

Singles Are Big Business in the Catskills

By Peter Osnos Washington Post Staff Writer

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Second in a series

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KIAMESHA LAKE, N.Y.—It is nearing a decade now since the savvy managers of the Concord, a big brash resort in the Catskill Mountains, devised a way to fill the hotel and a pressing public need at the same time: bring together the unattached.

Call it a Singles Weekend. Promise them a glamorous sun-filled holiday where anything goes. It couldn't miss.

Or putting it bluntly: "We recognized loneliness as a market," said Gordon Winarik, the hotel's executive director.

"Years back," he said relaxing one evening in his cluttered little office atop the Concord's steamy, sprawling kitchen, "you could say to people, 'Look, come up, you'll have a good dinner.'"

"Fine," they'd say, "I want a good dinner." But they didn't really want the dinner. They wanted to meet people. You know. Get acquainted. Contact. That's what it's all about."

As a business, the singles weekend has flourished, taking its place with the convention and the family vacation as a regular feature at resorts around the country. Weekends have become weeks and many hotels now make their pitch to singles all year round.

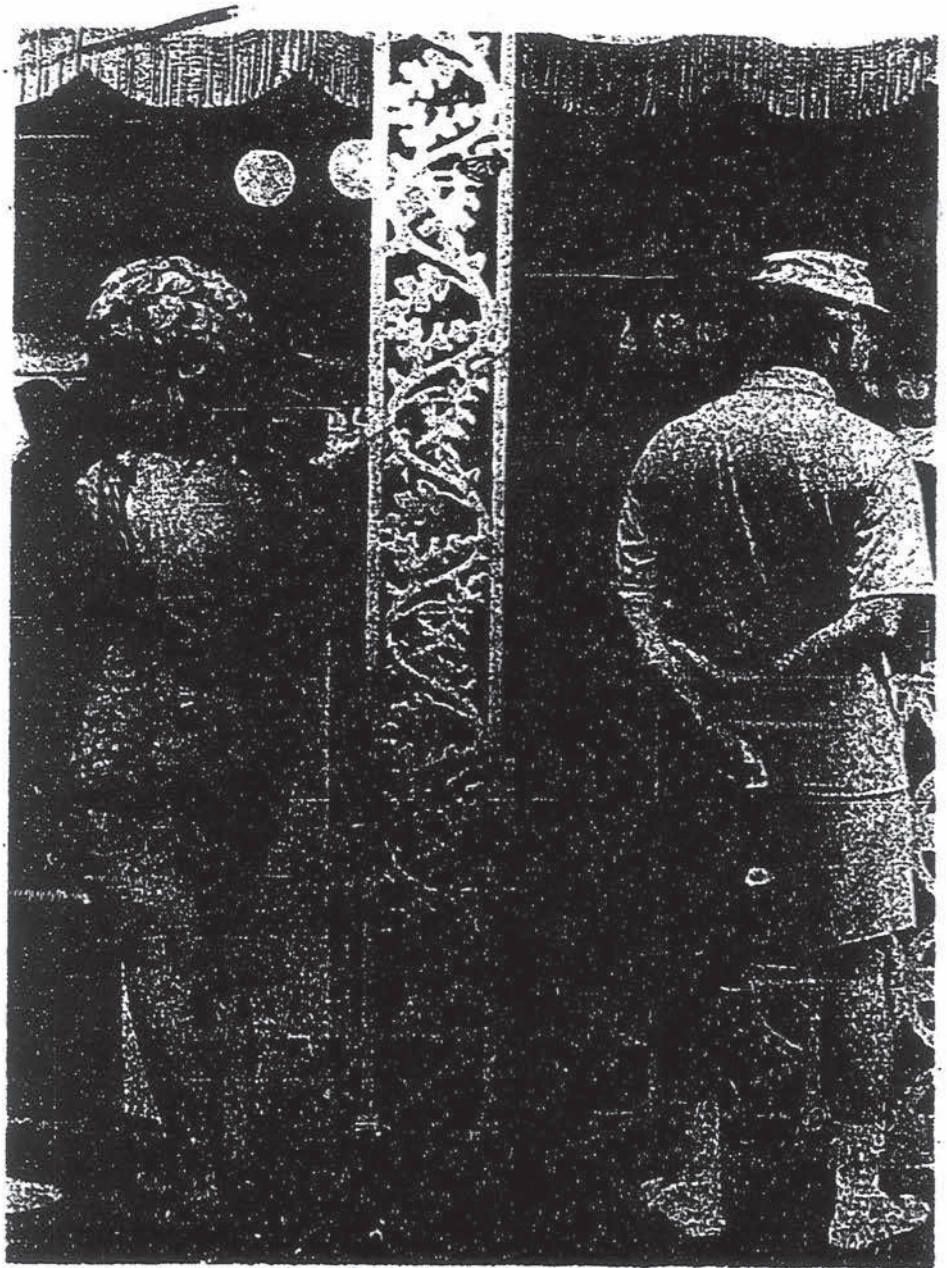
It is at the Concord, travel experts and experienced weekenders agree, that the singles event has reached its zenith, bigger and better organized than any other.

