

Roadside Overnight Lodging

As vehicular transportation gained in popularity and roadways improved during the early 20th century, trips in automobiles spurred development of entirely new business types that catered to an increasingly mobile public in need of temporary lodging, refreshments, and car necessities. These new businesses included gas stations, auto repair shops, car dealerships, cafes and diners, motels, and tourist attractions.

Deeply rooted in the tradition of inns that provided accommodations to weary travelers, new auto-related lodgings began as modest operations that offered the most basic services for motorists touring the nation.

Roads at the turn of the twentieth century were not that great. They were mud mires during the wet times and hard bumpy roads during dry. It was hard to get goods to market as well as problematic to move military vehicles and material, which gained critical significance after WWI. Prior to WWI, counties and towns funded and built roads across Texas, , connecting towns to each other and to the railroad. New car owners seldom ventured very far due to poor road conditions, scarcity of gas stations, and lack of highway infrastructure. By 1910 it was clear that county vision and funding would never result in integrated large-scale road construction projects that could match the benefits existing in the private rail network.

Better road conditions came about due to the Good Roads Movement. This movement started in 1880 when bicycle enthusiasts, riding clubs, and manufacturers met to form the League of American Wheelmen to support the burgeoning use of bicycles along with improving riding conditions on paved roads. The success of the League and its first advocacy efforts ultimately led to our national highway system. The movement was quickly taken over by automobilists who also saw the benefit of improved roadways.

Between 1900 and 1916 the number of motor vehicles registered in Texas jumped from a mere 180 vehicles to 125,000 with personal vehicles accounting for 95%. As traffic increased, the need for overnight accommodation and other traveler support increased as well. Besides existing hotel and boarding rooms, different lodging became available to a rapidly growing consumer niche.

The evolution of architectural forms of these lodging businesses followed a pattern that augmented and expanded upon railroad era hotels and eventually led to new building type. This development evolved over time into businesses such as auto camps, tourist camps, motor courts, and motels and highway hotels.

Before cars and improved roads, people traveled long distances by railroad and stayed in hotels and boarding houses. Hotels at this time were often located next to the railroad. Architectural historians refer to these as "railroad hotels." Whether the town was large or small, if it had a railroad stop, there was a nearby hotel for the fatigued rail traveler. Hotel design began to change in response to the number of guests who used automobile travel rather than trains. From the 1920s into the 1940s, hotels began to feature secondary automobile entrances, garages, and adjacent parking lots. The railroad hotels remained located in or at the edges of downtown, and were often difficult to reach from the newly improved roadways.

With improved road and cheaper cars, motorists began to travel extended distances from their homes, requiring overnight stops. With railroad hotels inconveniently located away from the new roads, people soon pitched tents wherever they chose, often squatting on private property usually without permission. This was a very cheap way to travel with no room costs, parking fees, tips or other expenses that accumulated during hotel stays.

Between 1915 and 1924, Henry Ford and his friends Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, and John Burrows, known as the Vagabonds, went on several annual road trips in Model T's outfitted for camping. Henry Ford designed a car with a built in stove and cooler and a truck with customs bins for tents, beds, and lawn chairs. The Vagabonds used these trips to promote road construction so people would buy more cars.

In the 1920s, the average white middle class family likely owned a car. Recreational travel by automobile became increasingly common as Americans sought a break from crowded cities.

As more and more people took to the roads, business owners developed a new type of lodging to serve tourists along the highways.. In order to protect their population from uncivil campers, towns roped off areas for travelers, which could be monitored by police. Known as "tourist camps," these areas were typically on the outskirts of town or within public . Towns usually did not charge to use these tourist camps. The camps included space for camping as well as restrooms. Competition between towns led to the addition of extra amenities in the camps such as picnic tables, fireplaces, flush toilets, showers, and sheltered eating and recreation areas. Fear of attracting transients led to the charging of entrance fees, for firewood, and limiting the number of nights that travelers could stay.

