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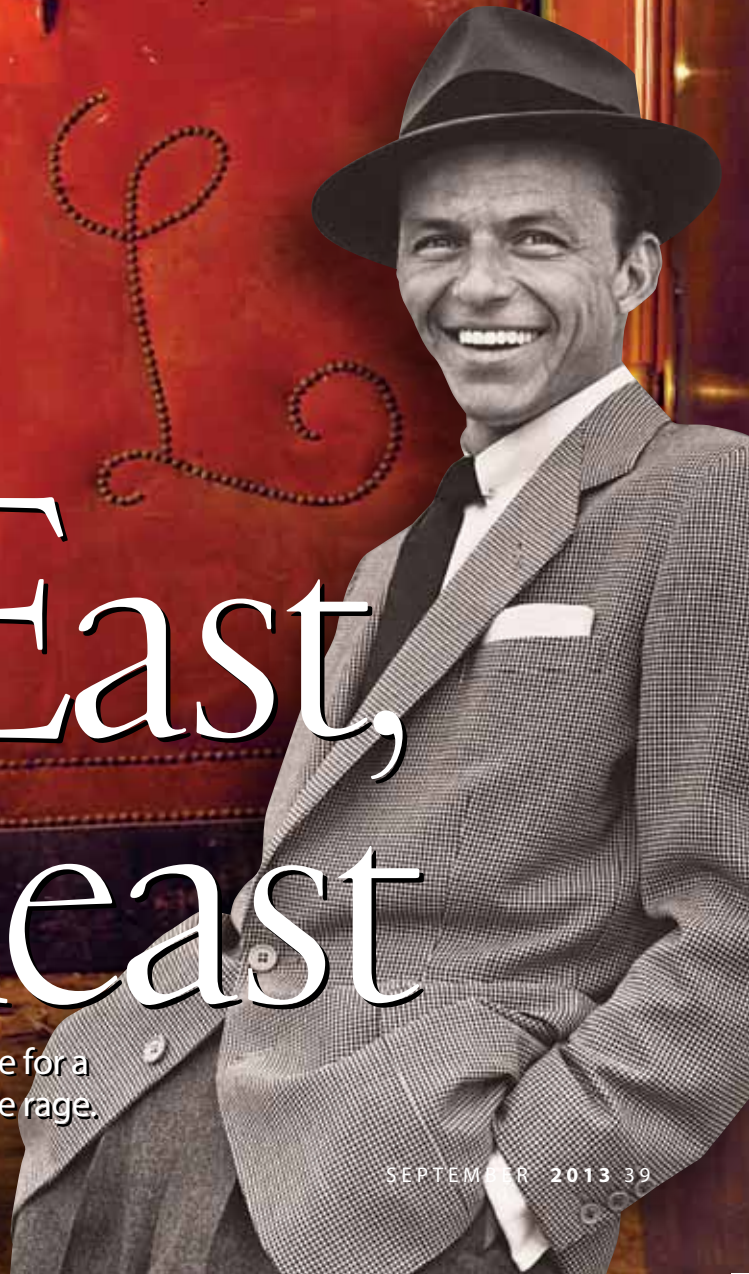
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# Near East, Downeast

Time was, Maine nightclubbers would walk a mile for a camel...because Middle Eastern decor was all the rage.

BY COLIN W. SARGENT



FROM TOP: RANDY HAZELTON; MEAGHAN MAURICE; FILE/CAPITOL RECORDS

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## VANISHING MAINE



**T**o visit the swankiest nightclub in Maine, you have to pass through a set of red doors.

The Morocco Lounge was a dine-and-dance attraction in the Wadsworth Hotel on 30 Preble Street. Built in 1924, the building still stands today and is known as Wadsworth Apartments, but the Morocco Lounge is long gone.

"My grandfather owned the hotel," says Dr. Kerry Citrin. "My father, Murray Citrin, was manager." From the late 1930s until the early 1950s, Murray "ran the nightclub and tended bar."

