

Remembering Kennebunk Beach in the 1950s

by Valerie Marier

Just 65 years ago, lobster salad rolls sold for 55 cents at Dot's Lunch at "Sea Road and the Four Corners," site of Bennett's Store today. Middle Beach, which most locals label Rocky Beach because of its carpeting of stone and gravel, was almost entirely sand.

Ten hotels, some with accommodations for 150 or more guests, surrounded the Kennebunk beaches, from Mother's to Gooch's. Their grandiose dining rooms served breakfast, lunch and dinner daily, culminating in Sunday night

lobster buffets accompanied by crystal finger bowls adorned with lemon slices.

In the Dipsy Baths Bathing Pavilion next to Mother's Beach, visitors rented towels and chairs and changed out of their clothes before plunging into the ocean or cove by the crescent beach on the south side of Lord's Point. After swimming, teenagers gathered in the Dipsy Bath lounge, sipping Coca-Colas while listening and dancing to the juke box.

Kennebunk Beach has attracted visitors from Boston, New York, Philadel-

phia, Montreal, Quebec and beyond since the mid-1800s. Accelerating the growth in tourism was the Boston & Maine Railroad system which, in the 1870s, opened a branch line into Kennebunk village and then another, in 1882, from the village to the beaches.

Wooden boarding houses and grand hotels rose along the water's edge to accommodate this influx of visitors, many of whom arrived with steamer trunks and stayed for several weeks, if not the entire season, July 1 through Labor Day. During the

Kennebunk area's heyday in the early 1900s, there were more than 40 hotels and inns in Kennebunk Beach and Kennebunkport.

By the 1950s, however, a new type of tourism was evolving. In this post-World War II era, workers often only had two weeks vacation. The family automobile replaced train travel, allowing visitors to "day trip" up the recently-opened Maine Turnpike.

They stayed at newly-built "motor courts," which

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On Middle Beach, the former Sundial Inn (large yellow building) is now known as the Beach House. Note that there is no seawall in this mid-'50s photo, and the beach was a wide swath of sand, rather than rocks as it is today.



Youngsters pose for a photo at Kennebunk Beach in 1956.

featured private baths, a luxury the old hotels lacked. Many of the original wooden hotels had closed, some having burned to the ground decades before, others succumbing to a dwindling business as the tastes and preferences of travelers changed.

But in the 1950s, the ten remaining hotels revealed a vacation style that was leisurely, elegant and yet also, like the decade, wonderfully simple.

Harriett Gott, who currently owns Bufflehead Cove Bed and Breakfast in Kennebunk, learned the hospitality business as a child. During the '50s, her mother was proprietor of the Webhannet Inn (formerly the Eagle Rock Hotel) on Sea Road, a three-and-a-half story building topped with a cupola and fronted with a porte cochere.

"My memory is that all the good hotels had fancy dining rooms and lobbies, but the bedrooms were simple, with no queen or king-size beds, just doubles or singles, and very few of the rooms had a private bath," Gott says.

At age 14 Gott became a "pantry girl," standing in the hotel's tiny butler's pantry at breakfast and handing juices and fruit to the more experienced waitresses. The following year she donned a blue uniform topped with a white apron and joined the staff serving three meals a day. "We always had a professional chef who came for the summer from Boston or New York," she says.

Gott lived with her fellow waitresses in a dormitory room on the top floor of the Webhannet Inn. She

says, "It was a big open room with no heat and we kept our belongings in little rickety dressers. Above our cots were ceiling beams where we painted the names of our boyfriends, our summer romances, each of us hoping we had the most names on the ceiling by the end of the summer."

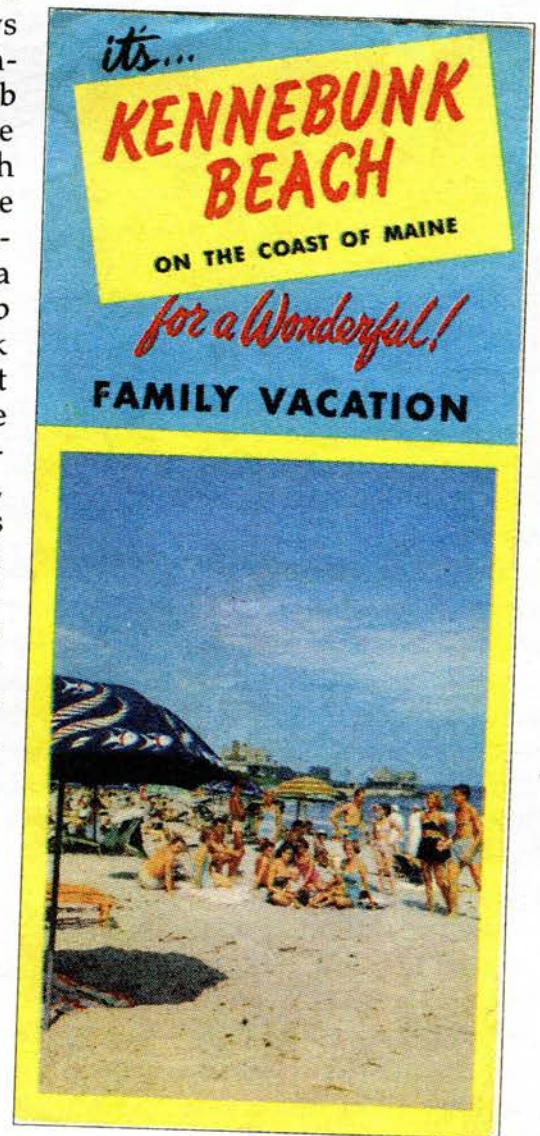
Across the fairways of Webhannet Golf Club from the Wentworth Hotel stood the majestic Atlantis Hotel, a key social hub at Kennebunk Beach. Built in 1902 in the Mexican mission style, this spacious hotel featured a low-pitched roof and wide eaves, an architectural departure from the more boxy beach hotels.

