

Post-War Rapid City Tourist Cabins, Tourist Courts, and Motels, 1945-1972

Between World War II and the 1972 flood, tourist cabins, tourist courts, and motels represented the most visible sign of the city's postwar economic boom. They were also the most distinctive commercial structures in Rapid City. In their design, signage, and advertising, these businesses reflected the mid-century imagination and pragmatism of a generation of local entrepreneurs as well as various romantic visions of the American West that appealed to the families and individuals who came to spend a few nights and tour the Black Hills region.

Usually owned and operated by husbands and wives, many of whom had grown up on farms and moved to the city during the Great Depression, these businesses flourished in an era before the emergence of national brands in the lodging industry. They provided entrepreneurial opportunities for local residents, jobs for maintenance workers and maids, and buyers for a host of contractors.

Today, some of these structures have been adaptively repurposed by a new generation of entrepreneurs to provide affordable housing for some of Rapid City's most economically challenged residents. This essay explores the history of the postwar lodging industry and the subsequent use of these structures for short- and long-term housing in the community.

Lodging for a Night

The advent of the automobile, especially relatively inexpensive models like Ford's Model T, combined with the construction of highways, inspired the Good Roads movement in the early 20th century. The affordability of assembly-line vehicles allowed middle class families to travel on vacation in unprecedented numbers starting in the late 1920s. With the construction of Mount Rushmore and the establishment of several state and national parks, the Black Hills became a major destination for these travelers as well as a stopping point on the way to Yellowstone National Park, Denver, or Minneapolis.

Catering to the needs of these travelers, cities opened campgrounds with amenities like bathrooms, camp stores, and recreational amenities to attract automobile tourists. To earn extra income, some homeowners offered rooms to travelers. Meanwhile, entrepreneurs improved on the tourist camp model by building rough individual cabins for individuals, couples, and families. Some of these cabins were stand-alone units on the homeowner's property. Others might have more than a dozen structures.

The new tourist camps proliferated along the main entrances to town, especially on East North Street. They also radiated from downtown along St. Joseph, Omaha, and West

Main. In addition to lodging, some owners added roadside diners or operated gas stations on site. Meanwhile, other entrepreneurs created roadside attractions like Reptile Gardens.²³⁷

Highway improvements were critical to the growth of the tourism industry. By 1937, tourist camp operators, for example, were optimistic that the state highway department would complete work on a “dustless” highway across the state that would encourage more visitors to come to the Black Hills.²³⁸

A *Rapid City Journal* survey in the spring of 1937 documented 24 “active camps” in and around the city with 342 cabins and cottages in total.²³⁹ The largest camp in the city, Baken Park, had 65 cabins with room trailers as well.²⁴⁰ The *Journal* touted the improvements that owners were making: painting and redecorating interiors, laying sidewalks, and upgrading landscaping and signage. Much of this work was done by the owners themselves.

In the prewar years, many of these entrepreneurs had grown up in farm country and were comfortable with basic construction and manual labor. Some had moved to Rapid City when the farm crisis of the 1920s was followed by the Great Depression. Fred and Florence Freeman, for example, homesteaded near Hermosa in 1907, but in 1929 they moved to Rapid City and later opened the Freeman Tourist Court at 125 East Boulevard North.²⁴¹ Their development was one of more than a dozen tourist camps and courts along East North that catered to tourists entering the city from the east. At 702 East North, Howard Irwin erected eight log cabins and a café in 1937.²⁴²

Notably, women played an important role as entrepreneurs in this era in combination with husbands or as solo operators. Mrs. E.C. Baken operated the Green Acres Tourist Camp on the west side of town in 1931 with 15 cabins.²⁴³ Anna Devine opened the DeVine Modern Log Cabin Camp at 1325 St. Joseph that year. Bess Dawkins and her husband Lewis, a Rapid City pioneer, owned the Dawkins Tourist Camp near the fairgrounds in the 1930s. When her husband died in 1936, Bess carried on the enterprise through the end of the war.²⁴⁴

In the years just prior to the war, the visitor industry in Rapid City began to organize. In 1939, the Black Hills and Badlands Association was established to promote the region. Hoping to encourage tourists to stay longer, the association also encouraged property owners to improve accommodations.²⁴⁵ Tourist camps evolved to become tourist courts. “Modern” cabins included private bathrooms and other amenities.