Cocktails included the Magic Carpet, the Turban Lifter, and Sultan's Favorite. Anyone out there know the recipes?

"My mother, Elinor Citrin, was the hat-check girl!" says Kerry's sister Nancy Citrin Rosenberg (Deering High School, 1965) from her home in St. Petersburg, Florida.

"It was a happening place. We had some big names in its heyday," including the Sid Lerman Orchestra. Other nights, Murray tickled the ivories. "He could really play. Believe it or not, I have the piano still! It's dark mahogany, a Kimball from Chicago. My dad was the arranger and conductor for a good deal of the music. It's beautiful. Listen!"

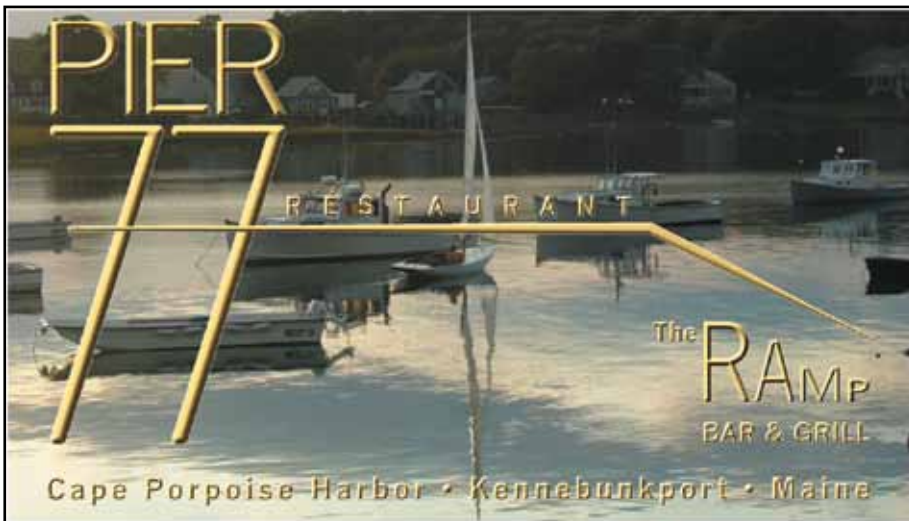
Nancy walks down two flights of stairs



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY SARA SVETKEY (3); RANDY HAZELTON

First page: Leather-upholstered, decoratively studded swinging doors and a forgotten matchbook scavenged on eBay are among the detritus of the Morocco Lounge, the 1940s hot spot where a callow Frank Sinatra once sang after a gig with the Dorsey Brothers' band.

This page, clockwise from top left: At the Morocco Lounge, youthful manager Murray Citrin and his wife Elinor bookend Murray's parents, Wadsworth Hotel owners Eva and Jacob Citrin, with Murray's sister-in-law, Edith Citrin (her husband Mike handled promotions and decor); Edith at the coat check; Mike and Edith's daughter Roberta Citrin and a friend share a little VIP nightclub glamor at a "reserved" table in the early 1950s; Portland event promoter Keith L. Citrine, nephew of Murray and Mike, sits among his souvenirs of a bygone era—chairs, tables, candlestick, and glassware from his family's trendy club. "I have shot glasses at my camp that I partied with during college," Keith recalls. "I was just having fun in my 20s. I had no idea how cool they were."



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## VANISHING MAINE

and there's a pause. Then she strikes a ghostly chord that puts chills down your spine when you think of what the Morocco Lounge used to be. She's spot-on. The sound is as good as any transporter or time machine.

Murray died in 1992, at age 74. Elinor died on April 14th of this year, at 95. "How she loved the Morocco," Nancy says. The memory keepers are gone, but the story lives on.

Featuring "dancing every evening," the supper club was "divided into the main lounge and the club section on a mezzanine," according to advertisements from the late 1940s.

At just 22 in 1940, "My dad was The Man," Kerry says of Murray, "but my Uncle Mike handled the decor and the promotions."

