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# SooNipi

## MAGAZINE

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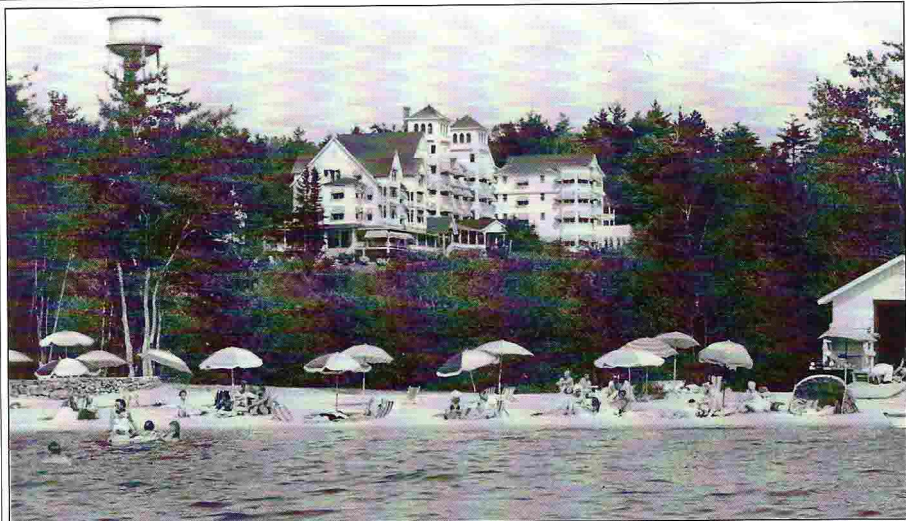
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# SooNipi Lodge



*View of SooNipi Lodge overlooking Lake Sunapee, the lovely beach attracted guests until the late 1960s.*

## SOO-NIPI LODGE

By Bret Wirta

One of my earliest memories is sitting on lush grass, looking way up at a white castle with red-roofed turrets. I was a small boy sitting on the lawn of my grandparents' cottage at Soo-Nipi Lodge, a four-hundred acre resort, one of the magnificent hotels that use to grace Lake Sunapee. While I was growing up, my grandpa, Elmer Goings, was the Maintenance Manager and my grandmother, Aunie, helped out in housekeeping. They lived year-round on the grounds of the Lodge. Uncles, aunts and even my dad worked there. I was only six when Soo-Nipi Lodge closed; so my memories seem more like fairy tales; but I think the real story of Soo-Nipi Lodge is just as colorful.

In 1894, the Lodge accommodated 70 guests and was, "...the nearest approach to an ideal summer resort that exists today in America." The two four-story buildings, connected by a covered promenade and porte-cochere, "...embodies every modern requisite of a perfect hotel, and is sumptuously furnished throughout."

In 1906 Soo-Nipi Park Lodge, as it was then called, expanded. The two separate buildings were

connected with a massive addition including two six-story towers and a wrap-around porch. A golf course, putting green, riding stables, and tennis courts were built, and the kitchen and dining room were expanded. The Lodge now catered to over two-hundred guests, promising, "...cultured and moral patrons the attractions of rustic life with modern comforts and rare social advantages. The coarse and otherwise undesirable elements of society are rigidly excluded."

Big-city socialites traveling in separate, first-class train compartments were whisked onto a steamboat at Lake Station in Newbury, at the southern end of Lake Sunapee. They disembarked at the private landing at the Soo-Nipi Park beach. Of course the "undesirable elements" weren't completely excluded: they were the army of workers that staffed the Lodge and made it run.

Flash forward half a century: the Great Depression, World War II, and the automobile stripped away the airs and pretensions of that earlier era. Gone were the trains and steamboats. What was left of the old-moneyed class aban-



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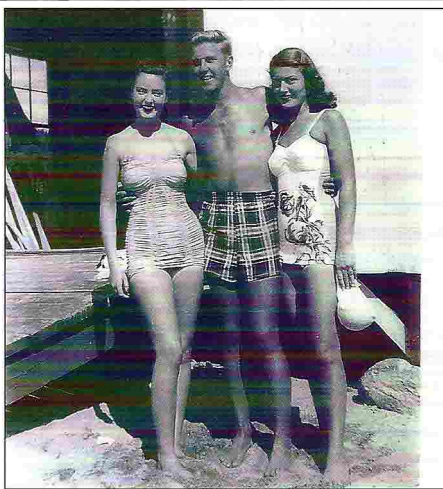
doned the Lodge, maintaining their reclusiveness by building private estates around the lake. Now Soo-Nipi Lodge, its name now shortened, turned to the middle class. Instead of exclusivity, Lodge advertisements pleaded, "We wait every day for the postman - We are listening for that telephone call. Won't you drop me a line today or call me collect and let me know when you are coming?"