²³⁷ See Suzanne Barta Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles: Black Hills Tourism, 1880–1941* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2009).

²³⁸ “Tourist Camp Owners Improve Properties: Expect Good Year,” *Rapid City Journal*, April 24, 1937, 3.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ “Mrs. Fred Freeman Dies Thursday; Rites Set Monday,” *Rapid City Journal*, April 25, 1952, 4.

²⁴² “Tourist Camp Owners Improve Properties.”

²⁴³ “Tourist Totals of Last Two Years About Same,” *Rapid City Journal*, January 1, 1931, 3.

²⁴⁴ “Lewis Dawkins, Pioneer, Dies,” *Rapid City Journal*, May 26, 1936, 2. Dawkins moved to Odessa, Kansas in 1955. She died in 1982. “Odessa,” *Kansas City Times*, February 26, 1982, 42.

²⁴⁵ See Barta Julin, *Marvelous Hundred Square Miles*.

Although some new construction took place during the war, limited supplies of building materials and the decline in tourism due to gas rationing restricted the expansion of the industry. Some existing owners filled their units by housing individuals or families associated with the new Rapid City Base, which became Ellsworth Air Force Base in 1953.²⁴⁶

After the war, existing business owners and would-be entrepreneurs were optimistic that greater prosperity throughout the region and the country would reinvigorate tourism. Tourist courts continued to improve with shared amenities and updated interiors.²⁴⁷ The Arneson Cottages on St. Joe, for example, featured knotty pine walls, western-themed bedding, and rustic furnishings.²⁴⁸ World War II veterans like Gerald Gill and Marvin Beach opened the Gill Motel and the Motel Beach in 1954.

As family incomes rose in the 1950s and tourism boomed, owners continued to upgrade their accommodations. Tourist courts became motels. Dozens of new structures were built along the main arteries in and out of town. Some were developed by existing owners who modernized their accommodations to keep up with market demand. Freeman's Tourist Court, for example, became Freeman's Western Motel, featuring 22 modern air-conditioned units with cooking facilities, refrigerators, and a playground.²⁴⁹

As the local industry grew, lodging owners organized the Rapid City Tourist Court Association to present a unified voice on issues affecting the business. Formed in 1936, the association grew significantly after the war.²⁵⁰ By January 1948, the association had 42 members out of a total of 65 tourist courts in the city.²⁵¹ A critical housing shortage in Rapid City after the war and across the nation put tourist operators at the heart of controversies over rent controls, especially for the long-term, off-season shelter they provided.²⁵² In 1950, the association also pushed for the construction of a swimming pool in Roosevelt Park that would serve visitors to Rapid City.²⁵³ The association was so successful it hosted the national tourist court convention in Rapid City in 1950.²⁵⁴ But in keeping with changing industry of automobile tourism, the organization changed its name the following year to become the Rapid City Motor Motel Association.²⁵⁵

²⁴⁶ The Gate City Camp became home to the newly married Pfc. Edward Allen and his wife Bernice Haynes in 1943. Kitty Arnold, "Society," *Rapid City Journal*, June 30, 1943, 6.

²⁴⁷ E.H. Lighter, "City Building Program Three and a Half Million for 1946," *Rapid City Journal*, March 15, 1946, 5.

²⁴⁸ Arneson Cottages postcard, Patrick Roseland Collection, nd. The earliest citation for the Arneson Cottages in the *Rapid City Journal* is from June 1, 1946.

²⁴⁹ Freeman's Western Motel postcard, Patrick Roseland Collection, nd.

²⁵⁰ "Motels Play Big Role in Hills Economy," *Rapid City Journal*, May 1, 1955, 11. The association may have been formed in March 1935 as the Black Hills Tourist Camp association. See *Deadwood Daily Pioneer-Times*, March 16, 1935, 2.

²⁵¹ "Tourist Court Club Convenes," *Rapid City Journal*, January 12, 1946, 4. See also, "Tourist Court Group Favors Winter Decontrol," *Rapid City Journal*, January 9, 1948, 2.

²⁵² "Controls Go Off Tourist Courts and Hotels—No Drastic Boosts Foreseen," *Rapid City Journal*, February 14, 1947, 1.

