

The Development

“Motels”! Today they’re one of those things that we ask ourselves how are predecessors ever got along without them. Historically, though, civilized people have always traveled, although, to be sure, not in the vast numbers that we see in modern times, and not over the vast distances that we think nothing of traversing today. And, travelers have always faced the basic problem of where to rest during those travels. So, although I could easily start the story of the Motel with the beginnings of the car, I think we can take it back much further than that...back at least as far as the Middle Ages, if not the Ancient world and the beginnings of civilization, itself.

In the Middle Ages (476-1453), the custom of “hospitality” was already entrenched in Western Civilization. If the traveler could make it to a town or city, he could avail himself of the services of an inn, but in between those often sparsely located oases of civilization, something else was needed. Thus, travelers, dirty, weary, and hungry by the end of the day’s journeying, could expect to stop at any hut, homestead, castle, monastery, etc. along their route and be made welcome with a night’s food and lodging. The custom was a logical adjustment to the needs of the time. Indeed, we can read of the custom at least as early as Homer’s *Odyssey*, which is dated at about 750 BC, as I remember.

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution (generally accepted as beginning with the invention of the steam engine by James Watt, in England, in the last 1700’s), modern technology began forever changing man’s daily existence. And, as part of that ever ongoing swath of technological innovation, as automobiles began replacing the horse for transportation in the early 1900’s (due mainly to Henry Ford’s concept of mass production), the traveler now required a resting place for both himself *and* his automobile!



Of The Motel

It's at *that* point that we can then begin to trace the motel's origins to the auto camps of the early 1900s, where simple roadside areas where 'tin can tourists' (named as much for their refuse as their cars) could pitch tents. From there, the auto camps developed into such later forms as the motor court.

Because the first auto camps attracted a large number of unemployed transients—who, like the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, often lingered for weeks or months—municipal camp operators in the 1920s began to impose entrance fees, charge for firewood, and enforce strict limitations on length of stay (measures which attracted the attention of commercial entrepreneurs). Among the cabin camps competing for tourist dollars in the early 1930s, the Red Hat Tourist Camp in Baxley, Georgia, featured a menagerie with a soda-drinking black bear, a monkey, an alligator, and a flock of peacocks. Eventually, the first “Mo-Tel” (Motor-Hotel) appeared in San Luis Obispo, California—The “Motel Inn”, opening in 1925 as the Milestone Motel. As the story goes, it was a couple of sign painters who couldn't fit MOTOR HOTEL on the sign, so they improvised!

As they developed as commercial enterprises, motels also molded Americans' ideas about residence and home. Travelers' rejection of hotels, located in congested downtown areas and lacking adequate parking, prompted the rapid rise of roadside lodging outside city limits: cabin courts, cottage courts, motor courts, motor inns, and eventually highway hotels. By whatever name, motels rapidly increased in number through the 1930s, and then again in the two decades after World War II, reaching their peak in the early 1960s, when about 61,000 motels operated in the United States. In 1962, fewer than 2 percent of all motels were affiliated with franchise lodging chains. By 1987, 64 percent of the country's motels were now part of these larger networks—Best Western, Holiday Inn, etc.

