



CONSIDER THE QUONSET

In praise of prefab

BY JOHN T. EDGE

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WHEN I WAS A FOURTH-YEAR SOPHOMORE at the University of Georgia, I won a three-nights-a-week security guard job at the Alpha Delta Pi house on Milledge Avenue. My charge was to sit in the sun room from around ten at night until three in the morning and make sure no other boys got inside. I think I got the post because many of my friends were members. I *know* I didn't get the job because I had any security skills.

That gig came with perks. Come summer, when the sorority house closed, I lived free in what ADPi called the Little House, a next-door bungalow. The location was ideal. From the porch, I could drink morning coffee and smell peach pies frying across the street at the Varsity Drive-In. Even better, by ten on weekdays, when the wind shifted the right way, I could smell country-fried steak, smothered in onions and gravy, coming off the line at the Chase Street Café.

Set in a retooled Quonset hut, next to a body shop, opposite a wrecker garage, Chase Street was the sort of place where frat boys in polos shared a U-shaped counter with machinists in coveralls and lawyers in seersucker. Owner Mark Hansford kept a sawed-off shotgun under that counter. He moonlighted as a cook at the county jail. On Fridays, he served chicken mull, thickened with crumbled saltine crackers and floated with butter. Living at the Little House, I came to fear Mark and love the lunchtime conversations that bounced off the corrugated metal walls of his Quonset.

BORN AN HOUR downstate from Athens, in a farmhouse built in 1814, I was predisposed to like prefabricated buildings. My mother venerated age and endurance. I rebelled in favor of ready-mades, born of assembly line production. On family road trips, I marveled at the

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tidy houses sold in Jim Walter Homes lots, imagining a life in which our windows didn't leak and tidy sheetrock instead of flaky plaster covered our walls. A fascination with Quonsets, born of trips to a nearby Army-Navy surplus store set in one of those arched steel buildings, was the next logical step.

Quonsets looked wonky and futuristic, like supersized culverts bisected longways, but the roots of the word are ancient. Quonset means boundary in the language of the Narragansett people who once lived on the land that became the Quonset Point Naval Air Station in Rhode Island. In 1941, engineers there developed the quickly assembled-building.

During World War II, the growth of the US military effort quickly outpaced its infrastructure. The military needed barracks, garages, and storage facilities—and quickly. Ten Seabees, the nickname for members of the Navy's construction



battalion, could assemble a small Quonset between the breakfast and dinner bells. The Navy built or procured more than 150,000 of the structures in a couple of years. And then the war was over.

The first wave of sales began in late December of 1945, when the federal government surplused more than 5,000 Quonsets. Small ones sold for around a thousand dollars. Elephant Quonsets (that's the term they used) cost around thirty-five hundred.

Interiors were blank and spartan and dome-ceilinged, accommodating of whatever a buyer shoved inside.

Colleges and universities bought Quonsets for temporary housing. Nashville's Music Row began when Owen Bradley opened the Quonset Hut studio in the 1950s. Until 1990, press coverage at the Master's Tournament in Augusta, Georgia, centered in a Quonset hut, set with rows of wooden tables where reporters worked. Bars and restaurants, always tight on margins and in need of cheap spaces, also turned to Quonsets.

After World War Two, nightlife in Washington, D.C. revolved around the Quonset Supper Club, home to gangsters, strippers, politicians, and a guitar-playing horse. The Silver Grill in Atlanta, famous for fried chicken, and an early beacon of gay life in that city, began in 1945 in a modified Quonset. In Stuttgart, Arkansas, the Little Chef operated in a big Quonset, serving eggs and grits for breakfast and fried quail for dinner. All have since closed.

MORE COMMON TODAY than Quonsets are restaurants set in repurposed mobile homes, Airstream trailers, shipping containers, and those prefab buildings they sell in Home Depot parking lots. But Quonsets still dot the Southern landscape.

Scroll photos of buildings erected by the Rural Studio, the Auburn University architectural lab in the Alabama Blackbelt, and you see Quonset-inspired designs. Visit Scott's Bar-B-Que in Hemingway, South Carolina, where pitmaster Rodney Scott began his career, and you'll notice that the pit room, rebuilt after a 2013 fire, is a Quonset-inspired structure designed by the Charleston architect Reggie Gibson.

When Mark Hansford closed Chase Street after twenty-eight years in business, he sold the lot and moved the hut seven miles northeast, beside his house on Highway 72 between Hull and Colbert. Since he died in 2015, the hut has sat empty. A few years back, I drove out that way. I couldn't find the Quonset,

U.S. Marines outside a Quonset hut at Parris Island, SC, 1942



Van B. Higdon Papers, WWII 184, WWII Papers, Military Collection, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC.



U.S. Navy Seabees assemble a Quonset hut at Chu Lai, Vietnam, 1966.

but I did come home with a realization.

Over the last decade, my wife Blair and I have filled our backyard with small buildings made of corrugated metal. I write in one; she paints in the other. We like the way our modern studios gesture to our shared past. Study their profiles and you recognize how our work spaces reference lean-tos and farm sheds. Made from similar materials, these vernacular buildings still line the roads of Alabama and Georgia, where we grew up, and

Mississippi where we now live.

On that drive through the countryside beyond Athens, I recognized how the metal buildings where we now work also reference the Quonset huts that captured my youthful imagination. Designed to be built quickly and just as quickly declared surplus, Quonsets have stuck around to serve other purposes, including the writing of this column, which I did under the cover of a corrugated steel roof. 🐦

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Tell me about the Quonset restaurants of your youth. And the ones that survive today. Write johnt@southernfoodways.org.