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Night at the Old Motel

Inns of the past still have a place in America

BY ROBERT L. KAISER | WATSEKA, ILLINOIS | 07.06.1997

U

sually it's time that wipes away the past. But sometimes it's Kathy Hitchens. Hitchens is the housekeeper at the Carousel Inn Motel, a piece of Americana so clean and tidy that tomorrow it will hold no trace of Don Bice, the Nashville musician passing through tonight on his way to a class reunion; or Charlie Campbell, the lighting technician staying over while he works on the car-dealership sign next door; or the man in Room 41, who's in town to visit relatives.

But there are some traces of the past that Hitchens will not be able to wipe away.

The Carousel is a throwback, one of a scattered few independently owned, roadside motels that have survived

being bypassed by the interstates. In an age of chain motels, scenes from George and May Huang's prim little inn are like postcards from the past. Vacationers looking for a cheap night on the road and a taste of yesterday can find both here: at the edge of U.S. Highway 24; on the cusp of an era.

Greetings from Watseka 1966.

"You kind of get back to small-town America," says Lisa Moll, 35, who is spending the night while she works on grain elevators just purchased by the agricultural company that employs her.

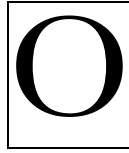
"You get to see a lot of what we've lost."

It's where Bice is staying this night as he travels back in time. U.S. 24, the two-lane highway that cuts through the ebb and flow of seasons in this Illinois farming town of 5,500, is carrying the Nashville man toward his 30-year class reunion in Kaukauna, Wis. On the way, it deposited him, his daughter and his violin at Room 44 of the Carousel, which was just getting started when Bice was.

The motel was barely a year old when Bice took that walk down the aisle at his high school graduation.

Bice pays the Carousel the ultimate compliment: He is spending the night a second time. "I decided to stay at the same place, so I didn't get any surprises," he says.

"It was getting late at night, and I was," he paused, "not desperate, but looking for the first place that came along and that was not too expensive and not bad."



Old motels like the Carousel still fill a need, but they aren't easy to find anymore. Though they litter the countryside, many have closed or been converted to low-rent apartment tenements for the down-and-out, places where check-out time never comes and freedom can be a curse. Many travelers now choose to stay in one of the chain motels out by the interstate when they're not opting for the posh digs of a hotel that caters to their every need. Industry behemoths such as Marriott have all the bases covered, adding ever more express-style motels and long-term residence inns to their line of full-service hotels and resorts.

"That's the way big business is," Gary Bower says dourly as he paces behind the counter of the Capitol City Motel in Springfield. "It killed mom and pop."

Bower is manager of the Capitol City, where many of the rooms have been converted to apartments. While discouraging stays shorter than a night--"No refund after 10 minutes," says the information board behind the desk--the motel now offers weekly and monthly rates.

At the Carousel, Huang has resisted converting rooms for long-term rentals because he doesn't like the hard-luck clientele it attracts. "Those types of people, they use the rooms, that's for sure. But not like we expect." His motel remains colorful and inviting, while many of those whose rooms have been converted to apartments sag.

The reality of most roadside inns is vastly different from the romanticized notion.

"There's a fascination with these old, forgotten motels," says Keith Sculle, adjunct professor of history at the University of Illinois at Springfield. More vacationers than ever are

planning trips down old U.S. Highway 66, says Ileana Rucci, a spokeswoman for the AAA Chicago Motor Club. "People have a real tender spot for nostalgia," she says.

The old roads are full of monuments to a bygone way of life--"rock 'n' roll and pizza and dress codes and all those things," says John Jakle, a geography professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. To many Americans, the centerpiece of that roadside culture, with its drive-ins and diners, was the motel, Jakle says.

But times have changed. The terrain of rural Illinois is quite different from the landscape of the heart, which still holds the old motel front and center, vibrant and bright. The truth is, most are run-down or even abandoned. A few have even become death traps.

Fatal fires in Illinois and Kentucky in recent years have brought to light serious building-code violations at those that burned. Other motels are well known to police if not the fire marshal.

