

# Borscht Belt today: A photographer's view

By GIA MILLER

When Marissa Scheinfeld was in graduate school for photography at San Diego University, she was stuck. She needed a theme for her thesis project and she was out of ideas. She turned to a mentor who gave her advice: When you don't know what to do, shoot what you know.

Ms. Scheinfeld chose to photograph her hometown and the surrounding area in upstate New York known as the "Borscht Belt." Later, she turned this project into her first book, "The Borscht Belt: Revisiting the Remains of America's Jewish Vacationland," which was released Oct. 4. Three days after the release date, Ms. Scheinfeld discussed her book and the Borscht Belt during an hour-long talk at the Katonah Village Library.

After opening with a brief history of the region, Ms. Scheinfeld described the heyday of the Borscht Belt, an era that impacted not only the Jewish American community, but American popular culture as well. It was the birthplace of stand-up comedy, where celebrities such as Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Rodney Dangerfield and Joan Rivers got their start, and considered the place to be "by celebrities of the time. But in recent decades, as Ms. Scheinfeld showed in her photographs, the region declined significantly.

"Presently, they are eyesores," Ms. Scheinfeld explained, describing the "former hotels, resorts and bungalows that have been lying neglected for periods ranging from five to 30 years."

Her book features images of 40 abandoned hotels and bungalows, photographed exactly as she found them. Throughout her talk, Ms. Scheinfeld shared many pages from her book, as well as photographs featured in a traveling exhibit she produced to accompany her talks. The images are not nostalgia; they are contemporary photographs that document what she describes as "the unruly and peculiar present." Nature has reclaimed many of the spaces, while others have been demolished or tampered with.

The author told the story of how this once internationally-known vacation mecca has transformed. Photographs showed a dining room that became a paintball battlefield, a showroom turned into a skate park, and a lobby with trees growing through the floor. Other images — including a kitchen full of pots and pans, which appeared



GIA MILLER PHOTO

**Marissa Scheinfeld signing books after her lecture at Katonah Village Library Oct. 7.**

washed and stacked for the next day — seemed apocalyptic.

"If you can look beyond the sadness and the pathos that runs through this series, there is a very peculiar beauty," said Ms. Scheinfeld. "These are, to me, modern day ruins. People like to consider ruins as things that are dead, but these are very inert and very alive, and they tell us a lot about the past. But, they are also signals of the present and even evidence of the imminent future."

To capture many of the images, Ms. Scheinfeld explained that she used her local connections to gain access. She knew someone who knew someone whose family member was a former groundskeeper at a hotel or a lawyer for one of the properties. When she didn't have a personal connection, she trespassed. The deteriorating nature of the buildings and landscapes around them made for treacherous conditions, so she always had someone accompany her visits.

She photographed each location during all four seasons and shot everything

on film. That forced her to set up her shots carefully and to be selective in the images she captured, instead of shooting mindlessly with a digital camera.

The Borscht Belt project took her five

years to complete. When she wasn't photographing on-site, Ms. Scheinfeld worked from her home in Waccabuc, editing photographs, securing a book deal, writing the essays, planning the book, producing the touring exhibit and scheduling book appearances. Her work has paid off. The book has been featured in numerous publications, such as The New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Slate. Even The Weather Channel ran a story about it.


Ms. Scheinfeld teaches photography and the history of photography at Westchester Community College. She also works as a freelance photographer, shooting everything from portraits to clothing lines.

In her free time, Ms. Scheinfeld and her husband, Sam McCabe, an interventional radiologist at Westchester Medical Center, might be seen walking their French bulldogs down Katonah Avenue or visiting the farmer's market at John Jay Homestead. In fact, Katonah serves as a big inspiration for Ms. Scheinfeld, and might figure into her next project.

"I'm tinkering with a few ideas," explained Ms. Scheinfeld. "I am interested in the stories and history that are embedded in a landscape. Living around here, I'm fascinated by the idea of transmitting history and how people pass down the stories of their homes."

"The Borscht Belt: Revisiting the Remains of America's Jewish Vacationland" is now available at Little Joe's Coffee & Books in Katonah. It can also be purchased online at [borschtbeltrevisited.com](http://borschtbeltrevisited.com).

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