Post-War Commercial Architecture in Rapid City
Neighborhood Business Plazas and the Motel Industry, 1945-1972

Executive Summary
As Rapid City grew after World War II, new suburbs began to sprawl in every direction. Merchants and service providers followed residents to these new communities. Before the rise of the regional shopping mall, new businesses developed along the main arteries that brought families in and out of the neighborhoods: East North and LaCrosse streets in the north; St. Patrick and Rushmore Road in the south; Omaha and Campbell to the east; and Jackson, Canyon Lake Drive, and West Main to the west.

Long before a retail revolution brought the rise of big box stores in the 1980s, these neighborhood commercial establishments were relatively small. Locally-owned grocery stores mixed with chain-store markets like Red Owl, Family Thrift, and Piggly-Wiggly. Commercial developers built multi-unit shopping centers to accommodate local hair salons, dry cleaners, insurance brokers, real estate agents, and more. Among the most recognizable of these centers today are the Baken Park Shopping Center (built in 1956) and Robbinsdale Plaza (built in 1953). In an era when most people still prepared and ate meals at home, early fast-food drive-ins provided a local eatery for neighborhood residents or the opportunity to grab a quick meal on the go.

Motels proliferated along all of these new neighborhood commercial arteries. They catered to visitors enjoying the postwar boom in automobile tourism. Service stations pumped their gas and repaired flat tires and flooded engines. The new motels were generally one or two-story constructions, built in an L- or U-shape with a courtyard as the focal point of the property. Porticos stretched out over the space in front of the office to shelter new arrivals from the rain or the sun. These were the days before the arrival of national motel chains, and most of these establishments were owned by local entrepreneurs.

With the completion of the Interstate and the development of the Rapid City Regional Mall, retail shopping and newer motels filled the outskirts of town. Postwar neighborhood commercial districts began to deteriorate in the later part of the twentieth century. Some of the older motels provided long-term rentals to transient workers in the construction trades or low-income families who could not afford first and last month deposits on an apartment. As cash flows decreased and maintenance costs rose, many of the structures suffered from neglect. Some were razed, but a few have been renovated and rejuvenated.

The Rapid City Historic Preservation Commission faces many opportunities to educate property owners about potential adaptive reuse of historic commercial plazas and motels. As the attached documentation shows, several major shopping centers and nearly 100 roadside motels operated in Rapid City during the postwar era. In a period defined by chain restaurants, hotels, and plazas, documenting and utilizing these places can restore a local flavor to the commercial landscape of Rapid City.

Historical Research & Narrative
Commercial development in Rapid City waned in the seventeen years between 1929 and 1946. The combined effects of the Great Depression and World War II, when most building materials were diverted to support the war effort, took their toll on construction and investment. The establishment
and development of Ellsworth Air Force Base however, had fueled a significant growth in population between 1940 and 1945, as the number of city residents rose from 13,844 to 17,117.\footnote{Michelle L. Dennis, “Post-World War II Architecture in South Dakota,” Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society / South Dakota State Historic Preservation Office, 2007, 30.}

With the end of the war, civic leaders in Rapid City predicted a building boom. Barely six months after the Japanese surrender, the Rapid City Journal surveyed business owners and suggested that commercial construction in 1946 might reach $4 million ($52.4 million in 2019 dollars).\footnote{E.H. Lighter, “City Building Program Three and a Half Million for 1946,” Rapid City Journal, March 15, 1946, 5. Current dollar values calculated based on Minneapolis Federal Reserve calculator: https://www.minneapolisfed.org/} But actual investment fell far short of these aspirations. Shortages of building materials and continued government price controls postponed the construction boom. In 1946 commercial construction barely exceeded $1 million.

Initially, commercial construction in the immediate postwar years focused on downtown Rapid City. Auto dealers expanded their showrooms and service centers, building supply and auto parts entrepreneurs erected new retail and warehouse facilities, and national and regional chain stores ranging from Sears Roebuck, to Gambles, to Mills Drugs built or upgraded their stores. Black Hills Power & Light opened a new headquarters on Sixth Street.

As neighborhoods expanded at the edge of town over the next quarter century, commercial development followed families to the new suburbs outside the city center. Proprietors faced several incentives to move. Some saw that new construction would be cheaper on inexpensive land outside the downtown area. Others were concerned about a new city ordinance that required costly fireproofing standards.\footnote{E.H. Lighter, “City Building Program Three and a Half Million for 1946,” Rapid City Journal, March 15, 1946, 5.} Most retailers and service providers, however, simply wanted to be close to customers in the new neighborhoods.

