

## Chapter One

### **HISTORY OF THE HOSTELLING MOVEMENT**

This chapter elaborates the development of the youth hostel as a phenomenon both abroad and in America. It establishes the historical context for the buildings in this study by examining the origins of the movement in Europe, the importation of hostelling to the United States in the 1930s, and the evolution of the organization American Youth Hostels from its inception to the present. The purpose of the chapter is both to educate the reader as to the nature of the youth hostel and to provide a framework for understanding the transmutations and current status of AYH as an organization.

#### *Origins in Germany*

Hostelling originated as part of a broader ideological movement in early twentieth-century Germany. In Berlin and Hamburg respectively, the two largest industrial German cities at the time, youth groups like the *Jugendbewegung* and the *Wandervögel* (“migratory birds”) shared a common appreciation of nature and a conviction that technological and societal progress brought with it certain danger to the human spirit.<sup>3</sup> These two youth groups sought to reform all aspects of society—they typically rejected smoking, drinking, and the stiff and formal clothing of the time. The *Wandervögel*s sought release from city-life by roaming the

---

<sup>3</sup> Ilse Reicke, “The Youth Movement: Its Momentum Felt Fifty Years Later,” *American-German Review* 30, no. 1 (1963), 6.

countryside on foot to experience the restorative powers of nature and to regain a sense of love for the landscape of their homeland.

In this context, a young German schoolteacher named Richard Schirrmann lamented the conditions under which his students were living and learning. Born in Prussia in 1874, Schirrmann had moved to Westphalia at 27 and soon found himself teaching elementary school in a highly industrialized region of Germany. Heartily in agreement with the ideals of the Wandervögels, Schirrmann began to personally take his young students to the countryside on weekends, knowing that they had no other opportunity to leave the unwholesome and crowded city.<sup>4</sup>

During the middle part of that decade, Schirrmann continued to lead groups of students on long walks out of the city. His commitment to his ideals is evident in his writings:

“The world is in great need of... physical, mental, and spiritual excellence among young people of devotion to their country with an attitude of peace and love toward all neighboring lands. Nor can the wonders of God be fully appreciated from a speeding automobile. Really to experience this is possible only for one who is so content to depend on his own legs or his bicycle who contemplatively and devotedly responds to nature with all his senses and knows what it means to be drenched the whole day in sunshine and the breath of winds.”<sup>5</sup>

It discouraged Schirrmann that these forays were by necessity limited to the length of one day, since the groups had nowhere to accommodate them overnight. Occasionally his groups could find refuge for a night in an unused schoolroom or in the barn of an

---

<sup>4</sup> James O'Donald Mays, “The Development of Youth Hostels in the United States” (M.S. Thesis, University of Georgia, 1941), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Schirrmann, “Where is the Man who Can Help?” (AYH Handbook, 1936), 7.

accommodating farmer. However, the risk of uncertain overnight lodging was prohibitive to long trips, given Schirrmann's responsibility for the health and safety of his charges.

“...every night there was the same anxious question, ‘Where shall we sleep tonight?’. Haystacks and barns were gladly welcomed as bedrooms. These were kindly offered by the peasants and the boys did not even have to pay for them. But the nights sometimes were cold and only a bit of hay was in the barn...”<sup>6</sup>

In 1907, he put forth an idea to his school district in Altena, Germany. Schirrmann proposed that the Nette School, where he worked, put rooms unused over holidays to use as temporary shelters for coeducational groups of traveling students. His proposal was to arrange simple stuffed palettes for students to sleep on, boys in one room and girls in another, both rooms chaperoned by a teacher of the appropriate sex. After the holiday, the students and teachers would be required to remove the palettes, replace the school furniture as it had been, and leave early in the morning so as not to interfere with the school's routine.<sup>7</sup>

In the days of this early experiment in overnight accommodation for youth, Schirrmann received little support from his fellow teachers. Perhaps they frowned on the idea of girls and boys sleeping in the same building, even under the supervision of chaperones, or perhaps it was the thought of teachers fraternizing with students in this way that unsettled them. Nonetheless, Herr Schirrmann remained convinced that this concept was worth promoting; he proposed that not just one but many schools, an entire network, should be opened for the purpose of sheltering youth overnight. He wrote articles on the

