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25 years ago today, the Coral Court closed its doors. This is lengthy but tells the story -

They look like a couple of plain old stone walls decorating the entrance to a subdivision that would be at home anywhere in Suburbia, USA. An entire generation has grown up without hearing the whispers of what went on behind those walls. Stories of crime, illicit trysts, honeymoons and family vacations all played out at 7555 Watson Road, at the Coral Court Motel. The motel closed its doors 25 summers ago on August 20, 1993.

The Coral Court was one of the finest on all of Route 66. The Streamline Moderne units with honey-colored bricks and windows of glass blocks were surrounded by immaculate grounds and shady pin oak trees. The units had individual garages, which later helped gain the motel a bit of a reputation. But for decades, the Coral Court was respectable and beautiful - and the road out front was the "Main Street of America."

This roadie's fascination with Route 66 began because of the Coral Court's slightly naughty image. A family member driving by on Watson Road would mumble under her breath about someone in the family "shacking up" there. That phrase meant nothing to a young boy, but this one knew that if it earned that sanctimonious tone of disapproval that it had to be fun.

When Route 66 and the national highway system was designated in 1926, roadside accommodations were somewhat austere to say the least. The automobile traveler shunned the motels in the city, nearly all of which were oriented to the rail traveler. At first, travelers simply camped along the roadside. But farmers soon had their fill of the "tin can tourists" and some cities began opening municipal auto camps. St. Louis had one in Forest Park. But the camps began attracting undesirables and motorists were demanding more.

At first, farmers and entrepreneurs put up a ramshackle cabin or three, perhaps starting with converted chicken coops like at Schuman's Tourist City in Rolla. A major change took place when the Pierce Oil Company announced it would build lavish terminals and hotels with facilities equal to those in even the largest cities and spaced about 125 miles apart. They were complete with car washes and overnight repair service. Some even had hospitals and emergency ambulance services.

The first of the Pierce-Pennant terminals opened at Springfield, Missouri in July 1928. The Pierce-Pennant Tavern in Rolla opened two weeks later and a hotel opened just up the road in November 1929. Pennant facilities eventually were found in Des Peres and Columbia, Missouri as well as in Miami, Oklahoma, Tulsa and Oklahoma City. But plans for a nationwide chain never came to fruition.

In 1933, Route 66 was relocated to enter St. Louis via the New Watson Road instead of Manchester Road, and a string of motels popped up approaching the city limits. There eventually were about 14 competing motels in a three mile section through the Village of Marlborough. They included the Crystal Court, the Wayside Court, Chippewa Motel, the Duplex Motel, La Casa Grande, Evergreen Cottages and the 66 Auto Court. At 8084 Watson, the Missouri Motel was built in 1950 and blatantly duplicated the style of the Coral Court. Of those, the Duplex, Wayside Court, Chippewa and La Casa Grande still stand.

The 66 Auto Court site is now the Watson Auto Care Plaza and a replica of the sign stands on the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge.

John Carr walked into this tumult of flashing neon and flashy architecture with a long police record and some notoriety. Carr was originally from Pennsylvania and reportedly had connections with notorious mobster Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel. He operated brothels in St. Louis for many years and his home was said to be a rendezvous for professional bondsmen, police and shady characters. Carr once was convicted on a Mann Act conviction, a charge of bringing a girl across state lines for “immoral purposes.”

Carr moved to St. Louis County in 1938. When he decided to build a motel, he had a vision that it would be something special. According to Shellee Graham in *Tales from the Coral Court*, the St. Louis Daily Record on June 11, 1940 reported that Carr and architect Adolph Struebig were planning to build ten two-room cabins and an office at a cost of \$7,000. Carr had bought 29 lots in the mostly undeveloped Marlborough Manor Subdivision at Highway 66 and Laclede Station Road. The subdivision had been planned in 1932, but the promoters ran into financial problems and sales slumped due to a delay in constructing the new Highway 66.

In a 1987 interview with E.F. Porter Jr. of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Struebig said that money was no object to Carr. “Johnnie was willing to go the limit. I used to take my sketch board and we'd sit across from the site on Highway 66, and I'd show him what I proposed to do. We had an open field to work with. I'd show where the trees would go and how the shadows would fall. I'd sit for hours with that man. I just tried to please him and go all-out because I knew he wanted something unique.”

