

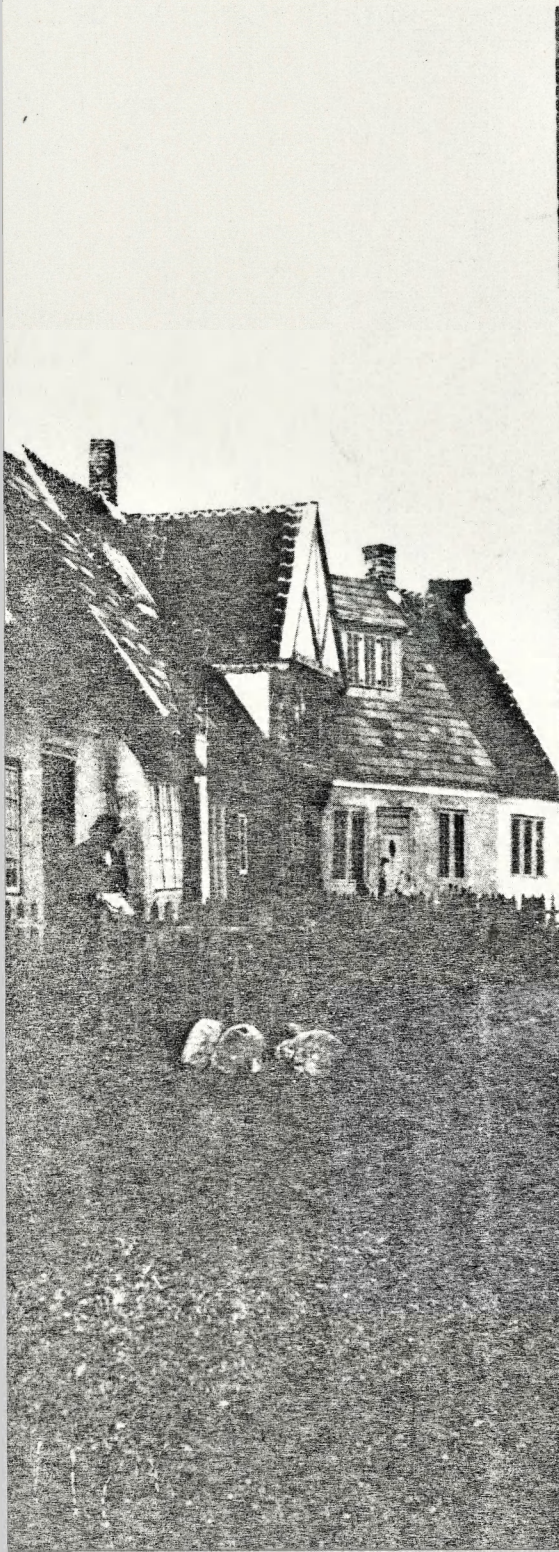
MAINE'S "DANISH"

Greater Portland's first "motel" offered early motorists something

Driving through the timelessly beautiful Scarborough Marshes to where Route 1 rises toward Portland,

you come upon a strip of nonesuch service-industry architecture. Unless you are in need of food, lodging or

fuel, little attention is generally afforded the surroundings, for this seems like nothing more than the



VILLAGE"

