore contends that the reason for the decline is related to the shifting cultural values of Jewish Americans. He additionally states that by the 1980s the hotels, and the towns that they occupied, simply looked and felt worn out, which was not uncommon for rural American towns in this time period.

Though Stefan Kanfer spends most of his time documenting the decline of the region, he fails to extensively look at the reasons behind the downfall of the resorts. He does briefly mention, however, that a generational divide plagued the Catskill resorts. The hotel experience was tailored to a generation that by the 1960s was getting older, and their children simply had no interest in continuing a tradition of vacationing in the mountains, or even spending such copious amounts of time with their parents. The children of the guests who frequented the hotels were “growing more familiar with roads around Miami, Disneyland, Las Vegas, the Hamptons and the Jersey Shore.”<sup>32</sup> Kanfer also stresses the changing lifestyles of Americans, as he explains that “fashions seemed to run against the Borscht

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<sup>31</sup> Stradling, 207.

<sup>32</sup> Stefan Kanfer, *A Summer World: The Attempt to Build a Jewish Eden in the Catskills, From the Days of the Ghetto to the Rise and Decline of the Borscht Belt* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), 258.



Belt. Underweight was in, and the famous Catskill menus came to be regarded as unhealthy.”<sup>33</sup> The Catskill hotels were therefore simply too grounded in a certain tradition, and were unwilling to adapt to the changing expectations of the American people.

Phil Brown adds another dimension to the discussion of the downfall of the region. He argues that “changes in family structure were important. By the 1960s, women were entering the workforce in large numbers.”<sup>34</sup> Brown explains that women no longer desired to spend the workweek in the mountains alone with their children. As a result, family ties loosened, and no longer did people “seek resorts that had a familial character, one of the central elements of the Catskill hotels.”<sup>35</sup> Brown also points to intermarriage, geographic mobility, changing jobs, changing vacation choices, and a lessening of anti-Semitism.

This thesis will present a new perspective on the resorts of the Catskills. While the existing literature points to the reasons for the rise and demise of the region, this study will show how the mountains fit into existing narratives of American history. The thesis will show that the Catskill region was not immune to the evolution of American society, and in fact, adapted along with the changing culture and values of the nation. This study starts by examining the region in the early twentieth century, at which point a strong desire to experience the natural beauty of the mountains existed, and then moves into a discussion about the large Catskill resorts that dominated the region in the postwar era, and the manner in which they reflected the emerging American penchant for consumerism. This

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<sup>33</sup> Kanfer, 258.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, 232.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

broader view of the Catskills relating to larger patterns within American history is something that is neglected within the existing writing on the mountains.

Finally, the thesis will examine the reasons for the nostalgia that exists within the secondary literature. This study depends heavily on primary sources, including newspaper articles from various publications, and firsthand accounts of those who experienced the mountains during its heyday, ranging from entertainers, waiters and waitresses, hotel owners, and guests. Together, these sources combine to tell a rich story of a resort region that has faded into history as a result of both Jewish assimilation into America and a decrease of anti-Semitism. The thesis will also show how the resorts of the Catskills played a significant role in the lives of many American Jews because the hotels allowed for Jews to partake in the distinctly American practice of leisure while still maintaining their religious and cultural traditions. The hotels fostered, and even helped create, a distinct Jewish American culture that flourished throughout the twentieth century, and still exists today.

## **Chapter Two:** *The Prewar Catskill Experience*

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, New York's Catskill Mountains provided an escape for Jews, primarily from New York City, who were forced to confront the harsh realities of American racism and xenophobia. In the case of American Jewish immigrants, who between the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often outright banned from frequenting institutions such as hotels and beaches, it is clear that these restrictions were one of the primary causes in creating a distinct brand of Jewish leisure and culture. As a result of the constraints on leisure that plagued Jewish American immigrants, Jews formed their own haven, only ninety miles from New York City, in the Catskill Mountains. Here, they created a land where refusal of services was, for the most part, no longer a major concern; they were free to frequent whichever hotels, boarding houses or bungalow colonies they desired. This resulted in the creation of a land of leisure, where Jews carried their culture from home into the mountains.

The Jewish desire to be among nature during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a result of Manhattan's Lower East Side. The Lower East Side was undoubtedly a ghetto, where horrific living and neighborhood conditions were the norm, and despite the fact that a distinct culture existed, there were definite problems. In his memoir, Michael Gold, a Jewish writer who grew up in the neighborhood, referred to the area as a "tenement canyon", filled with "armies

of howling pushcart peddlers” and “pimps, gamblers and red nose bums.”<sup>36</sup>The Lower East Side was one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the country. Many New Yorkers considered the area to be a city within a city, as at the beginning of the twentieth century it housed just under half a million people at a time when New York City’s entire population hovered around 1.8 million people. Life inside the tenements of the neighborhood reflected the brutal problem of overpopulation. Most tenements were between five and six stories, had four families to a floor and one common bathroom. The crowding within the tenements often forced residents of the area to congregate on the sidewalks, particularly in hot weather. When this happened, the neighborhood streets became so crowded that “there [were] squares where it was hard to make one’s way for the absolute pressure of the crowds of sitters and standers.”<sup>37</sup>

The Lower East Side was completely devoid of any space for recreation, and as result people felt disconnected from nature. The lack of both recreational and natural space was duly noted by the leading publications of the day. The *New York Times* published an article in 1901 dedicated to importance of J. Robinson Smith, a “former worker in the University Settlement who has planted three backyard gardens this year on the Lower East Side.” The tenants were so thrilled that the article notes, “it is just what they have been wanting—it has been their dream.”<sup>38</sup> Michael Gold, who spent his childhood in a tenement on the Lower

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1930), 13.

<sup>37</sup> “Centers of Civilization: On the Lower East Side of New York,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1901.

<sup>38</sup> “Tenement Yard Gardens: Flowers and Vegetables that Bring Pleasure to the People of the Lower East Side,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1901.

East Side, recalled “the hunger for country things”, explaining how there was no grass to be found and there were “no big living trees, no flowers, no soil, loam, earth.”<sup>39</sup> There therefore existed a desire to escape the city. This yearning, coupled with the fact that Jews were often forbidden from frequenting other places of leisure, led to the discovery of the Catskills and their natural beauty. This desire for the ‘country things’ reflected the way that families began to spend their leisure time. It is clear that nature, and being close to natural beauty such as plants and gardens, was becoming increasingly important to those New Yorkers who simply had no access to this realm due to the crowded conditions of the city.

The Catskills provided the perfect solution for the troubles of the cramped Jews of the Lower East Side. Tourists, including Jews, were originally drawn to the area in the early nineteenth century due to the popularity of Washington Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle*, which was set in the mountains and the Hudson River Valley. People ventured into the region as early as 1828 to be in the “very spot” where Rip slept and ate. By 1870, the Rip Van Winkle House, which acted as a boarding house, was built and throughout the nineteenth century, “Rip’s story had helped animate the entire region with legend and folklore, and locally produced tourist guides eager to sell the mountains used Rip’s name.”<sup>40</sup> Tourism in the Catskills began around the same time of Rip Van Winkle with the opening of the Catskill Mountain House in 1824. The grand structure “stood at the most prominent spot above the Hudson River” and was a leading “destination for

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<sup>39</sup> Gold, 40.

<sup>40</sup> David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 76-77.

tourists from around the nation and Europe.”<sup>41</sup> By the late nineteenth century, the Hotel Kaaterskill, which accepted Jews, was also a popular hotel. People like Mary and Ira Scribner also operated boarding houses within the region to cater to visitors who could not afford the hotels, and by 1908, Ulster and Delaware Counties were home to “over 1,000 hotels, farmhouses and boardinghouses” all of which accepted summer guests.”<sup>42</sup> Jews, primarily from New York City, therefore took advantage of these cheaper options and began to enter the region in full force, resulting in an “annual migration of Jewish tourists into the mountains.”<sup>43</sup>

In 1913, *The New York Times* published a comprehensive article on life in the mountains during the summer months. The article devotes substantial space to a discussion of the splendor of the region, which was clearly a main focus of those who chose to spend time in the Catskills. The article praises the mountains for their natural beauty, as well as their proximity to New York City. The author writes that it is as if “Dame Nature had provided the Catskills to meet the future needs of New Yorkers when she foresaw that a great city in time would take its place on Manhattan island, because in forming the Catskills she formed almost at the door of New York a mountain park...where six million people can find room to enjoy their Summer outing.”<sup>44</sup> This passage relays the significant relationship that the mountainous region maintained with the city of New York. People desired to leave the cramped confines of their homes, and the mountains provided the perfect escape. This article also illustrates the fact that leaving the city was an

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<sup>41</sup> Stradling, 80.

<sup>42</sup> Stradling, 94.

<sup>43</sup> Stradling, 178.

<sup>44</sup> “Catskills Lure Visitors with Varied Attractions” *The New York Times*, 22 June 1913.

important aim of many New Yorkers at the beginning of the twentieth century; city residents were seemingly always looking for a place to escape to, and the mountains provided just that.

The 1913 article also provides insight as to what vacationers at the beginning of the twentieth century were seeking when they decided to leave their homes for leisure. The author comments that people have been venturing into the Catskills since 1800 “in search of health and relaxation.”<sup>45</sup> Whereas by the mid twentieth century resort culture in the Catskills would evolve, and entertainment and luxury would come to become desired, at the beginning of the twentieth century people traveled so that they could improve themselves, not be entertained by others. This sentiment is reiterated in Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*. Published in 1917, the story focuses on a Russian Jewish immigrant and his attempts at success in New York City. In one telling scene in the novel, Levinsky travels to the Catskills, and when he steps off the train, he comments that mountains were “so full of ozone, so full of health-giving balms, it was almost overpowering. I was inhaling it in deep, intoxicating gulps. It gave me a pleasure so keen it seemed to verge on pain. It was so unlike the air I had left in the sweltering city that the place seemed to belong to another planet.”<sup>46</sup> Levinsky is clearly enthralled by the perceived health benefits of the mountains, showing that the mindset of the vacationer during late nineteenth and early twentieth century was therefore different than it would be later in the century, as a concern for nature’s benefits ultimately evolved into a desire for luxury and opulence.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917), 403.

In addition to the natural beauty of the Catskills, during the early twentieth century social events from New York City carried over to the mountains, thereby aiding in the creation of a distinct Catskill culture. The *New York Times* commented on the social happenings in Fleischmanns, a small village in Delaware County, and noted that “the charity concert for the benefit of the Hebrew Infant Asylum of New York...was an artistic and financial success.”<sup>47</sup> Despite the fact that there is no outright mention of the fact that it was mostly Jews who summered in the village of Fleischmanns, a farming village, it is clear, through the activities of Jewish charities and organizations that by the early twentieth century, the Catskills were beginning to assume a distinctly Jewish flavor. The mountains were connected to the Jewish community in New York by way of various philanthropic efforts that were not limited by the anti-Semitic tendencies that were prevalent in other parts of the state or country.

Jewish farmers, like those in Fleischmanns, were a mainstay in the region throughout the early twentieth century. Journalist Solomon Sufrin highlights the Jewish presence within the Catskills in 1916. Writing for the *Jewish Daily News*, Sufrin writes that while on vacation in the Catskills, he noticed the work ethic and professional manner of many Jewish farmers within the region, reaffirming his belief that the Jew is a nature lover. He argues that “the Jew is a good and able farmer...and he not only loves but actually adores nature with its deep mysteries and indescribable beauties.” Sufrin also comments on the intense work ethic of the Jewish Catskill farmer, explaining that “he is busy every minute of the day, and if he is lucky enough to accommodate a few summer boarders, he works from

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<sup>47</sup> “In the Catskills,” *New York Times*, August 5 1906.