The Atlantis perched on a hill with commanding views of the Atlantic to the east and the adjacent golf course to the west. Webhannet's

putting green was considered almost an amenity and extension of the hotel.

Kennebunk Beach resident Ellen Fagan recalls, "I waitressed at the Atlantis seven days a week in the early '50s, serving three meals a day, all season long,

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A 1950s-era brochure promotes tourism at Kennebunk Beach.

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and was paid \$3 a week at the end of summer -- so long as I stayed until Labor Day."

Dressed in a white nylon uniform ("which was impossible to keep clean"), Fagan recalls that a "good week might get me \$7 in tips." Bingo games, canasta parties and square dancing were weekly activities. Children of guests had a "supervised nursery" at Mother's Beach. Fagan also remembers the stable on Railroad Avenue where "folks from the Atlantis could get saddled up and ride along the beaches."

In addition to the main dining room and patio buffet area, the plaid-carpeted Highlander Room was especially popular on Friday and Saturday evenings where a

dance band played Benny Goodman tunes.

The Atlantis Hotel brochure from that era boasts a Highlander menu featuring "Individual seafood pots sizzling on the open hearth, or broiled steak and lobster."

In this pub-like restaurant, "People wore their best attire -- the ladies in cocktail dresses, the men in coat and tie, all the time," says Kennebunk resident Bob Gunter. "The Highlander was the hangout for golfers during the annual member-guest tournament at Webhannet. We had an auction dinner where we'd bid on teams. We'd sit at tables outside on the patio and watch golfers come up the 18th fairway. It was truly our 19th Hole."

A brochure for the Bass Rocks Hotel on Middle Beach boasted, "You can

almost step from the porch into the sea." Lifetime Kennebunk resident Pat Walsh has fond and familial memories of the Bass Rocks Hotel because his grandfather bought the "new" Bass Rocks Hotel in 1912 (the original burned in 1906), and his parents ultimately assumed ownership.

Young Pat's daily jobs were to tote the multi-stripe canvas beach chairs down to the water's edge at 9 AM, deliver box lunches to the bathers at noon, and then bring the chairs back at sunset. "Sunday night was the biggest food night at the hotel," Walsh says. "People came from all over to enjoy the buffet of roast beef and potatoes."

The Bass Rocks featured second and third floor dormers overlooking the sea,



Guests at the Narragansett (now a condominium complex) enjoy a lobster dinner on the front lawn overlooking Kennebunk Beach. The Colony Hotel is on the horizon at far right.

plus a broad veranda on the first floor where some of its 85 guests sat and enjoyed views of the then sandy Middle Beach. Bingo and bridge games were held twice a week in the spacious lobby. "The tables were set

up for these games all the time," Walsh says.

Straddling a jutting peninsula called Oake's Neck, between Gooch's and Middle Beach, the Narragansett-by-the-Sea offered special amenities to its guests. They

enjoyed not only an ocean view from each of the nearly 100 rooms, but also elevator service and in-room telephones, quite a novelty in the 1950s.

Tennis and shuffleboard courts, movies and concerts by visiting artists, plus a formal dining room with a jazz trio or piano player added to the creature comforts of this grand hotel. In good weather, "outdoor Maine shore dinners" were prepared on Oake's Neck and then served at tables set up on the Narragansett's lush lawns, complete with lobster and corn-on-the-cob steamed in seaweed. A buffet supper was standard Sunday night fare.

The Narragansett's Quarterdeck Cocktail Lounge promised "Cosmopolitan Comfort" for guests and visitors who beelined to this semi-circular room overlooking the beaches. Especially popular at sunset



The majestic Atlantis Hotel, across the fairways from Webhannet Golf Club, was a key social hub at Kennebunk Beach in the 1950s.