---

<sup>6</sup> Mays, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Bacil B. Warren, *Young at Any Age: American Youth Hostels' First Fifty Years* (Washington, DC: American Youth Hostels, 1985), 4-5.

topic, which were summarily rejected by educational journals. In 1910, however, he published these same ideas in the national press, dubbing these hostels *Jugendherbergen*.<sup>8</sup>

Although the teaching profession opposed the hostelling network, the general public approved. In fact, Schirrmann was a skilled promoter who was able to elicit financial gifts from wealthy patrons. By 1912, Schirrmann pushed his idea beyond the use of temporarily empty schools and advocated the creation of a system of lodgings permanently open to traveling groups. As the process of establishing his network of hostels gained supporters, he recognized another class of buildings in Germany (in addition to school-buildings) that were usually empty and for the most part unused. The German landscape was peppered with medieval castles, all hundreds of years old. Schirrmann and his slowly growing group of adherents realized that the questions, “Where shall we house the travelers?” and “What shall we do with our castles?” might be answered with a common solution.

The 12<sup>th</sup> century Castle Altena, near the Nette School where Schirrmann worked, was one such underused building. In 1912, the castle, which had previously functioned over the years as a courthouse, prison, home for invalids, poorhouse, hospital, historical society, museum, and even as a quarry, became home to the first permanent youth hostel in Germany (figures 1 and 2).

---

<sup>8</sup> Warren, 7, and Mays, 14. The articles were published in *Kolnische Zeitung* and in *Monatsschrift für Deutch Turnwesen*.



Figure 1. Burg Altena, the Castle at Altena, today. In 1912, the castle became the first permanent youth hostel in the world.



Figure 2. Burg Altena as it appeared before renovation around the turn of the 19th century. This image of the castle is from the *Universität Gesamthochschule Siegen*, where it was described as having badly deteriorated at the time this photograph was taken.

The Altena project converted a portion of the castle using a grant of the equivalent of \$200 U.S., and furnished it at a total cost of about \$2000.<sup>9</sup> After this obsolete building became a youth hostel, many other historic castles in Germany were put to the same use as Schirrmann continued his crusade to establish a hostel network. (Although the first hostels may have been created as improvisations, Germany would later devote much attention to the regulation of architectural design and construction of hostels, both newly constructed and adapted. *Notes Concerning the Construction of Youth Hostels*, a publication of the 1930s, describes in excruciating detail every facet of hostel planning ranging from conceptual—“no flat roofs... it is un-German”—to practical—“be very careful about putting pumice between beams, it is very hygroscopic”.)<sup>10</sup>

The early German hostel system initially had no organizing body, but as the concept gained popularity and more Jugendherbergen were founded, the need for one was realized. Schirrmann enlisted a friend, William Munker, to become the organizational and financial brains behind the so-called *Hauptausschuss für Jugendherbergen*, the national organization officially founded in 1913.<sup>11</sup> Munker was instrumental at this early time in the hostelling movement; several writings mention that while Schirrmann possessed the charisma of a spiritual leader, it was Munker who contributed real business knowledge to the endeavor. Munker provided advising, money, and even his own home as a hostel.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Lebert H. Weir, *Europe at Play* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1937), 444.

<sup>10</sup> “Notes Concerning the Construction of Youth Hostels”, reprinted in L.H. Weir (pp. 460-83) from the original “Die Baugestaltung der Jugendherbergen,” *Herausgegeben vom Reichsverband für Deutsche Jugendherbergen* (Berlin: Druck Wilhelm Limpert, 1934).

<sup>11</sup> Weir, 445.

<sup>12</sup> Mays, 16.

