The automobile changed Americans in almost every way a people can be changed. It changed where we went, how we got there, and what we took with us. The phenomenon of the automobile influenced and would eventually come to dictate much of the cultural and architectural landscape of everyday America. “All you need to know about American society can be gleaned from an anthropology of its driving behavior,” wrote cultural theorist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard. “Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together.”

Distinctly automobile-related structures like garages, roadside diners, gas stations, and tourist camps were influenced by and created to serve the American motorists who began hitting the road in unprecedented numbers in the first half of the twentieth century. Whether they traveled for leisure or for business, the sheer volume of people on the road soon overwhelmed the meager or nonexistent roadside accommodations located across South Dakota, creating a demand for new services. The tourist camp in South Dakota developed in the 1920s as a response to the rise of automobile travel and continued to grow and prosper as tourism increased throughout the state, leaving its architectural, historical, and cultural footprint behind.

Tourist camps preceded what came to be known as the motel, which

is an amalgamation of the words "motor" and "hotel." The tourist camp, also referred to as the cabin camp or cottage camp, represents a grouping of similar but separate buildings constructed in a planned arrangement designed to cater to the needs of automobile travelers. Tourist camps were laid out to allow customers plenty of space to park adjacent to their individual cabins. In some cases, individual carports or garages were provided. Somewhere between the tourist camp and the motel fall the tourist court, cottage court, and autotel, all of which tended to be arranged around a courtyard and integrated under a common roof. Although differing somewhat in name and configuration, these early establishments all grew up with the automobile and served in the same capacity.

Before 1900, extensive tourist travel was primarily done by train, accessed only limited areas, and was largely a pastime of the rich. Wealthy tourists who sought adventure off the beaten path could charter guides and outfitters at rail destinations, but their numbers and economic impact were relatively low. In the road-sparse Black Hills of western South Dakota, the Crouch Line of Rapid City and the Spearfish Canyon Line were two of several rail lines that catered to sightseers and resort patrons during the pre-automobile period. The mass production of the automobile, however, changed the dynamic of twentieth-century tourism, encouraging the middle class to explore previously remote areas like Yellowstone National Park or the Black Hills, to name a few. This craving to discover new places was fed as thousands of miles of roads were built from coast to coast and across South Dakota.

The Good Roads Movement, part of a national push to improve farm-to-market transportation and automobile travel generally, reached South Dakota in the first decade of the twentieth century. Proponents such as Joseph Parmley of Ipswich recognized the economic potential of good highways and championed the cause by establishing the Yellowstone Trail Association in 1912. The first stretch of the

"trail" ran from Aberdeen to Ipswich and eventually to Mobridge as part of a national road from Plymouth Rock to Puget Sound. Improved roads and their organized promotion not only helped farmers get their products to market but also allowed small South Dakota towns to tap into tourist dollars as automobile ownership and travel continued to increase.4

Automobile ownership became an almost maniacal pursuit in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In 1910, Americans owned fewer than five hundred thousand private automobiles. By 1920, the number had reached eight million, and by 1930, 23 million cars were plying the roads, creating a more transient society than ever before. Although owning an automobile was initially a privilege of the upper class, America's rapidly growing middle class would soon embrace the trend, contributing to a new autotouring industry. The first autotourers were self-sufficient motorists who carried their own supplies, camping at random spots along the road. Cities and private landowners soon became upset with the mess the tourists left behind and began establishing free municipal autocamps in order to regulate and profit from the growing number of travelers.5


Early tourists packed supplies into their cars and set up camp at random spots along the road until free municipal autocamps, such as this one in Huron, were established.
Early autocamping enthusiasts sought a break from "civilization," a vacation that nurtured an attachment to nature, free from the constraints of railroad schedules or hotel decorum. Autocamping was also a communal event in which families gathered with other families, forming a fellowship among travelers. Word of mouth and a growing trade industry geared toward tourists boosted the number of autocampers and created a demand for better accommodations. By the mid-1920s, municipal autocamps that charged fees and "pay-to-stay" private autocamps had evolved to replace the free camps of the previous decade.6

The Great Depression accelerated the demise of the free municipal autocamp as various economic and social factors changed the dynamics of the roadside. First, the depression put millions of people out of work and on the road, but those staying at the community-supported campgrounds were often penniless and became an economic burden rather than the intended economic boon. Moreover, these growing numbers of transient campers often exceeded the spatial and sanitary capabilities of the municipal camps, leaving communities with no option other than to close them.7

Autocamping was also a labor-intensive endeavor. After a long day of touring, travelers still had to set up camp, prepare food, clean up, and tear everything down the next day. One early autocamper, Mary Roberts Rinehart, commented, "The difference between the men I camp with and myself, generally speaking, has been this: they have called it sport; I have known it was work."8 Although middle-class tourists sought simplicity and a connection with nature, as modern consumers they valued comfort even more.9

Camp owners quickly recognized the traveler's desire for a lightened workload and began building and renting cabins and cottages complete with the amenities consumers desired. Autocampers re-

6. Ibid., pp. 156, 160, 166.
sponded by leaving their tents at home and patronizing the cottages of the roadside tourist camp. By the late 1920s, the tourist-camp industry had begun to blossom. *South Dakota Hiway Magazine* noted the trend as early as 1928, commenting, “Cabins appeal to the tourist who desires comfort without the expense of hotels and those who wish the outdoor life without the bother of camping.”

Two years later, sociologist Norman Hayner wrote, “Just as the inn developed in response to travel in animal-drawn vehicles and the hotel in response to the growth of railroads and the steamship, so the automobile tourist camp has developed as a new type of habitat for the traveler in response to the development of the automobile and automobile touring.”

Tourist camps in South Dakota fit into two general categories: resort camps, designed for an extended stay at a tourist destination such as the forests of the Black Hills or glacial lakes in the northeastern part of the state, and highway tourist camps, situated between destinations and often serving the tourist’s needs for a single night. In 1924, the City of Deadwood, with community support, built the Pine Crest Tourist Park to replace its old tenting grounds located east of the racetrack. One of the area’s first extensively developed resort camps, Pine Crest served as a base camp for families exploring the entire Black Hills area. Roy Ostrander and his family worked as caretakers of the park, which also featured the cabin of old-time Deadwood resident “Deadwood Dick” Clark. At the beginning of World War II, the city sold Pine Crest to private interests, which operated it until a forest fire destroyed everything in 1959.

One of the first highway tourist camps in the state was Camp Joy, built by P. L. Simon in Kadoka in 1920. Located on an isolated stretch of U.S. Highway 16 in western South Dakota, Camp Joy featured a.

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13. U.S. Highway 16 ran from Sioux Falls to Rapid City and served as the main route across the state. Towns along the route, such as Mitchell, Chamberlain, Presho, and Kadoka, benefited greatly from the heavy traffic flow to and from the Black Hills during the summer. Elizabeth Eiselen, “The Tourist Industry of a Modern Highway: U.S. 16 in South Dakota,” *Economic Geography* 21 (July 1945): 226.
service station, café, thirty-four cabins, and a five-story Japanese-style pagoda that could be seen for miles around. Although the pagoda was never used for tourist accommodations, it earned its keep as an unusual attraction on the wide-open prairie. Camp Joy held its lone share of the market in Kadoka for only a short time, as four more camps were established in the town by the mid-1930s.  

Before the 1920s, tourism in South Dakota was an unsophisticated affair. A farmer would take his family to stay at a nearby lake during the hot pre-harvest weeks of August, for example, or a wealthy eastern tourist would cross the state in comfort by rail. This dynamic underwent considerable change in the latter half of the 1920s, bolstered specifically by two events in 1927. First, President Calvin Coolidge’s use of the State Game Lodge at Custer State Park as his “summer White House” provided almost limitless publicity for the pristine beauty of the Black Hills. This national attention coincided with the commencement of work on sculptor Gutzon Borglum’s granite tribute to democracy known as Mount Rushmore. Both events combined to make South Dakota a prime destination for a newly emerging, travel-hungry society.

Once it had been jumpstarted in the late 1920s, tourism grew to become South Dakota’s second largest industry by the end of the 1930s. As affordable automobiles and the depression multiplied the number of people on the road, all types of roadside services—gas stations, diners, attractions, and tourist camps—sprang up in the state to meet the challenge of drawing and serving travelers. On a national scale, Americans’ increased mobility brought about a transformation that was equally impressive. Tourists traveling cross-country looked for services and accommodations that were informal and convenient. As a result, tourist camps and related businesses came to line the highways
President Coolidge enjoyed a number of typical Black Hills tourist activities during his 1927 stay, including horseback riding, rodeos, and fly fishing.

away from the congestion of the inner city. Property on the outskirts of towns that had formerly been pasture and cropland sprouted a variety of enterprises courting automobile travelers and foreshadowing the urban sprawl that would occur in coming years. Sharing a symbiotic relationship, the businesses of a community's traditional main street often banded together with the new establishments to form highway associations, offering travelers several incentives to stop.17

While the construction of roads to carry the burgeoning numbers of automobiles became increasingly regulated in the first half of the twentieth century, the development of roadside buildings did not. Vernacular structures, largely free from the regulation of zoning or ordinance, dominated, resulting in what geographer Karl Raitz has termed an "unstable zone between the discipline of the road and the

informality of the countryside." The influence of popular culture, along with the imagination of local businessmen who recognized the potential for economic growth, created a truly entrepreneurial roadside. Oil companies were often the first businesses to build along a highway, constructing service stations and sometimes garages, cafes, or tourist camps to make the business more attractive to passing motorists. If the company chose not to expand into a related enterprise, local entrepreneurs were more than willing to fill the void.

Although some of the early tourist camps were architect-designed, the majority were creations of individual proprietors. These owners often consulted the builders' journals of the time, however, resulting in camps with similar cabin designs and layouts. American buildings of the twentieth century drew largely on two opposing concepts: applied ornamentation, or a basic structural form with elements added for decoration, and the structurally expressive and integral approach, which emphasizes a building's design and materials. The majority of tourist camps in South Dakota utilized a simple structural form adorned with aesthetic architectural elements.

The cabin designs found in builder's journals became more sophisticated in the 1930s as the depression-starved construction industry found a welcome outlet for its wares and services. According to Architectural Record, cottage construction and modernization was the only aspect of the building industry to expand during the Great Depression as the number of tourist camps grew and their designs became more modern, requiring more materials and fixtures. It was also during this period that tourist-camp design received attention from architects, some of whom were desperate for any type of work.

Many of the tourist camps begun during the depression could not be considered luxurious, even by Dirty Thirties standards. A cash-
strapped farmer might remodel his empty chicken coops or other agricultural outbuildings slightly to create an “instant” tourist camp. A number of camps grew from these humble beginnings as farmers who had been forced to sell off or kill most of their livestock found a practical new use for their vacant outbuildings. If the initial venture met with success, more substantial cabins would be added, along with other accommodations, as money became available.^^

Tourist-cabin design can be classified into several thematic categories. One of the most popular in South Dakota and elsewhere was the Bungalow, which imitated in miniature the Craftsman style. Bungalows often had gable roofs, wood clapboard or brick siding, picture windows, and other features that created a homelike atmosphere. Exterior ornamentation along with attractive landscaping and interiors featuring the latest modern conveniences attempted to coax travelers in with the comforts of home. The Tourist Park in Sisseton adopted this style for their cabins built between 1928 and 1931. The charming little cottages came complete with multiple-pane windows, exposed rafter ends, and brackets in the larger cabins. Miller’s Cabins in Belle Fourche, built in the Bungalow style between 1933 and 1936, exhibited


This 1920s view of Tourist Park in Sisseton shows the clapboard siding and large windows typical of the popular Bungalow style.
both exterior and interior characteristics of the theme, with hardwood floors, large mopboards and door surrounds, and arched doorways between rooms.\textsuperscript{23}

The Rustic style was also a popular design in South Dakota. Structures built in the Rustic theme resembled log cabins with gable roofs, porches, and log or rough-sawn board siding. The style’s prevalence in the state was understandable, as it fit well into the natural setting of both the Black Hills and the glacial lakes resort region in the northeast. Its rough-hewn simplicity conveyed the tranquil western image that many tourist camps sought to promote. The Hollywood Park tourist camp, for example, located on U.S. Highway 14 and S.D. Highway 79 in Rapid City, fit perfectly against the backdrop of the Black Hills, blending with the natural surroundings. The Rustic style, however, also appeared on the open prairie at places like the Corn Palace Auto Court in Mitchell.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23} Beecher, “The Motel in Builder’s Literature,” p. 117; Postcards, Tourist Park, Sisseton, S.Dak., and Miller’s Cabins, Belle Fourche, S.Dak., both in author’s collection.


Rustic-style cottages like those of the Hollywood Park in Rapid City were designed to look like log cabins and blend into the natural forested surroundings.
Another popular style nationally, although less so in South Dakota, was Moderne, which was similar to the commercial architecture of the period in its lack of ornamentation. Moderne-themed cabins usually had flat roofs, smooth walls, large windows, and clean horizontal lines that paralleled their engineering and evoked a distinct, machine-inspired building typology. Like the Bungalow, the Moderne cabin's contemporary design was meant to attract tourists seeking a familiar setting. The style was never popular in South Dakota, as tourist-camp owners tended to stay with the more traditionally homelike designs or Rustic themes.

Tourist cabin designs also addressed historic themes in an attempt to draw travelers. The most popular of these styles was the Colonial, which featured a gabled roof, clapboard siding, and multipane windows complete with shutters. The ornamentation of Colonial cabins was readily identifiable and conveyed an association with history and domesticity. Tourist-camp owners soon discovered that these colonial cottages were smaller versions of the homes people were buying in the suburbs. The Colonial style was more popular in other regions of the nation, particularly the northeast, but it did appear in South Dakota, although typically with reserved ornamentation. The Sunnyside Tourist Cottages in Deadwood were relatively subdued in their Colonial ornamentation, but the pedimented front entries supported by round columns diagnose them as vernacular interpretations of the Colonial style.

Tourist camps also commonly adopted the Southwestern theme, based on the adobe architecture of the southwestern United States, and the Western theme, derived from the western aesthetics California architects explored in the 1930s. Both themes were popular in their respective regions but relatively rare in South Dakota. The Rushmore Motel in downtown Rapid City was composed of several units

In a subtle reflection of Colonial style, the Sunnyside Tourist Cottages in Deadwood featured round columns at the front entry.

The Rushmore Motel in Rapid City achieved its Southwestern look through the use of adobe architecture.

done in the Southwestern or Mission style, complete with smooth stucco walls, rounded roof parapets, and red clay tiles. While some camp proprietors opted for the familiar, others used the romantic connotations of far-off, exotic places to entice customers.27

27. Beecher, “The Motel in Builder’s Literature,” p. 120; Postcard, Rushmore Motel, Rapid City, S.Dak., author’s collection.
Even though thematic styles and their architectural features varied from camp to camp, the form used in cabin construction was relatively uniform. The rectangular plan and L-shaped plan were the most common types of cabin design, providing a compact, self-contained unit that could be easily modified with the addition of a carport. Bump-outs off the back elevation to accommodate indoor plumbing were also common. Cabin design, however, was by no means standardized and could incorporate more unorthodox forms such as wigwams or tipis. Interestingly, these designs were popular elsewhere in the nation but not in South Dakota, where other western themes flourished.28

The individual cabins were commonly arranged in a geometrically pleasing form that promoted aesthetics and function. Early camp layouts tended to maximize convenience, either for the traveler or the camp owner. Layouts were often configured around a central courtyard, with the cabins forming a U or L shape around the communal space where the camp owners sometimes set up attractions or services for travelers.29 The Pine Rest Inn in Hill City had a “Kid’s Korral” play area complete with a jail, house, and post office. During the 1950s, children of the guests were registered at the play post office and received daily mail in the form of a “Smokey Bear stamp, a picture postcard of the playground and usually a balloon and piece of candy or gum in an envelope.” The play area also boasted a mock store where empty cans and boxes of groceries were “bought” and “sold.” The currency of choice was usually pinecones.30

Whether a particular camp was a tourist’s vacation destination or simply a stop along the way, a pleasant-looking, attractively landscaped exterior was necessary to pull him or her off the highway. As automobiles went faster and faster, camp owners made changes to attract passersby. Tourist camps became located closer to the highway in order to be more visible. Large signs and billboards began to permeate

29. Ibid.
The Westwick Motel on the outskirts of Sioux Falls was configured around the common picnic area, making it easily accessible to all guests.

the roadside landscape. Largely unregulated, the signage seemed to grow proportionally in size and gaudiness as the speed of automobiles increased.31

A catchy or memorable name was yet another way camp owners sought to attract the attention of potential customers. The names of tourist camps in South Dakota generally fell into five broad categories. Western-themed names, undoubtedly meant to entice eastern tourists looking for the “Wild West,” were especially popular. Names like the Round-Up Cabin Camp, Buffalo Trail Motel, and the Motel Lariat harkened back to the region’s romantic past. Some owners went to great lengths to take full advantage of this image. John Mulvaney’s Log Cabin Tourist Camp in Hot Springs catered to tourists in the 1930s by offering a Texaco gas station, store, saddle horses, and an American Indian tipi out of which curios and souvenirs were sold.32

Local geography proved another popular source for tourist-camp names. Geographic names could be general and descriptive, such as the Hillside Cabin Camp or the Hillcrest Motel, or they could be spe-

pecific to an area, such as the Sioux Heights Cabin Camp in Sioux Falls or the American Island Tourist Camp, located on a Missouri River island near Chamberlain. A business associated with a readily identifiable geographic feature or place name was thought to have an advantage in attracting new customers.33

The promise of comfort for weary travelers might also factor into the naming of a tourist camp. Names like the Shady Rest Court, Camp Rest, and Cozy Court sold the idea of a peaceful, tranquil place to stay.34 Many camps provided this atmosphere, at least in the early years when they were typically located on the outskirts of town with open country nearby. Until the urban sprawl that accompanied the main United States highway system shifted that dynamic, the promise in the name usually held true.

33. Ibid., pp. 6, 25.
34. Ibid.; Miscellaneous brochures, Vertical File “Tourism,” State Archives, SDSHS.

As competition for tourists grew, establishments like the Log Cabin Courts in Hot Springs added amenities such as gas stations, restaurants, and gift shops to attract customers.
The names of some tourist camps, such as the Shady Rest Park in Sturgis pictured here, were chosen to entice travelers with the promise of relaxation after a long day's drive.

Tourist camps, like many other businesses, often bore the name of the owner. A name like Walt's Cabins in Custer, although unimaginative, sufficed to identify the camp. More creative owners came up with catchy appellations in an attempt to snare travelers. The names of Jerry's "How-Dee-Do" Tourist Court in Hill City and the Du Duck Inn in Watertown were designed to roll off the tongue and stick in the mind. While a catchy or comforting name could pull a potential customer off the highway for a night, the only factor that assured continued patronage was a clean, well-kept establishment. Tourist camps with modern cabins and sanitary conditions competed successfully against each other and with the established hotel industry.\(^{35}\)

The shift in lodging habits that occurred as automobile travelers opted to forgo the formality and expense of the hotel in favor of the tourist camp reached a climax in the 1930s. The hotel industry was hit hard during the Great Depression and viewed the expanding tourist camp industry as an impediment to its recovery.\(^{36}\) Hotel owners not only complained of supposedly "unsanitary" conditions at tourist camps but also made claims against the legitimacy of the businesses, specifically in reference to what was known euphemistically as the "hot-pillow trade." Tourist camps, like the backseats of automobiles, were viewed by many as providing an all-too-convenient opportunity

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) Vieyra, "The Architecture of America's Roadside Lodging," p. 64.
for immorality and temptation. “A man who will hesitate to take a girl to a hotel knows that he can go to an auto camp,” charged one hotel owner.  

Cabins, of course, were rented for purposes other than overnight stays, but the phenomenon is more indicative of a changing morality than the institution of the tourist camp. Hotel propriety was not completely abandoned in the tourist camp, but it was loosened substantially in accordance with the tenor of the times. Prospective customers were often required to sign a guest register and show luggage as proof of their intentions. These steps, however, could easily be circumnavigated through aliases, bribes, or the indifference of the camp owner. As one proprietor lamented, “I used to include the names, but the people kicked too much. Too many men come here with other men’s wives.”

