

Woodbourne

Welcome, everyone, and thank you so much for being here tonight to celebrate the unveiling of our newest historic marker here in Woodbourne.

This is the 13th marker in a planned series of 20. Each is more than just a sign; it's a symbol of time and a record of place highlighting the cultural renaissance and Jewish experience that shaped this region. It is an honor and labor of love to create this trail. Our hope is that it will be here long after we're gone, telling these stories.

The Borscht Belt was born from humble beginnings emerging in response to rampant antisemitism and the exclusion of Jews from many spaces across America during the early 1900s. In an act of resilience and imagination, the Jews carved out their own space here in the Catskills. Woodbourne might not have had all the glitter and glamour the Borscht Belt is known for but instead, is one of the starting points. Originally called Neversink Falls in the 1780s, it was renamed in 1830. By the mid-1800s, what was once a farming community became a thriving tanning industry. Many Eastern European Jewish immigrant families who started out farming in the area shifted into hospitality, running boarding houses and bungalow colonies that blended agriculture with tourism. Gradually, many gave up agriculture altogether. By the early 1900s, Woodbourne had become a popular Catskills resort town. Around 1920 the still active B'nai Israel Synagogue was built, in 1938 the Center Theatre was constructed. According to the Catskill Institute, Woodbourne had about 27 resorts and 52 bungalow colonies. Today Woodbourne is arguably the center of Hasidic life in the Catskills, part of a new and layered era being ushered in.

This marker honors those early roots, celebrating the vibrant *kuchalein* "Yiddish for cook alone" and bungalow culture of the era. It also pays tribute to the women who helped shape some of the most iconic Borscht Belt hotels, while acknowledging the hamlet's lively bohemian art scene and strong sense of community.

I will begin with the women. When people talk about the era, the focus is often on men. You find this across comedy, entertainment, music, and in the realm of hotel management. Women were the true heart of the resorts; gracious, hardworking, visionary entrepreneurs. The women of the Borscht Belt were pioneers in the field, owning and operating family run hotels, cultivating branding and vibes in the days long before boutique hotels, yoga and meditation retreats, spa-like atmospheres, Hiltons and Marriott's. They created the prototypes of what defined and continues to define American leisure. They poured their lives into their work and created spaces that were personal, welcoming, and frankly, iconic.

One of those women was Carrie Komito. She ran the Aladdin Hotel for 70 years after inheriting it from her parents Ida and Henry Fortgang. What began as a modest farmhouse taking in boarders to make ends meet eventually became Maple Lawn, then Hotel Levbourne, and finally, in the 1950s, Aladdin. Later in her life, Carrie wrote three books capturing the spirit and history of Aladdin.

Another remarkable figure was Anne Chester. She transformed Chesters'; originally Chesters' Zunbarg, meaning "Sun Hill" in Yiddish into one of the most progressive and artistic resorts in the region. When Anne took over in the 1950s, she created a vibrant adult-only retreat for singles, artists, and intellectuals. Paul Robeson, Zero Mostel, Alan Arkin and Anne Bancroft are just a few of the names of those who spent time there. Chester's featured an Olympic pool, tennis courts, a lake, a Japanese Ice Cream Parlor, and cultural programming that included music, yoga, meditation, art, and discussion.

There were so many trailblazing women: Jennie Grossinger of Grossinger's, Helen Kutsher of Kutsher's, Lillian Brown of Brown's, Esther Goldstein Strassberg and Irene Goldstein Asman of Esther Manor, Cissy Blumberg of Green Acres and New Roxy, Fanny Schaefer of the Vegetarian Hotel, Florence Blickstein of Homowack, and Harriet Ehrlich of the Pines—to name just a few.

Often eclipsed by the hotels, the bungalow colony is the essential other half of the Borscht Belt experience. Bungalow colonies are often described vividly and nostalgically as laid-back places full of freedom and paradise, nature and community. Words like Mah jong, canasta, gin runny, day camps and Saturday night at the casino also paint a picture of bungalow life. And just as with its hotels, many of Woodbourne's bungalow colonies fostered creativity too.

Nathan and Manya Jacoby were Polish Jewish immigrants who built one of those places. Manya had contracted tuberculosis, and part of Nathan's motivation to buy land was to move her somewhere healthier. In 1941, they purchased 100 acres from a former dairy farmer turned kuchalein owner by the name of Abraham Globberman. Globberman had operated a kuchalein called Globberman's Top of the Globe. It was a traditional kuchalein with families sharing the kitchen. Nathan Jacoby saw the prime views and altered the farm-house property, building cabins, buying barn, a playhouse, and even digging lake – Lake Annice -- he named after his granddaughter, Annice Jacoby, who is here with us tonight. The colony, which remains, is three miles up a mountain road, could host 50 families who shared a single phone line and a loudspeaker for calls -- very typical for a bungalow colony. Atypical for a bungalow colony were the masquerade balls and comedians like Rodney Dangerfield, Henny

Youngman and Lenny Bruce who came through Jacoby's for a set and the painters, poets, dancers, playwrights, and thinkers who gathered there. Jacoby's still operates today as the Buffalo Colony.

Other notable colonies included Woodcrest Villa, remembered by Anita Getzler as a *"unique time and place--a wonderful experience for mostly Holocaust survivors from Poland with their families."* There were also Furman's Bungalows, and Lansman's, founded in 1945 by Irving and Diana Lansman. Lansman's began as tents on the ground and grew into one of the most beloved bungalow colonies and day camps in the region.

The hotels and bungalows of Woodbourne weren't just places to relax they were like cultural wellsprings tucked into these mountains. That mix of art, identity, leisure and politics helped lay the groundwork for the explosion of Jewish American literature, theater, entertainment, music, film and social awareness in the decades that followed.

Tonight, we honor all of them.

Thank you to our partners; JASHP, who fund these markers, the Steingart Family, the Catskills Institute, SCHS, DVAA, and Sullivan Catskills. Thank you to the Town of Fallsburg; this is our sixth marker in Fallsburg and we're especially grateful to the town board, the supervisor, and the community. Special thanks to Jen Edwards and Lucas Price. Thank you, Assmblywoman Paula Kaye. And thank you, all of you, for being here and for helping us carry forward this beautiful and very important legacy.

-Marisa Scheinfeld, August 25, 2025, Woodbourne, NY