

Henny Youngman, one of the great comedians of the now-gone Borscht Belt era told this travel joke: “I told the ticket lady at the airline counter to send one of my bags to New York, one to Los Angeles, and one to Miami. When she said the airline couldn't do that, I said, why not, the airline did it last week.”

We fondly remember the other great comedians of that era: Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Jerry Lewis, Buddy Hackett, Red Skelton, Abbott and Costello, Danny Thomas and many others. Before going on to fame and fortune in film and TV, many started as “tumblers” at Catskill Mountain hotels.

Tumblers worked as stand-up comedians at night, and spent their daylight hours lifeguarding at the lake, waiting on tables, babysitting, greeting guests and other general duties. Their pay was as high as \$50 a month, with a bed in a cabin room and meals free.



The Borscht Belt consisted of a dozen hotels in mountain areas about 100 miles northwest of New York City. Emerging in the 1920s as a series of motel-like cabin compounds, they attracted people from the city, mostly first- and second-generation Jewish-American families. They wanted to escape the summer heat, humidity and crowded streets for the cool mountain air. The rates, usually including meals, started at \$5 a night for a cabin that slept four.

By the 1930s, some of the facilities expanded into hotels, complete with lobbies, auditoriums, dining rooms, pools, lakes and updated cabins. At first, the dance halls featured small bands and singers. MCs announced the upcoming songs and led special get-acquainted dances.

Those tumblers evolved into stand-up comedians, and they developed and honed their skills in the Borscht Belt hotels. At the same time, in the late 1930s, radio programs became more structured, particularly those featuring comedians, such as Jack Benny, Henny Youngman, Burns and Allen, Milton Berle and Red Skelton. It was only natural for the experienced tumblers to take advantage of the great opportunities and large salaries offered in the new medium.

Stardom in radio in the late 1930s and 1940s led to TV programs in the early 1950s, when vaudeville comedy was a major part of early television. For many of the former \$50-a-week tumblers, such as Sid Caesar, Red Skelton and Danny Thomas, multi-million-dollar film and TV contracts followed.

The Borscht Belt hotels continued to flourish through the 1930s, and had a big boost in the 1940s and 1950s by the prosperity that followed the end of World War II. The Catskills also became more than just a family destination when the hotels offered programs for young single adults, with emphasis on mixing and romance.

Singles from New York went to the Borscht Belt, hoping to meet that special person. In the Broadway play, "Wish You Were Here", the theme featured a single working girl who fell in love with a lowly Catskills hotel waiter. At the happy finale, she found out he was a medical student from a wealthy family.

By the beginning of the 1960s, everything seemed to be going well. The hotels were well attended in the summer months, and with ski slopes nearby, they could offer winter programs. However, when Las Vegas representatives attempted to introduce gambling, the farmers and other permanent residents of the area turned it down. When gambling was approved in Atlantic City in the early 1970s, it took away much of the popularity of the Borscht Belt hotels.

Another factor was Las Vegas itself. Before the 1950s, it was just a 2,000-miles-away rural gambling joint in the Nevada desert. Then, in the 1960s, airlines began flying jets from New York to Las Vegas in three hours with \$150 round trip specials, including three-night stays in Vegas hotels. Las Vegas built enormous resorts on the famous Strip, and presented everything from strippers to Broadway shows. By the end of the 1960s, the Borscht Belt was no more.