But the 26-room Carousel is an anomaly. Bright and immaculate, it enjoys a good reputation--not only with police but also with those in the travel industry. The comfortable little motel has many regular guests, a number of whom make reservations. The American Automobile Association recommends the Carousel, where a single room, including HBO, costs just \$31 a night. So does the staff of the Super 8 down the road, when that motel is full.

That's how Charlie Campbell came to be here, in Room 56, on a hot, still weeknight in early summer, mosquitoes swarming outside his window. Campbell, 43, of Texarkana, Texas, works for Sylvania. It's his job to maintain the signs at Ford

and General Motors dealerships. He's on the road three to four weeks at a time, then home for 10 days. He is in Watseka to work on a sign at the Geo dealership next door to the Carousel. But he first tried to get a room at the Super 8 farther west on U.S. 24.

"There were no vacancies," Campbell says, "so I asked the lady to recommend something, and she recommended this place."

He is happy with the Carousel, noting how much nicer it is than many other old motels. "A lot of 'em aren't well maintained and are pretty well trashed out," he says.

Still, if not for the Super 8 desk clerk's recommendation, Campbell would not have known about the Carousel. He came into town several miles to the west, off Interstate Highway 57.

"I do try to stay on the interstates," he says. "But a lot of our dealerships are out in the smaller, rural areas.

"I like to stay in small towns."

So does Bice. "I usually look for motels in medium-size or small towns that don't have buildings crowded up next to them," he says.

Getting a good night's sleep is no problem at the Carousel, even though the motel is hard by the highway. Late on a summer night, five minutes can pass between motorists on U.S. 24. It's quiet enough to hear the chirp of crickets, the belching of bullfrogs in the fishing pond out back and the soft wail of passing trains, which, after midnight, are more prevalent than passing cars.

The last light on is in Room 59, where Moll is staying up late watching television. The Decatur resident has been on the road since March. This is her second straight night at the Carousel. She, too, tried the Super 8 first. "This was the only motel in town," she says.

Moll works on the computers used to run grain elevators, a job that takes her on many a backroad. "Elevators end up in Nowheresville," she says.

Moll's room is one of 12 occupied tonight. The Huangs have seen occupancy rates drop slightly in the 15 years they have owned the Carousel. The motel stays about half full.

When Hitchens started 20 years ago, she was one of three housekeepers. Now, come morning, she alone will wipe away any trace of Moll, Bice, Campbell and the other guests. Everyone will be checking out.



s the place shudders to life--the door to Room 52 opens first, followed by 59, then 44, then 56—Hitchens will sit in the lobby, waiting, the television tuned to a country-music channel.

"Every sweet memory I can recall," Kenny Chesney will sing; "She got it all."

Old motels are about heartache and secrets. Consider the mystery of Room 59. Six years ago, Hitchens says, an older couple moving to a new town walked out never to return, leaving many of their belongings in the room.

"They just disappeared one day," she says.

But the Carousel has one more no-tell than most: the secret of success. It helps being the first motel westbound

motorists reach as they enter Watseka. But, mostly, the Carousel survives because it fills a niche and does it well.

"We still get vacation people," Huang says. "This is a small town. The people who come in here, they're all visiting relatives."

In fact, one of the three reservations he has taken for the following night was made by a Florida man coming in to see family.

But many who stay at the Carousel are also working people, passing through on the job. Besides Moll and Campbell, the guest list on this night includes technicians doing work at the local radio station.

In the morning, after Moll has checked out and resumed her journey through the lonely, flat sprawl of east-central Illinois, Bice will wake his daughter, Katharine, who like many 14-year-olds, is not easy to rouse. And Campbell will begin packing his truck.

"Sir? You finished in your room?" Hitchens will ask him. And Campbell will say: "Yeah, I'll be out in about 10 minutes."

But for now, it's time to sleep. At 1:34 a.m., Moll turns out the last light at the Carousel Inn Motel, and Room 59 fades to black. It's getting late in America.