Mike was talented, designing everything from the Moorish frescoes in the Casablanca vein to the menus and souvenir matchbooks.

"The Morocco was very romantic. The chairs were wooden with leather seats. When you entered through the red leather doors you'd see my mother at the hat check, then the polished maple bar would be straight ahead. To the left was more seating and the decor of what an idealized Morocco looked like. There was a dance floor, with the band up on a box.

"We had magicians and exotic dancers, women who danced with snakes. The talent agency my father used for big bands was out of Boston, Sam Rudiberg."

In a nutshell, the Morocco "was *it*, a huge attraction for sailors during World War II—you could count on maybe 100 when a new ship was in port." Visible as a series of long, dark silhouettes in Long Island Sound, "the North Atlantic Fleet was up here!

"People would dance, see the floor show, and drink. Rudy Vallee stopped by, with friends," Kerry says, "but he didn't sing."

Then Old Blue Eyes walked in.

### FRANKIE BOY...SINGING IN THE MOROCCO LOUNGE IN PORTLAND? GET OUT OF TOWN!

"Frank Sinatra was better known as the new kid with the Tommy Dorsey Band back then," Kerry says. "He'd just started with them, and one night, after a playing at Old Orchard Beach Pier, he came to the Morocco. It was way before he became famous. My father heard he was there and introduced him on the microphone, and Frank just got up



Autograph  
June 6  
me 1940

Frank Sinatra

## The Morocco Lounge's 1947 cocktail menu entices with Turban Lifters, Sultan's Favorites, and Magic Carpets.

and did an impromptu. He sang some songs." What songs? "Night and Day?" "Under My Skin?"

"Who knows?" Kerry says. There's a devilish pause. "I guess he did pretty well for himself after that."

The story checks out. On a thread on [sintrafamily.com](http://sintrafamily.com), Sinatra's swing through New England is documented with the Dorseys in late August through early September: "[He was in] Salem, New Hampshire, for a one-nighter with the Dorsey band on August 30, 1940. (On subsequent nights, they performed in Lynnfield, Mass.; Old Orchard Beach, Maine; and Neponset, Mass.)," writes George Lyons of Malden, Massachusetts. "My Auntie Florence, 16 at the time, got her FS autograph at the 1940 Neponset gig." Lyons, a Sinatra impersonator, has kindly provided an image to show how the future Chairman of the Board used to sign his name back then.

"One night," Kerry says, "some sailors came in and they said they'd sunk a German U-boat ten miles off the harbor. Everybody in Portland had heard the booms and explosions in the distance earlier that day."

Seems the Morocco Lounge had a knack for being in the right place at the right time.

In the lounge's twilight, "I was seven, so I remember the magic feeling of walking into the club," Kerry said. "My sister was three



Clockwise from top left: Frank as a fresh-faced young singer; Sinatra's autograph is a family souvenir shared by George Lyons, a Sinatra impersonator from Malden, Massachusetts, whose Aunt Florence obtained it when Sinatra toured Neponset, near Boston, just days from his Portland/Old Orchard stop in late August/early September 1940. The Morocco Lounge once lit up the Wadsworth Hotel at 30 Preble Street; today, the spot houses Down Home Cookin' at street level and the Wadsworth Apartments on the floors above; "priced to sell" in 1955, a newspaper ad boasts an "ultra smart cocktail lounge" with "the largest dance floor in the city."

# VANISHING MAINE



Putting the sheik in chic: The State Theatre's decor is a work of dreamy Arabian art restored to its original 1929 glory.

years younger."

"I remember it was dark inside," Nancy says. "I remember there was a stage where the acts used to perform."

Then there wasn't.

"My grandfather sold the hotel in 1955," Kerry says.

When we went in search of vestiges of the old Morocco Lounge, we found, after a walk through a dark basement below Down-Home Cookin' and a climb through a lost set of stairs, the original red leather doors with brass upholstery tacks spelling out "M" and "L." They are so vivid you can nearly hear the music. The original nightclubbers would have had to have taken a left from the main lobby to reach this point, which can only be gained via the basement today. The red doors are forever locked away behind a skeleton staircase.