The tourist court’s location on the edge of town often skirted local municipal and police jurisdiction, attracting those who engaged in questionable activities and contributing further to a somewhat shady image. J. Edgar Hoover, chief of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, characterized tourist camps as “hideaways for public enemies” and “bases of operations from which gangs of desperados prey upon the surrounding territory.” Newspapers, novels, and motion pictures of the time perpetuated this stereotype of the tourist camp, the majority of which operated in accordance with the law and mores of the era.

In contrast to the seedy image presented in popular culture, tourist camps for some who recall them conjure up sentimental memories of immaculate Ma-and-Pa operations whose “identical cabins lined up like lumps of sugar on a green table cloth.” Garrit and Elsie Hix, owners of the Reid Motel in Belle Fourche, enjoyed regular visits from a once-young married couple who stayed there in the 1940s and returned over the years to recall the good times. The Reid Motel (originally Miller’s Cabins) has changed little over the years and still retains its historical associations.

40. Ibid., p. 44.
Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, tourist camps in South Dakota were regulated by the state secretary of agriculture and required by law to keep a register for public record, post maximum rates, maintain a safe drinking supply, and keep all supplied bedding sanitary. Any infractions were subject to fines. Under these regulations, camp owners also had authority to place a lien of up to two hundred dollars on baggage and property to compensate for any unpaid expenses. The State Department of Agriculture performed routine inspections and also issued licenses with fees that generally ran between three and fifteen dollars per year.42

In 1938, 319 establishments with cabins for rent were listed in the Department of Agriculture's register of tourist facilities in the state.

42. Sioux Falls Tourist Camp Register, Manuscript Collections, State Archives, SDSHS.
Cabins rented for an average of $1.00 to $2.50 per night, reaching $6 per night on the top end, with linen available for an extra 25 cents. Special weekly rates also applied. Some cabins were relatively spartan, while others offered heat, lights, showers, cooking utensils, running water, and inner-spring mattresses. Camp location appears, at times, to have dictated the extent of amenities. Resort camps with plenty of competition may have had to entice potential customers with more luxuries while a camp standing alone on a vacant stretch of highway could rely on its lonely location as its main selling point.

From the peak of their popularity in the 1930s and 1940s, the cabins and cottages of the tourist camp began to evolve into the motor hotels, or motels, that predominate today. During the 1950s, chain developers such as Howard Johnson and Best Western began building large single-roof, multilevel facilities complete with restaurants, swimming pools, and gas stations, squeezing out the small mom-and-pop tourist camps. Postwar affluence, combined with the centralized highway system created under the Federal Highway Act of 1956, tended to steer travelers toward the larger operators, greatly crippling the small tourist-camp industry. In the 1950s, a motel with fifty or more units needed 50 percent occupancy to break even, while the average motel of twenty units needed 70 percent or more. New entrepreneurs no longer started modestly and built their way up, but instead purchased franchises in large, well-known chains such as Holiday Inn and Marriott. Once travelers had enjoyed a good experience at a chain motel, the name recognition, convenience, and consistency of service would bring them back.

Fueled by the popularity of the automobile and aided by the growth of tourism, the tourist camp emerged from humble beginnings in the 1920s to become an architectural, historical, and cultural icon on the landscape of South Dakota. Today, one no longer sees a cornucopia of stylistically diverse cabins on the outskirts of every town but, rather,

43. Ibid. In some instances, tourist camps also served as semipermanent housing. The Round-Up Cabin Camp in Belle Fourche, for example, not only accommodated tourists but also housed workers employed at the local sugar-beet processing plant during World War II. Interview with Hix.

the standardized commercial architecture of corporate-run motels. Unable to compete with the franchised chains, the tourist camp has gone the way of television tubes and record players, mainly to be sought out by nostalgia seekers and roadside architecture aficionados. Although their glory days have passed, a few tourist camps still remain along the highways and travelers' stops of South Dakota as a reminder of a bygone era.
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