²⁵³ "City Motor Court Operators Ask Pool Construction Now," *Rapid City Journal*, January 31, 1950, 4.

²⁵⁴ "Rapid City Eyed For 1950 Sessions," *Rapid City Journal*, May 12, 1949, 2.

²⁵⁵ "Local Motel Association Boosts Good Roads Program," *Rapid City Journal*, January 16, 1951, 3.

Meanwhile, the business continued to grow. Between 1947 and 1948, for example, existing operators added 75 new cabins and five new owners built 45 cabins.²⁵⁶ By 1955, when lodging institutions joined in the first nationwide Motel Week, there were 95 licensed motels and motor courts in Rapid City, representing one-seventh of all of the motels in the state. With 1,959 rooms, they offered shelter to an estimated 5,500 tourists and their families on any given night. Over the course of a year, according to the *Rapid City Journal*, they accommodated 2.3 million visitors.²⁵⁷

In an era before the consolidation of the lodging industry into nationwide chains, motels were small and locally owned. In 1955, the average Rapid City motor court had 12 to 15 units. The largest was the Baken Park Motel. First opened in 1920 by William Baken, the business had 86 units in 1955 and was known for its huge [cottonwood] trees. That year, however, plans were in the making to transform Baken Park into a 60,000 square foot shopping center to serve the growing population on the west side of town.²⁵⁸

Motels were an important part of Rapid City's economy. Rates were based on the number of people in a party. For a family of four, they ranged from \$8 to \$15 a night (\$76.33 to \$143.12 in 2019 dollars), and business was booming. In 1954, for example, local entrepreneurs added 200 new rooms. With construction costs running from \$4,000 up to \$8,000 a unit, the industry accounted for between \$800,000 and \$1.6 million (\$76.3 million to \$152.7 million in 2019 dollars) of total commercial construction.

Most motels were owner-operated and provided employment and a livelihood to not only the husband and wife who ran the establishment, but also to service staff and maintenance workers. In 1955, the industry employed approximately 300 people on an annual basis; during the summer months, employment doubled.²⁵⁹ That year, annual payrolls were estimated to be \$1.25 million (\$119.3 million in 2019 dollars). Owner-operated establishments could return 15 to 20 percent in profits to the proprietors.²⁶⁰

Many motels contracted out for laundry services like Rapid City Laundry and Dry Cleaners. They purchased supplies, including soap, toilet paper, and linens from local dealers and wholesalers. To advertise their businesses, they ordered post cards, match books, and neon signs, most of which were supplied locally. As the *Rapid City Journal* noted, most hotels carried insurance policies for public liability, fire, and workers' compensation, most of which were provided by local insurance agencies.²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ "Tourist Court Industry In Boom Here," *Rapid City Journal*, February 17, 1948, 2.

²⁵⁷ Jack Cannon, "Constant Improvement To Serve Traveling Public Keynotes Week," *Rapid City Journal*, May 1, 1955, 11.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. In 1955, the Baken Park Motel was operated by former mayor Neil Briggs, who bought the business in 1946. "Million Dollar Shopping Center May Be Erected," *Rapid City Journal*, March 25, 1955, 1.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

Motel Construction and Design

As entrepreneurs responded to the increase in tourism after the war in the tradition of the pre-war years, they built rustic, stand-alone or attached tourist cabins or “cottage courts” that were inexpensive to build. Many Rapid City establishments catered to the romantic view of the West that many travelers expected and desired. Prior to the war and in the immediate postwar years, exteriors featured logs, rough-wood siding, or stucco “adobe-like” finishes. Interior walls were covered with knotty pine. Many, like Price’s Motel on East North, were associated with service stations.

As the lodging industry grew in the immediate postwar years, many owners shifted from individual cabins to building one long structure to save as much as 50 percent on the costs of construction.²⁶² Owners focused on the economy traveler offered few amenities in either the design of the motel or the facilities.