"Well, I have some of the tables and chairs in the basement of my house in Cape

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Elizabeth,” says Keith Citrine, a cousin to Kerry and Nancy. “The tables have heavy metal bases. I also have some of the shot glasses, photos, and a sheaf of promotional materials.”

Which isn’t surprising, as Keith makes his living as an event planner today.

**M**y father was Nate Gold, of Nate Gold and His Commanders,” says Scarborough’s Bob Gold, who would rise from working at the Graymore Hotel across the street as a maître d’ to one day becoming the owner of WPOR radio. “Nate and his band performed regularly at the Morocco Lounge for years.

“Nate was born in Minsk, Russia, in 1912. He played trumpet—extremely good—I think of Harry James and Louis Armstrong. It was a combo; the drummer Bill Conley’s day job was at the U.S. Postal Service. He lived up in Munjoy Hill. My father lived in Deering.”

RANDY HAZELTON

The Morocco Lounge was so evocative “even the teapots” carried the North African motif.

The competing Graymore Hotel had a nightclub, too, “but it was more modern. The Morocco was leaning into the French Morocco” sense of things. “It was intimate,” Gold says.

If it was so great, then why did it die?

“After World War II, something happened to Portland,” Kerry says. “There were no more sailors.”

**MOOR, MOOR, MOOR—HOW DO YOU LIKE IT, HOW DO YOU LIKE IT?**

At 609 Congress Street in Portland, the interior of the State Theatre swept moviegoers away with its fanciful Moorish interior, vaulted tiled ceilings, and decorative painting. Visitors in 1929 felt as though they’d walked into *The Arabian Nights*.

Much of this decor is still in place, though many patrons don’t catch the feeling full

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VANISHING MAINE



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force. "I see it now," a State Theatre regular exclaims upon seeing our photo in this story. "Usually when I'm at the State, I'm just thinking about the show, getting a beer, or going to the bathroom."

**DINE LIKE AN EGYPTIAN**

Up on Congress Square, the Egyptian Room, 1927, adorned the Eastland Hotel. Chief among the amusements were the spectacular wall panels [to suggest stone carvings] of King Pepi II and Queen Sebek.

Frederic L. Thompson, in *The Rines Family Legacy* (Acadia Publishing, 2005), cites a page from the Egyptian Room's 1936 menu, which claims that "This [Egyptian] dining room is believed to be the first, if not the only public dining room of its type in America." Thompson ventures, "The motif was an attempt to capture the excitement of the recent archeological discoveries in Egypt and to forget the horrors and sadness of the First World War."

The blogger who styles himself "Dr. Sphinx" and insists "Egyptomania is a cure for boredom" considers "tea at the Egyptian Court" at the Eastland to be the apotheosis of retro-cool. Looking for something more substantial? According to faded

Eastland menus, in 1927 you could order a Lobster Newburg en Casserole for \$2.25 in the Egyptian Dining Room. (No doubt, the Egyptian Room at the Eastland was the inspiration for the New Egyptian Room at the Ferris Arms Motel on 44 College Ave. in Waterville, with "cocktails—dancing nitely 9 to 12." This oasis reached a peak between 1963 and 1973 and featured a United Nations Buffet in the Banquet Room.)

**WHAT IT ALL MEANS**

In these enlightened times, if the idea of exoticizing the Near East makes us culturally uncomfortable, how do we account for the Tiki torches smoldering from patios all over Maine today, suggesting Polynesia?

