

Moodus Is a Town Halfway to Everywhere

Ted Hilton Has Made Connecticut Resort
a Place Where Laughter Never Ends

By JOSEPH F. DINNEEN

Moodus, Conn., is a small town half way between everywhere if you take your directions for getting there from the man who made it famous.



It's on the Salmon River, not far from Middletown. Some people think it had a very funny name to start with, but Ted Hilton, a very funny man, has made it a growing legend of the hotel business and a fantastic success by doing unorthodox things that keep his guests either grinning or splitting their sides.

He is a professional showman, in a sense, although he has never appeared on a stage. He came to Boston last week for a television appearance.

His hotel is called "Ted Hilton's, Moodus, Conn." It is crowded with honeymoon couples in June and September probably because the first honeymoon couple to stop there 25 years ago talked so much about Ted Hilton that other honeymoon couples decided to go there, too, until it became a fad.

He even drives the new brides out into the kitchen, decks them out in chef's cap and apron and makes them cook baked Alaskas for their husbands.

Imagine a honeymoon couple walking up to a hotel desk to find behind it a clerk wearing a battered brown derby, black shell glasses without lenses and a red bandana around his neck, inquiring blandly of the bride before she has been registered: "Is this your first marriage? There were 20 honeymoon couples there last Friday night.

He encourages them to filch the ash trays and warns them that it's all on the bill anyway, and before the bride leaves the desk she is given a red, white and black tablecloth that screams Ted Hilton's name all over it.

She is told that if she can make a bathing suit out of it before the end of the week, she can keep it. If not, she'll have to pay for it because a cut up or misfit tablecloth is no good to Ted Hilton.

As a result, it is surprising how many home-made bathing suits you'll find at other watering places shrieking "Ted Hilton's, Moodus, Conn."

Walking the Dog

There are never less than 450 guests on hand; at the height of the season 600. Every morning selected groups are called to the lobby around 7:30, and marshalled outdoors for a canoe paddle, a horseback ride, or some other outdoors exercise with breakfast along the trail.

On such occasions Ted Hilton always wears the brown derby hat, the lens-less glasses, the red bandana and leads a pint-sized dog on a thick rope leash. At some time during the tour everybody in the group has worn the brown derby and walked the dog on the outrageous leash. If they don't know each other and aren't able to get along after three hours, they're anti-social.

Throughout all this Ted Hilton is a mixture of Groucho Marx, Arthur Godfrey and Mister Anthony. He has a mortar board and academic gown to wear when he gives advice.

If anybody complains about anything from taxes to romance, he has a special supply of red bandanas specifically for crying purposes. They are so labeled and he hands them out indifferently to all who feel badly about anything.

Honeymooners Return

There is a combination of science and psychology behind all this. Ted Hilton is a born showman, a natural for radio, quick with a spontaneous quip and very witty. He likes to make people laugh; but he just doesn't care about show business.

He likes to run a hotel, and he combines both perhaps with greater profit to himself than if he did either separately. He enjoys his guests and they enjoy him. They come back year after year for more. The honeymooners of 10 and 20 years ago now bring their children.

He had no intention of going into the hotel business 25 years ago when he was graduated from Storrs College, the University of Connecticut. He majored in chemistry, but he never put it to work. He found, even while he was working his way through college, that he liked business better and had a King Midas touch for it. While he was in college he bought an automobile and started a taxi business. By the time he was graduated he owned a fleet of taxis, all new, and paid for out of their earnings.

The taxis brought him to East Hampton and Moodus. The owner of Elm Camp in Moodus watched Hilton for a season, decided he'd make a fine manager for his hotel. Hilton tried it out, then sold his taxi business and bought the hotel.

Being Original Not Easy

It was not easy for him to be funny during the depression and after the hurricane, but he survived both intact. More and more guests began coming to Moodus, and now Hilton spends nine months a year preparing for his season of three months.

Being original and funny is not easy. What he does always seems to be spontaneous, and what he says sounds casual and is always laugh provoking. Mark Twain spent hours polishing humorous nuggets and waited patiently for weeks or months for the exact moment to use it.

During the Winter months Hilton flies out to Hollywood. He can't lift his material from radio or pictures. Too many guests would be familiar with it. Hotel men marvel at his technique. There's only one like him in the business.

During the season he employs college boys and girls exclusively and he makes each one of them learn every job in his hotel, running dish washers, waiting on tables and butchering. They must be able to cook, make salads, bake or make beds. They're assigned the jobs of their choice. They're well paid; but he makes sure that the wheels of his hotel will not stop moving smoothly because a key employee is missing for any reason.

There aren't any key employees; and he's not beneath running a dishwasher himself, because, like his Summer-time employees he says: "I get the same pay no matter what I do around the hotel."