This was a period of tremendous idealism in spite of future trouble on the horizon. Munker and Schirrmann may have been aware, even before the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany, that there was a need to protect their fledgling network from domination or cooption by outside powers like religious and political factions. Although the First World War had seen many of the initial founders of other German youth groups killed in action, a second wave of youth groups continued in the spirit of the first. Youth movements in Germany were strong and active in the 1930s, which posed a potential threat to the coalescing Nazi agenda. The hostelling movement, however, was too popular to be wholly liquidated. Instead of fighting to destroy the national hostelling organization, by then called the *Verbund für Deutsche Jugendherbergen*, the Nazi Party subsumed all youth groups under National Socialism in 1933.<sup>13</sup> Even as German hostellers were forced to join uniform-wearing propagandists called Hitler Youth under the new *Reichjugendführung* or National Youth Leadership, Schirrmann remained optimistic. However, in April of that year, he was commanded to resign as Chairman of the Youth Hostels Association and take up an honorary position while the real leadership was transferred to Berlin. Reduced to a mere puppet, Schirrmann resigned from this position in 1936.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the Third Reich's attempt to exploit the rabid ideology of youth under National Socialism, the seeds of hostelling were sown during this period of reform-minded enthusiasm. Regrettable as the inter-war transformation of German hostelling was, the original ideals had already spread to other parts of Europe. Although there was no pointed effort made by the Germans to spread hostelling to other countries, visitors who had come

---

<sup>13</sup> Biesanz, 81, and Reicke, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Oliver Coburn, *The Youth Hostel Story* (London: National Council of Social Service, 1950), 149.

and experienced the idea exported it from its birthplace and the momentum of an international consciousness began to build.

### *Youth Hostel Development throughout Europe*

In the decades before World War II, the hostelling movement spread and morphed throughout both Western and Eastern Europe. It failed to penetrate only those underdeveloped countries where roads were too poor for cycling, or where the middle class (the predominant users of hostels) accounted for too small a percentage of the populace, or where overpopulation, overcrowding, and pollution were non-issues. The idea in its basic form transcended most boundaries, yet each country did not adhere to the same rules and organizational styles. In fact, the various countries of Europe modified elements of the German model in response to unique social and cultural conditions in each nation. The hostelling mission was like a snowball; it rolled through Europe accreting layers of meaning that represented regional hopes for what the movement might accomplish. (When, in 1934, hostelling would be brought to America, its proponents consciously examined the range of European models in order to form a system suited to the United States.)

In Germany, as discussed, hostelling had begun as one of many manifestations of a broader set of political and social movements borne of unrest. Schirrmann spoke often on the importance of instilling in youth a love of country, and also on the value of maintaining hostelling as an egalitarian adventure open to both men and women and to people of all races. It was in Germany, before the Nazis came to power, that the inclusion of a “day room” or common room became codified as a critical space within the hostel where

travelers from many lands might meet and exchange ideas. Schirrmann thus infused his original mission, one that began as a primarily health-related concern, with an additional element of idealism—the hope that through international friendship lay the hope for world peace.

A comparison between the French and English systems illustrates how hostelling arose differently in ways specific to the conditions and culture of each nation. Both nations shared a common preference for a self-consciously international system over one oriented to domestic travelers. However, the growth of France's system was influenced by religious concerns that resulted in disunity within the hostelling network. Since the English/Welsh system was greater able to avoid this type of intrusion by such interests, it focused on mitigating the divisive effects of rigid British social stratification. The British YHA also emphasized preservation of the countryside and decried the construction of flimsy and unsightly new houses thereon.<sup>15</sup> The reuse of England's existing structures was thought of as preferable to creation of new ones, especially outside of London (figures 3 and 4 illustrate an example of adaptive reuse of an obsolete mill in Huntingdonshire). The founders of American hostelling later considered elements of both the French and British systems as they attempted to bring this tradition across the Atlantic Ocean.

Other European countries added their own nuances of meaning. In 1929, the movement spread to Holland where hostelling was thought of as a way to relieve the tensions of a high unemployment rate by providing youth with an alternative to idleness.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Biesanz, 142.

<sup>16</sup> Mays, 88.



