

The Bates Motel

A case study in the importance of the ordinary

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As is usually the case when people live near a significant historical establishment or structure, they usually take it for granted or are ambivalent as to its importance. The familiarity of the structure causes people to take it for granted as they pass by it on a regular basis. They just do not view it as significant or important. This is understandable. However, it is important and necessary to research and document such a structure and place it into the correct cultural and historical context. This is even more important for the community and surrounding area. The structure was placed at its specific location for a reason. The structure becomes apart of the fabric of the community. In a greater sense, it may also represent an important historical theme within the state or nation. The structure itself does not have to be a high end example of an architectural style or place where Lincoln slept. In many cases it may look quite ordinary, nothing to call attention to it. However, this does not mean it is insignificant or unimportant.



The Bates Motel—there it stood, a small roadside lodging on old U.S. 36 and ten miles west of the state capital,



Bates Motel. Courtesy Stacie Peecher.

helping anchor the small, unincorporated town of Bates' business community since the dawn of the nation's surge in prosperity after World War 2. Following the decade of the Great Depression and, during the early-1940s self-sacrifice in international war, most Americans experienced and enjoyed the recreation of travel by automobile on the nation's extensively developing highway system. Lodging en route, like the Bates Motel, functioned as a home away from home.

Known as mom and pop motels

because they were owner-managed, these lodgings superseded the cabins, camps, cottages, or villages as roadside lodgings were known earlier in the twentieth century. Motels offered security and comfort in a domestic style familiar to post-war auto travelers. Yet, the name *motel* was more modernistic, connoting the automobile, *motel* being a contraction of *motor-hotel*, rather than the earlier names.

Spectacular in no regard, ruins would be the best sources regarding the size of the Bates Motel's rooms but would reveal little without an archeologist's attention. The motel began with a mere seven units in 1949 with four units added in 1953 and, even though unoccupied into the mid-1980s, remained until 1994. Certainly it was the creation of a husband and wife team, Stanley C. and Mary Kazokaitis, married in 1939, in Jacksonville. They had no children. Family files do not exist and oral history has been minimal, although neighbors in Bates and the surrounding area have shared bits of information.

It is with a yearning sense of nostalgia we look back to understand and capture the past. The past is comprised of many faceted layers, imbued with different meanings for



Bates Motel. Courtesy Stacie Peecher.



Bates Motel. *Courtesy Stacie Peecher.*

different people. The historian's arduous job is to weave a mosaic of facts, to present a discernible and understandable overview of the historical topic. This has been the case with the Bates Motel. A modicum of facts remains concerning the motel.

Three color photographs taken circa early-1970s, provide us with the best existing documentation of what the motel looked like. A 1989 article states the motel resembled "a little row of residential homes." The wooden structure was painted white with a red roof. Matching red shutters and red flower boxes adorned the exterior. Dormers interspersed along the front of the building gave the motel a homey and inviting facade. A 1953 newspaper advertisement describes the eleven units as "ultra modern, with air conditioning, fans and tiled showers." Each unit consisted of "four room living quarters." The motel's office existed on the west end of the structure. The motel was aligned parallel to Route 36 to in an effort to maximize motorist recognition of the structure. A local contractor, John Walters built the motel using material from the nearby Alexander Lumber Company of New Berlin, Illinois.

Kazokaitis sold the motel the same year his wife had died, 1981, and the new owners briefly managed it. Construction earlier of nearby Interstate 72, later also

named the Central Illinois Expressway, had began quickly, according to oral history, syphoning off passing travelers in the mid-1970s. After Kazokaitis' successors departed, the motel stood unoccupied and, we learn from oral history, succumbed to ruinous conditions for a long while. Eventually, the Sangamon County health authorities ordered that it be fixed or torn down. In 1994, it was demolished and, shortly afterward, burned in a fire, a newspaper article reveals.

No article about the Bates Motel would be complete without a wink and a nod to the 1960 Alfred Hitchcock

thriller, *Psycho*. For those who grew up during that time period, it has become a cultural reference, inextricably linked to the Bates Motel in Bates, Illinois. The newspaper reporter of the fire in 1994 also noted that "younger people" often passed the site, "taking pictures to impress their friends that they had been to the Bates Motel."

Many examples of these types of structures exist across the landscapes of this country. They survive in varying stages of disrepair. Unfortunately, a large number have been demolished, leaving only a faint footprint on the land it once occupied. A few live on in a repurposed state. Regardless of their current status, these buildings stand as a stark reminder of a specific time and place and to the values of those who built them. 

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Stephen Leonard regularly contributes to Illinois Heritage as does Keith A. Sculle, who has written much elsewhere about automotive roadside commerce.



Looking east along Route 36 from the driveway in front of the Bates Motel, May 2018. *Authors' photograph.*