By the 1950s, the ostentatious air was replaced by a more egalitarian atmosphere. Dick Malkin, who worked as the Bell Captain from '50 to '54 recalls, "There were no soda or ice machines in the halls and so the bell boys were very busy bringing ice and soda to the rooms. We made a great deal of money delivering this. On many an evening when I would deliver ice to a room, I was invited to stay for a gin and tonic. On a slow evening I would accept the invitation."

Lois Lyle, who was then a University of Connecticut student says, "Once a week the chef, kitchen workers, waitresses and busboys loaded up vehicles with picnic food and drink and drove it all, along with the guests, to the base of Mount Sunapee where the food was cooked over grills. It was a great outing and very enjoyable for the guests."

I can remember my grandmother taking me into the kitchen where one of the chefs, Jim Bender, would give me warm cookies. I called him Uncle Jim. Once my mom, Evelyn Wirta, dressed me up in a red suit and took me to the "Christmas in July" party that was hosted by the staff for the guests. When I heard Santa's German accent and recognized his shoes, I said, "That's not Santa Claus, that's Uncle Jim." The guests and staff all laughed.

Jane Long, who waitressed during the summers of '52 and '53 while she was attending Miami University of Ohio, remembers, "The bellhops, waitresses and some of the younger guests would go down to the beach at night, build a fire and party." But the Lodge did have limits. Jane said, "I was dating one of the bellhops, and this couple invited us to their room to play bridge one night. It was fun to dress up and enter the hotel as guests, but management was not happy; we only did that once."



*Marianne Quinn, Dick Malkin, Jackie Kemp*

Dick Malkin says, "There were dances twice a week with an orchestra, bingo, or special entertainment every night." Running the Lodge were waitresses, chefs, cooks, kitchen help, barmen, housekeepers, bellmen, maintenance workers, and front desk staff. Greg Harris was the busy Assistant Manager during the summers of '62 to '64. He was in charge of the seventy-five person payroll. Greg recalled, "Payroll had to be paid in cash. It meant I had to figure out how many pennies, nickels, dimes, one-dollar bills and five-dollar bills I needed. I'd stuff the pay envelopes. When you finished you better not be short or over or you'd have to go back and do it all again."

My Grandpa, Elmer, was hired in 1956. With only two others, Elmer was responsible for keeping the grounds looking beautiful and fixing all that was broken during the day, while at night receiving the occasional call to quell staff rowdiness. He worked year round. My dad, Allen Wirta, worked for him during the winter in the unheated Lodge. My Dad recalled, "I don't know how many square feet of hardwood flooring there was but it was Elmer's job to sand them down and to coat them with shellac. My main job was keeping the snow shoveled off the roofs. It would take all day to get done, and when I went to bed and it snowed, I would have to do it all again."

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*Formal Dining Room of the lodge. The lodge could accomodate over 200 guests in it's heyday.*

I meandered through the miles of rooms, corridors and porches with my family while they worked at the Lodge. Today it seems incomprehensible to me that grandpa could have maintained that ramshackle wooden structure, the grounds and the beach with any less than an army of contractors.

There were many beautiful hotels around Lake Sunapee, but none of them had a white sand beach that compared to the one at Soo-Nipi Lodge. You could walk in the shallow water or swim out to the raft anchored to the sandy lake bottom far from shore. Steve McGrath, who worked as a beach boy in 1959 said, "The beach was a key selling point for the hotel. We raked the entire beach, picked up cigarette butts and swept shuffle board courts off every morning. When the guests would come down you took out their chairs and mats from the wooden beach house. A guest would raise their hand. You'd run over and see what they needed. So they wanted three Cokes. The Cokes were 15 cents and you hoped they would give you a dollar and say keep the change."