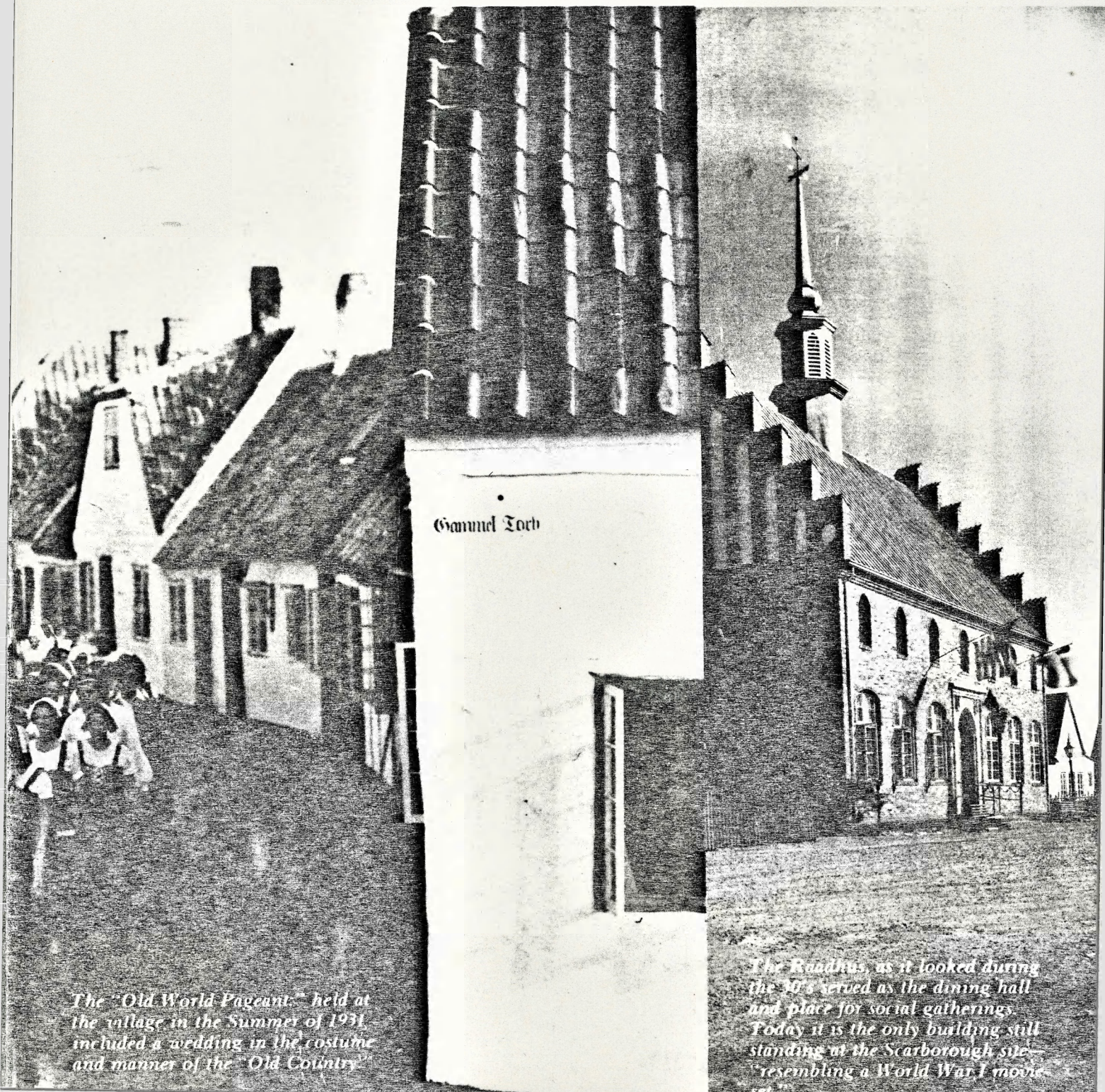
extra they probably didn't come to Maine for. by Bill Barry and Debra Verrier

kind of scruffy growth we have come to expect on the outskirts of urban areas. Such an attitude is understand-

able, but in this particular stretch, there is something worth seeing.

Set back among the trees some 100

yards from the highway, across from a scrap iron company and a motel, and just before a large bowling alley



Gannet Torch

The "Old World Pageant," held at the village in the Summer of 1931, included a wedding in the costume and manner of the "Old Country"

The Roadhus, as it looked during the 30's served as the dining hall and place for social gatherings. Today it is the only building still standing at the Scarborough site, "resembling a World War I movie set."

on the right, is an impressive ruin. This is Den Danske Landsby or The Danish Village, once the most famous and lavish of Maine's motor-courts. Here, amid crumbling brick gateways, land fill, landscaped grounds gone back to pucker-brush, and a vast red-roofed Raadhus or Town Hall, one can still grasp something of the vision that led Portland hotel-man Henry P. Rines and Boston architect Peter Holdensen to "bring the Old World to New England." The setting, on a hill overlooking the marshes, is extraordinary, and must have been even more so before the area was built up.

During the decade of the 1930's, this imaginative confection played host to "the better class of the motor-ing public" as well as to Eleanor Roosevelt, the State of Maine Garden Exhibit & Spring Flower Show, an authentic Danish wedding ceremony and an Old World Pageant. Indeed, this unique 100 unit pre-motel attracted the attention of the local press, numerous hotel and automobile magazines and even the *National Geographic Magazine*.

Looking at the Raadhus, which in its present form resembles nothing more than a World War I movie-set, one overwhelming question rises; Why would anyone in Maine have constructed a motor-court disguised

as a medieval Danish village? The answer is interesting if a bit complex.

Two central figures were responsible for the creation this Danish style tourist-court in Scarborough. The first was Henry P. Rines who, like his father before him, was the leading DownEast hotel-man of his time. In 1927, he had lavished some two million dollars on the construction of the Eastland Hotel, then the largest structure in Portland. It adjoined the famous Congress Square Hotel, which his father had opened in 1886. Together these establishments formed "Maine's largest single hotel-group."