The revolution in building materials after the war, however, soon led to improvements and changes to the look and feel of lodging establishments. Tourist cabins and tourist courts gave way to modern motels in the 1950s that featured stainless steel, aluminum, and larger windows (especially in the main office), as well as two-story construction with amenities like swimming pools, television sets, air-conditioning, full-service restaurants and bars.²⁶³ With these changes, *Architectural Forum* proclaimed in 1953 that the industry was showing “signs of maturity.”²⁶⁴

The Interstate and the National Chain

The development of the Interstate Highway system in the late 1950s and the rise of national hotel and motel chains posed an existential threat to the small owner-operated local motel. For years, travelers had relied on travel guidebooks, like those published by Duncan Hines and the American Automobile Association in the late 1940s, to increase their confidence that a motel room would be clean and safe. With the advent of national brands in the industry, early pioneers like Howard Johnsons and Holiday Inn used print and broadcast advertising to communicate service standards that gave them a competitive advantage in local markets.²⁶⁵ National chains became so ubiquitous by the late 1970s, that local owner-operated motels either went out of business or affiliated with the chains and increasingly lost their sense of local character and identity in the process.

By the 1980s, many of the smaller, independent motels constructed during the postwar boom were struggling in Rapid City and across the country. In 1981, the president of the Rapid City Motel Association was the manager of the Howard Johnson’s Motor

²⁶² See Troy Paiva, *Lost America: The Abandoned Roadside West* (St. Paul: Motorbooks International, 2003).

²⁶³ Michelle L. Dennis, “Post-World War II Architecture in South Dakota,” Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society / South Dakota State Historic Preservation Office, 2007, 31–32.

²⁶⁴ “420 Million Spent in ’53 On Motels,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 1954, R7.

²⁶⁵ “Big and Better Motel Trend Lures Chains,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 30, 1956, A6.

Lodge. That year, the group became part of the Rapid City Area Hospitality Association and the small independents were less able to be heard in economic planning circles.²⁶⁶

Increasingly the owners reoriented their businesses to meet the housing needs of low-income residents of the community. Over the next three decades, many only drew attention from the community when they were the site of a violent crime. In the 1990s, the city, the health department, and the police department looked for ways to collaborate with the owners to ensure that these residences offered safer shelter. During this time, many of these businesses were razed and replaced by more modern motels or by other businesses. Still, many of these structures have survived.

Preservation

In Rapid City today a number of remaining structures reflect the postwar boom in owner-operated tourist courts and motels in Rapid City. East North Street, which used to be the primary highway into town for generations, is still home to the Corral and the Ranch House Motels, as well as the historic structures from the Cozy Cottages. Nearby, on North Maple, the building that was once the Model Motel provides affordable housing to residents while down the street the Avanti Motel has been upgraded to serve visitors and local residents. On East Omaha, the Evergreen Motel is now the East Omaha Lodge. On Jackson Boulevard, the Garden Cottages is probably one of the most intact examples from the postwar era. Meanwhile, on Sturgis Road, the Marco Motel has evolved to become the Family Inn, and on Canyon Lake Drive the structures that were once part of L'il Audrey's Motel provide long-term housing for individuals and families. Over the last several decades, these businesses have shifted away from tourism and more frequently offer short and long-term inexpensive lodging to blue collar workers and low-income families.

²⁶⁶ "Davis Re-Elected Head of Motel Group," *Rapid City Journal*, October 22, 1981, 5.

Documentation

As a part of this project, VPHS developed a spreadsheet that includes references to more than 120 historic tourist camps, tourist courts, and motels. Due to the high number of these businesses in Rapid City and the incomplete nature of records documenting their history, this document does not include a full table. A draft research document was provided to the RCHPC to assist with a more detailed future survey.

Contemporary Photos

Corral Motel (c. 1940) – 210 East North Street.



Ranch House Motel (c. 1946) – 202 East North Street.²⁶⁷



²⁶⁷ Construction date drawn from: Rapid City Planning Department, Commercial Properties database.

Avanti Motel (c. 1965) – 102 North Maple Street.



Former Model Motel – North Maple Street.



