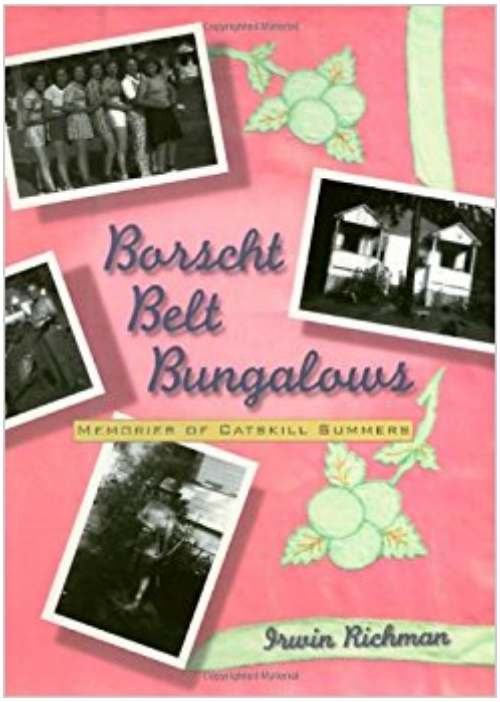
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Borscht Belt Bungalows: Memoirs Of Catskill Summers



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Synopsis

Every year between 1920 and 1970, almost one million of New York City’s Jewish population summered in the Catskills. This book tells about the attitudes of the renters and the owners, the differences between the social activities and swimming pools advertised and what people actually received.

Book Information

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: Temple University Press (February 5, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1592131905

ISBN-13: 978-1592131907

Product Dimensions: 7 x 0.7 x 10 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #155,694 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #4 inÃ Â Books > Travel > United States > New York > Catskills #104 inÃ Â Books > Travel > United States > Northeast > Mid Atlantic #383 inÃ Â Books > Travel > Reference > General

Customer Reviews

"Richman is particularly suited to give us this historical overview, as a professor of American studies and history and as one who has made the pilgrimage to the mountains nearly every summer of his life, first to the bungalow colony of his grandparents and later as an employee at similar establishments. ...Richman is nostalgically superb in his recall of the importance of these annual gatherings in the communal context of an immigrant people, liberally quoting from fiction and nonfiction writings on this era and this place."-Publishers Weekly "A Jewish-American pastoral? Thoreau in the Catskills? Irwin Richman’s marvelous Borscht Belt Bungalows is as much a literary work-a retrospect of country summers, now history-as a scholarly study....Let no reader of this lively first-person narrative be deceived that this is just a reminiscence, without scholarly depth. Richman collected an amazing range of information on Borscht Belt life and gracefully folds it into his memories."-Anne C. Rose, Pennsylvania History "Richman’s style is simple and direct....A pleasant Borscht Belt memoir, much like a Borscht Belt meal: excessive beyond nourishment, but hey, why not try a little?"-Kirkus Reviews "Richman delights the reader, not only with portraits of the people who rented the bungalows, but with the activities that occupied their time. He tells us of the small

time entertainers who often began their careers in the mountain hotels and casinos and more often than not, ended their entertainment careers there too....well worth reading and, for some of us, evok[ing] long forgotten, pleasant memories."-Jewish Journal "There are very few people who could do such a fine job of recapturing for us the remarkable world of the Catskill bungalow colonies."-Phil Brown, Brown University

Irwin Richman, Professor of American Studies and History at Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg and author of Catskills, NY, has spent at least part of every summer of his life in the Catskills. Richman grew up in the bungalow colony business. His parents Alexander and Bertha owned a small colony, and his grandfather Abraham was in the mortgage business. From an early age Irwin went along on the detailed site visits to other colonies that were made prior to granting loans. He also worked as a counselor and as a camp director at their large colonies.

Pre baby boomers so difficult to identify with.

Very interesting to us old timers who used to go to the mountains!