This is the Loneliness Industry at its most successful and lucrative.

Six to eight times a year the hotel is given over completely to singles, and the guests, ranging in age from 18 to 60, are packed three and four to a room. The price is about \$90 a person and there is almost never a vacancy.

What with almost 3,000 people on hand, the weekend becomes a spectacle of sorts, a mixture of commercialism, crudity, cruelty and compassion, a madcap pursuit of pleasure and one another. Depending on how you feel about these things, it can all be seen as a festive round of parties and games—

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By Linda Wheeler—The Washington Post

In bathing suits and Bermuda shorts, singles attend resort weekend.

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Hotel Cashes In on Singles Weekends

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During the day, the bodies are displayed on wooden slabs by the pool. There is an outdoor bar and band playing cha-chas and mambo. After each number the handleader shouts: "Is everybody happy?" The dancers, their near naked bodies shining in the heat, reply with a ringing, "Yes!"

At night, they jam the Night Owl Lounge. The wisecracks fly. Putdowns abound. This is not the place for dignity or the niceties of parlor exchange. The approach is direct. If you want it, ask for it. The pace is very fast. Time is short.

And then perhaps to the bedroom. With three and four people sharing, the arrangements can get complicated. "They do it in shifts," said one veteran, "or the first guy that gets there puts out the 'do not disturb' sign and everybody else has to wait his turn."

"Some girls," he added, "have no objections to doing it together."

In its own way it has all become as structured and predictable as the celebrated mating rituals of aboriginal tribes. Stu Bush, a curly haired, boyish and slender 33-year-old who is the hotel's director of activities, has been watching the process for six years and summed it up neatly one noon time, speaking above the din of the Concord's 24-hour coffee shop:

"Friday night the girls are traveling, they're tussy, they're looking for this, they're looking for that. They're looking for the knight in shining armor,



or as a depressing testament to human desperation. They're looking for Mr. Clean. They're looking for everything."

"Saturday night about midnight, one o'clock in the morning they say 'The hell with it, I'm not blowing ninety bucks and not scoring. You! Harry! Over here!'"

Mostly, the weekenders have sped up the thruway from New York City, two or three to a car. But they bus some in also, from places like Washington, Baltimore and Boston. "Out of towners," the New Yorkers call them with a touch of a sneer, "GU-geographically undesirable."

They are an urbanized affluent crowd; the men in sales, manufacturing or marketing; the women likely to be secretaries, teachers, medical assistants or housewives with alimony. The bulk of them are young, in their 20s and 30s. Men over 40 usually can make it. Women that age find it a great deal harder. Practically all are Jewish because that's the way it has always been in the Catskills.