Former Cozy Court buildings – East North

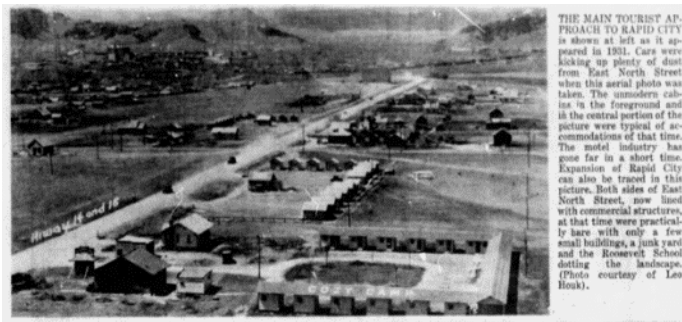


Historical Photos

Horseshoe Motel

308 E. North Street. In 1945, John and Almeda Moses quit farming after 29 years and moved to Rapid City to operate the Horseshoe Motel.²⁶⁸ This location is now Auto World Auto Sales. [No remaining structures from the motel.]

Entrance to Rapid City along East North Street in 1931. Tourist cabins at Cozy Camp on the right. (*Rapid City Journal*, May 1, 1955)



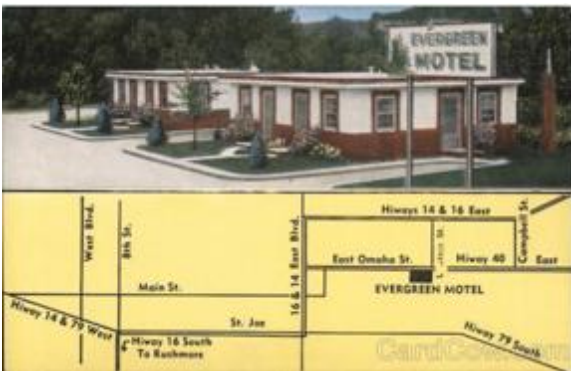
²⁶⁸ "John H. Moses," *Rapid City Journal*, October 9, 1978, 5.

Rapid City Journal, May 1955



Evergreen Motel

525 East Omaha Street (Highway 40). (c. 1953). In 1955, the business was operated by Victor and Gladys Pengra.²⁶⁹ Today, this is the East Omaha Lodge.

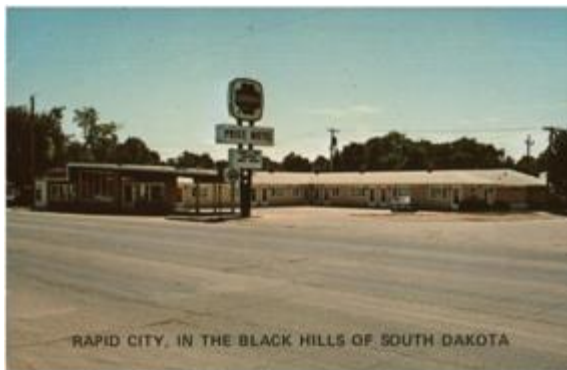


²⁶⁹ Display advertisement, *Rapid City Journal*, May 6, 1955, 4.

Jensen's Pine View Court (later Jensen's Motel)
1916 Mt. Rushmore Road.



Price's Motel and Standard Service
Established in 1938.



Open House for National Motel Week, May 1955. (*Rapid City Journal*, May 6, 1955, 10.)



De Vines Court

Patrick Roseland Collection



Cozy Court Motel

Patrick Roseland Collection



Corral Motel

Patrick Roseland Collection



Historic postcard (eBay) (1957)



Historic postcard (eBay)



Garden Cottages Motel

Historic postcard, Garden Cottages Motel (1968)
Patrick Roseland Collection



Garden Cottages Motel
Google Maps (2021)



Rushmore Motel

207 St. Joe. (c. 1941). Operated by Mr. and Mrs. Earl Updike in 1941.²⁷⁰

Patrick Roseland Collection



Lake Park Motel

Patrick Roseland Collection



²⁷⁰ Beverly Pechan and Bill Groethe, *Remembering Rapid City: A Nostalgic Look at the 1920s Through the 1970s* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2002), 26. See also, *South Dakota History* 35 (2005), 326.