Adolf Struebig worked for the architectural firm of Edward F. Nolte and Fred Nauman from 1926 until 1936. He partnered with Nolte for a time striking out on his own. Nolte designed some minor buildings at the 1904 World's Fair. Nolte is also credited with the modernist Lambskin Masonic Lodge, opened in 1927 on South Kingshighway north of Oakland Avenue. The monumental looking building has been converted to apartments. Struebig went on to become a staff architect for the State of Illinois.

Struebig designed the ten original units with two rooms and two garages each. Carr wanted a distinctive material that also was low maintenance. Struebig said it was his idea to use hollow ceramic glazed blocks made by Architex Ceramics of Brazil, Indiana. It wasn't uncommon for tourist courts to have attached garages, but it was a little unusual for them to lead straight into the unit, meaning the clientele never had to go outside.

In 1944, Webster Groves moved towards annexing the site of Carr's motel. But zoning laws in Webster Groves didn't allow motels. So Carr led the way in creating the Village of Marlborough in 1944. He became the treasurer of the village and its chief power broker. In addition to the string of motels, Marlborough was chiefly known for being a notorious speed trap. Carr knew all of the village officers and officials. So much so that when St. Louis County would stake out the place, they never notified Carr or Marlborough Police.

After the war, Americans hit the road in record numbers and the Coral Court became a favorite stop for families on vacation. Faced with increased demand, Carr expanded in 1946. He tapped architect Carl Tyrer to design another 23 units with 46 rooms, which Graham says were known as “Mae West” cabins because they had two rounded bays on the front and the glass block windows were arranged in a pyramid shape. All of the units had hot water radiant heat, piped under the thick concrete slab floors. In

1951, three more two-story buildings were added on. These were designed by Tyrer as well, with the lower units covered in the same tile but the top unit covered with plain old clapboard siding.

The Coral Court grew to 77 rooms all together but 65 was the highest number. They stopped one shy of the double sixes, according to Graham, because the units in the back had eight rooms in each building. They were numbered as 51, 51a, 52, 52a and so on. Room 65 was actually in the office building.

Carr had a tunnel constructed that ran from the motel grounds to a home across Watson Road that belonged to a gentleman who worked at the Coral Court. But it certainly could have been used as an escape route in an emergency.

The image of the Coral Court began to change forever after September 28, 1953. On that date, Carl Austin Hall and Bonnie Lee Heady kidnapped six-year-old Bobby Greenlease from his school. Bobby was the son of a wealthy Kansas City Cadillac dealer who paid a \$600,000 ransom as instructed. But the child had already been murdered and his body was found behind Mrs. Heady's home in St. Joseph on October 7th.

Hall dumped his drunken partner in crime at an apartment in St. Louis and hit the streets looking for a party. He checked into the Coral Court with Polly Lane and Sandra O'Day, described by the newspapers as "ladies of easy virtue." Day spent the night and Hall gave her \$1,000.

A cab driver for Ace Cab, operated by mobster Joe Costello, tipped off his boss that Hall was throwing money around. It is also likely that John Carr knew as he was always aware of everything going on at the motel. Thinking they had an easy mark, perhaps a run-of-the-mill embezzler, Costello sent a crooked cop named Louis Shoulders to pick him up at Townhouse Apartments on Pershing. Patrolman Elmer Dolan was the driver.

Hall insisted he had most of the \$600,000 ransom with him when they left the apartment for the Newstead Street Police Station, but half of the money didn't make it. Until the Coral Court was demolished, rumors persisted that it was stashed in the wall of unit 49-A, one of the nondescript two story units added in 1951 where Hall stayed.

The money was never found, but Dolan later confessed that Shoulders and Costello had taken the money. Justice moved swiftly in those days. Heady and Hall died in the gas chamber in December. Dolan and Shoulders were convicted of perjury but Dolan later received a presidential pardon.