When Steve was a few years older he joined Frank Morse's water ski school. In the 1960s, the Lodge hired them to entertain guests with water

ski shows at the beach during mid-week. They towed their ski-jump all the way across the lake for the show.

Both guests and staff alike loved the beach, but the dining room was also a big attraction at Soo-Nipi Lodge. "The food was outstanding," says Dick Malkin. In addition to the wait-staff and busboys (one waiter would quote Shakespeare) there was a water boy, relish boy and even a boy passing out the fresh baked rolls to the tables, Steve McGrath says, "The guests were all dressed to the nines. It was pretty intimidating and formal dining back in those days."

Greg Harris says, "Sunday was a buffet. There was a beautiful ice carving with a big lobster surrounded by chilled lobster meat. Once while I was kicking bathers off the beach who weren't supposed to be there, my friends broke into the refrigerator, and stole the lobster claws from the display. The head chef was not happy."

The unhappy head chef was Alfred "Fuzzo" Karpowitz. Walt Goddard, who now lives in Sunapee but at the time was from Massachusetts recalls, "Fuzzo was a big guy with a big white hat and a big gut. He could slap a waitress on the backside and get away with it. Fuzzo and the bakery chef would play cribbage and drink beer



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all the time. I grew up in a straight-laced family, but once you were in with the kitchen crew you learned there was more to life than chocolate milk. Once three of us challenged Fuzzo to a drinking contest. We ended up owing him a week's salary worth of beer."

Jane Long says, "Fuzzo caught three of us sitting on a pile of dirty laundry in the closet, eating desserts. Thank goodness they didn't care if the dining room made money because they made up the difference on the bar tabs." The kitchen crew worked hard, most of them seven days a week. In the work-frenzy of summer, partying, gambling, and a little food pilfering was overlooked, but there was one rule that wasn't: never interrupt the chef's sleep.

Work in the kitchen began early. Walt Goddard painfully recalls, "My second summer eight of us lowly kitchen crew had our own cabin close to the water tower. After an evening shift we had a party that was loud enough to wake Fuzzo and the bakery chef. This was really serious. The kangaroo court took ten minutes. Fuzzo picked us up one at a time physically and threw us out. We pleaded for our jobs, but on the short list of things Fuzzo wouldn't tolerate was being woken-up in the middle of the night."

By 1960, like all the great hotels on Lake Sunapee, the end was near for Soo-Nipi Lodge. Steve McGrath says that by then, "The golf course was overgrown, the tennis courts weren't doing well either. The hotel was living on its laurels." Greg Harris adds, "There was no question in my mind the hotel was losing money. The owners just enjoyed going up there. They just kept it as a hobby."

Priscilla Murphy was a desk clerk in 1965, Soo-Nipi Lodge's last season. Her family lived

outside of Boston. Priscilla says, "It was a difficult year...When we started, the staff numbered about 70; by Labor Day there were only 20 of us doing all the work, although the clientele had dwindled considerably by then as well." Soo-Nipi Lodge closed for the season on that Labor Day weekend and never reopened. The furniture, fixtures and equipment were auctioned off and the buildings were razed in 1968.

Though the hotel was gone our family remained tied to the Soo-Nipi property for years afterward. My grandparents lived in their cottage on the grounds until Grandpa passed away in 1988. He was the caretaker of the property right up until he died. My family use to walk through the woods that had reclaimed the grounds, reminiscing about the wonderful old hotel.

A half century after she worked there Jane Long recalls, "Soo-Nipi was a great place to work. I was able to pay for half a year of college after each summer. This would be impossible in the present day."

Throughout all the youthful shenanigans, there was a love of the Lodge and a heartfelt commitment to hospitality from every

employee I interviewed for this story. Today, I'm a hotel owner in the Pacific Northwest who strives to create the same magical experiences for my guests and employees as were at Soo-Nipi Lodge.

Dick Malkin concurs. "It was one of the best experiences in the early years of my life. I can still vividly recall events and guests' names. I was able to help pay for my tuition at Colgate and Harvard and buy my first car while I was at the hotel...To me Soo-Nipi Lodge was a good group of employees and wonderful guests. It was like one big family affair."