Sometimes fun is just fun. If there's anything deeper about the phenomenon, Douglas C. Towne excavates it in his wonderful essay, "A Retro Magic Carpet Ride," in *SCA Journal* (Spring 2009), in which he mentions Maine's largest city first as an exemplar of Arabian kitsch:

"For most of the 20th century, the Near East captivated Americans, its influence extending coast-to-coast. Countless owners of motels, restaurants, and nightclubs bet their economic futures that naming their business after elements of this region would bring

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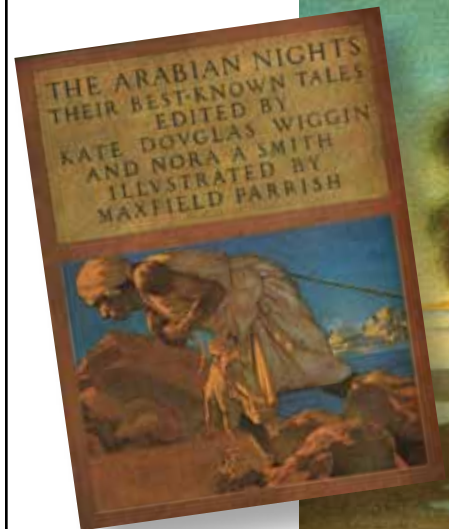
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## VANISHING MAINE



**YOUR WISH IS MY COMMAND—** Maine author Kate Douglas Wiggin, of all people, edited a version of *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, illustrated by Maxfield Parrish, and first published in 1909.

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success. Namesakes included place names (Morocco Lounge in Portland, Maine), monuments (Luxor Motel in Danville, Illinois), historical figures (Cleopatra Lounge in Omaha, Nebraska), literary figures (Ali Baba Club in Oakland, California), and natural features (Sands Motel in Vaughn, New Mexico)."

Exactly when did the mysticism sweep us up? Towne traces the fascination to 1855, when "the USS *Supply* sailed to the Mediterranean in search of camels" ...for experimental use in the Southwest desert by the U.S. Army. Thirty-three were brought here, Towne reports. The project was abandoned, but the camels went wild and thrived as their legend grew: "The last camel was reportedly captured in Arizona in 1946, though some were seen in Mexico as late as 1956." (Maybe we should take another look at the Desert of Maine in Freeport.)

### WILL THE REAL LITTLE EGYPT PLEASE KEEP GYRATING

Then, too, America fell in love with Egypt during the famous 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, according to Towne. "The most renowned tale...was that of the dancer, 'Little Egypt,' who is alleged to have made her debut at the 1893 Exposition. To capitalize on the success of the attraction 'A Street in Cairo,' after the Exposition closed, a number of dancers, all calling themselves 'Little

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS/MAXFIELD PARRISH (2)



Egypt,' toured the country, performing in burlesque halls to scandalous acclaim."

#### REBECCA OF SUNNYBROOK PYRAMID

Araby was so chic 'up this way' that famous Maine novelist Kate Douglas Wiggin (*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*) responded to market pressures and redirected her energies to edit a new version of *The Arabian Nights*, with gorgeous illustrations by Maxfield Parrish.

But the cultural event that sealed the deal was the return after World War II of U.S. troops who had served in the North Africa Campaign, Towne says.

Today, while Portland has a hookah club (the Purple Caterpillar on Exchange Street) and sells hookahs at Ebenezer African Grocery on Congress, the phenomenon is on the wane. We follow other stars now. "Perhaps because our relationship with the culture is more problematic, influenced by the region's political issues and 9/11," Towne claims.

On the other hand, Near East reverberations still direct our unconscious decisions. We have *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, Rick's Café in Naples, the Sahara Club (an oasis of sobriety on Washington Avenue), and... hey, the Maine College of Art isn't called MECA for nothing! ■

» For more, visit [portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2013/08/near-eastern](http://portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2013/08/near-eastern).

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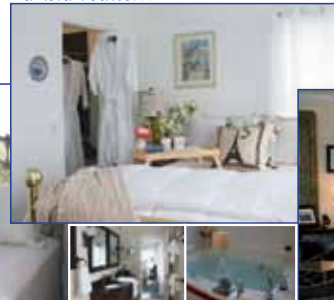


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