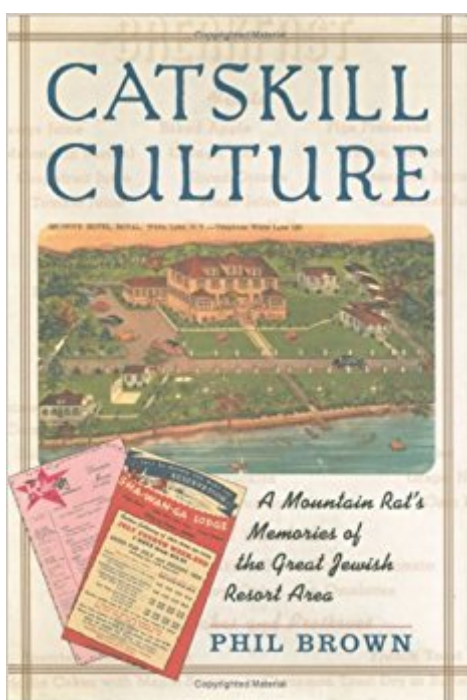


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Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat's Memories Of The Great Jewish Resort Area



Synopsis

A century ago, New Yorkers, hungry for mountain air, good food, and a Jewish environment combined with an American way of leisure, began to develop a resort area unique in the world. By the 1950s, this summer Eden of bungalow colonies, summer camps, and over 900 hotels had attracted over a million people a year. This was the Jewish Catskills of Sullivan and Ulster Counties. Born to a small hotel-owning family who worked for decades in hotels after losing their own, Phil Brown tells a story of the many elements of this magical environment. His own waiter's tales, his mother's culinary exploits as a chef, and his father's jobs as maitre d' and coffee shop operator offer a backdrop to the vital life of Catskills summers. Catskill Culture recounts the life of guests, staff, resort owners, entertainers, and local residents through the author's memories and archival research and the memories of 120 others. The Catskills resorts shaped American Jewish culture, enabling Jews to become more American while at the same time introducing the American public to immigrant Jewish culture. Catskills entertainment provided the nation with a rich supply of comedians, musicians, and singers. Legions of young men and women used the Catskills as a springboard to successful careers and marriages. A decline for the resort area beginning in the 1970s has led to many changes. Today most of the hotels and bungalow colonies are gone or in ruins, while other communities, notably those of the Hasidim, have appeared. The author includes an appendix listing over 900 hotels he has been able to document and invites readers to contact him with additional entries.

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Customer Reviews

The author, a professor of sociology at Brown University and co-founder of the Catskills Institute, this book is an examination of his childhood legacy. He grew up a "mountain rat" in the Catskills where his mother worked as a chef, his father in various resort occupations; Brown himself had numerous jobs. His visits as an adult to his old haunts reveal a changed emotional and social landscape. Most of the bungalow colonies and once-grand and second-rate hotels are vacant or burned down and the resorts still alive today are run by Orthodox Jews or have become New Age ashrams. A once vibrant culture, "a major facet of the Jewish experience," has, says Brown, disappeared with the secularization of Jewish daily life and the growth of affordable airline travel. Lasting for a good part of the 20th century, the Catskills were a community that went beyond a simple vacation escape. Tourism grew with demands for better facilities and entertainment. There was a magic in mountain life for the workers and for the summer residents that became truly glitzy with the addition of big-name entertainers. In 1991, Brown first began to see his roots as "grist for an ethnography" and from that time on he read, compiled oral histories and, in 1995, organized the first annual "History of the Catskills" conference. It was, he said, a "spiritual homecoming." Because of his fond experience, Brown's ethnography is much warmer, more personal than most. It is a documentary of assimilation and of a return to one's roots. An appendix lists 926 hotels. 91 b&w photos. (Oct.) FYI: Temple also published Irwin Richman's *Borscht Belt Bungalows: Memories of Catskill Summers* (Forecasts, Nov. 17, 1997). Copyright 1998 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Warm and poignant memories of a bygone place and time, the Borscht Belt of the 1950s, fill this memoir-cum-socioethnological study. A small resort area that catered to New Yorkers and was a catalyst in the Americanization of the immigrant Jewish population, the Catskill Mountains also served as the training ground of many of the comedians and writers who are so well known today. Brown's parents were owners of a small hotel in the area, where he worked during his college years; subsequently, Brown (sociology, Brown Univ.) became cofounder of the Catskills Institute. Using photographs and interviews, he takes a nostalgic look at the Borscht Belt and its decline. The old bungalows and hotels, in rundown condition, are now being used by Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish communities. A pleasant read with a scholarly bent; recommended for libraries with ethno-American, New York State, or Judaica collections. Idelle Rudman, Touro Coll. Lib., Brooklyn, NY Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

If you are a baby boomer or older and ever went to the Catskill Mountains, then this book is a must-read. Having gone to the Catskill's as a child to visit my grandparents who stayed there during

their summers, this book brought incredible and fantastic memories back to life. The author knows the Catskills like the palm of his hand. His knowledge of the Catskill Mountains is vast, insightful, touching and funny. This is a lost period in time that the book memorializes so that this time in history may continue to live on in our hearts and minds. Again, a must-read! I gave this book to my older sister as a gift and she said that "this book is a treasure". Younger generations may find this interesting also. Thank you to the author for writing this! I just happened to be researching the Catskill Mountains on-line and pleasantly stumbled upon this book! What a find!

I loved the book and tell people about it. This brings back great memories for me and for the generation that went to and worked in the Catskills.

I bought this as a present, therefore cannot review contents. I was very pleased with the rapidity with which the book was shipped. It was well packed and accurately described with regard to its excellent condition.

I got this book for my husband who grew up in the Catskills. He waited tables at a large hotel and really related to this book.

my dad loves the book-spent his summer up in the catskills

I was born and raised in the Catskills, grew up on a chicken farm, and worked in resort hotels during my teens. I always thought this was a very special experience, and now Phil Brown's book brings it back with wonderful detail and confirms my feelings about how special it all was. This book is not only about Catskills culture; it is also about Catskills economics, and explains quite vividly how hard people worked to make the Catskills experience enjoyable for those who came for the summer.

I grew up in the Catskills. I worked as a caddy and lifeguard at Grossingers, showed movies at dozens of small bungalow colonies, and worked with my Dad (he was an electrician) at many hotels in Swan Lake (the Fieldston and Swan Lake Hotel). I also got to see some of the shows and particularly remember Jackie Mason hitting on my high school classmates. My most impressive experience was caddying, when I was around 15 years old, in a group with Mickey Mantle, Whitey Ford and Roger Maris. This book covers it all along with many other historical chapters that bring many memories back.

Recollection of times spent with my family were brought back to life. Having married into the Siegel family that owned several hotels in the Swan Lake area, including the Commodore and the hotel my inlaws sold to the Dinnersteins; and the author having worked at the Commodore brought back many years of my youth. There is nothing so gratifying as to have someone write of part of your life, and this is What Mr. Brown has done. To go back even further, I remember playing with a small four piece "orchestra" at a place in Monticello, called Skliars - that was 64 years ago. What wonderful memories!.

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