Figure 3. The Houghton Mill in Huntingdonshire, England. Although there has been a mill on this site for 1,000 years, the present structure was built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century after the previous mill had been destroyed by fire. In 1928, the mill ceased operation and was threatened with demolition when local citizens formed a committee to save it. It was converted to a Youth Hostel in 1934, and in 1939 was presented by local supporters to the (British) National Trust, who leased it to the Youth Hostel Association. In 1983, the YHA's lease expired and the mill was opened to the general public.



Figure 4. This undated advertisement for Player's Cigarettes depicts the Houghton Mill Youth Hostel as a backdrop for a cycling adventure. The reverse of the card reads: "Family Tandem With Side-Car—Thousands of cycling mothers and fathers became acquainted and enjoyed their courtship on 'a bicycle made for two.' And they do not forgo the pleasures of cycling after marriage. When the little one comes along, the happy couple wait only the passing of the baby-in-arms period before the addition of a side-car to the tandem makes possible healthy and enjoyable week-ending and holiday touring for the family trio. Many tandem side-car clubs have been formed and family rallies are held. Houghton Mill Youth Hostel in Huntingdonshire forms the background to this cycling scene."

Switzerland's system was similar to Germany's, but financing was dependent on gifts and the sale of membership passes. Poland's hostelling network was developed as a branch of the government in 1927, part of the Department of Education and grouped with physical education, "school hygiene", and tourist development.<sup>17</sup> Poland was not the only country to adopt hostelling agencies under the jurisdiction of its Department of Education, but hostel leaders were generally against such practice after the loss of autonomy suffered by the German council. Czechoslovakia, before being annexed by Germany, added a requirement that high-school aged students participate in a minimum of 14 days hostelling, although the government did not directly control the hostel system.<sup>18</sup> Harold Arnjot, the hostelling spiritual leader of Norway, developed hostels in Scandinavia as Schirrmann had done in Germany.<sup>19</sup> By then, Denmark's system was rapidly growing as well.

### *The International Work Party*

In 1938, with the number of European hostelling organizations growing rapidly, Finland made the twentieth nation to become involved.<sup>20</sup> Hope was high for associations in Italy, Greece, Egypt and Palestine. Youth hostels everywhere were open to people of any nationality. It was in this climate of burgeoning enthusiasm for hostelling, despite the threat of war, that the "International Work Party" was born.

The concept of the International Work Party began in France in 1935. Unlike wealthier national associations, such as Britain with its tremendous endowment from the

---

<sup>17</sup> Warren, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Lee Wahl, "How it Began," (AYH Knapsack, Fall, 1937), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Wahl, 8.

<sup>20</sup> See map, Mays, 23.

Carnegie Trust, the Ligue Francaise was at this time largely without financial resources. In response, the Children's Country Holiday Association offered to the Ligue, rent free, a hunting lodge in the forest of Fontainebleau called the Chateau de Brolles. Jack Catchpool, former secretary of the British association and then president of the International Youth Hostel Federation, discussed re-conditioning the building with volunteer labor; he promised to bring over a group from England, and, with the French members combined, they would renovate the chateau. Master builder Walter Wilkes volunteered to lead the party of 30 Scots, Irish and Belgians, all of whom paid their own passage. The process of adapting the chateau to use as a hostel took ten days, after which they planted a "tree of international friendship" to celebrate the "Miracle of Bois-le-Roi."<sup>21</sup> The British Youth Hostel Federation's newsletter, called *The Rucksack*, talked about the First International Work Party that year:

"There was something miraculous about it: not only in the sudden transformation of the Chateau de Brolles from a damp, dirty, dismantled house, which had been empty for twenty years, into a bright attractive Youth Hostel; but still more in the sudden friendship that sprang up, so real and deep, among the young people of different countries who did this work together."<sup>22</sup>

In 1937, in what became the Second International Work Party, a party of thirty English youth brought their volunteer labor to Denmark in the same spirit. Four groups came, each staying two weeks, and worked under the leadership of a teacher from the Danish Rambling Guild. In this case, a new hostel was erected on the island of Als as an L-shaped extension of an older hostel. In the field of adaptive use, Denmark seemed well able

---

<sup>21</sup> Coburn, 153.