Although Henry Rines was a modest individual who shunned personal notoriety and often spent his leisure moments splitting cord wood, he earned a formidable reputation as a "hotel-man" who took personal concern with the detail of his establishments and the comfort of his guests. During the 1920's, as the Eastland rose, Rines and his wife began touring New England with a camera in search of Colonial architecture. They had the idea that a special motor-court on Route 1 would meet the needs of Americans who were increasingly taking to the road. But for the advent of one Peter Holdensen, the complex would probably have consisted of individual cabins, and



Maine Historical Society

Once the most famous and lavish of Maine's motor courts, Den Danske Landsby was an authentic copy of the Danish village of Ribe.

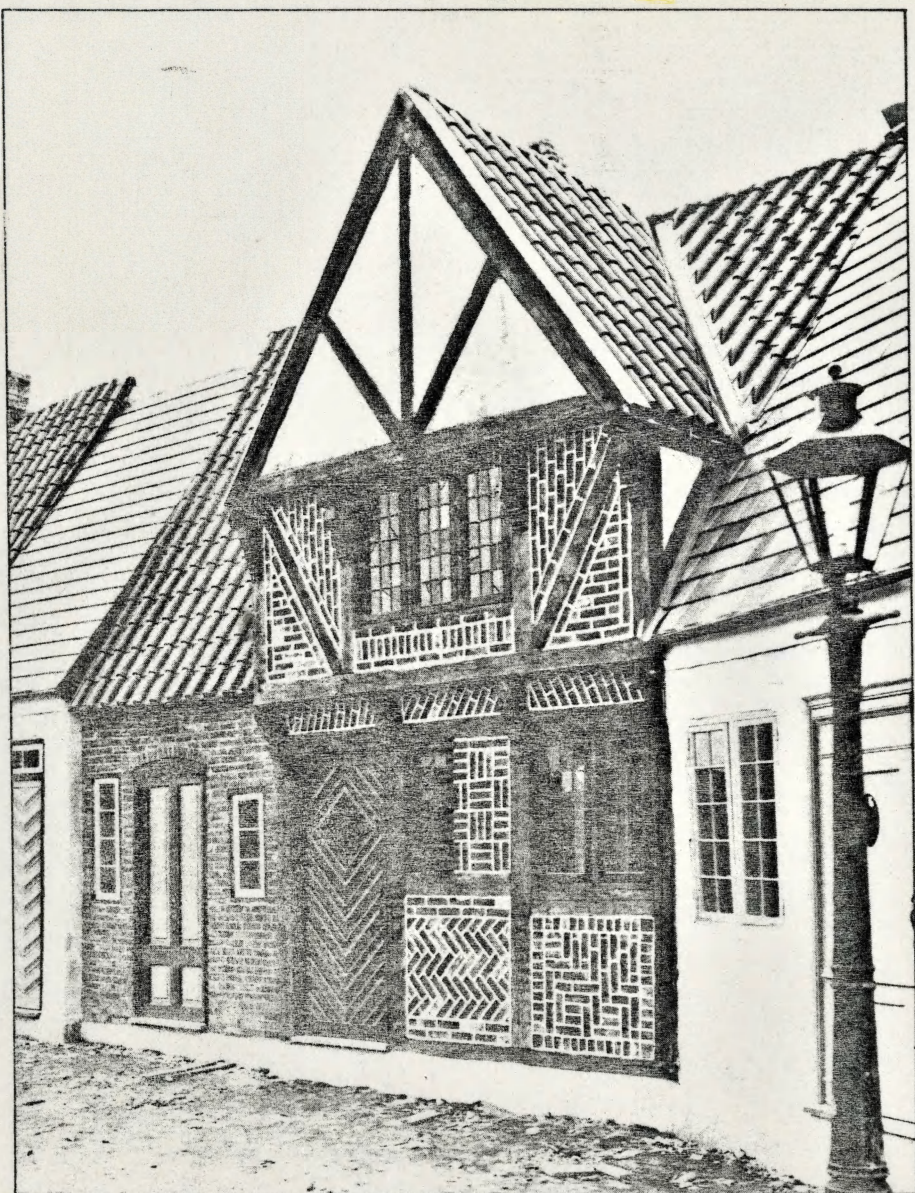
without question, the hostelry would have been "Colonial" in style and spirit.

Herbert Rhodes was the architect for the great Eastland Hotel project, but it was the Danish-American architect and designer Holdensen, who created the hotel's Danish Tea Room. Rines was clearly impressed by both the man's work and his knowledge of European architectural styles. He mentioned his intention to build a Colonial Village and asked if Holdensen was interested in designing such a complex. He was, but with one radical change. The architect pointed out that New England buildings were generally built as single family dwellings. To connect simple Cape-

style buildings would look silly.