However, these city-owned campgrounds didn't last long.. Costs, overcrowding, and disgruntled hotel owners led to their closures. Another reason for phasing out public campgrounds was due to the entrepreneurial spirit that led private individuals to develop their own tourist camps by the mid-1920s. These were available to the traveling public for a fee and had greater amenities such as coin operated stoves, electrical outlets, tent floors, and even tents. Pricing was around 50 cents to a dollar per night. These commercial campsites continued until the 1930s.

By the 1930s, as competition between tourist camps continued to grow, some camp owners began building and renting cabins as an alternative to tent sites. These became known as "tourist courts." Tourist courts typically had individual cabins placed in patterns such as in rows or in an L shape or U shape plan with bathrooms located in a separate building at the center of the site. The courts provided car parking directly in front of the cabins.

Tourist courts advertised availability in auto guides and maps, as well as city directories. The Dixie Camp on Division Street (Bankhead Highway) in Arlington, had modern cabins furnished with private baths and toilets, natural gas for cooking and heating stoves, electric lights, running water, sinks, chairs and a table, bed – with or without linens, hot and cold showers and sheds for the car. It was even approved by the state board of health. Later versions of the tourist courts added amenities such as restaurants and gas stations. The Dixie Camp also had a Texaco gas station on site.

Tourist courts from the 1930s were updated for year round business. Attached carports or garages appear after 1930. Some tourist courts arranged cabins and garages to form a combined roof line. These buildings eventually morphed into continuous blocks under one roof.

Tourist courts reflected popular trends in architectural styles, such as Mission Revival, Tudor and Minimal Traditional. Regional themes gained in popularity in Texas and many tourist courts were crafted to look like teepees, Spanish missions, adobe huts, or log cabins. Tourist courts slowly became known as "motor courts."

The terms "motor court" and "motel" are often used interchangeably in spite of some physical differences. Motor court start to form an enclosed space with a continuous roofline, the next stage in evolution from the tourist court of individual cabins. But it still incorporates spaces for cars between the rooms.

On the other hand, a motel has a continuous roofline with linear or enclosed format. In motels, the cars are parked in front of the rooms or in the parking lot out front. To grab the attention of passing motorists these long one-story structures were typically situated parallel to the highway with bold, colorful signage to attract attention. Often, motels surrounded a large courtyard, sometimes with a swimming pool. The post-WWII era saw an increase in usage of the word motel over the term motor court by these business owners.

The Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts brand was the first motel chain in the United States and got its start in Waco in 1929. This brand used a distinctive mission revival style of architecture. Each formed a U shape court with multiple buildings fronted by a distinctive façade that mimics the Alamo. This chain reached its peak in the 1950s with 55 locations across the nation and faded by the mid-1960s. In Texas, it was located in Beaumont, Dallas, Houston, Tyler, and Waco.

The roadside tactic of using distinctive architecture to catch the attention of passing motorists would also be used by other chains such as the Wigwam Village, the orange rooftops of Howard Johnsons, and the gold wing of the Imperial 400.

By the mid-1900s, motels started adding second and even third story rooms, all with exterior access. Later design versions placed rooms back to back with a central core for plumbing ,allowing for efficiency of construction and maximum capacity of space.

With the coming of the interstate highway and the development of freeways, motel architecture became less important and rather non-descript. Motel signs increased in importance and changed dramatically in size and color as a means of attracting the high-speed motorist. The signs incorporated iconography symbolic of exotic getaways and the motel's quality as well as their range of amenities such as a restaurant, color television, and air conditioning.

The highway "hotel" began to appear in the 1950s and was largely a reinterpretation of an old idea, the railroad hotel. This building type combined the advantages of the increasingly popular motel with those of more traditional pre-automobile-era hotel designs. They were built along busy highways instead of along railroads and featured expansive parking lots. The rooms reverted back to interior access rather than exterior. The hotel generally included a lobby, a restaurant, display rooms, meeting rooms, and an indoor swimming pool.

So in conclusion, what was old is new again as we go full circle from railroad hotel to auto camp to motor courts to motels and ending back at hotel, but a highway hotel rather than a railroad one. We have seen how the advent of the automobile and road improvements go hand in hand with consumer demands in creation of new building types that catered to an increasingly mobile public in need of overnight lodging.