<sup>22</sup> YHA *Rucksack*, 1935.

to utilize volunteer labor—in Copenhagen, a former cavalry barracks was converted to a youth hostel, as was an old quarantine hospital in Odensee. In both cases, the hostel conversions were financed by the respective cities, “for whom the hostels meant an enrichment to the lives of their citizens.”<sup>23</sup>

Ireland hosted the Third International Work Party in 1938. At Bunnaton, described as the most beautiful part of Donnegal on the shores of Lake Swilly, five Coast Guard houses that had been unoccupied for thirty years were cleaned and fully rehabilitated. A description of the tasks performed indicates that Work Party members were capable of hard work and could provide skilled labor under supervision:

“In many of the rooms it was necessary to take up the rotten floor boards and joists and float in new concrete floors. All sash lines and many broken windows had to be renewed. Two walls were knocked out, which made it possible to provide a large common room and a large dining room...”<sup>24</sup>

Jack Catchpool offered to bring a party to Norway in 1939. In order to make a project at Mjølfjell happen, active hosteller Lektor Sigurd Stinessen appealed to the Norwegian Ministry of Education and to the B. & N. Shipping Line, who responded by making substantial grants towards the project. In these last months before World War II, about a hundred hostellers from twelve different nations came together at Mjølfjell to build a new hostel, with each room in the style of a different nation. Before the hostel was complete, however, the war intervened and the buildings were occupied by German troops.

The effects of World War II made hostelling on an international scale impossible; there was a general blackout of European hostelling during this time, and the International

---

<sup>23</sup> Coburn, 154.

<sup>24</sup> Coburn, 155-6.

Federation did not meet. When the war was over, reconstruction was accompanied by a rehabilitation of hostels and hostelling. In the summer of 1945, Catchpool visited Western Europe and in Holland found only seven out of seventy hostels functioning. Nine had been totally destroyed, the rest plundered. Fifty were reopened after the British YHA donated a large gift of mattresses.

European youth accepted the challenge of hostel rebuilding. The first post-war Work Party was at Le Bez, near Briançon, in France (figure 5). During the summer of 1946, four hundred members of the YHA joined international work parties in Norway, Holland, Luxembourg, France, and Italy (figure 6). The IYHF met again in 1946 at the Loch Lommond Hostel in Scotland, and reports there showed that much progress had been made in restoring devastated buildings and reconstituting dissolved organizations.<sup>25</sup> One hosteller related this story in reference to the Arnhem Hostel in Holland:

“In 1944 British parachutists had shelled this lovely hostel which stood on a high sand dune overlooking the town and was being used by the Germans as an observation post; it was grievously damaged. But after the war was over, one of the parachute lads came back with the International Working Party, so that he could say to his friends of the Dutch Youth Hostel Movement: ‘In 1944 we destroyed your hostel, we could do no other. Now we have come to restore it’.”<sup>26</sup>

Many Americans, too, came over to Europe after the war to help reconstruct the countries that they had seen injured. By that time, Isabel and Monroe Smith had imported the hostelling movement to America as an organization called “American Youth Hostels, Inc.”, or “AYH.”

---

<sup>25</sup> Coburn, 167.

<sup>26</sup> Coburn, 173.



Figure 5. International Work Party at Le Bez, near Briançon (Weir).



Figure 6. Arnhem Youth Hostel in Holland, in the process of reconstruction (Weir).

*The United States—the Beginnings of American Youth Hostels*

After 1910, when Richard Schirrmann was finally able to publish his articles on the virtues of hostelling, the response was immediate as letters came in from all over Germany from other European countries. Still, the United States was geographically and spiritually isolated from the new movement. It wasn't until the early 1930s, while the almost all Americans had yet to even hear of "youth hostelling", that a young couple would grow to love the experience enough to attempt to import back home. Isabel and Monroe Smith, a Boy Scout leader and art teacher, became acquainted with hostels in Germany and visited Richard Schirrmann at his home in July 1933, where he suggested that they attend the international hostelling conference in Bad Godesberg to be held in October of that year. There, the couple learned about the various flavors of European hostelling and began to ask themselves logistical questions about bringing hostelling to the U.S.