16 to 18 hours daily.” It is almost as if Sufrin is making the case that Jewish farmers are productive members of society, and the anti-Semitism that was shown to them was completely unwarranted. In addition, to their work, the author comments that the Jewish farmer always “finds sufficient time to read a Jewish newspaper.” Therefore, while Jews were assimilating into an American agricultural life in the Catskills, they also retained their heritage and cultural interests. Sufrin’s article shows the manner in which Jews were becoming apart of Catskill life, as he writes that “thousands of Jewish families are now spending their vacation” in the Catskills.<sup>48</sup>

Attempts by Jews to settle within the area occurred before Solomon Sufrin’s time as well. Robert Carter, a Polish Jew, bought 489 acres in Ulster County in 1837, to be used as a retreat. Carter split the cost with five other Jewish families, and started one of the first Jewish colonies in the mountains. Despite the fact that the colony was unsuccessful, due to a recession that started in 1840, the colony, named Sholem, the Hebrew word for peace, was nonetheless a precursor of the relationship that developed between Catskill Mountains and the Jewish people.<sup>49</sup> Jews continued to leave their mark on the region throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, as they migrated to the mountains for its farmland as well.

Jews often attempted to settle within the confines of the mountains because of the anti-Semitic tendencies of hotel owners elsewhere in New York

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<sup>48</sup> Solomon Sufrin, “The Jews as a Nature Lover,” *The Jewish Daily News*, July 27, 1916.

<sup>49</sup> Stefan Kanfer, *A Summer World: The Attempt to Build a Jewish Eden in the Catskills, From the Days of the Ghetto to the Rise and Decline of the Borscht Belt* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), 23-24.

State. In 1877, in ritzy Saratoga Springs at the Grand Union Hotel, Joseph Seligman, a prominent New York City banker and economic advisor to Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses Grant, was told that “Israelites would no longer be accepted, because their vulgarity kept good Christian people away.” Following in the Grand Union’s footsteps, numerous other hotels throughout New York State advertised that “Hebrews need not apply.”<sup>50</sup> Shortly after, in 1879, Austin Corbin, a hotel owner in Coney Island, barred Jews from his hotel and from the section of beach his hotel was situated on, stating that he personally was “opposed to Jews.”<sup>51</sup>

To combat this exclusion, Jews made their way into the Catskills. However, there too they initially faced barriers. In 1889 the *New York Times* reported on a rumor that “hotel and boarding house proprietors in the Catskill Mountains decided that they will not receive Hebrews as guests during the season of 1889.” The author concludes that this was wildly exaggerated, and that it is “wide of the mark when applied to the entire range.” Only proprietors in one village, Pine Hill, had publicly announced that they would not “entertain Hebrews.”<sup>52</sup>

By the early twentieth century, as the anti-Semitic tendencies of the resorts were beginning to fade, Jews, primarily of German descent, were increasingly heading to the mountains’ resorts. The Catskill Mountain House, which was recognized as one of America’s leading resorts by 1902, “accepted all white comers—even Jews—without protest...The register for the Mountain House for 1902 and the years following show a large number of names of German and

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<sup>50</sup> Jon Sterngass, *First Resorts* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 106.

<sup>51</sup> Sterngass, 108.

<sup>52</sup> “The Anti-Hebrew Crusade,” *New York Times*, May 7 1889.

German Jews as well as Irish families. All these people had been in the United States long enough to win out in the race for money which was the national obsession.”<sup>53</sup> Despite anti-Semitism in the mountains, it was therefore clear that wealthy Jews were often immune, as hotel owners increasingly came to believe discrimination was not worth the monetary losses. Boarding houses provided an alternate for those Jews who could not afford the luxury of the Catskill Mountain House. While “many boarding continued to refuse to accept Jews, a growing number...were operated by Jews and emphasized Jewish observances.”<sup>54</sup> By the early twentieth century, Jews were slowly beginning to make their mark on the region. When Abraham Cahan’s protagonist, David Levinsky, ventures into the Catskills, he is surrounded by Jewish families from New York. In fact, it seems as if the entire town of Tannersville, as well as the Rigi Kulm House, the hotel where Levinsky stays, is devoid of any Gentiles.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the Catskills permitted Jews to partake in the American experience of leisure in a peaceful and safe manner, in that they were not discriminated against, and were mostly surrounded by fellow Jewish people.

While not everyone in the Catskills was pleased with the continued influx of Jews into the region, the economic potential of catering to Jews was slowly being realized. Arthur Shulman, who grew up in the town of Liberty, recalled that there certainly was anti-Semitism in the area even during the 1920s, a full thirty years after the infamous ‘anti-Hebrew Crusade.’ Jews still did not make up the

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<sup>53</sup> Alf Evers, *The Catskills: From Wilderness to Woodstock* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1972), 660.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Cahan, 404.

majority of Catskill vacationers during this era, but were nonetheless a significant presence. Rejecting Jews simply did not make sense “because the Gentiles made a lot of money from the resort trade.”<sup>56</sup> As a result of this, Jews started visiting the area more frequently without disturbance, as proprietors increasingly accepted both Jews and Gentiles, “provided they have the wherewithal to make their way.”<sup>57</sup> Certain villages, and even counties, such as Sullivan County, became home to thousands of Jews looking to escape the confines of their urban homes.

The increasing importance of the Catskills in Jewish society was reflected in their charity efforts. Establishing their presence in the Catskills, Jews actively helped others reach the area so that they too could partake in the wonder of the open surroundings. New York Jews participated in charitable efforts that would help fund summer “fresh air” camps, which provided “outings...for thousands of boys and girls who otherwise would be little prisoners of the sidewalks of New York.” These outdoor establishments were operated and supported by the Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies. In previous years, the article explains that the Jewish Vacation Committee concluded that some “48,000 Jewish children” qualified for leisure time in the Catskills, and therefore “a special fund...was placed at the association’s disposal.”<sup>58</sup> Although at this point in time Jews had not developed their own specific mountain culture, as they would by the middle of the twentieth century, a definite pattern of Jewish vacationing was emerging, and they nonetheless both understood and embraced

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<sup>56</sup>Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *It Happened in the Catskills* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1991), 6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> “Country Camps for Children From New York’s Sidewalks,” *New York Times*, July 1 1928.

the importance of the mountains in relation to their own health, and the well being of their coreligionists.

New York City's Jewish population became further connected with the Catskills with the introduction of the automobile into American life. Cars allowed travelers to take advantage of the mountain setting from the comfort of their vehicle. Cars allowed travelers to "escape the sweltering metropolis and reach the region in time for dinner."<sup>59</sup> A 1932 *New York Times* article contends that drivers can become "so engrossed in the scenery" that they can forget the historical significance of the Catskills. The article addresses both the "motorist" and the "tourist", providing various routes so that one could maximize the scenery.<sup>60</sup> The journalists write about the roads that one can take with such excitement, as well as a sense of exploration, that it is as if the journey to the Catskills was an integral part of any vacation. For example, Leon A. Dickinson writes that, to get to the Catskills, "motorists from New York may now chose one of two excellent highways..."<sup>61</sup> He continues with extensive detail on the two routes, and the natural sights one might see on their way to their final destination. It is clear that simply absorbing the natural beauty of the mountains was regarded as an enjoyable and pleasant activity at the start of the 1930s. The automobile also helped redefine the Catskills, and in the process, counties of the region, such as Sullivan and Ulster Counties, which were largely regarded as Jewish, were increasingly becoming recognized as a part of the overall Catskill Mountains.

With the rising use of the automobile, "the Jewish resorts of the high Catskills lost

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<sup>59</sup> Leon A. Dickinson, "Into the Catskills," *The New York Times*, June 14, 1931.

<sup>60</sup> Leon A. Dickinson, "To The Catskills and Beyond," *New York Times* May 29, 1932.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

ground, and those of Sullivan gained.”<sup>62</sup> Sullivan County was closer, and a less dangerous drive from New York City. Before the automobile, resort owners in Sullivan were hesitant to equate their resorts with those of the Catskills. In fact, vacationers only became aware of Sullivan County in the late nineteenth century, in part because of railroads that were continually expanding upstate. Before that, most vacationers perceived the Catskills as comprising of primarily Greene County.<sup>63</sup> By the middle of the 1920s, however, tourists, most of whom were Jewish, firmly planted themselves within the Catskills. The automobile made the region seem smaller and interconnected in a way that the railroad or horse drawn carriages never had.

In the 1920s, the Jewish presence in the Catskills was fast growing, increasing the feeling of community within the region. Flora Berger, a retired New York City schoolteacher who summered in the Catskills, recalled that before the outbreak of World War I, her family spent several summers at Hardin’s Farm, a working farm and hotel off Route 17. She explains that “all the clientele were friends, Jewish, and mostly from New York City. It was a family crowd with a lot of young children always running around.”<sup>64</sup> Ms. Berger’s reminisces are evidence that by the 1920s, there seems to be a shift in the reasons for vacationing in the Catskills. While nature, and a desire to escape the city certainly remained, the social aspects of the Catskills were also becoming increasingly more important and appealing to Jewish families. The Catskills allowed these families to vacation amongst themselves in an environment where they could maintain

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<sup>62</sup> Evers, 689.

<sup>63</sup> Evers, 493.

<sup>64</sup> Frommer and Frommer 17.

religious and cultural practices. However, the nature of the vacation was soon about to change.

Despite a clear presence in the region, by the 1930s, journalists were still not making explicit references to the Jewish existence in the area. From reading *The New York Times*' coverage of the area, one might have never known of their influence in the region. Firsthand accounts of Catskill visitors however established that indeed the Catskills was a distinctly Jewish place. Bill Smith, a Sullivan County historian, recalls that Jews starting arriving en masse toward the end of the nineteenth century, and they brought with them their own cultural practices.<sup>65</sup> Yiddish entertainment migrated from the Lower East Side to the mountains, and was a mainstay in the area by the 1920s. Charles Brett, who started visiting the mountains when he was just a child in 1919, recalled that although he and his family were "American-born, we all spoke Yiddish most of the time."<sup>66</sup> For his family the Catskills therefore represented a retreat from city life, but also a place where it was acceptable to continue cultural practices. Basic tenets of Jewish daily life therefore flowed very easily from New York City into the Catskills, and that visitors were able to take in their surroundings without having to leave their religious and cultural traditions at home.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, it was well understood that Jews had a special connection with the mountains, and this relationship made its way into popular culture. In 1948, Molly Picon, an American actress famous within the Yiddish theater, starred in a production of "Abi Gezunt", a Catskills operetta

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<sup>65</sup> Frommer and Frommer 2.

<sup>66</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 14.

which tellingly translates to “be healthy.” The show displays “the customs and manners of a kosher summer hotel in the Catskills” and the “comedy is familiar Jewish clowning—broad and folksy.” Throughout the production Yiddish was the main language, even though “very little Yiddish is spoken during the intermission.” A review of the production states that the use of Yiddish, “mixed up with a lot of English phrases, is probably the basic element in the familiar, sentimental impression ‘Abi Gezunt’ creates.”<sup>67</sup> This review, published in 1949 in *The New York Times*, explains that even by the middle of the twentieth century, Jews still had a distinct brand of culture that had not yet left behind, and that they were even somewhat nostalgic for it. Acculturation, while seemingly occurring, still did not deter Jewish entertainment. This attachment to a particular style of comedy and entertainment would ultimately follow American Jews into the Catskills, where it could be enjoyed in the mountainous setting.