In their manner and appearance, they tend to be more showy than chic. Everyone's hair is cut, combed, brushed and sprayed into the latest styles. Toupees outnumber beards. Makeup is taken seriously. There are men in white shoes, see through shirts and pinky rings and women in halters, baring their midriffs, regardless of how it looks.

From a distance, the veneer is glossy, the way "swinging singles" are supposed to look whether in Georgetown or on New York's upper East Side. The music is loud. The laughter is too. But when you get close enough, it begins to sound shrill. The market, as Winarik observed, is loneliness. The pressures can be intense.

* Dolores is 25 and works with the aged. She's lived in a New York apart-

ment building for three months and hasn't met a soul. "My parents look at me and they're crying inside because I'm not married," she said. Dolores had been to the Concord before, two years ago. "I figured I'd try it again," she said. "I guess I'd forgotten what a rat race it is."

* Ilene is 24. She's a teacher. "I just felt like I had to get away," she said. "my social life this summer has been lousy. I was very depressed." Her parents suggested the Concord. "Everybody's telling me that if I don't push myself I'm never going to find someone," she said.

* Ellen is 26 and divorced. She lives in a Long Island apartment with her 2½ year old son. "It's horrible to have to do this," she said, "a lot of the men I've spoken to have told me I'm not the type." One man in the bar asked her how long she'd been on her own.

"A year and a half," she replied. "That's too bad," he said, "because if it were longer, you'd really be desperate."

* Larry is 33, a garment executive, divorced. "Ninety per cent of the people who come here are unhappy," he said. "They come here looking to meet someone, but they put on an act like they're swingers and they're having a great time. Most of them are very unhappy."

* Neil is 25, a government worker from Baltimore. "I've never been to one of these before," he said. "I wanted to meet some people. I thought I was ready. The Concord seemed the best place to go."

At his dining room table the first evening Neil addressed the girls sitting opposite him "Hello," he said, tentatively, "are you having a good time?"

The girls glared back. "We're waiting to meet someone sophisticated," one finally said.

Over and over again, during meals, at the swimming pool, at the tennis courts, at the bars, nightclubs and dancers, the weekend and those attending it are disparaged. Having to be there is an embarrassment, an admission that somehow your life is lacking.

For all the good times they may appear to be having, the resentment is always there, along with the self-doubts, the guilt and cynicism.

Nowhere is the harshness more evident than in the gala hotel-sponsored Saturday afternoon bathing beauty contest. This is a regular event and those who have seen it more than once say that it gets no less offensive with repetition.

The contest was called for 4 p.m. and a large crowd had gathered. The respective beauty queens there were no special qualifications for entering; assembled around the platform each was given a number, there were 30 in all. A few were pretty. Many were plain.

The emcee was a local comedian named Eddie Schaffer. "As each girl came forward he made a crack."

To the first girl. "Oh, this is a tuchus (Yiddish for buttocks). . . come to me. . . jump on me." To another: "You haven't got much of a chest dar-



By Linda Wheeler—The Washington Post

Bar and dance floor near the singles pool are popular spots.

ing unless you throw your shoulders back."

To another. "I think we're going sharply downhill." And to another who was overweight: "If there's a place for you, it's your belly button."

Then came the plainest girl of all. When she appeared, Schaffer pretended to vomit and said: "This is too much folks. I don't know if I can go on." The crowd roared with laughter.

The winner was a demure 24-year-old teacher from Brooklyn. She was overcome with emotion, tears trickled down her cheeks and she was unable to speak. The ridiculed girl watched silently. A few hours later she was in the bar, still trying to be noticed. If anyone at the Concord can explain why the girl entered in the first place, it is Irving Cohen, for 25 years the hotel maitre'd and a gentle man who speaks with modest wisdom about the people he deals with.

"It's a little like having a healthy nursing home," he said. "What you have in a nursing home is sick people that you have to care for. It's the same with some of these people. They live the kind of life that when they come

up here they're looking that somebody should pay a little attention to them and talk to them."

