

We're here to honor the Borscht Belt history of Ellenville, a village with a layered history of settlement, industry, and regarding the Borscht Belt, cultural transformation. This is our 10th historic marker in a projected trail of 20. Each is a symbolic representation, heralding the histories of the hotel and bungalow colonies and helping to cement the Borscht Belt era's legacy in its physical place.

Since the Marker Project's inception in late 2022, we've learned that preserving Borscht Belt history isn't about polishing it until it shines. It is about honoring what was and interpreting it with care. Before the Borscht Belt dazzled with glamour, punchlines, and packed showrooms, it was a world built on grit, not glitz. Its story begins with the dirt and sweat of Jewish immigrants fleeing exile, persecution and poverty who found themselves in an America that exuded them. Barred from housing, employment, educational, legal opportunities, and mainstream American vacation access, Jews coming to this region didn't seek luxury as much as they sought respite. They didn't arrive to opulence, and instead to muddy land, fruitless farms and the determination to build something from nothing.

As the story goes, Jewish farmers decided to take in boarders to supplement their income. Eventually many made boarding their sole enterprise, morphing farmhouses into boarding houses, small hotels and bungalow colonies. The Nevele opened as the Neverly Falls Farmhouse in 1903. By 1917 it advertised in the *Jewish Vacation Guide* as the "*finest kosher house in Ellenville, beautifully located, wonderful scenery and all modern improvements.*" The 1920 edition of the O&W RR *Summer Homes* guide cites Ellenville as a town "*in the very heart of a vast playground,*" situated "*at the low foothills of the Shawangunks rising, as if by magic, into one of the most boldest and picturesque ranges.*"

A short while later, in 1944, my maternal grandparents Hattie and Benny Moskowitz honeymooned at the Nevele. Later, they rented a bungalow in Wawarsing. Like so many others escaping the city, they joined the steady stream of travelers heading north and leaving the city, first passing through Jersey, then boarding a ferry up the Hudson River to a junction point. From there, they continued via the D&H Canal, and later, the O&W Railroad or Old Route 17, bound for Ellenville. I can only imagine their feelings - anxiously and excitedly making the long trek in search of a little slice of paradise with particularly awesome views.

In the Catskills, people gathered, ate, and laughed, a lot. But the laughter wasn't just entertainment; it was cathartic, therapeutic, and it was connection. Comedians in the Borscht Belt didn't fly in from Hollywood, many came in through the kitchen. Comedy wasn't imported - it grew naturally. These weren't polished acts. They were fast-talking, raw, brutally honest and self-deprecating jokes about relationships, overbearing mothers, the weather, food, and everyday observations.

A waiter named might crack a joke between courses— before being hired as a tummler who could entertain a room with comic accents and high energy. He later took that charm to Broadway, and eventually to the big screen in Disney films like *The Love Bug* and *The Little Mermaid*. That was Buddy Hackett—whose daughter, Lisa, is here with us today.

A busboy might step up after dinner to tell a funny story—only to end up on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and in movies like *History of the World* and *Caddyshack*. That was Jackie Mason.

A 14-year-old drummer gets pulled onstage when the headliner called in sick. That drummer? Mel Brooks.

And a girl from Ohio—funny, bold, and way ahead of her time—paved the way for generations of female comics with her outrageous, razor-sharp style. Her name was Phyllis Diller.

A tummler named Leonard Schneider entertained guests at Kramer's Hotel in Hurleyville. He later pushed boundaries with sharp satire and his raw, explicit humor. He'd go on to revolutionize stand-up. That was Lenny Bruce.

A young comedian named Jacob Cohen later known as Jack Roy began with flop performances in the Catskills. He eventually quit and took up house painting to make ends meet. But he made a major comeback—right here in the Catskills and found fame in Hollywood. You know him as Rodney Dangerfield.

Another young comedian bombed early on at the Nevele Hotel, only to later become a cast member on *Saturday Night Live*, appearing in numerous films, including *Beverly Hills Cop II*, *Problem Child* and *The Aristocrats*. His distinctive voice **brought to life** some of the most memorable and zany characters in animation, particularly in *Aladdin* and *Family Guy*. That was Gilbert Gottfried, whose wife Dara and children Lily and Max are here with us today.

Because of these individuals, a new style of American humor was born, eventually shaping stand-up comedy as we know it. At its root, the genre was cultivated by immigrants and outsiders who literally made culture out of adversity and alienation. To tell the entire story of the Borscht Belt and the comedians who came up here without acknowledging its humble beginnings would be remiss and overlook the very essence of what makes the era so enduring.

While the glitz, neon lights, and fame came later, the Borscht Belt was never about luxury. While yes, luxury and even gluttony eventually became part of the experience, the era is a testament to a people who had nothing and made it feel like everything. It's a story not just about of laughter but of labor. It's not only about what was built here, but about what it *represented*. Preserving the Borscht Belt isn't just about reviving the past for nostalgia's sake—it's about honoring its deep cultural significance and carrying forward its authenticity, voices, and impact. It's a joy and an honor to help create this trail alongside my friends, as a tribute to what came before and a foundation for what's ahead. We're building something that not only pays tribute the past, but invites the community—old and new—to be part of its future.

I wish to thank our partners who have been with us every step of the way – JASHP (who funds each of our markers), the Steingart Family, Catskills Institute, SCHS, DVAA, and Sullivan Catskills. And thank you to our newest partners and collaborators, the Village of Ellenville, with a special thank you to Michael Jeter. Another special shout out to Barbara Hoff whom I deeply respect, particularly for how hard she rallies for her hometown. We are very grateful to Arts-Mid Hudson for funding our cultural and public programs this weekend. This includes an artist talk and signing with photographer Isaac Jeffreys and me at The Common Good at 5 p.m., and a hotel tour tomorrow.

I also want to express our gratitude to the Ellenville Public Library for giving the marker a home. When we first approached the library board with the idea, their support and lightning speed agreement — literally hours — made it clear that they truly value local history and community. Thank you to Nicole Sorbara for being our steward, and Joyce Cates for her support. And finally, thank you all for joining us.

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Borscht Belt Historical Marker Project

