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## The Auto Rest Park

Reid Hand

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Story: "The Auto Rest Park"

Storyteller: Reid Hand

Town: Carmel, ME

NA 867 CD 571 Track 1

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Date: April 22, 1975

For several decades, one of the most popular entertainment venues in the Bangor area was a place called the Auto Rest Park located on Rt. 2 in Carmel. The Auto Rest Park opened in 1922 as a gas station and expanded under new owners (Harry Wise and his wife) in 1925. The Park offered food, lodging, and entertainment until the early 1960s when its popularity declined and the restaurant unfortunately burned down. It included a ballroom that hosted many top name bands, a broad array of rides (including a "Chair-o-Plane"), a large arcade, and the only licensed zoo in Maine at that time. The Park may be best known, however, as the place the Brady Gang stayed the night before their famed shootout with the FBI in Bangor.

Reid Hand was one of many musicians that performed at the Auto Rest Park over the years. He worked there from the 1920s into the 1940s, at times performing four nights a week as needed. He only performed as a side job, and for many of the years that he worked at the Park, he broadcast performances from the Auto Rest Park live on WABI in Bangor. (To top it off, he also had a radio show on WLBZ.) He eventually stopped radio broadcasts because it was too expensive and he felt there were too many restrictions (as he described in the story heard here). These broadcasts, made via telephone line, were something of a marvel in the early days of radio. WABI was Maine's first radio station (910 AM), and the call letters were adopted for Maine's first TV station, launched January 25, 1953. WLBZ had similar beginnings as 620 AM, and the call letters were later used for a Bangor television station.

In the latter half of the story, Hand mentioned the song "Lydia the Tattooed Lady." Written by Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg in 1939, it first appeared in the 1939 Marx Brothers movie *At the Circus* and became one of Groucho Marx's signature tunes. The lyrics explain the various - often humorous - tattoos featured all over Lydia's body. The song seems tame enough today, but the innuendo was clearly "over the line" in the late 1930s. This, however, did not seem to dampen its popularity!

In the transcript below, sections where multiple interviewers engage in conversation are summarized and marked by italics and brackets. The ellipsis marks a section of the interview that has been edited out because of an error in the original tape. As such, the conversation skips from one topic to another abruptly.

Transcript:

Reid Hand: I had played for dances no less, just chords on the piano, for a long time before I went to work [at the Auto Rest Park]. They used to have band concerts there; that was really something in those days. This fellow had come out there and built it up.

Class: What was his name?

Hand: Harry Wise. He used to have band concerts, and I used to strum on the guitar, play chords on the

piano, and all that stuff. One night they said, "Sunday night, why don't get up and sing some of those crazy songs you sing?" I said, "Alright." So I did that for fifteen years. That was an amusement park; he had a full-time caretaker for just the animals. It was a beautiful place, made up well, and he also had probably the first large arcade there was in this area. It was a large, well, I used to spend the biggest part of my time taking care of the machines in there. Then, of course, Prohibition was [over] and in May we opened up a big tent, a dance tent. And from then on it was amusement of all kinds, even to a circus in there, bringing in just a two-ring circus. Oh, I can tell you he made money! We worked, oh, I was on the payroll four nights a week if necessary. Saturday night I was free. I was, just as this picture here, someone, they gave them a season's ticket to all the Friday night dances, the person that named me the "Deacon." They used to give me all kinds of names, some I wouldn't mention in here...

Hand: I had my own band, too, that I worked. *[Conversation about the band's name, "Deacon Hand's Orchestra."]* Oh, no dancing Sunday nights. In those days you didn't do that! No, you didn't sing "X" songs *[Conversation about what he meant by this.]* I'll never forget when we had a program on the radio, and this song was published, the name of it was "[Lydia] The Tattooed Lady," and it was, there was nothing in there; you could make up your own mind, as you say. *[Aside about others who sang this song.]* We used to get more requests to sing it than any song, or almost any, and they used to, if I happened to get going on that on the air, they'd cut it off. Same as they do it on TV.

Class: Did they ever broadcast from the Auto Rest Park?

Hand: Oh, yeah. Sure, we had a direct line right into WABI in Bangor.

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Sources: Visit <http://video.mpbn.net/video/1351832212/> for a MPBN special that features the Auto Rest Park. The segment about the ARP starts shortly after the halfway mark; look for the mentions of Deacon Hand!