

# The Boston Globe

## Rhode Island via the Wayback Machine

By **James Sullivan** Globe Correspondent, May 15, 2019, 4:16 p.m.

You've heard of Throwback Thursday, the social media trend that celebrates all things yesteryear. Well, they take their nostalgia quite seriously in Rhode Island, in real life.

Take, for instance, their root beer. This summer the A&W of Smithfield — the last old-fashioned carhop restaurant in the state — is marking 100 years of the brand by offering throwback prices on select dates.

When the Smithfield franchise opened in 1960, a 14-ounce, fresh-made root beer in a frosty mug cost 10 cents. A hot dog was two dimes; a hamburger, a quarter. (Presumably, prices were even cheaper in 1919, when Roy W. Allen — the “A” of A&W — set up his original root beer stand in Lodi, Calif.) As part of a full calendar of events to celebrate the centennial, the little orange drive-in will offer 1960 prices on select #TBT dates.

Every Tuesday the A&W welcomes Cruise Night, a classic car show hosted by the local gearhead known as Cruisin' Bruce. Bruce Palmer is a radio DJ by day (early morning, actually) who also hosts dozens of car shows around his adopted state of Rhode Island all summer long.

“There's almost a subculture in the state that's very prone to nostalgia, loving things the way they used to be,” says Palmer, who left his native Pennsylvania for Little Rhody three decades ago. For example, he says, there's the running joke that Rhode Islanders like to give directions based on old landmarks that no longer exist.

“If you ask somebody how to get to a certain place, they'll say, ‘Go about 3 miles and turn right where the Benny's used to be,’” he explains. “I don't know if the folks of the state are unwilling to give up the past, or they're rebelling against modern times. But the people of Rhode Island have always been aware of, and proud of, their history.”



In North Smithfield, R.I., the Rustic Tri View Drive-In is now open for its 69th season.

In fact, a casual day trip touring our smallest state — it's not quite 40 miles across, just short of 50 miles long — can feel like an uncanny joyride in the Wayback Machine. Rhode Islanders love their clam shacks, their chowder houses, and old-fashioned ice cream shops. The logo for Del's beloved frozen lemonade, a local institution since 1948 ("Stop at the Sign of the Lemon"), is nearly as ubiquitous in the Ocean State as the Golden Arches. And in North Smithfield, the Rustic Tri View Drive-In is now open for its 69th season.

Just around the corner from Del's in the town of Warren is the Delekta Pharmacy, where they've been serving coffee "cabinets" — milkshakes made with homemade coffee syrup — since the late 1940s. The family owners stopped filling prescriptions at their Main Street storefront a few years ago, but the place survives as an old-timey soda fountain, with a pressed-tin ceiling, countertop service, and pint-size booths.

In Rhode Island, coffee flavor is a cure-all. Autocrat, the Lincoln-based company that began manufacturing coffee syrup before World War II, got a boost a couple decades back when the state Legislature confirmed something that true Rhode Islanders have known all along: Coffee milk is the official state beverage.

It's safe to say that Narragansett beer is another beverage that enjoys pride of place in local refrigerators. Fourteen years after its noted revival, the 129-year-old brewing company continues to pay tribute to its regional heritage. This year, company reps are visiting every town in the state, making weekly promotional stops at bars and restaurants. True to the old slogan — fondly recalled by longtime Red Sox fans: "Hi, neighbor! Have a 'Gansett" — the brand wants to buy every legal-age Rhode Islander a beer. For their "Buy RI" campaign, they're handing out wooden nickels, each one good for a 'Gansett on the house. (Keep an eye on the "Neighborhood Watch" page on their website for details.)

According to VP Jim Crooks, Narragansett plans to open a new brewing facility and tasting room in Providence by the spring of 2020. Among other things, the 30,000-square-foot building — a block or so from the waterfront Hot Club, one of the capital city's most popular gathering spots — will provide a place for all the vintage 'Gansett memorabilia the company has been collecting from loyal former employees.

"We're so lucky to have 130 years of history to draw from," say Crooks, enjoying a mid-afternoon pint.

But the current owners have also built some new traditions of their own, adding to the classic 'Gansett line with new craft beers created in partnership with several Rhode Island institutions. They've brewed an Autocrat Coffee Milk Stout, another specialty beer called Allie's Double Chocolate Porter (named for the popular donut shop in North Kingstown), and a summer shandy made with Del's lemonade.

After a quick history lesson, Crooks sends a Massachusetts visitor over to Nick-A-Nees, a dog-friendly, cash-only dive bar just across the water, in Providence's Jewelry District. There's a jukebox, a pool table, and shuffleboard. One clever patron has crafted little biplanes from empty Narragansett cans, which hang over the bar. The place is an undeniable throwback, another one of the many.

“From Boston,” as Bruce Palmer says, “you can be in Rhode Island in less than an hour, and it’s like you’ve gone back in time 30 or 40 years.”