www.nytimes.com
The New York Times
ON THE WEB

**August 22, 2003**

# HAVENS; A Tradition Endures in the Catskills

**By JOHN MARCHESE**

IRWIN RICHMAN'S special summer world began as many did -- with a house in the country on more property than his immigrant, Brooklyn-dwelling grandparents had ever dreamed of. Three whole acres.

"My grandmother was very practical," Mr. Richman said recently, "and she looked at it and said, 'Such a big house! Why should we have it all for ourselves?' So she turned it into a rooming house. A few years later they added the first bungalows."

What became Richman's Bungalow Colony eventually offered summer accommodations to 13 families. And from its beginnings in the Depression, through its decline after the birth of Woodstock Nation, Richman's typified a thriving culture. In his book "Borscht Belt Bungalows: Memories of Catskill Summers," published by Temple University Press in 1998 and recently released in paperback, Mr. Richman describes them as "a lost world." These days a drive around Sullivan County reveals scores of abandoned bungalow colonies that are decaying back into the grassy hillsides. But others are alive, some operated by religious groups or restructured (and remodeled) as summer co-ops for new generations of families.

Mr. Richman estimated there once were as many as 500 bungalow colonies -- and that far fewer than a hundred survive, including a handful that still serve longtime clients who are now elderly snowbirds, spending most of the year in Florida. Most of the larger colonies that still exist are operated by Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups.

Thanks to a strong real estate market in Sullivan County, middle-size and smaller colonies, often shabby reminders of a thriving past, are finding buyers, according to William Rieber Jr., an owner of Rieber Realty in Monticello, N.Y. "Nowadays, people are buying up the properties and putting more substantial homes on them," he said.

Gloria Weiss, the owner of Kaaterskill Realty in Monticello, whose grandparents ran a bungalow colony, said that she now had fewer than a half-dozen colonies among her listings, including a 30-acre property that has 13 cabins, a pool, a pond and a stream. It is listed for $346,000. When it sells, she predicted, a developer will take advantage of the density allowed by the bungalow colony zoning, tear down the old cabins and replace them with more substantial homes or town houses that appeal to today's buyers. "Young people today have more money to spend," she said.

At the height of colony life, when a young couple might have about $800 to spend for an entire summer season, there were hundreds of options but little variety. The colonies were remarkably similar -- simple one-story wooden cabins built on concrete blocks, usually amid a stand of trees. As small as the bungalows were, most were divided into two units, each with a bedroom, a kitchen and a bath (the outdoors was your living room). A telephone was usually in the owner's house and a loudspeaker announced when someone had a call or when vendors were visiting. Linoleum was an amenity.

In the boom years after World War II, a lot of colonies added swimming pools and recreation halls that were invariably called casinos. Typically, nonworking mothers and their children moved in on the Fourth of July and stayed until Labor Day; the fathers joined them on weekends. The children could run around outdoors all day, swim and pick berries; parents could gossip in the cool night air on small screened porches.

"Bungalow colonies died out with the coming of the women's movement and a whole range of other things," Mr. Richman said in a telephone interview from his home in central Pennsylvania. (He spends at least part of each summer in the Catskills and will be there this weekend, speaking about bungalow colonies at the annual Catskills Conference, an academic gathering in Monticello.) "They included suburbanization, air-conditioning, cheaper air travel and civil rights legislation of the 1960's that made it possible for Jews to go anywhere." In 1980, Mr. Richman's mother, Bertha, sold the bungalows to the nearby Aladdin Hotel. They were trucked off the property, which the Richmans still own, floated across the Neversink River and placed on the hotel property: instant and cheap new rooms. The Aladdin itself has since ceased to operate as a public hotel.

THESE days, if you drive past the old Richman property in the town of Woodbourne and go two miles up steep Michigan Road, you pass several bungalow colonies that have been purchased by Orthodox Jewish groups. "A lot of the ultra-Orthodox and Hasidim have bought these colonies," Mr. Richman said. "They set up a synagogue or a yeshiva."

Continue to the top of Michigan Road and you will find another former colony, now a cooperative community founded by Shael Shapiro, a Manhattan architect. "I had been involved in co-op conversions of loft spaces in SoHo," he said, "and I got the idea to do the same thing up here."

In 1981 he paid $155,000 for a collection of bungalows set around a semicircular drive lined with a double row of trees. Beneath the trees was a small manor house. A farmhouse remained from the property's beginnings as a dairy farm. There was a big pool and a large casino building. The view from the hill was spectacular, Mr. Shapiro said.

After converting some of the two-unit cabins into roomier single-family bungalows and turning the old farmhouse into apartments, Mr. Shapiro and his partners ended up with 30 units that sold for $10,000 to $20,000 each. The co-op's marketing was solely by word of mouth; 11 of the original buyers were

related, and the rest were friends or friends of friends, or colleagues.

His wife, Roslyn Bernstein, a professor of English at Baruch College, gave the place its name, the Buffalo Colony, when searching for an analogy to explain to her young children what bungalow colonies were. Finally, she likened them to buffalos, once great herds whose numbers had dwindled.

About the same time the Buffalo Colony was being created, a few other bungalow colonies went co-op, offering cheap summer homes. In 1980, another Manhattan architect, Richard Hamner, bought a 96-acre bungalow colony near White Lake and developed the 17-unit Kauneonga Estates, where unheated cabins priced well under $10,000 attracted buyers like the writer Jonathan Schell and the poet Ann Lauterbach.

The trend toward country co-ops was small and brief, mostly because so few original bungalow colonies offered the remote location that Manhattanites coveted. ("Being close to the road was considered an advantage in the old days," Mr. Richman said.) And for the co-ops that do exist, turnover remains low, perhaps because expenses are so low. "Our yearly maintenance is still less that it costs to keep a car garaged in New York," said Mr. Hamner, who said that the one unit at Kauneonga Estates he recalled being sold in recent years went for $60,000.

Two units are for sale at the Buffalo Colony, where most of the formerly Spartan three-room bungalows have been transformed with sleeping lofts, decks, porches and modern kitchens and baths. The asking price for a double-size extensively remodeled and winterized bungalow is $75,000. And a woman who just bought a larger place within the colony is selling her smaller, less plush place for $55,000. Though it is not expressly against the rules to use a real estate agent, the co-op board encourages sellers to rely on word of mouth or listings on the colony's Web site, www.buffalocolony.com.

The children of the original co-op buyers have grown and now their children spend the summer much the way previous generations did at the old-style colonies: running free around the property, picking berries, swimming, playing games. "I never went to summer camp," said Debra Robbins, a New York City schoolteacher who lives in Brooklyn and was pregnant with her first child (now a college student) when she and her husband bought a unit at Buffalo Colony. "Now I understand why people liked summer camp. I dream about this place all winter."