### Tourist Cabins, Tourist Courts, and Motels

Between World War II and the 1972 flood, tourist cabins, tourist courts, and motels represented the most distinctive commercial structures in Rapid City. They were a visible and vital element of the city’s leading industry—tourism. The advent of the automobile, especially relatively inexpensive models like Ford’s Model T, combined with the construction of highways allowed middle class families to travel on vacation in unprecedented numbers starting in the late 1920s. With the creation of Mount Rushmore, the Black Hills became a major destination for these travelers as well as a stopping point on the way to Yellowstone National Park. Catering to the needs of these travelers, new businesses including auto camps, motor courts, motels, roadside diners, and tourist attractions proliferated in the years before war.\footnote{Sam Hurst, Rattlesnake Under His Hat: The Life and Times of Earl Brockelsby (Rapid City: Vantage Point Press, 2016)}

After the war, existing business owners and would-be entrepreneurs were optimistic that greater prosperity throughout the region and the country would reinvigorate tourism. In the late 1940s, the construction of tourist cabins was in full swing. Some were multi-unit operations with shared amenities like Gill’s Motor Court and Cory Gardens on West St. Joe or the Jackson Park tourist cabins and riding facilities near Canyon Lake.\footnote{E.H. Lighter, “City Building Program Three and a Half Million for 1946,” Rapid City Journal, March 15, 1946, 5.} Others were built one at a time by property owners to provide supplemental income during the summer. Because much of the area between downtown and Canyon Lake had previously been a sparsely populated, unannexed area filled with vacation cabins, the streets and neighborhoods there were not set on a neat grid like downtown.

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4. Sam Hurst, Rattlesnake Under His Hat: The Life and Times of Earl Brockelsby (Rapid City: Vantage Point Press, 2016)
Instead, the area took on an idiosyncratic feel as entrepreneurs and homeowners acquired available land to accommodate their personal or business plans.

As family incomes rose in the 1950s and tourism boomed, motels were built along the main arteries in and out of town, including East North, Eighth Street, West Main, and Jackson Boulevard. Many of these new businesses were operated by veterans who, like Gerald Gill, who were eager to try their hands as entrepreneurs and had access to low-interest business loans through the GI Bill.

By 1955, when lodging institutions joined in the first nationwide Motel Week, there were 95 licensed motels and motor courts in Rapid City, representing one-seventh of all of the motels in the state. With 1,959 rooms, they offered shelter to an estimated 5,500 tourists and their families on any given night. Over the course of a year, according to the Rapid City Journal, they accommodated 2.3 million visitors.\(^6\)

In an era before the consolidation of the lodging industry into nationwide chains, motels were small and locally owned. In 1955, the average Rapid City motor court had 12 to 15 units. The largest was the Baken Park Motel. First opened in 1920 by William Baken, the business had 86 units in 1955 and was known for its huge [cottonwood] trees. That year, however, plans were in the making to transform Baken Park into a 60,000 square foot shopping center to serve the growing population on the west side of town.\(^7\)

Motels were an important part of Rapid City’s economy. Rates were based on the number of people in a party. For a family of four, they ranged from $8 to $15 a night ($76.33 to $143.12 in 2019 dollars), and business was booming. In 1954, for example, local entrepreneurs added 200 new rooms. With construction costs running from $4,000 up to $8,000 a unit, the industry accounted for between $800,000 and $1.6 million ($76.3 million to $152.7 million to in 2019 dollars) of total commercial construction.

Most motels were owner-operated and provided employment and a livelihood to not only the husband and wife who ran the establishment, but also to service staff and maintenance workers. In 1955, the industry employed approximately 300 people on an annual basis; during the summer months, employment doubled.\(^8\) That year, annual payrolls were estimated to be $1.25 million ($119.3 million in 2019 dollars). Owner-operated establishments could return 15 to 20 percent in profits to the proprietors.\(^9\)

Many motels contracted out for laundry services like Rapid City Laundry and Dry Cleaners. They purchased supplies, including soap, toilet paper, and linens from local dealers and wholesalers. To advertise their businesses, they ordered post cards, match books, and neon signs, most of which were supplied locally. As the Rapid City Journal noted, most hotels carried insurance policies for public liability, fire, and workers’ compensation, most of which were provided by local insurance agencies.\(^10\)

### Motel Construction and Design

As entrepreneurs responded to the increase in tourism after the war in the tradition of the pre-war years, they built rustic, stand-alone or attached tourist cabins or “cottage courts” that were inexpensive to build. Many Rapid City establishments catered to the romantic view of the West that


many travelers expected and desired. Prior to the war and in the immediate postwar years, exteriors featured logs, rough-wood siding, or stucco “adobe-like” finishes. Interior walls were covered with knotty pine. Many, like Price’s Motel on East North, were associated with service stations.