The mid 1940s is often regarded as the start of the Golden Age of the Catskills, and during this time, in the minds of many guests, the social benefits of the area far eclipsed nature's healing powers. There is increasing testimony to the importance of the area, as well as a growing awareness concerning the Jewish population. Of important note is the fact that the makeup of the typical Catskill customer had by this point changed. No longer were the occupants of the ghettos of New York City making the mountain trek; nor were many of them immigrants. Instead, they were bona fide Americans, who wanted to partake in the American pastime of leisure. While many would say that this was an attempt at acculturating themselves into American society, as they adopted American cultural practices, it

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<sup>67</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “At the Theater,” *New York Times*, October 10, 1949.



is clear, however, that American Jews in the Catskills were still more similar to each other than to Gentile America. Part of the appeal of the Catskills was the knowledge of who your fellow guests would be; and in fact the majority were indeed Jewish. Therefore, Catskill resorts allowed American Jews to maintain their identity while simultaneously integrating themselves into American society by embracing the concept of the vacation.

A very distinct Catskill experience existed in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. Americans had a desire to witness the natural beauty of their ever-evolving country, and the Catskills provided the perfect locale with which to do so. For American Jews in particular, the Catskills represented an oasis away from the ghetto of the Lower East Side, and also a place where they too could partake in the American practice of leisure, as the Jewish-owned resorts and boarding houses freed Jews from having to confront the anti-Semitic tendencies that existed throughout parts of New York State. Eventually however, Jews stopped going to the mountains out of necessity, and by the middle of the twentieth century, a new generation of Jewish Americans frequented the Catskills because they had become one of the most glamorous and storied resort destinations in the country. Thus, the Golden Age was born.

### **Chapter Three:** *The Significance of the Golden Age*

For many years, observers branded the Catskill Mountains as a serene escape from the hustle and bustle of crowded city life. Visitors, most of whom came from New York City, journeyed to the Catskills in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to experience nature, and free themselves from the confines of their congested neighborhoods. Yet by the time of the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the American idea of a vacation had evolved. No longer did the majority of guests want to spend money to experience the natural surroundings that the mountains offered. Instead, vacationers wanted to be entertained. The hotels of the Catskills, which steadily grew over the twentieth century, reached their zenith during the postwar era. It was during this golden era that a distinct Jewish culture, one that still exists today, was formed in the mountains.

During the Golden Age, which started approximately in 1940, the demographic of the typical Jewish Catskill vacationer was changing. Most were not confined to the ghetto of the Lower East Side. Instead, these were Americans who had both settled into American society and adopted American cultural habits. Their attachment to their home country was diminishing, and taking part in the decidedly American pastime of vacationing influenced this. While the Catskill vacationer may have started his or her life in New York City, by the time of the Golden Age, the potential Catskill guest had improved their living conditions, and had most likely reached the outer boroughs of the Bronx and Queens. In some

extreme cases, if they were fortunate enough, some even made it to the suburbs of Long Island or Westchester. English was their primary language, and they were continually moving away from the Yiddish, or other languages, that they heard at home.<sup>68</sup>

The late 1930s and early 1940s signaled the beginning of a new way of life for the Catskill vacationer. In the *New York Times*, reporters began to divert their attention to the ever-expanding resorts of the area. The days of long, descriptive newspaper articles expounding the benefits of mountain life, and the varying routes that the motorist could take to the mountains, were seemingly over. They began to be replaced with stories about the growing field of leisure, and the increasing importance of tourism to the American way of life. In 1952, at the height of the Golden Age, money spent by tourists was among the top three sources of income for one third of American states. The article lists the reasons for the increase in tourism, which include an increase in national income, a rise of paid vacations among laborers and an improvement in the country's transportation systems.<sup>69</sup> It is thus not coincidental that the height of the Catskills occurred during this time of transition and change. Whereas earlier guests were perhaps tied down to their jobs, by the 1950s, it is apparent that leisure was a built in part of life, as an increasing number of people were both depending upon and partaking in the practice.

The middle of the twentieth century also witnessed a general remodeling of the Catskills. Before World War II the area was known for its "summer parade

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<sup>68</sup> Stefan Kanfer, *A Summer World* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), 134.

<sup>69</sup> "Advertising & Marketing: Spending by Tourists Important Income in Many States," *New York Times*, June 18, 1952.

of factory workers and middle class folk from New York's teeming boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx." These people generally vacationed in "small summer hotels and boarding houses." In the postwar years, however, the region rapidly developed, and "a series of gigantic luxury hotels, such as Grossinger's and The Concord, began to draw a year-round trade of both weekenders and casual holiday-makers."<sup>70</sup> A journalist in 1952 commented on the state of the Catskills:

The belief still persists in some quarters that spending time in that patch of the Catskill Mountains known as the borscht circuit is one way of roughing it. Some souls still feel that...they are heading into a land of rough-hewn tables, paper plates, outdoor bathrooms, muddy trails, mail once a week, and sleeping under tents. Hah! A little recent investigation has shown that the borscht circuit has become the rich man's Miami Beach.<sup>71</sup>

An evolution therefore took place in the mountains, whereby because people had more money to spend, the luxurious and large resort hotels significantly overshadowed the bungalow colonies and smaller resorts. The bigger hotels, that had the ability to cater to thousands of guests each night, became defined by luxury, and this luxury in turn came to define the Catskills in the public eye.

In postwar America, travel quickly became a product of a new consumer society, and consumer habits became intertwined with the field of leisure. Immediately after the war in 1946, the federal government began taking measures to promote consumption among the American people. The Employment Act of 1946 defined the federal government's responsibility as "promoting maximum employment, production, and purchasing power, with purchasing power providing

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<sup>70</sup> UPI, "Catskills Popular Resort Area," *The Sandusky Register*, March 27, 1968.

<sup>71</sup> Mel Helmer, "My New York," *The Vidette Messenger*, August 28, 1952.

the fulcrum for activating the other two.”<sup>72</sup>. Additionally, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, or the “GI Bill of Rights”, also contributed to increased spending by Americans. Consumerism within postwar America was a strong force, as Americans were fed information by the federal government, and other major publications of the day such as *Life* magazine, which claimed that a purchaser who was “devoted to ‘more, newer, better’ was the good citizen.” The consuming American thereby became the mark of the model citizen, who “simultaneously fulfilled personal desire and civic obligation by consuming.”<sup>73</sup> This attitude is representative of the increase in travel and leisure throughout American society. Because Americans were slowly becoming confident spenders, taking time away from work to vacation was not only viewed as a viable option, but therefore also a distinctly American activity.

Vacations were clearly becoming an integral part of American life by the 1950s, so much so that novel businesses such as travel agencies were continually gaining significance. A 1955 *New York Time* article explains to readers the exact role of a travel agent in the ever-growing field of tourism, which by the mid 1950s had become the third largest industry in the United States. By this time, over sixty-five percent of the nation’s workforce was granted at least two weeks vacation time, a far cry from the harsh working conditions that ruled that earlier part of the twentieth century. The article also explains that Americans had increasingly greater concerns when it comes to selecting hotels. No longer do the only concerns include “a place to eat and sleep.” By the 1950s, questions such as

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<sup>72</sup> Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 118.

<sup>73</sup> Cohen, 119.

“can we get a babysitter?” “what are the facilities for golf, tennis, swimming, horseback riding?” “How should we dress?” and—“how much will it cost?” were commonplace.<sup>74</sup> This article illustrates that Americans were increasingly coming to expect more out of their vacations. No longer was it acceptable to just entertain yourself with your surroundings. By the postwar era, the surroundings were quickly being adapted and modernized in order to entertain and satisfy the guest. This was in part due to the increasing consumer culture of America. Americans became used to their new comforts of home, which included appliances, and new electronics that defined the postwar era. As a result, hotels and resorts were forced to evolve and incorporate such cutting edge products into the overall experience.<sup>75</sup>

While postwar consumerism may have been built around the notion of “mass consumption, both in terms of material life and the more idealistic goals of greater freedom, democracy, and equality,” it is clear that family togetherness, and the nuclear family, was built into this concept.<sup>76</sup> Mass produced homes in new suburbs like Levittown encouraged homeowners with families. “Houses were designed with to accommodate families with small children...Kitchens were near the front entrance, so mothers could keep an eye on their children as they cooked...The one-story design gave the home an informal look and was practical for families with young children...Homes were designed for enjoyment, fun and

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<sup>74</sup> Philip Andrews, “How A Travel Agent Works,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1955.

<sup>75</sup> Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet?* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 5.

<sup>76</sup> Rugh, 5.

togetherness.”<sup>77</sup> Having a family propelled one to spend on activities and items, which included, dishwashers, cars and, of course, family vacations. The Catskills consistently catered to families because the region was seen as a family destination. The hotels also provided their guests with day camps. Grossinger’s children’s day camp was located on the grounds of the hotel, but was a “little resort in itself.” At any given time, the camp catered to around sixty children, ranging from four year olds to fourteen year olds. Management of the hotel explained that “the camp was developed as an enticement for guest families to bring their children with them for the entire summer.”<sup>78</sup> The camp also had its own children’s dining room that was adorned with drawings of the Seven Dwarves and Disney characters. The children’s dining room was located behind “the kitchen, far removed from the main dining room, and was really operated as a convenience to guests who preferred to eat later than their children—and without them”<sup>79</sup> The children’s dining room allowed Catskill vacationers to continue the tradition of the nuclear family in that they were allowed, and even encouraged to bring their children with them on vacation. Yet the dining room also allowed for parents to have time away from their children with the comfort of knowing that their children would safe within the confines of the hotel. The fact that children, and families, were becoming an integral part of life in postwar America was recognized by the Catskill hotels, which tried to evolve with the changes of American society and culture.

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<sup>77</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 163.

<sup>78</sup> Grossinger, 25-26.

<sup>79</sup> Tania Grossinger, *Growing up at Grossinger’s* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2008), 26.

The role of consumer society in driving the gradual shift from nature to resort based tourism did not go unnoticed. In 1954, the *New York Times* commented that while the mountains still existed, they certainly played a secondary role within Sullivan County. Reminiscent of the immense optimism that overtook America in the postwar years, the article claims that in the Catskills, “man has truly triumphed over nature, rearing on its battered remains a collection of main buildings, Hollywood annexes, Florida cabanas, Waikiki palm courts, and intimate cocktail lounges without parallel in the civilized world.”<sup>80</sup> The author is aware that America was progressing at an unparalleled rate, and that this era of consumer spending and affluence was a truly unique time within America’s history. The Catskills were representative of this new era of abundance and prosperity.

In postwar America, Jews created their own distinct style of vacationing in the Catskills that was representative of the postwar consumption that engulfed the country. During this Golden Age, there was a constant feeling in the region that bigger was better. Competition existed among the hotels, which prompted continued expansion. In the mountains, particularly in Sullivan and Ulster Counties, hotels such as Grossinger’s, Kutsher’s, The New Roxy, The Fallsview, Brown’s Hotel, The Pines, The Concord, The Flagler and the Nevele were in a constant state of growth to cater to the increasing demands of guests. Visitor expectations were on the rise, and these hotels were determined to meet any and all desires of their patrons. Interestingly, most of these hotels had roots that tied

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<sup>80</sup> Armand Schwab Jr., “Highlife in the Hinterland,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1954.



to the era of boarding houses and farmers. Kutsher's began as a farm in 1907, and started to take in boarders by 1920. From there, the facilities grew and it became one of the leading hotels of the region.<sup>81</sup> Grossinger's began as a boarding house in 1919, and ultimately continued to grow throughout the middle of the twentieth century into a resort that catered to over one thousand guests on any single day. The Flagler Hotel was started in 1872, and catered to Gentile guests, but in 1908 it was acquired by new owners and turned into a kosher boarding house.<sup>82</sup> The Nevele Hotel operated as a farm until 1938, when it began taking in boarders.<sup>83</sup> The Concord Hotel, often viewed as a more modern and luxurious option to Grossinger's was started in 1935, and the Pines Hotel was started in 1933.

