

Memories of The Catskills The Making of a Hotel

by Alvin L. Lesser

Foreword by John Conway,
Sullivan County Historian

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More than 110 b&w photographs

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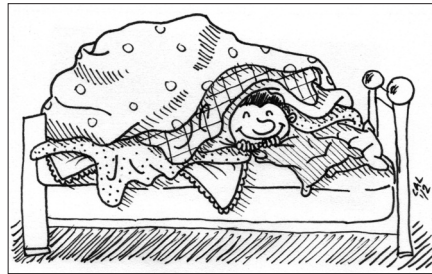
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Those Were the Days, My Friends...

The Catskill Mountains are a large area in the southeastern portion of New York State. They are located approximately 100 miles north-northwest of New York City and forty miles southwest of Albany, starting just west of the Hudson River. The term “the Catskills” came to mean specifically Sullivan County and the “Borscht Belt” hotels that became the favored destination from the 1920s through the 1960s for Jewish vacationers from the Tri-State Area.

In **Memories of The Catskills: The Making of a Hotel** (© 1/13, www.lesserlodge.com), Alvin L. Lesser reminisces about a place and a time that will live on in the memory of those who were part of it. Through



humorous vignettes and personal recollections, the book takes readers back to experience those days. We learn of Alvin’s mischievous boyhood pranks that often involved one of his cousins, a bit about his schooling (not a highlight for him), and we learn briefly

about his time serving overseas during World War II. He then shares memories of his return to The Lesser Lodge, finding a bride, and working side-by-side with his family to make the Lodge a success.

The hotels of this region that struggled benefited during the recovery years. By 1940, a period of prosperity called the Golden Age had begun. By the middle of the next decade, *The New York Times* reported that there were 538 hotels in Sullivan County, along with 1,000 rooming houses and 50,000 bungalows. These hotels lured the same vacationers back year after year and treated them like members of the family.



The Lesser Lodge was started by Alvin’s mother and father with just a modest house and some out buildings. However, Lesser Lodge ultimately grew from a sprawling complex into a resort of some prominence with multiple buildings and bungalows as well as a lake, swimming pool, handball courts, and a separate day camp for the children of guests.

—over—

From his birth in 1922, on through his childhood and young adulthood, Alvin Lesser lived mostly in his parents' hotel. During the winter—when a new building wasn't going up—the family lived in the Bronx or Brooklyn.

The 1987 film *Dirty Dancing*, set in a Catskills resort in the summer of 1963, gave many a snapshot of life in one of the hotels where a guest was provided not only a room, but also food and entertainment free of additional charges. Now **Memories of The Catskills** puts the reader there in a more intimate way.

Memories of The Catskills: The Making of a Hotel

is not just the story of the Lesser family and those who made up the day-to-day, year-to-year life there. Lesser conveys the warmth of people who made others welcome by providing a respite making them all family—staff, entertainers and guests alike.

From 1922 until The Lesser Lodge burned down in 1963, Alvin's life reflects that special time and place.

Famous stars of yesteryear came to entertain in the “Borscht Belt” at Lesser Lodge or one of the hundreds of other hotels in the area. Some hotels had thirty or forty members on their entertainment staffs, and future greats like Moss Hart, Dore Schary, Eddie Fisher, Buddy Hackett, Danny Kaye, Jerry Lewis, Robert Merrill, Jan Peerce, Jan Murray, Red Buttons, Sid Caesar, and Van Johnson all got their start in The Catskills. Lesser shares his interactions with many of these now well-known stars.



“With each passing year, there are fewer folks who remember this era,” writes John Conway, Sullivan County Historian, in the book’s Foreword. “That’s why efforts like this book are so important and so vital to preserving memories of a time that will likely never be duplicated.”

Alvin’s son Gary encouraged his father, now 91, to write this memoir so that his immediate family wouldn’t forget the stories, and—others who might have spent time in “the Catskills” or heard about it all their lives—could get a taste of it for themselves.

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Early Praise for **Memories of The Catskills: The Making of a Hotel**

*“Those were the days my friends!! Whatever your frame of reference of the ‘Catskills’ is—guest, staff member or ‘just heard about the area,’ you will find Al Lesser’s book a delight. Traveling down memory lane, while reading this sincere and heartwarming true story, brought back many wonderful memories. Al Lesser has given us a unique opportunity to go behind the scenes and learn how it all happened. I laughed, smiled, and also shed a few tears with the Lesser family. Whether one came from a smaller property, or a large one such as mine (Grossinger’s), we all traveled the same road, perhaps with a few minor detours. Our ultimate destination was identical—hospitality for the folks who vacationed with us. Next scheduled activity, READ **Memories of The Catskills**.” ~ Elaine Grossinger Etes, Grossinger’s Hotel*

To request a review copy of **Memories of The Catskills**, to arrange an interview with Alvin Lesser, to receive cover and/or interior art, or for any additional information, please contact Kate Bandos at KSB Promotions: 800-304-3269, 616-676-0758 or kate@ksbpromotions.com.