John Carr's son met a violent end. Bobby Carr was a Korean War hero who had worked driving a cab. His body was found in the trunk of his car on the lot of a coal mine on July 21, 1955. John Carr had been stabbed in the heart and shot four times. Carr's estranged wife had been living with the suspect. Also in 1955, the Coral Court was one of the St. Louis County motels targeted by an absurd and politicized investigation into the operation of tourist courts. Nothing came of it.

The Coral Court thrived through the 1960s, when a swimming pool was added. But Interstate 44 was completed to St. Louis in 1971 and Watson Road became MO 366.

The motel turned to short term rates to survive. Those rates were originally intended to allow truckers to get some rest. But instead, they helped make the Coral Court the most famous of the "No-Tell" motels. It even became somewhat hip to say one stayed there, whether that was true or not. A bumper

sticker read "Your Place, My Place or the Coral Court." Novelty key chains were produced for Room 69. Guests walked out with anything that said "Coral Court" on it, from ashtrays to towels.

John Carr died at the age of 83 on April 12, 1984. His wife Jesse took over operation and married Carl Williams, a long time employee. She nearly sold the property to developers on two separate occasions but each time decided to soldier on with the motel. But maintenance began to suffer. The Coral Court Preservation Society was formed in May 1978 in a bid to save the landmark. Due in large part to the work of preservation historian Esley Hamilton, the Coral Court was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on April 25, 1989. Syndicated columnist Elaine Viets also joined the preservation efforts. But the place needed at least \$1 million in repairs and Jesse put it up for sale with the stipulation that a buyer would have to tear down the motel. She couldn't bear to see it deteriorate further. It didn't help that Marlborough was looking for additional tax revenue from the site.

In the end, the units were badly vandalized. Huge holes appeared in the walls, where the glass blocks had been busted out and air conditioner units removed. The once proud Coral Court became a haven for vagrants. It was heartbreaking when Jesse ordered the sign out front destroyed despite several offers to purchase it.

On May 1, 1995, the fate of the Coral Court Motel was sealed, as Conrad Properties bought the site for construction of 45 homes new homes in the Oak Knoll Manor Subdivision. Spirtas Wrecking got the demolition contract and erected a sign that said "It's Checkout Time at the Coral Court. No More One Night Stands." Roadies who loved the place failed to see the humor. Demolition was completed on June 11, 1995. Jesse Carr Williams died on October 15, 1996.

A group of about 20 volunteers salvaged one of the structures just ahead of the bulldozers. There wasn't enough money to move the unit intact so the materials were placed in storage at the Museum of Transportation. Part of the salvaged structure was erected inside the automobile building at the museum in 2000 complete with an old Cadillac partly sticking out of the garage. Items from the CCM can also be seen at the Route 66 Museum in Times Beach.

In 2004, Bill Boll and Shellee Graham completed their award winning video documentary "Built for Speed: The Coral Court Motel." Memorabilia, photos, furniture and signs from the roadside icon were also prominently displayed in 2016-2017 as part of the Route 66: Main Street through St. Louis exhibit at the Missouri History Museum in Forest Park. It was also featured in the documentary produced in conjunction with the exhibit.

My favorite Coral Court story was told by Michael Wallis to Shellee Graham in her book Tales from the Coral Court. In 1990, Wallis was on the road promoting his landmark work Route 66: the Mother Road when he appeared on KMOX-AM in St. Louis. Wallis said that the host called the Coral Court "A monument to adultery." But a listener describing herself as an "old lady" called in.

The woman said that in 1941 she spent her wedding night with her high school sweetheart after they ran off to get married before he shipped out with the Marines. Wallis told Graham that the woman said, "We spent the night wrapped in each other's arms." The woman said she could remember every single second with the lights and the sound of traffic in the distance. They said goodbye the next morning at Union Station. She never saw him again. Her new husband was killed in the Pacific and came home in a coffin.

The woman continued that she remarried and raised a family but she crossed herself when driving by the Coral Court as if it were holy ground, thinking of the young man she married and their short time together. It's hard to read the story or hear Wallis tell it and not choke up just a little. And that's just one of countless stories that show the Coral Court wasn't just a "No-Tell Motel." It was a very special place, an old friend to remember lovingly.