Despite the fact that the Golden Age brought with it a newfound demand for luxury, the hotels still maintained their Jewish traditions. Most all of the hotels in Sullivan and Ulster Counties maintained some type of religious dedication to the Jewish faith. Services in the morning were a common occurrence at Kutsher's, and Grossinger's maintained a strictly kosher dining room and kitchen. The Pioneer Hotel, in South Fallsburgh, Sullivan County, was considered the most religious of the region's resorts. Guests were forbidden from driving around the grounds on the Sabbath, and were not allowed to check in or out of the hotel. On the Sabbath, Jewish workers were forbidden from working. The hotel took this very seriously, and was even once cited by the State Commission against discrimination for refusing to hire Jewish bellhops. Ultimately the owners won the

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<sup>81</sup> Phil Brown, *Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat's Memories of the Great Jewish Resort Area* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>82</sup> Brown, 62.

<sup>83</sup> Brown, 31.

case, arguing that the only way the hotel could efficiently operate on weekends was if the bellhops were Gentile.<sup>84</sup>

Out-of-state journalists seemed impressed with the manner in which the hotels were dedicated to the Jewish religious laws and customs. The *Daily Review*, a newspaper from the San Francisco Bay Area, commented in awe “that to see the Catskills put on the dog is a sight to remember.” The majority of the article is dedicated to the religious manner in which Grossinger’s Hotel operated, and the author admires how such a large and well-known resort functioned with so many religious barriers. Toast was barred on the Sabbath, as a “mechanical contrivance” was necessary to prepare it. In addition, to keep with the tradition of the Sabbath, the Grossinger’s management “even removed all the writing paper from the desks and counters.”<sup>85</sup> Hotels of the Catskills were able to maintain their reputations as luxurious mountain getaways while still prominently retaining their religious beliefs, to the point where journalists are somewhat in awe of the way that the hotels operate.

Grossinger’s, also dedicated to maintaining the Jewish religious laws forbid smoking on the Sabbath, although this was later changed to accommodate guests requests. By 1950, this dedication to religious law was lightened, and smoking on the Sabbath was prohibited in the dining room and main lobby only. For many years, no musical entertainment was allowed on Fridays. Yet Jennie Grossinger, the hotel’s ever-present matriarch, did not want to disappoint the Jewish soldiers who often visited the hotel after returning from World War II. The

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<sup>84</sup> Grossinger, 53.

<sup>85</sup> Cleveland Amory, “Faces and Places,” *The Daily Review*, September 8, 1963.

hotel therefore reached a compromise, whereby “each Friday, for the sum of \$1.00, the hotel would be leased to Hans Behrens, the scenic designer for the playhouse, thereafter affectionately known as ‘The Shabbos Goy.’ He would return it to the family at sundown on Saturday. For the twenty-four hours of the Sabbath, the hotel was not officially owned by a Jew, so no religious rules would be broken by providing entertainment.”<sup>86</sup> In order to cope with the rising expectations of guests, hotels therefore had to act cleverly to maintain their religious obligations, yet also provide for guests who often decided to slightly relax their religious tendencies while on vacation.

Daily activity schedules as well as hotel menus also illustrate the Jewish culture that existed in the resorts. A Kutsher’s Country Club and Resort daily activity program from April 20, 1968 shows that at 9:00 a.m., “services” were scheduled, as it was clearly assumed what denomination the services would be held. At 10:30, Yizkor, the Jewish Memorial Service, was scheduled. Swimming races and a day camp talent show also were included on the schedule. Entertainment was mixed in with religion, and this combination would come to define the area. Other events of the day included a demonstration on Men’s Hairpieces, where there would be a “discussion and demonstration” on how to ‘Look 20 Years Younger’, and a lecture on the state of the New York Stock Exchange. Catskill resorts were therefore a place that people could go and observe the Jewish faith by attending services, and also partake in other forms of entertainment, and then immediately return to their vacation.<sup>87</sup> This is evident in

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<sup>86</sup> Grossinger, 54.

<sup>87</sup> Kutsher’s County Club “Daily Activity Program,” April 20, 1968. Retrieved from The

the way that the Hotel Aladdin, in Sullivan County, approached the High Holy Days. A 1963 invitation for Passover listed the highlights of the weekend, which included “services on premises by Cantor,” as well as “dancing and entertainment” and activities at the “new indoor pool and sauna rooms, plus the indoor recreation room.” The bottom of the schedule makes note that “dietary laws are observed.” The Aladdin therefore lured guests with promises of a traditional vacation weekend interspersed with religious activities.<sup>88</sup>

The food served at the hotels also aided in creating a distinct Catskill Jewish culture. A 1969 menu at the Commodore Hotel in Sullivan County demonstrates the explicit Jewish presence in the region. A summer night’s menu included, among other items, chopped liver, matzo ball soup and noodle pudding, dishes that exemplify Jewish cuisine to this day. A 1954 menu for the ritzier Grossinger’s echoes this sentiment. The menu included a “consommé, Matzo Ball,” rolled stuffed cabbage, stuffed derma, which is kosher beef intestines stuffed in casings, and carrot tzimmi, all very traditional Ashkenazi dishes. The food so typified Jewish cuisine that it is easy to see how gentiles would avoid the area.<sup>89</sup>

Catskill hotels thrived on their kitchens, but the Jewish High Holy Days were just as important to the hotels. Grossinger’s was recognized as the leader in catering to the religious needs of its guests, so much so that by 1950, the hotel had built a synagogue on the grounds. Tania Grossinger, niece of Jennie Grossinger,

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Catskills Institute, [www.catskills.brown.edu](http://www.catskills.brown.edu).

<sup>88</sup> The Aladdin Passover Rates Schedule, 1963. Retrieved from the Catskills Institute, [www.catskills.brown.edu](http://www.catskills.brown.edu).

<sup>89</sup> Commodore Hotel Menu, August 23, 1969. Retrieved from The Catskills Institute, [www.catskills.brown.edu](http://www.catskills.brown.edu).

and daughter of Karla Grossinger, the hotel's social hostess, grew up at the hotel. She recalled in her memoir that on the holy days, the hotel "attracted the cream of Jewish families, certainly in New York, if not in the nation." She commented that for the three major Jewish Holidays, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover, the crowd at Grossinger's was rather observant of religious customs. The services were carried out in an Orthodox manner, and women were not allowed on the bimah, the elevated platform where the torah, rabbi, cantor and choir congregate. Female guests were, however, permitted to worship with the males in the main auditorium, or women could retreat to the balcony.<sup>90</sup> On Yom Kippur, a day of fasting, Grossinger explained that the dining room still remained open for the extreme few who were not observing the holiday, and that "the staff schedules had been rearranged so that only gentiles were working that day." Jennie Grossinger's mother, Mom Grossinger, as she was affectionately referred to, would often go through the offices of the hotel making sure that no Jews were working on the Holy Days. She explained that "Yom Kippur was God's Day, not the Grossinger Hotel Day."<sup>91</sup>

In postwar America, when consumers were a powerful group that was moving the American economy along, the vacation developed into a status symbol, especially for those who partook in a Catskill vacation, where status, opulence and abundance were prime characteristics of the evolving region. The number of hotels was quickly growing as well. Signposts along New York's Route Seventeen, the main highway to the Catskills before the Quickway was

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Grossinger, 57.

built, were common, often with “about twenty or thirty arrows pointing to different hotels. The signs were so crowded you really had to study to find the hotel you were looking for.”<sup>92</sup>

By 1958, the *New York Times* created an image of a modern Catskills region, where there was no end to the potential of the area. Marvin Schwartz comments that “the big hotels are still building...and a new harness race track is being bulldozed into shape just outside of the village.”<sup>93</sup> Schwartz’s article portrays the Catskills as an exciting place that was still growing. The raceway, which still stands today, was created in order to “add to the national character of the Catskills”. It is therefore clear that while a great relationship existed between New York and the area, there was a strong desire to reach beyond just New York State, yet another example of the optimism of the times. While the *New York Times* consistently updated its readers on the additions of various Catskill hotels, it is also clear that they understood the larger meaning of such expansions. By 1958, right in the heart of the transformation of the big resorts, hotel owners admitted that the region was undergoing a transformation that was essentially fifty years in the making, for the Catskills had been evolving ever since visitors first started vacationing in the Catskills. Yet the fifties were witness to a period where this evolution intensified, and the additions were of a different scale. In 1958, hotel owners were expecting to spend approximately \$8,000,000 on improvements in the hopes of impressing their existing clientele, and attracting new guests. The *Times* comments that “resort owners have been modernizing their

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<sup>92</sup> Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *It Happened in the Catskills* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1991), 96.

<sup>93</sup> Marvin Schwartz “Adding Character to the Catskills” *New York Times*, May 11, 1958.

establishments on a scale the likes of which have never been seen in this teeming, summer-minded country community.” The major trend of the year was the construction of indoor pools so that hotels could transfer their popularity into the winter months. In 1958, approximately nine resorts had indoor pools, and what is certainly an example of the competition and tendency for conspicuous spending that was evident at the resorts. It was estimated that by the next summer, to keep up with the resorts that already had indoor pools, another twenty hotels would add them to their facilities.<sup>94</sup> The fact that the resort area was well known for its ambitious spirit was not a secret. The *New York Times* commented in 1954 that Sullivan County is recognized as a “competitive resort area, with the hotel owners and managers fighting it out it out in an [intense] atmosphere.”<sup>95</sup>

In commenting on the hotels in 1958, Marvin Schwartz comments that “the biggest and the bigger hotels are having another big year in the way of new additions and new facilities.” The article comments that Grossinger’s was putting its “finishing touches” on its new million-dollar, 25,000 square foot three-story glass enclosed indoor swimming pool and health club. The space “will have, among other things, special lighting effects and both heating and air conditioning.” The article continues to talk about room expansion at Grossinger’s, which will be complete with air conditioners, the Pines Hotel, and Gibber, in addition to new golf courses at both Kutsher’s Country Club, the Nevele and the Roxy Hotel. In addition, Grossinger’s expanded their playhouse “to care for 1,500

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<sup>94</sup> Michael Strauss, “The Catskills ‘Revolution,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1959.

<sup>95</sup> Armand Schwab Jr., “Highlife in the Hinterland,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1954.

playful people.”<sup>96</sup> The author of the article proudly shows that these resorts are on the forefront of both modernity and luxury. The dining room was another stalwart of the Catskill resort. A 1963 California newspaper article comments on the immense dining rooms at Grossinger’s and the Concord. The dining room at Grossinger’s, which sat 1700 people, “must be seen to be believed,” the article comments. Yet the dining room at the Concord, which sat 2,700 people, is simply “on sight, beyond belief.”<sup>97</sup> Additionally, a newspaper from Valparaiso, Indiana commented in 1952 that “if you turn up in the borscht belt without evening clothes, daily change of shaving lotion or perfume and twelve pairs of shoes, you may not be accepted as a paying guest. They are doing things on a big scale up there.”<sup>98</sup> This is indicative of the fact that not only were the Catskill resorts physically changing, but their guests were as well. The facilities at the hotels were so immense that it was often too difficult for people to understand their magnitude. The resorts and their technological and lavish accommodations represent the postwar consumption that engulfed America during the middle of the twentieth century. Such expansion and modernization led to a public perception of the Catskills as one of the most elegant places in the country.

