

SUMMER 2011



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SOONIPi MAGAZINE

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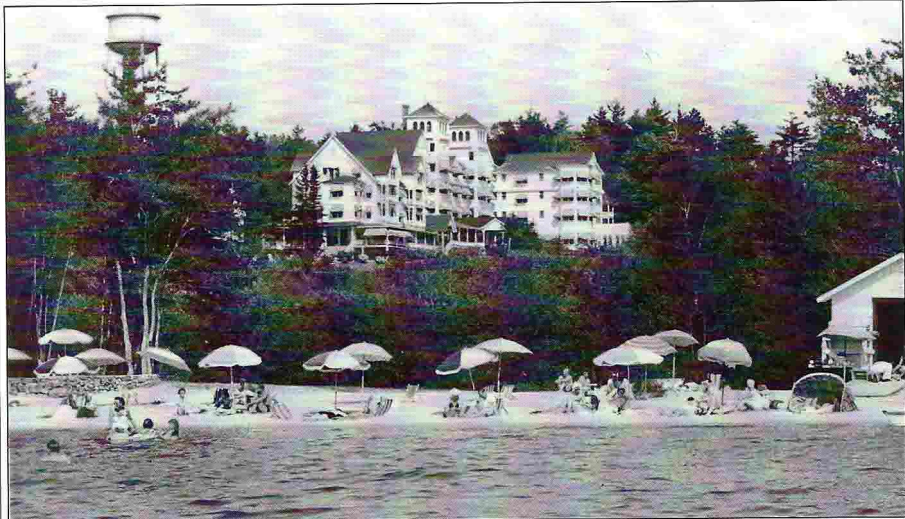
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View of SooNipi Lodge overlooking Lake Sunapee, the lovely beach attracted guests until the late 1960s.

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-

SooNipi Lodge

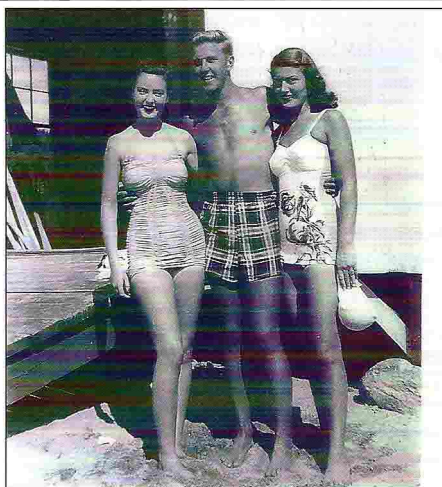
doned the Lodge, maintaining their reclusiveness by building private estates around the lake. Now Soo-Nipi Lodge, its name now shortened, turned to the middle class. Instead of exclusivity, Lodge advertisements pleaded, "We wait every day for the postman - We are listening for that telephone call. Won't 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."

