The Legacy of Women Leaders In Hawai‘i’s Travel Industry
By Richard Kelley

Last week, many of the veterans of Hawai‘i’s Travel & Tourism industry gathered to celebrate the life of Myrtle Chun Lee, who recently passed away at age 85. A veteran of our industry since the end of World War II, she rose to become the first woman president of a major Hawai‘i corporation, Island Holiday Tours and Amfac Resorts Hawaii, in 1973.

In a beautifully written article, Honolulu Star-Advertiser tourism writer Allison Schaefers described how Myrtle started her career by working in her grandmother’s Ah Hee Poi Factory in Hilo. Her grandmother rewarded Myrtle’s long hours and hard work by funding a scholarship at the college of her choice. Myrtle chose the Pierce School of Business in Pennsylvania and, with war clouds on the horizon, left Hawai‘i on the SS Lurline for an unknown future around 1940.

After the end of World War II, Myrtle got a job at International Travel Service (ITS), Hawai‘i’s first accredited travel agency, which had been founded in 1946 by Bob MacGregor, Bernice Char Loui and former Honolulu Star-Bulletin sports writer Leong Hop Loui. The main office was in downtown Honolulu but they opened a Waikiki branch in the Outrigger Canoe Club's street-front retail arcade. It was located just about where the Bell Desk of the Waikiki Outrigger on the Beach now stands.

I can remember Bob MacGregor reminiscing about those early days. He proudly recalled there were just three people working in the ITS Waikiki office – himself, his wife Emalita, a feisty Castilian raised in Manila, and Myrtle Lee. “Hardly a customer left the office without buying SOMETHING,” Bob would often brag.

ITS added a wholesale tour division, Trade Wind Tours, and Myrtle quickly rose to become operations manager. In 1958, Lyle Guslander recruited her to work for his tour company, Island Holidays, which, over a period of time, became one of Outrigger Enterprises’ largest sources of guests. Island Holidays was also a competitor in the hotel business. Starting with the Coco Palms on Kaua‘i, over some years it added the Kauai Beach Boy, the King Kamehameha and Keauhou Beach hotels in Kona, and the Holiday Isle and Beachcomber hotels in Waikiki. Myrtle Lee was involved in many of the details of their operations.

I told the Star-Advertiser’s Schaefers that Myrtle Lee was a no-nonsense, very outspoken lady, not afraid to tell you where she stood on anything. I admired her spunk and take-charge attitude.

I also mentioned to Schaefers that the Hawai‘i Travel & Tourism industry seemed to nurture the development of a number of strong women leaders. As Saturday Briefing readers know, my mother, Estelle Kelley, was certainly one of those. The photo on the next page from the 1950s shows her relaxing with other female leaders in Hawai‘i’s visitor industry, when all those in the photo except Estelle worked for Trade Wind Tours.
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Grace Buscher was another dynamic travel industry pioneer. In 1953, without any hotel experience, she took a job at Guslander’s Coco Palms Hotel on Kaua‘i. She must have really made an impression on him – he married her. Grace’s instinctive understanding of hospitality and guest relations set her – and the Coco Palms – apart from the ordinary. She embraced the Hawaiian culture and added any number of great touches to the property’s décor and activities, making guests feel they were in a real Pacific paradise. Grace, in 1979, was the first woman to win the Man of the Year award at the International Hotel, Motel and Restaurant show in New York. She was inducted into the Hawai‘i Hospitality Hall of Fame in 2007.

Annalie Tatibouet was another woman who played a strong role in Hawai‘i’s travel community. She and her husband, Joseph, opened the 15-room Royal Grove Hotel on Uluniu Avenue in 1948, just a year after Roy and Estelle Kelley opened the Islander Hotel a few blocks away on Seaside Avenue. That was the start of the company now known as ASTON Hotels & Resorts. Annalie had great faith in the future of Hawai‘i’s tourism industry and went out on a limb, borrowing the money to expand the Royal Grove to 85 rooms. According to her family, “She was a hands-on general manager – as well as housekeeper, reservationist and engineer in those early years.” In 2009, she too was inducted into the Hawaiian Hospitality Hall of Fame.

After reviewing a draft of this article, Jane Tatibouet, Annalie’s daughter-in-law, said, “When I arrived in Hawai‘i in 1964, I quickly met each of these pioneering women and they, both directly and indirectly, became examples for me. They showed me how, here in Hawai‘i, women could truly contribute their talent and energy in what was then a man’s world. They set the bar high for the young ones, as I was then. I have long been very grateful for all that these ladies passed on to me with their great accomplishments! Having known every one of them, I think that while they would be flattered by this article in Saturday Briefing, they might, to a person, say something like, ‘I was just doing what I saw could and should be done. I enjoyed every single day of it.’”

Yes, Myrtle Lee, Bernice Loui, Grace Buscher, Estelle Kelley, Annalie Tatibouet and others set the bar high and inspired many. We’ll look at the lives of other women leaders in Travel & Tourism in future editions of Saturday Briefing.

References: