

I am here to celebrate legacy, and share memories of the bygone era that was the Borscht Belt. I am honored to be here to represent my Dad, Buddy Hackett, and his place in comedy history and how it began here, in the Catskills.

Although my years in the Borscht Belt were between my infancy and just shy of my seventh birthday, I'm blessed to have vivid memories of my time at Arthur and Jean Winarick's Concorde, and at the Tamarak. I first re-visited the Catskills for a Thanksgiving gathering with friends in Livingston Manor eight years ago, the experience ignited a desire to reconnect with this area and that time. This is only my second visit to the Catskills since my family's move west in '67.

While the Borscht Belt was a popular vacation destination for Jewish families of various incomes, the Concord specifically catered to a more affluent clientele. It was known for its upscale amenities and grand atmosphere, making it a favorite among those who could afford a more luxurious summer vacation.

It is where my parents met. Both were from poor families and couldn't afford such extravagance, they made their livings as staff in this upper middle class playground. My father started working at the hotel when he came home from the war. He was a bus boy but quickly became a tummler, Yiddish for a person with the ability to take an ordinary moment and breathe great life into it, creating excitement and frenzy, or more simply put, a merry maker. That was Buddy, and by the early 1950s, my father was a rising comedian headlining at the El Rancho in Las Vegas, Billy Gray's Band Box in Los Angeles, and here, throughout the Borscht Belt where it all started and where Buddy learned and honed his craft.

My mother changed her name and came to the Catskills to pursue a career as a dancer. After they married my father would say, "I married the exotic Cherene Dubois, that's why I was so surprised when I met her mother, Esther Cohen". Sherry worked as one of the six dance instructors who would demonstrate dances, then work with guests teaching the steps. One afternoon as a dance class was ending, Buddy entered the room. My father was born Leonard Hacker. At 29, he was a portly man with a youthful cherub face, bright eyes, and his brow seemed permanently raised, as if to ask, "What?" Buddy approached Marie (Rubino) who ran the dance school with her brother, Tony (Mellusi), and asked, "Say Marie, would you like to go for a drink later?" Marie responded, "Oh Buddy, I'm too old for you!" Marie, a born matchmaker, was trying to set him up, "Why don't you ask Sherry?"

A rejected Buddy made his way out the door, he glanced at Sherry, taking in the stunning 18 year old beauty with the perfect dancer's body, "You could just say no thanks, Marie." Not long after, along side a road near the hotel, the dance instructors were on a walk. Buddy was driving his new black Cadillac convertible with the top down. He rounded a curve a little too fast just as one of the dancers stepped from the shoulder on to the road. Buddy hit his brakes, the car swerved. The dancer reacted and jumped out of the way along with another dancer who stumbled and fell to the ground. Buddy stopped the car asking the fallen dancer, "You OK?" No one was hurt, just a bit shook up.

Sherry, frightened and angry, yelled, "Why don't you watch where you're going!" And Buddy responded, "Why don't you piss up a rope!" and drove off. Those were the first words my father ever spoke to my mother.

Weeks passed, the season unfolded. Every Saturday night the hotel would host The Champagne Hour. The show played to full capacity crowds in the 3,000 seat Imperial room. Buddy emceed and headlined. He'd open the show with all the dancers, introducing Tony and Marie, who would talk about the dances as Sherry and the other professional dancers would glide across the stage with grace and flair as they showcased a Lindy Hop, Fox Trot, Rumba or Cha Cha to the changing music.

Buddy could not take his eyes off Sherry. Sherry soon began to take notice of Buddy. As the weeks passed, the dance portion of the hour held more interest between these two. Buddy and Sherry worked together every Saturday night for over a year before there was a first date. One Saturday night, in December of '54, there was a new emcee for The Champagne Hour. As he finished up and walked off stage, Sherry asked, "Where's Buddy?" She learned he got a show on Broadway in, "Lunatics and Lovers" and was working at the Broadhurst Theater, he would drive up after curtain call on Saturday night and get to the Catskills in time to do a late show, blue comedy, for the late night crowd, then leave after the guests on Sunday evening.

Not long after, one Sunday morning, Sherry was with the dancers as they gathered in the lobby before driving back to the city. Buddy asked Sherry if she might like to ride with him? Sherry declined saying, "No, thank you, I don't know you well enough, I'll ride with my friends." Buddy persisted, perhaps he could see her in the city? Sherry declined again, "No, I work." Buddy asked, "All the time?" And so it went back and forth as Buddy learned Sherry was a telephone operator on the 72nd floor of the Empire State building, and in the evenings went to her other job, at a dance studio in the city, where she gave Mambo lessons. Buddy persisted, "How's about next Sunday? We could go for a drive?" Sherry agreed.

The following Sunday afternoon brought a storm and the rain fell steadily. Guests were leaving the resort. Buddy found Sherry in the coffee shop watching the rain through the window. He joined her at the table and asked if she'd like to go over to the Tamarak? She responded, "No, I don't think so." Buddy was confused, "I thought we had a date?" Sherry tried to explain, that would have been nice, but...she couldn't because it was raining. Buddy said, "So?" Embarrassed, almost in tears, Sherry explained she was wearing her dance shoes, and shouldn't get them wet.

Buddy offered, "I can wait while you go change." She explained she didn't own any other shoes, and with that got up and ran from the table. The next day Buddy went to the Ansonia Bootery, a Manhattan shoe store, repair shop and bank of shoe shine stations. Harry worked the counter. He spoke with a heavy Yiddish accent. "Lenny? Vas macht du? You vant you should come back to work with me again?" Buddy greeted his old boss. Harry congratulated him on his rising success and seeing Buddy's name in the papers! Buddy knocked three times on the counter, "Eight months and going strong." Harry asked, "Zo, what I can do for you?"

Buddy came to ask for a favor and with that, looked around the store and chose an elegant lady's sling back shoe. He handed Harry an envelope, and a piece of paper with an address. Sherry and her mom, Esther, lived in a small walk up apartment on Delancey Street. When a delivery boy knocked on the apartment door, Sherry answered. The boy handed her a note and three shoe boxes. Each clearly marked: 6, 6 1/2, 7. The boy waited while Sherry read the note, sat down, and tried on each pair of shoes. She gave two of the boxes back.

The following weekend, at the Concord dance studio, Sherry was finishing up a class. Buddy entered the room, she smiled at him. After the students left, Buddy asked again, "Would you like to go for a drink at the Tamarak?" This time, Sherry responded, "Yes, just a moment." She sat on the bench, removed her dance shoes, and put on her new sling backs. Buddy extended a hand to help her to her feet and they walked out arm in arm.

My parents were married at the Concord in June of '55, my brother arrived a year later, and my sister a year after that. A month prior to my birth, Jean Winarick passed away. My middle name is Jean, I am proud to be named after Mrs. Winarick and to have ties to this place.

Without knowing it, my parents were part of a golden generation, a golden era. Vibrancy filled the air. Simple pleasures and great expectations abounded. They may not have known where they were going, but they were on their way. Love, talent, and joy floated on the breeze. Friendships, marriages, alliances and lifelong memories were forged and treasured. All made in the Catskills, all made in the Borscht Belt. My father and mother were lucky to have found themselves, love and each other here, and I am lucky to be the inheritor of that love and luck, made here in the Catskills, made here in the Borscht Belt.

I'd like to thank The Borscht Belt Historical Marker Project, Marisa Scheinfeld and your team, for your vision, hard work, and quite speedy execution and roll out of such an impactful and meaningful foundation, and, thank you for honoring Buddy with his inclusion on this 11th marker.

Lisa Hackett

Source: BuddyHackett.tv

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1HKRsedujA/>