Instead, Holdensen turned to the historical urban architectural groupings of his native land. As a model, he chose the Danish village of Ribe and asked his sister to provide photographs of the buildings there. Medieval towns like Ribe grew almost organically, and homes were built, for defensive and other reasons, against each other.

The Scarborough motor-court units were likewise constructed as five chains of little houses, grouped around a Raadhus and central fountain. In this premier era of roadside attractions, a Danish Village seemed a show stopper. Great attention was given to detail. A statue of Niels



No two of the units were the same in terms of size, shape or structure. Inside, the oak woodwork and medieval frescos added to the authentic atmosphere.

Ebbenson, the Danish patriot of 1340, stood proudly above the large fountain and a real stork's nest — complete with wooden stork — was imported for the rooftop perch. No two units were the same in terms of size, shape, and external and internal color scheme. As Holdensen wrote in the *Portland Evening Express* of 3 November 1930:

"This is the atmosphere we have tried to introduce in 'Den Danske Landsby' with its crooked streets, sagging roofs, variety of chimneys, weather vanes, bird houses, and the great variety of windows from ancient leaded, to the semi-modern. The front doors are copies of actual Danish doors, and so throughout, the greatest care has been exercised to hold to the spirit, but making no sacrifice of comfort in the rooms. A beautiful fountain has been constructed in the 'Square' copied from one of the old Danish cities. This faces the Raadhus . . . which is very true in style. The town council chamber has been turned into a large dining hall and place for social gatherings. The beamed ceiling, wainscotting and woodwork, generally, is in oak. The beams are ornamented, and the walls are decorated in real medieval fresco, conforming to the general style and time of the town.

When the extensive painting pro-

gram has been carried out, and the final touches applied to the buildings, walls, gates, etc., we hope to show a little bit of Denmark dropped into a Maine hillside."

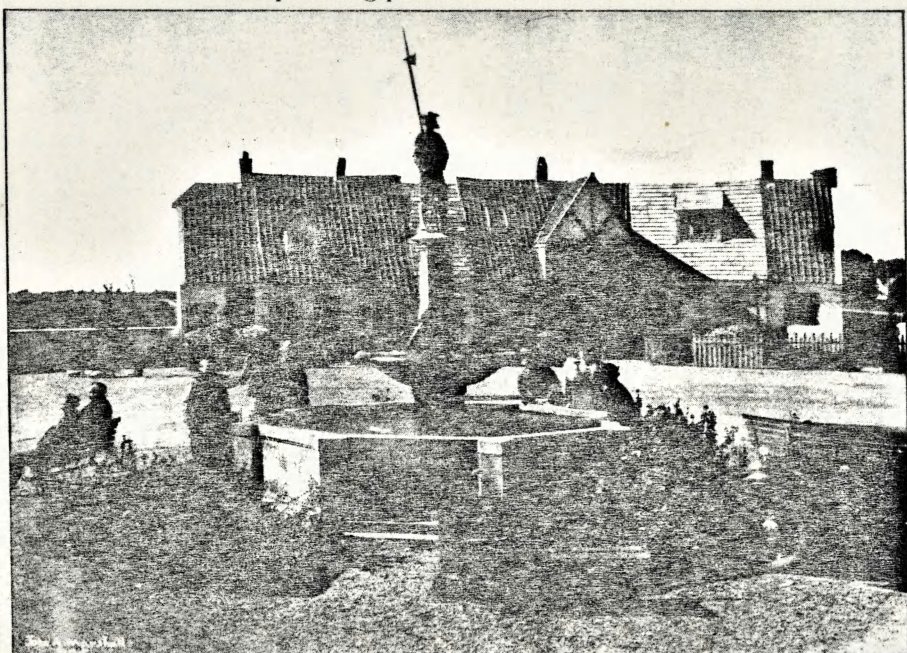
By turning to the Middle Ages for inspiration and as a design source, Peter Holdensen arrived at a connected series of units which soon came to typify the modern "motel."

Since Den Danske Landsby attracted such notoriety in national magazines, it no doubt played a significant role in the transition from individual cabin units to connected rooms.

Writing as a critic for the magazine *Highway Host* in May of 1936, C.W. Giddinge termed the operation:

"Unquestionably one of the most outstanding tourist cottage developments in the East, the Danish Village is a model of convenience and accessibility. Every luxury to be found in the best hotels, better than the average home affords, the cottage units are ever bright and cheery. Spacious parking grounds are available within a few steps from the lodging quarters, and several fully equipped garages are not far out along the concrete highway."