To keep up with this image of the Catskills as a land of luxury, hotels continually expanded not only their recreational facilities, but also their entertainment facilities. Entertainment was a hallmark of the Catskill resorts, and singers, comedians, and Broadway shows graced the stages of the mountains. The region was even responsible for the careers of such superstars as Eddie Cantor,

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<sup>96</sup> Marvin Schwartz, “Adding Character to the Catskills” *New York Times*, May 11, 1958.

<sup>97</sup> Cleveland Amory, “Faces and Places,” *The Daily Review*, September 8, 1963.

<sup>98</sup> Mel Helmer, “My New York,” *The Vidette-Messenger*, August 28, 1952.



Eddie Fisher, Neil Sedaka, Don Rickles, Jackie Mason, Joan Rivers, and Milton Berle. The Catskill resorts as a whole enjoyed pointing out that many of the biggest stars of the mid twentieth century were products of the region. The plethora of resorts in the Catskills allowed for comedians and singers to play numerous different hotels. Once entertainers became popular on the “Borscht Circuit,” word often spread back to New York City, where talent agencies would quickly sign them.<sup>99</sup> The Catskills were often seen as a starting point for many of the mid twentieth century’s biggest stars. Carl Reiner, in a documentary for PBS, explained that “all the comics that ever meant anything came through those portals and learned their craft” in the Catskills. Freddie Roman, a Catskill institution, commented on the history of Catskill entertainment:

Standup comedy was an art form developed by Jews. And where did they develop it? In the Catskills. The Catskills were the comedy clubs of the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s. And at one time, there were over three hundred places for a comedian to work in the mountains...The comedians that worked in the mountains had to gear their entertainment for their audience, and the audiences in the mountains were primarily Jewish.<sup>100</sup>

Entertainment was a very serious aspect of the Catskills. Audiences were notoriously tough. Joan Rivers recalled that “the Catskill hotel audiences, were without question, the worst in the world.”<sup>101</sup> Yet despite their bad reputation, a good performance in the Catskills often paved the way for a bright career. The hotels understood their potential, and their status as the gateways to larger fame, and as a result, they invested heavily in their entertainment facilities.

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<sup>99</sup> Laurence Malson and Michael Kantor, “Clubs, Camps, and Catskills,” <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/makeemlaugh/episodes/history/clubs-camps-and-catskills/29/>.

<sup>100</sup> Freddie Roman, interviewed for PBS, *Jewish Americans*, PBS, retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/jewishamericans/watch/index.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Kanfer, 231.

In 1962, Sullivan County introduced the “Sullys,” an award for “the big names in show business who began on the borscht circuit when it was something less than a glamorous career.” Nominees included mainly Jewish entertainers such as Jerry Lewis, Eddie Fisher, Sid Caesar, and Robert Merrill. The awards were meant to spawn a Hall of Fame, which was to be located at the Monticello Raceway.<sup>102</sup> While these awards represented the power of the Catskills during the twentieth century, they also signify that the Catskills were especially significant for Jewish entertainers. Few other resort towns in the country rivaled the Catskills, and because of the Jewish connection to the area, these people not only represented Catskill success, but their achievements also embodied a distinct type of Jewish success in America.

As a result of the caliber of entertainers that graced Catskill stages, hotels were very proud of their entertainment facilities. In 1958, the Concord Hotel, a major competitor of Grossinger’s, revamped their nightclub, which accommodated 1,500 people, deciding that this was too small. The new nightclub had room for three thousand guests. Both the Concord and Grossinger’s also erected new buildings to accommodate new guests. The new wing at Grossinger’s had “eighty deluxe air-conditioned rooms, an arcade of shops, and an enlarged playhouse seating 1,500.” While the larger hotels of the region certainly gained more attention for their opulence, the motels of the area also “found themselves caught in this torrent of construction and reconstruction which has made the building industry in this community a bustling one. Rare today is the bungalow

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<sup>102</sup> “Catskills to Pick Their Honor Grads,” *The Oneonta Star*, August 22, 1962.

colony without a swimming pool of its own.”<sup>103</sup> Building and renovations were therefore also accessible to the lower classes of Catskill guests; one did not have to have incredible sums of money to partake in the growing American pastime of leisure. Finally, the article comments that hotelmen “have dug into their pockets and spent at a greater rate than ever before.” Hotel owners were clearly trying to take advantage of the purchasing power of their guests like never before. In addition, they had faith in the fact that this period of abundance and consumption would carry on for time to come, as it was often believed that hotel additions such as pools would pay for themselves within three years.<sup>104</sup>

Golf courses also became symbols of pride for many of the larger resorts. The *New York Times* explains how, by 1960, “the modest croquet lawn has made way for a collection of golf courses that is said to make the Southern Catskills one of the busiest rural links areas in the world.” Again, there is a sense of pride in the area, as well as an awareness of the evolution of the state of the hotels. Where at one time modesty reigned supreme, by the Golden Age of the 1950s and 1960s, people instead wanted to be surrounded by luxury.<sup>105</sup> The same article also notes that there has been an increased demand for luxury among Catskill vacationers.

Perhaps the most striking example of the immense consumerism in the Catskills is represented in the Concord Hotel’s golf course. It was said that upon hearing that Grossinger’s had completed an eighteen hole golf-course, Arthur Winarick, a Russian immigrant who expanded the hotel from three acres to 2,800, told his landscaper to build him a fifty hole course. Although his grand vision of

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<sup>103</sup> Armand Schwab Jr., “Highlife in the Hinterland,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1954.

<sup>104</sup> Rugh, 37.

<sup>105</sup> Michael Strauss, “Golf No Handicap,” *New York Times*, August 13, 1961.

one large course never came to fruition, the result of his original plan led to two eighteen-hole courses and a smaller nine-hole course on the hotel's premises.<sup>106</sup> This type of competition spurred the type of excess that became well known in the Catskills. However, neither guests nor owners viewed the massive construction projects as extreme or unnecessary. Instead, it is apparent that the hotels, guests and media thrived on the fact that these hotels were constantly trying to outdo each other. In postwar times, the fact that people could spend to produce such objects of excess was seen as exciting and a signal of power.

The expansion and modernization of the hotels in the Catskills also serve as examples of the optimism of the times, for it seemed as if nothing could stop the region's momentum, or the purchasing power of its guests. Yet by 1964, it was recognized that such competition could present serious challenges for the region. The *Sheboygan Press* newspaper commented that the Catskills were "particularly sensitive to the problem of competition" because the "more than four hundred hotels contend for trade against each other as well as the rest of the world." The article comments that the hotels feel that they have to keep spending and improving their facilities because of the threat of "speedy jet airliners and luxury cruise ships" which allowed Americans, who had previously defined a vacation as a "short trip from home," to "think nothing of taking off for the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and even the Far Pacific."<sup>107</sup> Therefore, while the immense spending of hotelmen in the Catskills was representative of the consumerist attitude that filled America in the postwar years, it was not the sole

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<sup>106</sup> Kanfer, 167.

<sup>107</sup> Murry J. Brown, "New York's 'Borscht Belt' Vies For Bigger Share of Tourist \$," *The Sheboygan Press*, March 28, 1964.

reason for the tremendous improvement and modernization in the mountains. Increasingly, the region had to deal with the fact that cars and railways were not the only modes of transportation, and new opportunities for travel had become available with the advent of emerging technologies.

The Golden Age of the Catskills was undoubtedly a time where luxury reigned supreme. In Sullivan and Ulster Counties, Jewish families found a place to call their own while simultaneously developing their own distinct brand of American Jewish culture. The food, entertainment and lifestyle of the hotels certainly impacted future Jewish generations, much in the way that the consumerism in postwar America forever transformed the country. Postwar America was a time of opportunity and optimism, and these sentiments were echoed in the manner in which hotels were both created and operated.

## **Chapter Four:** *The Nostalgia For the Catskills*

The resorts of the Catskill Mountains provided a distinct form of leisure for many Jewish Americans. The hotels of the region firmly built themselves into American Jewish culture by spawning distinct types of Jewish food and entertainment, both of which guests fondly remember as they look back at their time spent in the mountains. A definite Catskill culture formed in large part because of the practices and traditions that took place within the hotels. Yet the fact remains that despite being such an integral part of the lives of many Jewish families, the entire region of the Catskills experienced a rapid decline, starting in the late 1980s, which led to the shuttering of most of the hotels and bungalow colonies that had at one time defined the area. The age of the Catskill experience lasted for less than half a century, but despite the short time period of its existence, there exists a tremendous amount of nostalgia concerning the region. In fact, most of the history on the Catskill experience is written by those who had connections to the area; either their families owned hotels, they worked in the mountains, or they vacationed at the resorts or bungalow colonies. The Catskill Mountains are remembered universally as a summer Eden, and all who examine the region approach the topic with a sort of wistfulness, that while seemingly appropriate, is still somewhat perplexing. It is apparent that most of the nostalgia stems from the fact that the Catskills produced a feeling of Jewish community in the mountains, and the hotels represented a place where American Jews were able to come together and both participate in the activities that the hotel provided, and

practice their religious traditions in a serene environment. The practices and preferences of the guests at the resorts ultimately came to mirror larger patterns of Jewish culture that still exist today. Today, there exists a strong desire to revisit the past glory of the mountain resorts. The inclination to look back at the Catskill experience is due to the fact that so many of the hotels and bungalow colonies, and even the towns where these resorts and lodgings were located, no longer exist; as a result only the memories of former guests and employees allow these summer havens to live on. In addition, today's American Jewry is distinctly different than previous generations; no longer is there a need for resorts that foster such religious customs. As a result, Jews often look back with a sort of longing to a time when distinct Jewish communities flourished.

The hotels began to decline in the mid 1960s, when women began entering the workforce, and a resulting shift in the family dynamic occurred. Family ties were loosened, and people no longer valued the idea of a family vacation as much as they had during the first half of the twentieth century. Additionally, the children of former Catskill vacationers developed new tastes for leisure, and this younger generation was not "as tied to the Catskills" as their parents.<sup>108</sup> As air travel entered into the lives of Americans, more exotic destinations, such as Hawaii, the Caribbean, and even Florida, became more easily accessible, and as a result, Catskill resorts faced much more intense competition than just each other. Murray Posner, owner of the former Brickman's Hotel, reiterated this when he commented, "I used to think I'm competing with the hotel down the road. Now

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<sup>108</sup> Phil Brown, *Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat's Memories of the Great Jewish Resort Area* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 234.

I'm competing with every resort in the world."<sup>109</sup> All of these factors contributed to the decline of the region, and the deterioration of the Catskills is what is in part responsible for the nostalgia that exists today.

It is important to realize that certain elements beyond the Jewish nature of the area, as well as the decline of the region, encouraged nostalgia as well. Paul Friedlander, writing for the *New York Times* in 1958, argued that many factors went into making "the Catskill Mountains the great New York City playground that it is."<sup>110</sup> An essential part of the Catskill experience was the large hotels that guaranteed entertainment and a plethora of food. Yet the hotels also insured that guests could surround themselves with others who were like-minded in their pursuits and beliefs without leaving the exclusive confines of the hotels. This was noted by the *New York Times* in 1958 when it was commented that "the Sullivan County guest pays a substantial weekly fee for his hotel package...[everything] is provided on the premises, and he need not take a step off the hotel property all week...the vacationist has little desire to leave his fortress."<sup>111</sup> The all-inclusive nature of the hotels, and the manner in which guests interacted with each other, contributed to the nostalgia that exists today. Because guests were paying upfront for all their services, it must have seemed wasteful to leave the hotel and spend extra money. As a result of this, guests stayed on the hotel premises and intermingled with each other.

The hotels were very social atmospheres, and an eagerness to meet other guests is one reason for the nostalgia that exists today. Tania Grossinger, niece of

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Paul J. C. Freidlander, "In the Mountains," *New York Times*, July 20, 1958.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.



