

1950s Tourist Cabins

Video Podcast Transcript

Minnesota Historical Society

Summer is here as we record this podcast, and Minnesotans are taking to the highways on vacations across the state. Some of these road warriors will “rough it” at trailer parks and RV campgrounds, and others will hit motels just off the exit ramp. But odds are not too many of them will be staying in tourist cabins. Overnight lodgings like this, once common along the state’s highways, have now largely either disappeared or evolved into longer-term destination resorts.

The tourist cabin is something of a missing link in the evolution of overnight lodging. At the start of the 20th Century, every respectable city had at least one hotel. Like the train station, the hotel was downtown and within walking distance of every important place.

Travel habits began to change in the 1920s. Cars became more affordable and reliable but, more importantly, roads coalesced from local country lanes into a true national network of numbered highways. Road signs and reliable maps became commonplace. Savvy business people soon catered to the needs of these new travelers, building gas stations, restaurants and – yes – overnight lodgings right on the highways.

The typical cabin was modest, with a double bed, a table and chairs, a small heater, and a washbasin. Unlike the typical hotel room, with a door that opened to a common corridor, the tourist cabin was its own little unit, and offered a relative degree of privacy. While this privacy might afford the traveler a good night’s sleep, it also tended to encourage some illicit activity. None other than FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover himself referred to tourist cabins as “camps of crime.” And while it’s true that gangsters like John Dillinger were known to hide out in cabins between sprees, Hoover was more concerned with a less violent type of crime euphemistically referred to as the “hot pillow trade.” Every respectable cabin manager made a point of not renting to questionable couples or to local residents to discourage this sort of clientele.

In the end though, it wasn’t crime or vice that pushed the cabins aside. Instead, it was the next generation of roads. The Interstate Highway System, launched in 1956, took motorists off of the old highways and away from the cabins. A new generation of entrepreneurs built new motor hotels – or motels – along interstate ramps, and most of the old cabins faded away.

Object: Cabin #3 from Star Harbor Resort (1990.481.38)

We have several associated items at the Minnesota Historical Society starting with... a tourist cabin. This is Cabin #3 from the Star Harbor Resort on Lake Superior north of Two Harbors. The cabin was built about 1910 and stood on the North Shore – and right off of Highway 61 – until 1990, when it came to the Society. Star Harbor was the first cabin resort located on Minnesota's Lake Superior shoreline.

The cabin's simple floor plan includes a living room and cooking area, one bedroom, and a tiny bathroom. In addition to the building itself, the Society also acquired 47 different items that were used in the cabin.

Object: Gas Stove from Cabin #3 (1992.464.5)

This little Skelgas stove, made by the Skelly Oil Company of El Dorado, Kansas, has four burners and a small broiler.

Object: Refrigerator from Cabin #3 (1992.464.6)

This refrigerator, made by the Sanitary Refrigerator Company of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, stands at a compact 43 inches high.

Object: Coffee Percolator from Cabin #3 (1992.106.25)

This aluminum coffee pot, a product of the Foley Company of Manitowoc, Wisconsin, doubtless helped many tourists appreciate those early morning Lake Superior sunrises just a little bit more.

Object: Bed from Cabin #3 (1992.464.1.1-5)

The bed, like other furnishings from the cabin, is simple and serviceable. The headboard is a simple design constructed from plywood.

Object: Dining Room Suite from Cabin #3 (1992.464.3.1-3)

The Douglas Foam Corporation of Chicago made this dining room suite, and if the formica, chrome and vinyl surfaces aren't proof enough, a stamp on the table confirms that it was indeed manufactured in 1958.

Object: St. Paul Tourist Cabins sign (2007.30.1)

More recently, the Society acquired a neon sign that advertised the St. Paul Tourist Cabins. This resort, actually located on Lake Phalen in Maplewood, just north of the capital city, opened in the mid-1920s as a tent campground.

Tourist cabins haven't disappeared entirely from Minnesota. There are still a few such resorts scattered around the state, forgotten witnesses to the first generation of the great American summer road trip.

I'm Matt Anderson for the Minnesota Historical Society. Happy travels!