Springtime in Brooklyn, circa 1966, was punctuated by the gruff call of Ruby The Knish Man (a minor celebrity in Brooklyn and in this book), who sold legendary hot potato knishes smothered in kosher salt from a pushcart which would magically appear anywhere you were in Brooklyn or in "the country," that area of the Catskill Mountains of lower upstate New York usually referred to as the Borscht Belt and characterized by bungalow colonies.Bungalow colonies have been slighted in the histories. Large resorts, such as Grossinger’s, are extensively documented, and the careers of Borscht Belt comedians and other stage performers, are the stories of rising stars. But most of New York City’s Jewish population (and the Borscht Belt was almost exclusively Jewish) could not afford an entire summer away at a large resort; they chose rather, to rent bungalows. A bungalow can be charitably described as a summerhouse, and less charitably described as a shack. Which it was depended largely on the bungalow colony where you rented.Irwin Richman, whose family owned a bungalow colony in Woodbourne, New York, has written an exhaustive, chatty history of the bungalow colony business, which had its beginnings in the Ninteen-teens, but really only came into its own with the general prosperity of the 1950s. For the next twenty years, the annual migration of Jews from the Five Boroughs to the relatively rustic towns of Ulster and Sullivan Counties topped one million per summer.Bungalow colonies were resorts of last resort. Mothers and children typically

stayed away from home all summer long, with fathers coming up on weekends and during vacation weeks.Entertainment was scarce and primitive: A man with a movie projector, several cans of films, and a portable screen would set up weekly in the "casino," a large, rambling building sometimes containing a few chairs, a pinball machine, ping pong tables, and bingo paraphernalia. Card games were ubiquitous. Occasionally, a singer or comedian either from the large resorts, or not talented enough for the large resorts, would perform. There was always a pool, not always in the best of shape. TV reception was poor and snowy, since the mountains and distance interfered with the broadcast signals from New York.Mothers cleaned and cooked and played mah-jongg, and were single parents five days a week. The outside world seemed far away. Cars (usually only one per family in those days) stayed behind in the city with fathers so they could go to work. Food shopping was a family outing left for weekends. So many bungalow colonies had just one pay telephone for all the residents. Jars of change were helpful, but calls, both outgoing and incoming, were rare (and announced over the colony's PA: "Mrs. Minde, you have a call from your sister!"). In the bungalows, where one bedroom was often shared by parents and children and where walls were paper thin, privacy was more a matter of mutual disregard than self-containment. A bungalow colony was also a mosquito's idea of a luncheonette.Yet, so many of us (including me) who spent summers there remember bungalow colonies fondly. They were countrified, particularly in comparison with our neighborhoods at home. Parents seemed more relaxed and tolerant in the clearer, cleaner air of the mountains. Kids roamed freely and safely, having spectacular adventures in the woods, catching butterflies and frogs and salamanders and fireflies in jars, picking blueberries, and running from snakes as fast as possible. Trees. There were trees. And lots of grass. Barbecues were a common form of meal preparation. Mornings in the mountains were often chilly, and I can remember my father lighting the stove in the predawn half-darkness to heat our little house, the sweet smell of the propane still a comforting memory. Stars seemed to jump out of the sky at night. Ice cream was particularly cold in the country, glass soda bottles needed an opener in those days, baseball games were best experienced on the radio, you made new friends in minutes, and it was a time that had come and gone before we even knew that what we were seeing was vanishing before our very eyes.As Richman points out, bungalow colonies still remain, now primarily the preserve of Orthodox Jews who maintain traditional forms of behavior. It seems proper that they still sustain a bungalow colony culture, after so many of us have moved away from it.Bungalow colonies ended for us much as Brooklyn ended for us, when we city dwellers moved to Long Island. In the green spaces of the suburbs, the need to get away was less pressing, and bungalow colonies suffered from suburbanization since so much of what motivated bungalow colony life was that need. In the light of

suburbia, bungalow colonies took on a ratty, disreputable air in memory, and those summers were rarely recalled with much affection, particularly by women, who cooked, cleaned and kept house, it all being very much like being at home. As travel costs dropped and the world shrank, a winter trip to the Bahamas became less expensive and far more appealing than a summer in a bungalow, just as a trip to Las Vegas trumped a trip to the Tamarack Lodge.Today, with cable and satellite TV, cell phones, iPhones, computers, fax machines, and X-boxes, the relative remoteness of bungalow colonies, one hundred miles from home, seems unbelievable, but, as Irwin Richman tells us, it was a simpler, gentler, and more stable world. Passing Yankee Stadium on Memorial Day. Passing Yankee Stadium on Labor Day. Birds and bugs. Milk "from Dellwood with love." Flypaper. Blow-up liferings in the shape of seamonsters for swimming, and still more change for the phone. Splintery Adirondack chairs. And Daddy, driving up in the ’60 Chevy convertible in the middle of the night because I had a 104-degree fever. He made it from Brooklyn to Monticello, a two hour drive, in 45 minutes.Some things you never forget. Thanks Dad.

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