Cohen worries about all his guests. That is his nature. But he worries especially about the older women, the widows mainly, and the ones that never married. In a lonely society, he said, these can be the loneliest of all.

"Picture this. She lives in an apartment alone. She has breakfast alone. She works in an office full of women. For lunch maybe it's a quick sandwich and then, if the other women aren't married, it's dinner together. Afterwards she goes to her apartment."

"Now here you get a man in his 40s and put him with a woman of 35 and he doesn't want to sit with her. He says she's too old. So you ask them to sit, maybe just for a meal of two. The women need some male companionship."

"To the women I say, 'We're going to put a couple of men at the table. Don't let them talk to you first. Don't sit there and stare at them and don't ask questions.' They can ask such em-

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By Linda Wheeler—The Washington Post

Boy meets girl by the pool at the Concord. The hotel holds singles weekends six or eight times a year.

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barrassing questions. 'Are you married?' they'll ask.

'There is a segment of women that are so forward that a man would get scared sitting with them. But then, you know, in their 40s they can't waste time with a married man. They have very little time left.'

At the other end of the spectrum are the youngest and prettiest girls. The men call them "Jewish-American princesses" because of how pampered and fussed over they've been by their families.

They have the right clothes, the right hairdoes, the right jewelry, all designed to get a man, and if it hasn't worked so far, then maybe the Concord will help.

The girls, knowing how they stack up to the competition, tend to adopt an expression of disdain that is inclined to discourage the very attention they have been sent there to get.

'They do want fellas to walk up to them, but they want the right fellas,' Stu Bush, the activities director explained. 'A nice looking girl can get pushed around pretty good and approached dozens of times.'

'A guy sits down next to you in the bar and buys you a drink. It can tie you up for an hour.'

It is easier on the whole to be a man at the Concord because the initiative is yours and so is the numerical advantage. Women always outnumber men, especially the older they get. On some past weekends, the ratio reached 3 and even 4 to 1. Recently, though, it's been a bit more even.

The men, in their way, are as varied as the women: from nervous pimply, post adolescents to the paunchy middle-aged who affect the panache of experience. 'You can take some of the quietest guys in the world,' said



IRVING COHEN
... 'it's like a nursing home'

Bush, "and get them into the singles environment and they literally, some of them, become beasts. It's amazing. They let it all out here."

"A young single guy that comes here and plays golf for two or three days and makes the bar scene at night. He's got it made," said Bush.

The golf, tennis and innumerable other activities the hotel provides (the array is remarkable, including skeet shooting, karate and rug auctions) play an essential part in making a singles weekend work. Not only would the guests get bored if they had nothing

much to do, but also they'd find meeting a whole lot harder.

Rose Ahrens, the plump and genial hotel matchmaker, has a role, of course (her motto is "we serve the needy not the greedy") and she's around making introductions. But the best approaches, particularly for young people are the ones made more or less naturally.

Says he: "Wow, that's a great forehead."

Says she: "You're not so bad yourself."

And from there on it's easier. "You know the big trick," said Stu Bush, "is getting the opening line in there."

The hotel goes to some unusual lengths to help people get acquainted. Irving Cohen, for example, deliberately slows down the line in front of his dining room, because he's found that the inconvenience encourages conversation.

"What could be better," he said. "Turn to the person next to you and say, 'Listen, why do we have to wait in line here wherever we go.' By the time they get inside, they'll say, 'Why don't we all sit together.' It works beautifully."

Two years ago, the management tried yet another approach and mounted a weekend long "encounter group" session. It was a big financial success but the owners decided not to do it again.

"We did some soul searching," said Gordon Winarik, "and concluded that the problems of the mind are not for us. Let's keep it a resort, we said, we don't want to get into the inner mind. We want them to have fun."

And they do try. But it is fun for a very serious purpose. That makes it a lot harder.

NEXT: The Money in the Local Loneliness Industry.