Jennie Grossinger, the matriarch and owner of Grossinger's hotel, recalled in her memoir the intense social atmosphere of the hotel, where grand dinners dictated that younger guests find dates. She explains an encounter between a mother and daughter:

I remember the first time I overheard a mother asking her twelve-year-old if she had a date that night. When told no, she chided her unaggressive child and told her in no uncertain terms: 'why do you think I brought you here? It's never too early in life to meet the right kind of people. The boys you are playing with may very well grow up to be doctors and lawyers someday.'<sup>112</sup>

While this attitude certainly does not portray the guest in a positive light, this vignette highlights the fact that guests came to the hotels with a desire to socialize; there was a very open and welcoming atmosphere within the hotel to facilitate this. The candidness of the guests, and the fact that most families were willing and open to socialize with other paying guests contributes to the convivial manner in which the Catskills are so often remembered.

The hotels often facilitated the desires of their guests to meet others. At the Catskill resorts, the staff was not just staff; they were an integral part of the resort experience. Karla Grossinger, Jennie Grossinger's sister-in-law, held the position of the social hostess at Grossinger's Hotel. Tania Grossinger, Karla's daughter, recalled that at least ninety percent of her mother's time "was spent either introducing people to each other or consoling those who couldn't find someone to their liking. How many times I was to hear her say sympathetically 'don't be upset darling. It's not your fault. There's just not anybody here good

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<sup>112</sup> Tania Grossinger, *Growing Up At Grossinger's* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2008), 21.

enough for you.”<sup>113</sup> When looking back at their Catskill experiences, this personal atmosphere was something that consistently drew visitors back to the hotels. It is this closeness between the hotels and the guests that people so fondly remember today, as seen in Grossinger’s memoirs.

The desire of guests to meet other guests is related to the fact that Catskill visitors were very much like each other, in that most were Jewish and from the New York area. As a result, Catskill historian Phil Brown argues that a “powerful sense of community” pervaded the Catskills, and that this feeling contributes to today’s existing nostalgia. An *Albany Times Union* article written in 2000, and therefore an example of nostalgia in itself, explained that “whole neighborhoods would come up here to the same hotel, year after year, and you would have dinner with the same people every summer. There was a sense of belonging to a place.”<sup>114</sup> Brown and the *Times Union* article show that there was a real social scene in the Catskills, and despite the fact that an average of one million visitors paraded into the mountains every summer, vacationers still felt as if they were always among friends. Adding to this vision of the Catskills as a highly social environment is an advertisement from the early 1950s, which touts Grossinger’s as an “internationally famous resort covering 1,300 acres.” It also advertises the hotel as a “meeting place for young people of all ages.” The advertisement, which is filled with photographs of attractive young men and women interacting, explains that the hotels “atmosphere is congenial, relaxed, and unstuffy. As a result, so are our guests. They get to know one another...at the pool, in the dining

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<sup>113</sup> Grossinger, 12.

<sup>114</sup> Josh Getlin, “In Catskills, World of the Borscht Belt is at an End,” *Albany Times Union*, September 24, 2000.

room, on the ski slopes, at the cocktail lounge or in the nightclub, on the golf course, or around the fireplace. We may be over fifty, but we still think young.”<sup>115</sup> This idea that one could travel two hours and transform their social worlds was one of the reasons that guests made their way into the mountains, and it is also one of the reasons that the hotels are remembered so fondly today. A guest was surrounded by friendly people; people who went on vacation expecting and wanting to meet other guests. As a result, social relationships within the hotels formed, and a feeling of togetherness pervaded the hotels.

Relationships that formed at Catskill hotels often encouraged visitors to continually return to the resort. In a typical example of nostalgia, Tania Grossinger recalled that during the Golden Age, “Grossinger’s was a magical place.” She felt that it was because of the special connections that formed as a result of having so many repeat guests. She presents a typical letter from a guest to the hotel, which said “I’d like to bring my family up from the Fourth of July to Labor Day. We’d like to reserve Sadie the waitress and Meyer the bellhop. Please give us the same room and table that we always have.”<sup>116</sup> This consistency was a primary aspect in the appeal of the Catskills. A sense of comfort and community pervaded the atmosphere that certainly contributed to the “magic” of the area. Bob Lipman, a Catskill publicist and longtime guest of the area wrote that one of the things he treasures most about the hotel experience is the way in which “you’re welcomed when you come up. You get the same table, the same waiter. The owner comes over to you. She knows your aunt had died or your business had

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<sup>115</sup> Grossinger, 108.

<sup>116</sup> Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *It Happened in the Catskills* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1991), 44.

expanded. She knows what to talk to you about.”<sup>117</sup> Going to a hotel in the Catskills was a personal experience, where a sense of family existed among guests. There was also a feeling of routine and comfort in a Catskill vacation. Guests who came to the hotels knew both who and what to expect.

Helen Kutsher, the owner of Kutsher’s Hotel and Country Club in Monticello, New York, highlighted the community aspect of the mountains when she explained that “some guests out of habit go to their rooms first and then let the front desk know they’ve arrived. If there’s a room someone likes, you make sure they get it year after year...to me this is not a business. It’s a way of life”<sup>118</sup> Helen Kutsher’s life was devoted to the comfort and well being of her guests; there are perhaps very few others more qualified to comment on the Catskill way of life than her. The idea that the Catskills were a way of life and not just a vacation is yet another reason that people remember the mountains so vividly. A resort vacation in the mountains was not just about skiing, or swimming. It was about the lifestyle, the social scene, the food, the entertainment, and of course, the hotel.

As vacationing tastes shifted, it was no longer considered a status symbol to frequent the same hotel year after year. As a result, relationships between hotels and their guests faded, and people such as Paul Grossinger, son of Jennie and Harry Grossinger, the founders of the hotel looked back longingly at a time when they did. The staff at Grossinger’s Hotel in particular was known for their ability to make guests feel as if they were personally welcome at the hotel, despite

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<sup>117</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 230.

<sup>118</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 41.

the fact that there were hundreds, or even thousands, of other guests at the hotel on any given day. Paul Grossinger recalled that “during the summer, it was one big family—the staff, the guests, the Grossingers.”<sup>119</sup> This family atmosphere is something that consistently drew guests to the hotel. Jennie Grossinger’s personality epitomized the family feeling that pervaded the hotel. Robert Towers, the activities director of the hotel, reminisced that “Jennie had magic.” Jennie Grossinger was always nearby within her hotel, and her presence was an integral part of a Grossinger vacation. Guests recalled that Jennie acted in a very motherly, protective way. The future star Eddie Fisher made his way into show business at the hotel. He recalled that “Jennie treated [him] like a son, and [he] behaved as a son...Jennie lived for her children, but she went beyond—her guests were her children.”<sup>120</sup> Jennie Grossinger certainly understood that the affection she displayed helped foster an image of the hotel as one large happy family. She also understood the importance of her presence in the hotel, for not only was she seen as the matriarch of the hotel, but she was also somewhat of a celebrity herself, and took it unto herself to help create a feeling of community within the hotel. Her dedication to the hotel also led to the fact that “Jennie had a repeat business that was unbelievable.”<sup>121</sup>

In today’s world of large hotels owned by large corporations and businesses, it is easy to see why such relationships foster these memories. In 1990, The *Cedar Rapids Gazette* looked at the rapidly declining Catskills and commented that one of the most disturbing symbols of the decay of the area was

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<sup>119</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 31.

<sup>120</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 49.

<sup>121</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 48.

the closing of Grossinger's. The author fondly wrote that "Jennie Grossinger, may she rest in peace, once presided over the hotel like a Jewish grandmother. She ensured that there was enough seltzer on the tables and looked the other way when visitors put extra pastries in their bags for the long ride home. It was a family business that grew into an empire"<sup>122</sup> When looking back at the establishment that was Grossinger's, it is hard to ignore the fact, as the article shows, that the family atmosphere of the resort was one of the most notable aspects of a Catskill vacation.

The concept of the hotel as a version of extended family was not exclusive to Grossinger's. Jerry Ehrlich, owner of the Pines Hotel, recalled that his two sons ran the hotel with him and his wife. "They came up through the ranks as kitchen workers, bellhops, behind the desk." They explained that it was important for the hotel that someone from the family is around all the time, on the premises, visible to the guests."<sup>123</sup> Julie Slutsky, whose family owned the Nevele Hotel, one of the few hotels that are still in business today, explained that the hotel "went from my father, to my brother Ben and me, to our children."<sup>124</sup> Family owners were an integral part of all Catskill hotels, and contributed to the manner in which guests were so strongly attached to the resorts. Much of the nostalgia from the Golden Age is steeped in this fact.

Mal Z. Lawrence, a comedian and a Catskill institution, underscored the contrast between the Catskills resorts and modern hotels when he commented in

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<sup>122</sup> "Catskills: Once Booming Area Falls on Hard Times," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, October 28, 1990.

<sup>123</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 228.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

1991 that “if you work in Atlantic City, you don’t mingle with Donald Trump. But the Kutshers, for example, are like family to me. I’ve made so much money from them, drank so much of their whiskey.” Freddie Roman, another Catskill comedian, commented that when he walks into Kutsher’s Hotel he doesn’t “go to the front desk. I walk right into the office, sit down on the couch and schmooze with Milton for an hour or so. Then we go have dinner in the dining room. And that’s the same with every one of the owners pretty much. It’s not corporate.”<sup>125</sup> As corporate America has come to dominate the hotel business, it is only natural that people look back at a time when hotels were run as family businesses. This is what the hotels of the Catskills provided for so many guests and entertainers: an intimate vacation experience among friends and family.

Guests had such strong connections to the Catskill hotels that during World War II, soldiers would often write to the hotels of the region. Robert Towers, an advertising executive who began as director of activities for Grossinger’s, recalled that he began receiving hundreds of letters from soldiers who had connections to the hotel. The resort therefore started sending packages to soldiers abroad, which they called “Grossinger’s Canteen by Mail.” The packages were filled with cigarettes, gum, sewing kits, whatever...<sup>126</sup> Towers later arranged a charity sporting event in New York City at the Park Avenue armory. The event sold out, and hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised for the Canteen by Mail program. Grossinger’s also continually gave away free weekends at the resort to Jewish soldiers who had returned home from abroad.

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<sup>125</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 230-231.

<sup>126</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 40.

Harry First, a Jewish World War II veteran, recalled that while in the hospital for wartime injuries, a rabbi arranged for him to “have a free weekend at Grossinger’s—they had soldiers as their guests all during the war. I was a poor boy from Brooklyn, and it was the first time I had ever seen such affluence. The staff was friendly to servicemen...the waiters didn’t even want to take tips from us...Seven years later I took my bride to Grossinger’s for our honeymoon.”<sup>127</sup>

Harry First’s experience represents an example of the type of nostalgia that pervades Catskill history. People with a history, or even a small story of the mountains, enjoy telling how they found their way into the mountains because the hotels became such a happy part of their lives.

First’s nostalgia therefore exists in part because the hotel weaved its way into this life. His nostalgia stems not only from his good experiences in the mountains, but also because this experience at the hotel is an overall happy memory from his life. This is a common theme among memories of the Catskills; overall they are happy, they come from an optimistic time of postwar America. It is therefore only natural to think fondly of past experiences and want to express these events to those who never had to chance to see the Catskills at their height. Catskill historian Phil Brown relays the feelings of a person who wrote Brown a letter on his past experiences. He wrote of the Catskills:

To me it’s sacred. I remember most everything that went on there as a kid. I had a good childhood. I guess when I go back it’s like the Holy Land. Some people go to the cemetery to visit their parents. I get more of a good clean feeling when I’m up in this place...I think it was beautiful years. I still get kicks out of just touching the ground. It’s important to me.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 41.