"How do you set up the organization? What has worked in the past, and what has not? Is there really a need for youth hostels in the United States? Will the public support them? Will America's sophisticated young people want to use them?"<sup>27</sup>

The Smiths studied European examples of organization and financing. Some organizations used private money in the form of donations, some depended more on the sale of membership passes, and some received state subsidy. Most of them were private entities, although some, like the Polish agency, were a branch of the government. The organization in Holland appealed to the Americans because it differed from the German model in that it was centralized but decidedly *not* state-run; the double-edged sword of governmental subsidy and government rule was now seen as a threat to the movement after

---

<sup>27</sup> Warren, 14.

the Nazis had completely taken over German hostelling.<sup>28</sup> The idea of a centralized national organization instead of a coalition of local groups was attractive in that it would preclude local authority and the local aberrations (like segregation) that might accompany it. Therefore, hostelling in America began in 1934 as “American Youth Hostels, Incorporated”, which had a small staff and central headquarters with no ties to government agencies.

On December 27, 1934, America opened its first hostel in Northfield, Massachusetts (figure 7). By 1935, thirty-five hostels existed in America, and by 1936 there were seventy-six. In 1937, loops of hostels were established in California and Michigan, and Pennsylvania opened a string of hostels on the Horse-Shoe trail (figure 8).<sup>29</sup> By 1940, twenty-five states had at least one youth hostel, with field workers and a publicity campaign passionately waged by the Smiths and their disciples.<sup>30</sup> This rapid growth rate for the first five years suggests that there was indeed a latent American interest in the hostelling idea and that the Smiths simply catalyzed the movement.

Although the demand was present, the path to a comprehensive network of American hostels was difficult. At this point in AYH history, all hostels but Northfield (owned by AYH) were privately owned and merely licensed and publicized by the national organization, so it was imperative to continue investigating ways of encouraging Americans to open hostels. AYH was consistently in debt in its infancy until Jack Catchpool visited the Smiths in and illuminated the benefits of attracting high-profile donors and advocates as the British YHF had. Catchpool used his influence to procure a \$2000 grant for AYH from

---

<sup>28</sup> Warren, 15, and Mays, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Carroll P. Moore, “Contributions in the field of Education made by the Youth Hostel Movement,” (M.S. Thesis, Massachusetts State College, 1937), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Mays, 40.



Figure 7. The first AYH Hostel at Northfield, Massachusetts. “It is a lovely old New England Town with a very wide main road, broad grass walks on either side and then the white houses. This one was old and rickety and the Smiths fixed it up and gave part of it and the barn for a Youth Hostel... there are two big lofts—one for boys and one for girls, with double and triple-decker bunks like crews’ quarters on a ship. Down below are washrooms and dining rooms and recreation rooms—dark beams and woodwork, rustic furniture, red candles, and red and blue stairs... this morning we were up early heaving straw mattresses around in the bunks and making up the beds... this is no place for sissies for those beds are *hard*.”<sup>31</sup> (Warren)

---

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Winifred Drake to her mother in the winter of 1935 (published with permission in Warren’s *Young at Any Age...*).



Figure 8. The Bowmansville Youth Hostel on the Pennsylvania Horse-Shoe Trail. The hostel was opened in the autumn of 1937 through the efforts of Henry N. Woolman, president of the Horse-Shoe Trails Club. It occupied one corner of a larger two-story stone structure, the oldest in the village, erected in 1820 by Samuel Bowman. Before it was forced to close temporarily after seventy years of service, it had been the oldest functioning hostel in the United States.

the Carnegie Corporation, and interested several prominent businesses and educational leaders in the cause of U.S. hostelling. After meeting Catchpool in Boston, Mrs. Helen Storrow presented AYH with a donation of a building in Meredith, New Hampshire, which became the Clover Ridge Youth Hostel.<sup>32</sup> Most importantly, Catchpool facilitated a meeting between the Smiths and President Franklin Roosevelt, where both he and Eleanor offered their support for hostelling and became honorary presidents of AYH. Roosevelt commented in 1938:

“I was brought up on this sort of thing and realize the need for it. From the time I was nine till my seventh birthday, I spent most of my holidays bicycling on the Continent; it is much the best education I ever had. The more you circulate on your travels, the better citizen you become, not only of your own country but of the whole world.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite these advances, AYH continued to struggle financially and with national and international support for its cause. Moralists took issue with boys and girls sleeping under the same roof, wearing shorts, and skipping church to travel the countryside on weekends. Some held growing suspicion of the hostelling movement and its association with Germans, as well as its questionable communal principles, and wondered if AYH members were in fact Nazi sympathizers or communists. By writing to President Roosevelt in 1938 requesting support for a bill in Congress to grant free passports to AYH members, Monroe Smith drew the negative attention of members of the Washington bureaucracy who encouraged the president to reconsider his support for this small, vocal group. After a protracted investigation, the President and Eleanor Roosevelt officially withdrew their support for AYH in 1939, commenting that they’d rather not be associated with a group with which they

---

<sup>32</sup> Coburn, 160-1.

<sup>33</sup> Quote by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Coburn, 145.

were not actively involved. The Carnegie Corporation declined to renew their grant to AYH after rumors of imprudent accounting practices circulated.

In addition, a sentiment was present within the international hostelling community that Americans were wishful thinkers—that “considering the country as a whole, hostelling seems to call for the creation of a new want rather than the satisfaction of a felt need.”<sup>34</sup> Some Europeans, and even some Americans who had experienced European hostelling, looked down their noses at the “abortive” American youth movement, stating that while the European movement was one borne of industrial and political oppression that fostered true youth solidarity, American hostelling boasted no such youth culture and was simply a glorified summer camp run by an autocratic central agency.<sup>35</sup> The Smiths were even criticized for trying to make a full-time career of hostelling (in typical American *laissez-faire* ideology) and for deriving profit from organized hostelling trips, a claim that does not bear out in fact. These criticisms and disappointments led to several attempts to comply with more rigorous accounting procedures and to an eventual decentralizing amendment to the AYH constitution in 1939.

It is now seventy years since Isabel and Monroe first attended the International Youth Hostel Conference in Godesburg in hopes of learning how to import hostelling to America. AYH has persevered as an organization despite countless changes in structure and leadership over the years, and although the majority of Americans do not use hostels, many have heard of them and are curious about them. Since the American movement did not develop under the same conditions as European hostelling did, it is clear that American

---

<sup>34</sup> Biesanz, 197.

<sup>35</sup> Biesanz, 200-9.

hostelling is its own phenomenon. Just as the nations of Europe chose elements of the movement that best suited the national youth culture and social structure there, the United States created a new type of hostelling unique to its borders. What, then, is American hostelling?

American hostelling is now a self-conscious pursuit. International travelers may use American hostels by habit, since they are so much a part of European backpacking practice, but Americans hostellers identify with hostelling out of desire to be a part of the hostelling community at large. Many hostellers are in fact middle or upper class, yet they choose to lodge communally in these facilities for less tangible reasons than cheap accommodations and a love of hiking in nature. American hostellers know that to stay in a hostel is to explore American history and culture, and to meet like-minded people.

The first motto of AYH was written:

“The purpose of American Youth Hostels, Inc., is to help all, especially the young people, to a greater knowledge, understanding and love of the world by providing for them Youth Hostels, bicycle trails and foot paths in America, and by assisting them in their travels here and abroad.”<sup>36</sup>

Since then, the statement has been shortened, but the sentiment is the same. This thesis demonstrates that although this statement reflects the social idealism of the movement’s founders, there are other concerns that have gained equal prominence with the codified AYH mission. Although the concept of adaptive reuse of older buildings was not fashionable in the 1930s when compared with the desire for educational and social reform, times have changed—today, the virtues of the youth hostel could be as easily celebrated by

---

<sup>36</sup> American Youth Hostels Handbook (1936), 11.

champions of architectural reuse as by social reformers. Historic preservation is and has always been an unwritten mission of American Youth Hostels.