South Town Motel

2018 Mt. Rushmore Road
Patrick Roseland Collection

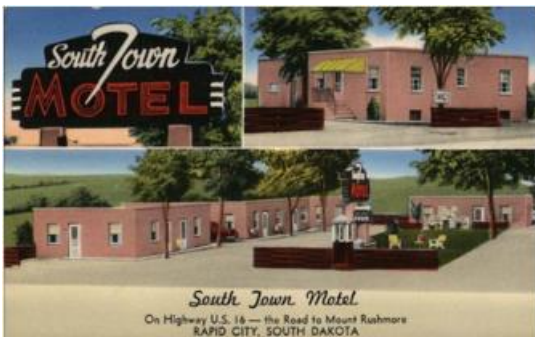
Motel ownership continued to be attractive to servicemen in the 1950s. When he got out of the Army in 1955, Eddie Mayo purchased the Southtown Motel from Charlie and Marge Schmitt.²⁷¹ Site is now the Pioneer Bank and Trust.



Rapid City Journal, May 8, 1955.



Patrick Roseland Collection



²⁷¹ “Eddie Learns About the Motel Business,” [advertisement], *Rapid City Journal*, May 8, 1955, 14.

Town 'N Country Motel
Patrick Roseland Collection



Freeman's Western Motel
103 East North Street, current location of Parkway Laundry.
Patrick Roseland Collection



Traveler's Motel

407 East North Street. (c. 1952)

Patrick Roseland Collection



Lazy "U" Motor Lodge

2215 Mt. Rushmore Road. Opened in 1957.

Patrick Roseland Collection



Google Maps (2021)



Rapid City Journal, December 17, 1957

AZYU MOTOR LODGE
"Your Home Away From Home"

**Rapid City's Newest, Most Modern Motel, Is
 OPEN FOR BUSINESS**
 at 2215 South Eighth St.

15 SPACIOUS SUITS
 7 Doubles
 8 Singles

Radio-Phone Equipped... Individual Air-Conditioning
 ... Refrigerator... Electric Fan... Bathrooms equipped
 with complete 24-hour service...
 Telephone in Each Room

Your Own Large One-Step Car Wash
 The Largest in South Dakota

"BRIDAL SUIT" FEATURED

Ceremonial Suits and Gift Shop
 Specially Made for Mrs. Schaeffer

Mr. and Mrs. Lester Sellenberger
 2215 South Eighth
 Rapid City, S. D.

Horseshoe Motel

308 East North Street. (Prior to 1951)

Patrick Roseland Collection



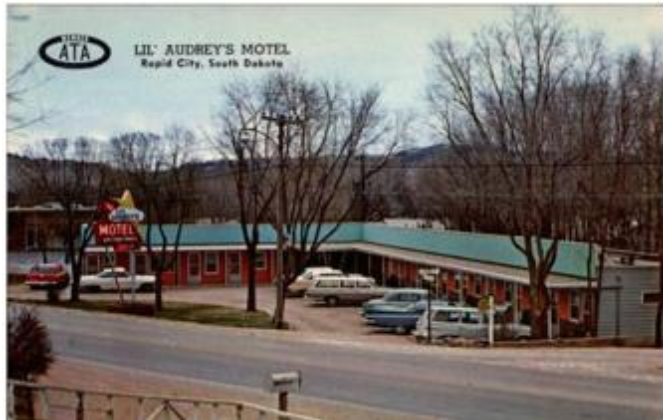
Google Maps, 2021



Lil' Audrey Motel

4007 Canyon Lake Drive. (Prior to 1951). Owned and operated by “Maurice, Audrey and Roger.”²⁷²

Patrick Roseland Collection



Google Maps, 2021.



²⁷² Display advertisement, *Rapid City Journal*, May 6, 1955, 4.

Cozy Court

402 East North Street. (Before 1951)

Patrick Roseland Collection

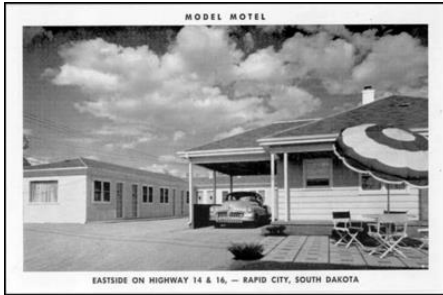


Google Maps, 2021



Model Motel

508 North Maple. Circa 1951 or earlier.
Patrick Roseland Collection



Model Motel building, 2021



Motel Rapid

3515 Sturgis Road (1953)
Patrick Roseland Collection



Google Maps, 2021