<sup>128</sup> Brown, 259.



This passage represents the idea that while the cultural experiences within the Catskills were of extreme importance, so too was the fact that, much of the time, simply happy experiences pervaded the region. As a result, childhood memories of the Catskills often come to the forefront.

The hotels also maintain such a special place in the hearts of their former guests because of the manner in which they remained dedicated to Jewish traditions and customs. Most all of the hotels in Sullivan and Ulster Counties maintained some type of religious dedication to the Jewish faith. Services in the morning were a common occurrence at Kutsher's, and Grossinger's maintained a strictly kosher dining room and kitchen. Yet the hotels really came alive during the Jewish High Holy Days. Lee First, a regular Grossinger guest and wife of Harry First, the World War II veteran aforementioned, explained that she took her family to Grossinger's "year after year for Passover and weekends." Her family even moved to Riverdale from Brooklyn so they could be closer to the mountains. She tells that when her daughter was in school, "her teacher had the class discuss the topic: 'How does your mommy get ready for Passover?' Her daughter replied, "My mommy writes out a check to Grossinger's."<sup>129</sup> This is yet another reason that people look back so fondly at the Catskill resorts. They were intertwined with their lives in so many different aspects, including religion. For the First family, Passover was clearly defined as a weekend at Grossinger's. In this regard, hotels were an integral part of the family. They were a place to spend holidays that are traditionally spent with loved ones.

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<sup>129</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 41.

The Jewish impact of the area was, what some would say, created the lively atmosphere that was common during the Golden Age, and it remained a source of nostalgia. Reminiscing on the Jewish influence of the area, Robert Towers commented that by the early 1990s, there are times when he looks around and “*mer ziet nisht keyn yiddishe punim*—a Jewish face is nowhere to be seen. But then on Passover, Jewish families come from Denver, from Peoria, from St. Louis—from all over the country, all over the world. Sometimes three, even four generations. They want that “tam”—taste—of *Yiddishkeit*, that sentimentality, that feeling.”<sup>130</sup> Towers maintained a vision of the hotels as a Jewish haven, where traditions and practices were not only a significant part of the resort experience, but they were also embraced. Part of the reason that such nostalgia exists now is because of the Jewish culture that existed within the hotels. No longer are the hotels dominated by Jewish guests on a daily basis, and because the Jewishness of the hotels was such a defining factor, they represent a sort of nostalgic pull for former Catskill visitors.

Nostalgia for the Jewish resort experience was also a result of the overall Jewish atmosphere of the hotels, where guests were able to learn, and teach their families, about religious customs and traditions. Mr. Fireman commented that in Wisconsin, where his children now live, he doesn't think that his “children know of a shul where they live because there is none.” Irving Cohen, the *maitre'd* at the Concord Hotel for fifty years, commented Mr. Fireman would bring his family to the hotel for a week during Passover. “He takes his grandchildren to shul, teaches

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<sup>130</sup> Frommer and Frommer, 229.

them Hebrew.”<sup>131</sup> The hotels allowed guests to both embrace, develop and maintain their Judaism. Now that the hotels no longer draw such a distinctly Jewish clientele, it seems that people look back and realize just how important Judaism was to the hotels environment. Therefore, towards the end of the twentieth century, when a majority of American Jews had assimilated into America, it is evident that during the dying days of the hotels the Jewishness of the region’s hotels became even more important than it was during the Golden Age.

The Jewish culture that Mr. Cohen and Mr. Fireman sought was largely gone by the 1990s. Abe Barish, a retired hotel *maitre’d* commented that “It’s a sad thing...the whole culture is gone, the Jewishness of everything: the shows, the food, the Jewish cooking, the Jewish entertainment. Everything.”<sup>132</sup> Mr. Barish clearly holds a different view than that of Mr. Cohen and Mr. Fireman. His nostalgia, along with countless others, again points back to the fact that before the downturn of the Catskills, a true Catskill culture existed, where Jewish traditions and practices were embraced. Yet what Mr. Barish overlooks is the fact that the plethora of memories and nostalgia contribute to maintaining a Jewish culture in the Catskills. While most hotels and bungalow colonies have closed, because of the rich history that has lived on it is hard not to equate the area with its rich cultural and religious history. Kutsher’s Hotel, recognized as the last of the great Catskill resorts, now caters to an older clientele that have continually maintained their connection to the area. Bernard Gitner, a “lifelong Catskills visitor”,

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> News Service Reports, “Borscht Belt Reinvents the Resort,” *The Post Standard*, February 6, 1999.

explained in 2009 that he had been coming to the region ever since he was a little boy.<sup>133</sup> His nostalgia is what fuels hotels today, as people want to relive their mountain experiences.

The near-extinction of the Catskill resorts have not only affected former guests and employees, but also the upstate towns that were so dependent upon hotel guests for business. During the Golden Age, towns such as Liberty were bustling and alive. In 1992, WABC news in New York City created a four part series on the Jewish Catskills, illustrating the fact that the nostalgia of the region is not only limited to former guests. The narrator explained that “at midnight, when the big show let out, shops and the streets were packed with people. No more. Today stores are boarded up.”<sup>134</sup> The hotels essentially supported the small towns that they were located in. They provided thousands of jobs, and their guests would frequent Main Street. Yet once the hotels started closing these towns became depressed. Over time, Phil Brown, in conjunction with other Catskill historians, compiled a list of Catskill resorts, which includes 1,172 hotels. Brown concedes that this number, which does not include bungalow colonies, “vastly exceeds the commonly heard estimate of five hundred hotels, making even more significant the extent of hotels in the Catskill Mountains of Sullivan County, Ulster County, and southern Greene County.”<sup>135</sup> Today, less than a dozen of these hotels remain, and as a result, the economies of the towns in which the resorts

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<sup>133</sup> *Kutsher’s Country Club—Catskill Classics* [video]. (2009). Retrieved February 19, 2011, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3g5BMKrLO7c&feature=related>

<sup>134</sup> *Memories of the Catskills—Part Four of Four* [video]. (1992) Retrieved February 19, 2011, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUGHkLoPz48&feature=related>

<sup>135</sup> Phil Brown, “Hotels and Bungalows,” *The Catskills Institute*, [www.catskills.brown.edu](http://www.catskills.brown.edu)

were located have undergone drastic changes. In 1988, Jack Simmons, the Liberty town supervisor, commented that “we in Sullivan County have been under a dark cloud for some time.” Monticello, where at one time “17,000 patrons would fill the Monticello Racetrack on a weekend, [and] downtown’s Broadway was jammed with traffic,” was also deserted by the 190s. “Monticello is tough, very tough. The money is not here. The money is someplace else,” commented Claudio Braga, who ran a diner that was in serious financial dire despite being located next to the Monticello Racetrack.

In 2003, Monticello was beginning to look like a decaying former picture of itself. Tony Cellini, a former manager at an auto parts and hardware store, reminisced about “the glory days” when “money flowed like the nonstop traffic feeding the Catskills resort economy.” Cellini remembered “how great it was back then...we used to keep our store open until midnight during summers.” The article implores the reader to “fast forward to 2003: most of the bungalow colonies and resort hotels are shuttered. On Monticello’s main street a string of empty storefronts leads to the abandoned Broadway Theater.”<sup>136</sup> By the late 1980s the small towns that once prospered because of their proximity to the resorts felt the effects of the desertion that plagued the resorts. While guests and employees alike reminisce about a Golden Era of the resorts and hotels, built into their nostalgia is certainly the fact that postwar America allowed for prosperous economic times. Small towns like those located in Sullivan County were able to financially prosper, and certainly this plays into the nostalgia of past visitors, as

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<sup>136</sup> Scott Rapp, “Monticello Welcomes Cayugas, Others,” *The Post-Standard*, June 9, 2003.

they are not only looking back to a time when the hotels were prospering, but the country as a whole. Phil Brown writes that it is precisely because of the current situation of many Catskill towns that the Catskills of the Golden Age are so fondly remembered now. He writes that “in terms of the Catskills, for the most part, we are unable to return to the places we knew: the old markers and signposts have disappeared; we can hardly find the postcards and menus. Now we have to nourish the memories, write commentaries, and pass the tradition on.”<sup>137</sup> Because such drastic changes have taken place within the entire makeup of the Catskills, Brown explains, the visual history is gone. As a result, people cling to their nostalgia as a way to ensure the remembrance of the region.

The contrast between the Golden Age and the depression that followed in the late 1980s is best seen in a 1987 Associated Press newspaper article. The article, entitled “Catskill Resorts Point up Wealth, Homelessness,” discusses the stark differences between life in the hotels and life outside them. Whereas at one time, particularly in the late 1940s and 1950s, writers and journalists looked at the expansion and opulence of the Catskills with a sense of pride and excitement, by the 1980s the excess which had defined the region in the postwar era was seen as overindulgent and even inappropriate. The article highlights the dining room at the Concord Hotel, which accommodated 3,500 people, and the “fleets of white-coated waiters” who “glide” through the room to serve “the elaborate ritual that is dinner at the Concord.” The article explains that a plethora of options were available for dinner in keeping with the formula that touted “no fewer than 120 varieties and selections of food per three meals.” The luxurious atmosphere of the

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<sup>137</sup> Brown, 255.

Concord is contrasted to the situation of Wendy Pegram, a homeless woman living in a motel in Monticello with her family. The author claims that “the Pegrams are homeless in a land of plenty: the Borscht Belt, famous for serving up gargantuan meals and nightly shtick to generations of visitors...Nowadays there are soup kitchens and welfare motels amid the eight-course dinners and luxury resorts.”<sup>138</sup> Certainly this represents a stark difference to the atmosphere that existed in the Catskills during the Golden Age, when upstate towns flourished.

In the heyday of the Catskills, there were over 1,000 bungalow colonies. Bungalow colonies, which were home to middle class Jews who summered in the Catskills, were by 1987 “used by homeless men rounded up at New York City shelters and driven to the Catskills by private employment agencies.”<sup>139</sup> Whereas bungalow colonies used to be their own miniature societies, they quickly disintegrated, along with the resorts, by the early 1980s, and a culture of nostalgia was created in part because of the sad reality of what the bungalows had become. Phil Brown writes of a woman who stayed at Mintz’s Bungalow Colony in White Lake, New York, during the 1950s. In 1993, the bungalow colony had become home to orthodox Jews. She wrote that she “went back to Mintz’s to see it. It was so depressing. Tears came to [her] eyes when [she] drove up. This beautiful colony; clean, magnificent pool; beautiful casino. What [she] saw depressed [her] so.” She explained that she “drove away with tears, that’s how badly [she]

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<sup>138</sup> Associated Press, “Catskill Resorts Point Up Wealth, Homelessness”, *Intelligencer/Montgomery County Record*, December 20, 1987.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

felt.”<sup>140</sup> To see the sad reality of places that once held such life and vivacity within them brings about sadness, from which the nostalgia spurs.

Today, modern technology has also allowed for former Catskill goers to digitally congregate. A Facebook group exists that is solely dedicated to the Catskill bungalow colonies. Commenters are all looking for others to share their memories with. One commenter, Rami Dressler, commented in the group that she always has flashbacks to the “great days” of the bungalow colonies. She comments that she “misses the Catskills” and “hopes one day they are revived.”<sup>141</sup> Additionally, on the internet there exists a certain fascination to document the abandoned hotels of the region, and compare the images of the decaying hotels with old pictures that show the hotels in their former glory.