As the lodging industry grew in the immediate postwar years, many owners shifted from individual cabins to building one long structure to save as much as 50 percent on the costs of construction.11 Owners focused on the economy traveler offered few amenities in either the design of the motel or the facilities.

The revolution in building materials after the war, however, soon led to improvements and changes to the look and feel of lodging establishments. Tourist cabins and tourist courts gave way to modern motels in the 1950s that featured stainless steel, aluminum, and larger windows (especially in the main office), as well as two-story construction with amenities like swimming pools, television sets, air-conditioning, full-service restaurants and bars.12 With these changes, Architectural Forum proclaimed in 1953 that the industry was showing “signs of maturity.”13

The Interstate and the National Chain

The development of the Interstate Highway system in the late 1950s and the rise of national hotel and motel chains posed an existential threat to the small owner-operated local motel. For years, travelers had relied on travel guide books, like those published by Duncan Hines and the American Automobile Association in the late 1940s, to increase their confidence that a motel room would be clean and safe. With the advent of national brands in the industry, early pioneers like Howard Johnsons and Holiday Inn used print and broadcast advertising to communicate service standards that gave them a competitive advantage in local markets.14 National chains became so ubiquitous by the late 1970s, that local owner-operated motels either went out of business or affiliated with the chains and increasingly lost their sense of local character and identity in the process.

Preservation

In Rapid City today fewer than a dozen remaining structures reflect the postwar boom in owner-operated tourist courts and motels in Rapid City. East North Street, which used to be the primary highway into town for generations, is still home to the Corral and the Ranch House Motels. On East Omaha, the Evergreen Motel is now the East Omaha Lodge. On Jackson Boulevard, the Garden Cottages is probably one of the most intact examples from the postwar era. Over the last several decades, these businesses have shifted away from tourism and more frequently offer short and long-term inexpensive lodging to blue collar workers and low-income families.

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Opportunities for Further Research
Because the development of new suburbs and automobile tourism played such a key role in the local economy after World War II, this essay focused on history of commercial business plazas, tourist cabins, tourist courts, and motels in Rapid City. To continue developing the history of Rapid City’s economy, the RCHCP could support further research into the following industries:

- Railroad and highway transport
- Industrial manufacturing
- Banking and financial services

Database of Historic Motels
The RCHPC could sponsor the creation of an online database of historic motels, their years of existence, and their various owners. Researchers could hope to track down families of some of these entrepreneurs to capture oral histories and locate family archives to fill out this important element in Rapid City’s history.

Neon Signs – Rosenbaum Signs
The Rosenbaum Sign company played a key role in creating neon signs for many of the city’s motels, as well as other establishments. Research on the history of the company and in its archives might yield more information on the look and feel of the industry and the city in the postwar years.
General Bibliography/References


Sam Hurst, *Rattlesnake Under His Hat: The Life and Times of Earl Brockelsby* (Rapid City: Vantage Point Press, 2016)
Preliminary Documentation

Motels

Corral Motel (1940) – 210 East North Street.\textsuperscript{15}

Ranch House Motel (1946) – 202 East North Street.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Construction date: Rapid City Planning Department, Commercial Properties database. Image: VPHS.

\textsuperscript{16} Construction date: Rapid City Planning Department, Commercial Properties database. Image: VPHS.
Historical Photos / Maps

Entrance to Rapid City along East North Street in 1931. Tourist cabins at Cozy Camp on the right. (Rapid City Journal, May 1, 1955)
Horseshoe Motel
308 E. North Street. In 1945, John and Almeda Moses quit farming after 29 years and moved to Rapid City to operate the Horseshoe Motel. This location is now Auto World Auto Sales. [No remaining structures from the motel.]

Evergreen Motel
525 East Omaha Street (Highway 40). (c. 1953). In 1955, the business was operated by Victor and Gladys Pengra. Today, this is the East Omaha Lodge.

Star Motel
Jensen’s Pine View Court (later Jensen’s Motel)
1916 Mt. Rushmore Road.
Price’s Motel and Standard Service.
Established in 1938.

Open House for National Motel Week, May 1955. (Rapid City Journal, May 6, 1955, 10.)
De Vines Court

Cozy Court Motel
Corral Motel

Historic postcard (eBay) (1957)

Historic postcard (eBay)
Garden Cottages Motel

Historic postcard, Garden Cottages Motel (1968)

Google Maps (2021)
Rushmore Motel,
207 St. Joe. (c. 1941). Operated by Mr. and Mrs. Earl Updike in 1941.¹⁹

South Town Motel
2018 Mt. Rushmore Road

Motel ownership continued to be attractive to servicemen in the 1950s. When he got out of the Army in 1955, Eddie Mayo purchased the Southtown Motel from Charlie and Marge Schmitt. Site is now the Pioneer Bank and Trust.


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Freeman's Western Motel
103 East North Street, current location of Parkway Laundry.
Imperial 400 Motel
**Traveler’s Motel**
407 East North Street. (c. 1952)
Now the location of Liberty Pawn. Jack Harold was the manager in 1969. Later Clara and Ray Sigler were managers. In 1977, the motel and its cabins were auctioned off to be removed from the property. (RCJ 2.17.1977, 10)

Google Maps, 2021
Lazy “U” Motor Lodge
2215 Mt. Rushmore Road. Opened in 1957.
United Motor Courts – Dow’s Park
810 Mountain View Drive. (Prior to 1955). In 1955, owned and operated by George and Evelyn Allen. 24 units in 1955.²¹

Horseshoe Motel
308 East North Street. (Prior to 1951)

Google Maps, 2021
Swiss Chalets
Rapid Canyon. (Prior to 1951). Owned and operated by Mr. and Mrs. G.A. Harms.22

Alps Court
Black Hills Cabins and Cafe
Lil’ Audrey Motel
4007 Canyon Lake Drive. (Prior to 1951). Owned and operated by “Maurice, Audrey and Roger.”


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Stables Motel
518 East Omaha Street. (Prior to 1955.)

Bunkhouse Motel
(Prior to 1955.) Half mile south of Baken Park. Offered saddle horses for hire and a western motif.25

**Motel Reynick**

801 East North Street. (Prior to 1955.) Owned and operated by Dick and Georgia Reynick. 14 units in 1955.\(^\text{26}\)

Motel Gill / Gill's Sun Inn
1901 St. Joseph Street. Owned and operated by Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Gill in 1955.

Google Maps, 2021
Cozy Court
402 East North Street. (Before 1951)

Google Maps, 2021
Model Motel
508 North Maple. Circa 1951 or earlier. Also known as Jergie’s Model Motel. In 1955, it was owned and operated by Mr. and Mrs. Otto J. Zeeck. In 1958, the Model Motel was acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Wilder.


Motel Rapid
3515 Sturgis Road (1953)

Oscar Goehring, a reservist at the Rapid City Air Force Base, built this motel to operate after he was discharged from the service in 1953. The motel added 11 units in 1955, as well as a lawn and playground. In 1957, the Motel Rapid was purchased by H.W. Sharkey and Dale Mann, who owned the Lazy U Motel on Mount Rushmore and the Marco Motel, which they sold that year to Charles Gurney.

Google Maps (2021)

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31 “Charles Gurney Buys Motel Here,” Rapid City Journal, December 1, 1959, 3.
Strip Commercial

Mills Drug Stores in three locations in Rapid City: Southside, Downtown, and Westside.

Robbinsdale Businesses

Robbinsdale Hardware in the Robbinsdale Plaza Shopping Center, 309 St. Patrick. (Display advertisement, Rapid City Journal, May 6, 1955, 18)
Robbinsdale Plaza included a barber shop (405 Robbins Drive) that was in continuous operation for more than half a century from the mid-1950s to the early 2000s. For many years it was operated by Harley Leslie who retired in 2007 after 52 years of cutting hair. (Dan Daly, “Harley’s to become Earl’s Barbershop,” Rapid City Journal, November 29, 2007, 13) The Plaza also includes 2nd Time Around Consignment Shop, which opened in 1976, operated by Roberta Hamlet. (“Good Things Move Quickly the 2nd Time Around,” Rapid City Journal, January 2, 2009, 32)
Potential Projects

National Register Eligibility

Already on national register:

Eligible
- Ranch House Motel (1946) – 202 East North Street.\(^{32}\)
- Corral Motel (1940) – 210 East North Street.\(^{33}\)
- Price Motel (1948) - 401 East North Street.\(^{34}\)
- East Omaha Lodge – 525 East Omaha Street (formerly Evergreen Motel)
- Lazy “U” Motel (1957) – Mount Rushmore Road
- Rapid Motel – Sturgis Road

Soon-to-Be Eligible

Resources

Elevate Rapid City (Chamber of Commerce collection)
Journey Museum and Learning Center
Rapid City Public Library

\(^{32}\) Construction date: Rapid City Planning Department, Commercial Properties database. Image: VPHS.
\(^{33}\) Construction date: Rapid City Planning Department, Commercial Properties database. Image: VPHS.
\(^{34}\) Construction date: Rapid City Planning Department, Commercial Properties database. Historic postcard: [www.cardcow.com](http://www.cardcow.com), Contemporary image: Google Maps.