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with its spectacular Atlantic vistas, "The Quarterdeck Lounge was always hopping and it was also our 'last call' on a Saturday evening," Bob Gunter says.

Located next to the mouth of the Kennebunk River, the Seaside House has welcomed overnight guests since the 1660s. During the late 1950s, Louise Hurlbutt of Kennebunk recalls her days working as a chambermaid at the 33-room Seaside.

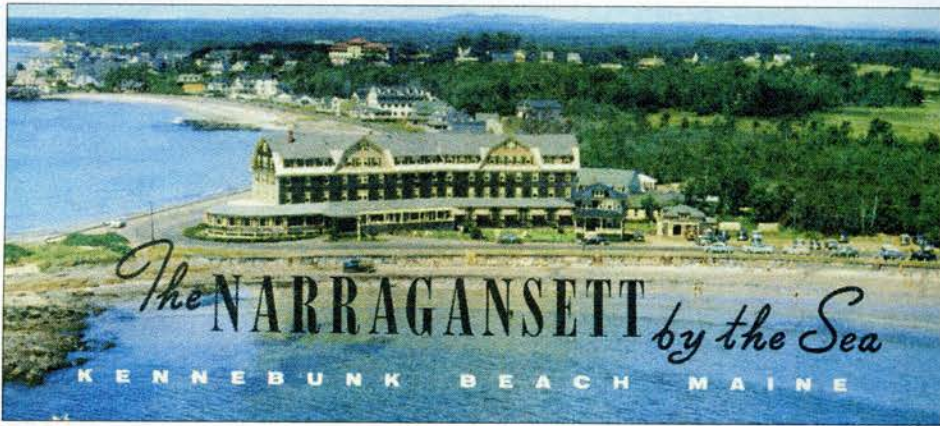
She says, "We'd put on our yellow uniforms with crisp white aprons and work every morning from 7 AM until noon. The owners were old-school and the rooms had to be meticulously clean. If we didn't get it done by noon, we'd keep working."

"Afterwards," Hurlbutt says, "we would put on our bathing suits, dash to the beach and gather in front of the lifeguard stand. No one had cars so we walked everywhere or rode our bikes. We saved our tip money, sometimes \$10 a week, to go to the Lyric movie theater in Kennebunkport."

Parties on the beach were part of the youth culture then as they are now, though the lack of streetlights offered some distinct advantages.

Says, Hurlbutt, "Some nights we went to Parsons Beach because it was so private, no one could see us, especially the police, and we could drink there! We also partied at night in the basement of the Atlantis. I owned a portable aqua radio with gold plastic knobs that I carried everywhere, and we'd dance to Fats Domino or the Platters."

As the 1950s faded, the skyline at Kennebunk Beach underwent major changes. This once almost entirely commercial beach yielded to



The Quarterdeck Lounge at The Narragansett by-the-Sea was a popular 'watering hole' for local residents as well as guests.

the reality of rising land values and the prohibitive costs of fire code regulations.

The 55-room Sea View House near Mother's Beach was razed in 1962 to make room for a summer cottage. The three-and-a-half-story Webhannet Inn was cut to one story in 1964 and sold to a private homeowner. Diagonally across Sea Road from the Webhannet, the 60-room Wentworth Hotel, originally the Wentworth family farmhouse, was razed in 1982 and High Seas Condominiums rose in its place.

The Bass Rocks closed in 1962 and the Atlantis came down in 1968. The Narragansett still advertises today that "every room has an ocean view," but the views are seen from condominium windows, a conversion that

took place in the late 1970s.

In 1963 Jon and Liz Milligan purchased the four-story Sagamore Hotel situated on Gooch's Beach. They renamed it the Sea & Surf Motor Inn, and later it became known as the Sea Spray. Milligan spruced up the hotel and added a watering hole in the lower level favored by locals called Ma Russell's Barn.

"It had a little dance floor and space for about 50 people," says Bob Gunter. "There was a piano that we'd sing around, plus a big open grill that made the place a virtual firetrap, but we loved going there." The Sea Spray was demolished in 1980.

The cozy Forest Hill House located one-third mile in from Kennebunk Beach on Beach Avenue

was built by the Boothby family in the mid-1880s. Eventually, it became the renowned White Barn Inn.

Today only two hotels remain as the last commercial establishments at Kennebunk Beach. The sprawling Seaside House complex was converted in the late 1960s to a 22-unit motel. Guests still enjoy the proximity perk of being a stone's throw from Gooch's Beach.

On Middle Beach, the former Sundial is now known as the Beach House. This yellow-clapboard hotel, designed by local architect William Barry in the late 1890s, no longer serves lunch on tables at the beach, as it did in the 1950s. But overnight visitors enjoy the exact same view and smell the same sea air that guests have enjoyed for more than a century.