It is clear that the current state of the Catskills has influenced peoples’ memories; they want to remember a time when the Catskills were lively and flourishing. Phil Brown, a Brown University sociologist whose family owned and operated a resort in the Catskills, has even created an online community whereby former vacationers can congregate in online chat forums. Participants are encouraged to post about their past experiences in hotels, and are also invited to send in any visual memorabilia, including hotel matchbooks, menus, daily schedules, postcards, rate cards, and family photos. There is even a section entirely devoted to the nostalgia of the Catskills, aptly named the “do you remember?” section. Here, Brown encourages visitors to share their memories and their questions about the Catskill region, and there are over four hundred different

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<sup>140</sup> Brown, 267.

<sup>141</sup> Rami Dressler, from <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=24727389683&v=wall>



discussion threads in which to do so. Often commenters are looking to reconnect with others whom they met in the mountains, showing that the nostalgia is also tied to the overall social experience of the Catskill resort, whereby a community feeling in the mountains fostered both romantic and friendly relationships.

Brown's website claims that the bungalow colonies, summer camps, large resort hotels, and smaller motels "shaped American Jewish culture, while enabling Jews to become more American while at the same time introducing the American public to immigrant Jewish culture."<sup>142</sup> The concept of Jewish assimilation within America is therefore tied to the Catskill experience. The hotels allowed their guests to maintain their Jewish practices, yet they also allowed for assimilation into American culture by promoting the concept of leisure, which for first generation Jews was a novel practice. In contrast, later generations of American Jews, who had already assimilated into American ways of life, simply did not feel the need for such distinctly Jewish forms of leisure. By the late 1960s, Jews no longer faced such glaring barriers within society, and as a result, they integrated themselves into American society in a manner that had never before been seen. Jews became presidents of colleges and universities where they had once been excluded, and also became chief executive officers of companies that had once refused to hire Jews.<sup>143</sup> As a result of the disintegration of such overt obstacles, Jews increasingly integrated into America, and places such as the Catskills were simply no longer needed, as they did not serve the purpose that they once did. Hasia R. Diner, a scholar on Jewish American studies, explains that

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<sup>142</sup> Phil Brown, *The Catskills Institute*, <http://catskills.brown.edu/index.shtml>.

<sup>143</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124.

by the latter half of the twentieth century, “ a great many American Jews had risen into the upper middle class. Lawyers, doctors, engineers, scientists, and academics, they had more education and earned higher incomes than almost any other group in the country. They had come remarkably far from the poor, excluded immigrants of the past century.”<sup>144</sup> The excluded immigrants of the past were just the ones who frequented the Catskill resorts. Yet as later generations of Americans assimilated and became accepted into American life, there simply became a decreasing need for the hotels and their distinct Jewish practices. Diner claims that in the last quarter of the twentieth century, “by almost every measure available to scholars who study rates of religious and ethnic participation, many American Jews had only marginal ties to ‘being Jewish...Jewishness seemed to have less and less to do with their everyday lives’”.<sup>145</sup> Because the resorts were so deeply tied to a Jewish way of life, it is only natural that they faded into history, as Jews left behind the religious practices that so defined earlier generations of American Jews. Because Jewish practices were no longer a part of everyday Jewish life, it seems inconceivable that they should be a part of leisure, and as a result, the Catskills floundered. The nostalgia that surrounds the Catskills is therefore also tied to the tendency to look back at earlier generations of American Jewry, who had ties to much stronger Jewish communities. Now, however, with assimilation and the acceptance of Jews into America, there is no need for such communities. The glory days of the Catskills allow Jews to look back at a time

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<sup>144</sup> Diner, 125.

<sup>145</sup> Diner, 128-129.

when being Jewish was an integral aspect of life, and Jewish practices pervaded meals, activities and social life.

In 1993, *The Village Voice* newspaper published an article entitled “The Lost Daughters of Zion Return to the Catskills.” The author, Donna Gaines, writes that she grew up in a Jewish community. She attended Yeshiva, spoke fluent Hebrew and her grandfather was a cantor. Yet she admits, that as she grew older, she now looks back at her childhood as if it was “another life.” As Gaines grew up, she moved away from the distinct Jewish life that she led. She explained that her “ties to Jewish life had frayed,” and no longer does she live in a Jewish neighborhood, participate in Jewish holidays, or even belong to a temple. Her adherence to Jewish traditions had certainly eroded over time. She felt that the best way to reconnect with her Jewish life was to go to the Catskills for a weekend at the Concord Resort. Gaines explains that she was overwhelmed by the sheer size of everything at the hotel, from the tennis courts, to the nightclub, and of course, the food. Yet Gaines takes a different approach to the legendary meals of the Catskills, explaining that to an outsider the food may “seem grotesque, a vulgar excess. But the lavish feeding is very Jewish. In the old days, the grand matriarchs—Jillian Brown, Jenny Grossinger—hosted as if they were your own mother, making sure you got enough good kosher food to eat.” Gaines shows that, despite the evolution and assimilation of American Jews, characteristics of the Catskill hotels have woven their way into Jewish culture. While the hotels were not able to fully capture the attention of the children of the Golden Age Catskill goers, it is clear that the hotels impacted the way that many think about Jewish

culture. The hotels served people like Donna Gaines in that, while assimilation into America was taking place, the resorts allowed for people to travel back to a place where a strictly Jewish community existed, thereby revisiting their religious heritage and combating the effects of assimilation. Gaines writes that she always thought of herself in her adult years as a “slacker Jew,” but after being in the Catskills for a weekend among friends, she decided that she wanted to go back with her family, and there she would “celebrate the eternity of Jewish life.”<sup>146</sup> Gaines points to the fact that no matter how much Jews have assimilated over time, it appears as if the Catskill resorts maintain their devotion to Jewish traditions and religious practices. The nostalgia of the Catskills not only lies in the glory days of the hotels, but also in the fact that these resorts cultivated Jewish communities and practices, and even if those practices have been slowly fading from younger generations of American Jews, they can always be found within the Catskills.

Today, the Catskills are remembered for a myriad of reasons, and these remembrances are most often expressed in positive ways. When looking at the nostalgia of the region, it is also important to remember the role of the family within the resorts, as most hotels, especially during the Golden Age, catered to families. As a result, people look back at their time in the mountains as representing the innocence and happiness of their childhood. People often enjoy

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<sup>146</sup> Donna Gaines, “The Lost Daughters of Zion Return to the Catskills: A Journey to the Source of Jewish Identity Featuring Gefilte Fish, Matzoh Ball Soup, Boiled Chicken, Pot Roast, Corned Beef, Potato Kugel, and Memories,” *The Village*

*Voice*, October 5, 1993.

looking back to days of their youth, and the Catskills were certainly home to a generation of young families. The resorts and bungalow colonies cultivated feelings of community within the mountains, and those participants feel the need to look back and reminisce because of the changing atmosphere in the Catskills today, where a Jewish culture no longer exists.

The Catskills have come a long way throughout the course of the twentieth century. From the Jewish farmland that they once were at the start of the century, to the major resort destination they became by the middle of the 1900s, the Catskills mirrored major milestones within both American Jewish history, and American history as a whole. As the nation was continually developing throughout the early twentieth century, so too where the mountains, as they evolved from a farmland into a tourist destination filled with summer boarding houses. As the country emerged from the postwar spending drought, so too did the mountain resorts, whose owners spent lavishly on their facilities in a successful attempt to bring modernity and opulence to the Catskills. Within this larger story of the Catskills, however, is the fact that the hotels both fostered and created a distinct Jewish culture that still lives on today.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

In 2001, Catskill historian Irwin Richman commented that the ‘Borscht Belt’ Catskills were “a land we never realized was unique.”<sup>147</sup> While the Catskill Mountain experience is a fascinating chapter within the history of Jews in America, Richman is largely correct that while the Catskills were flourishing, no one ever realized just how special and unique the region was until it disappeared from sight. For over three-quarters of a century, a mesmerizing world of luxury, entertainment, and most importantly, Jewish culture existed. Yet in the quaint beginnings of the region, right through the Golden Age, Jewish visitors hardly ever expressed their awareness of the distinct nature of the Catskill hotels. It is only after the area deteriorates do these memories come alive. This speaks to the fact that while Jews were visiting the Catskill resorts, they saw themselves as taking part in an American custom of leisure, as opposed to a uniquely Jewish experience. Yet as time has gone by, and the first generation of literature on the region is nearly complete, it is clear that the interplay of American values and Jewish traditions is what makes this region stand out within history.

This thesis has shown that the Catskills served a dual role in that they allowed for assimilation, but they also promoted the retention of Jewish practices, which helped form a distinct Catskill culture. The family owned nature of the resorts also contributed to this, as owners made guests feel both welcome and

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<sup>147</sup> Irwin Richman, *Images of America: Sullivan County Borscht Belt* (South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2001), 7.

comfortable to express their religion. While the physical remnants of the resorts no longer exist today, what they created is indeed still alive.

The Catskills represent a compelling story within American history. While the United States has always prided itself on the freedom and liberty that it presents its citizens, the Jewish immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century show otherwise. Anti-Semitism was a very real threat to Jewish New Yorkers. They were not welcome at many locales, and as a result, ventured into the Catskills, where, for the most part, they were not only welcome, but free to maintain their religious customs and practices. In this manner, the Catskills became a mecca of Jewish culture, a culture that today exists in the lives of many Jews. Many Ashkenazi Jews still equate the food of the Catskills with being distinctly Jewish food, and the comedy and entertainment that emerged in the Catskills still lives on today.

Jews were not the only Americans to create leisure enclaves. African Americans often traveled out of the United States, to places like Mexico and Bermuda, to avoid the humiliation that Jews were subject to in the first part of the twentieth century. Yet what sets the two experiences apart, among other things, is the fact that, with so many Jews in one small New York County, a culture was born. Jews, and people of all races and religion with them, still visit Jewish delicatessens, where the food is very similar to what was served in the Catskills. Even remnants of Borscht Belt humor still exist today. “Seinfeld,” the popular sitcom, was co-created by Jerry Seinfeld, who started his career in the mountains. The pilot episode of “Seinfeld” was even originally deemed “too Jewish” for

network television.<sup>148</sup> So while the resorts and even the region itself has faded from view, its effects still live on in our culture today.

Unfortunately, the Catskill experience will never again be created in America. The ‘Borscht Belt’ of yesteryear served a very distinct purpose in Jewish history, and American Jews simply no longer have a need for such ethnic institutions. The community feeling that pervaded the region is no longer of necessity for assimilated Jews. Yet interestingly, functioning resorts such as Kutsher’s in Monticello, cater heavily to Hasidic Jews, whose religious practices “demand a community that provides them with kosher food and orthodox services.”<sup>149</sup> Jews no longer have such a devotion to their religion, nor such a need to be apart of such a strong community. As a result, the vacation experience for American Jews has changed.

While the resorts of the Catskills are rightfully lauded for the inimitable experience they offered vacationers, they also epitomized the American Dream, which so many resort owners achieved. In her memoir, hotel owner Cissie Blumberg commented that despite the condition of the region today, when “you pass a closed, decaying resort, know that in the sagging gray timbers and weed-choked pool are buried the dreams, expectations, and prodigious labor of a family. The faded signs and crumbling entrance gates are a mute memorial to the Herculean efforts of real people who struggled and eventually lost.”<sup>150</sup> While specific families may have lost money in the Catskills as a result of the closing of

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<sup>148</sup> Peter Ephross and Rebecca Segall, “Critics Call Show ‘Self-Hating’: Was ‘Seinfeld’ Good for Jews?,” *Jewish Weekly*, May 9, 1998.

<sup>149</sup> Richman, 9.

<sup>150</sup> Brown, 237.



the region's hotels, an entire faction of Jewish Americans gained a culture and an entrance into American ways of life.