Continual references are made to "better class" motoring parties and travellers and, indeed, among those that stayed there was First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt on her way to Campobello. But as Giddinge pointed



A statue of Niels Ebbenson, the Danish patriot of 1340, stood on the fountain in the central square. Attention to detail made the village a "real show stoppa."

out "no one can consider himself excluded for financial reasons." In 1934, a dollar and a half procured all services for a single patron.

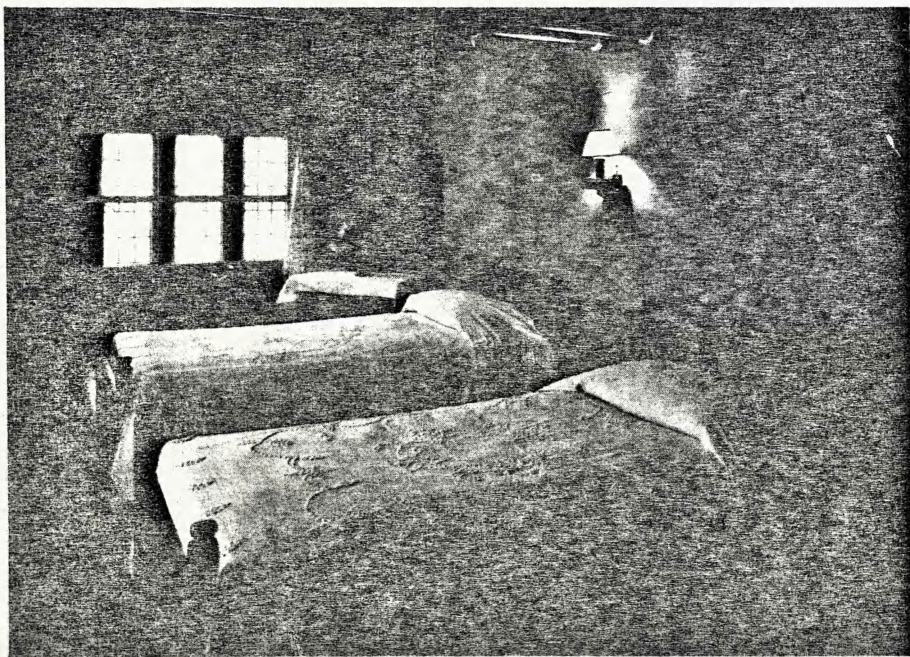
It is perhaps curious that the heyday of the Danish Village coincided with the Great Depression. Under the Rines management, successful attempts were made to bring events to the Village year-round and accordingly, the Raadhus was opened to business conventions and social gatherings. In the summer of 1931, during the "Old World Pageant," Ruth Nickerson and John Olesen exchanged vows in the costume and manner of the Old Country, an event covered widely in the press. In May and June of 1934, area residents were treated to the "State of Maine Garden Exhibit & Spring Flower Show," complete with an attractive catalogue and map of the grounds. In 1937, Paramount Pictures utilized the Village as a set for a Santa Claus short feature.

Throughout the 30's, the Village remained a popular and successful venture; a product peculiar to the times. But the Second World War led to a curtailment of automobile travel, in the face of gasoline and tire rationing, and the business closed. Rines leased the units to the government as housing for South Portland ship yard workers, but this project was a boondoggle from the start. Progress in converting the rooms into apart-

ments went slowly and after thousands of dollars of work, the units proved unpopular. In 1947, when fire damaged the Raadhus, the government returned the Village to the Rines family.

The following year the Rines family sold the Village, which subsequently passed through several owners as a tourist camp and restaurant in the 1950's. Apparently, it was not attended by much success, and vandalism appears to have been a recurring theme. In 1967, the Village was sold to the Milestone Foundation as an alcohol rehabilitation center, but another fire broke out the next year. By 1970, all the units were demolished and the property offered for sale.

Clearly, the Danish Village was a peculiar product of its time. A popular success during the 30's, when Americans were entranced by personal mobility and the freedom of automobile travel, its real history ended with the War. Sadly altered by the government, it emerged as a white elephant and subsequent attempts to make it pay or adapt it to new use failed. Today the Village streets are choked with weeds, the fountain is filled with rushes and all that remains of Niels Ebbenson are his feet. Still, the impressive brick Raadhus stands, as it has for five decades; a Scarborough landmark of the first order. ■



National magazines extolled the village as playing host to "the better class of motoring public." Prices were low nonetheless; \$1.50 procured all services for a single patron in 1934.