Waikiki Beach Walk®

Current Honors and Memories of the Past

As reported in David Carey’s article to the left, the Hawaii Chapter of the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties recently honored Outrigger Enterprises Group for the development of Waikiki Beach Walk. It is a great honor, and I wish to add my sincere thanks and heartfelt congratulations to everyone who worked on this enormous, complex project.

That said, I must confess that every time I visit Waikiki Beach Walk and look at the throngs of people visiting the shops and restaurants, my mind always flashes back to the history of the area, and what it was like during my youth and even before that. I have recounted some of that history before, but I hope that, given the recent award, the following will be of interest to the readers of Saturday Briefing today.

In 2008, few remember that in the early 1900s, Waikiki was a bedroom community for the downtown Honolulu commercial area. A trolley, first drawn by mules and later powered by electricity, carried young executives and office workers from Kalakaua Avenue in Waikiki to their Bishop Street offices in less than 30 minutes. They enjoyed the open-air ride, and after work, they could take a swim in Waikiki’s gentle waters or visit the bars and restaurants that were scattered about, even in those days.

As the demand for housing grew, a gentleman by the name of Percy Pond subdivided the property makai of Kalakaua Avenue and between Lewers Street and Saratoga Road. Since there were very few automobiles in those days, and those that were around were not very big, the streets Mr. Pond laid out were narrow. He did include small alleyways behind the houses, possibly for trash collection, and remnants of those paths can still be seen today in some of the undeveloped lots near Waikiki Beach Walk.

Many small homes were built in the area, some of which were rented out as vacation cottages. The tenants, who generally arrived for long stays on a Matson steamer, had close access to Waikiki Beach by means of the pedestrian right-of-way that still exists on the Diamond Head side of the Outrigger Reef Hotel.

It all changed when World War II ended in 1945. As demand for hotels gradually increased, Roy and Estelle Kelley, who found success with their new five-story walkup, the Islander Hotel on Seaside Avenue, turned to the Lewers Street area for their next project. They acquired, from the Buscher family, a small parcel of land with several cottages bounded by Beach Walk, Lewers Street, and Kalia Road. The cottages facing Lewers Street were turned into shops, and the bungalows at the corner of Kalia and Beach Walk were torn down to make room for the six-story, 100-room Edgewater Hotel. As the first modern hotel built in Waikiki after World War II, it received a lot of attention, especially because it featured two amenities no other hotel had – an automatic elevator and a swimming pool. Air conditioning was not needed in those days, as the rooms were cooled naturally by the tradewinds filtering through the louvered doors and window jalousies.

Roy and Estelle Kelley operated from open desks in the lobby of the Edgewater Hotel. Roy greeted guests on arrival and sketched plans for his next project on an ever-present 5-1/2” x 8-1/2” pad of paper. Estelle battèd out a steady stream of letters on a manual typewriter, confirming reservations, and mailing them to the mainland with three cent stamps. During school vacations, my sisters Jean and Pat and I worked there too.

The Edgewater Hotel was an instant hit. In the early evening cocktail hour, beachboy Splash Lyons entertained poolside on his steel guitar. The lush gardens between the cottages created an authentic tropical ambiance. Movie stars and entertainers, such as John Wayne, were frequent guests, forsaking the then-stuffy Royal Hawaiian Hotel, where jackets and ties were de rigueur after sundown.

During the summer of 1953, while the second wing of the Edgewater Hotel was under construction, Roy Kelley and I were driving home one day, when an out-of-control vehicle heading toward Waikiki hit us head-on, just below the Diamond Head lighthouse. We were both severely injured, particularly Roy, who suffered a badly broken leg. After surgery to realign the bone fragments, the doctors strung him up in a huge cast with pulleys and weights attached to an overhead bed frame and told him he would spend the next several months in Queen’s Hospital.

Roy had a better idea and ordered one of the rooms of the Edgewater Hotel turned into a hospital suite, complete with adjustable bed and private nurse. From there, as he convalesced, he supervised the work on the new wing and kept in close contact with employees and guests. He was President of the Hawaii Hotel Association at the time and gave the opening speech for the group’s convention via telephone patch from that bed. As his leg healed, Roy gradually regained his strength, thanks to daily swims in the Edgewater’s pool. He even took a scrub brush along to clean the pool’s scuppers, while he went through his hydrotherapy routine.
From that point on, Roy and Estelle gradually acquired more of the cottages that lined Lewers Street. Some were used as vacation rentals, while others were converted into restaurants or shops.

The Edgewater Hotel needed space for guest parking, so when the lot across from Beach Walk was acquired, all the cottages but one were torn down. That cottage was used to store the tile destined for the Outrigger Reef Hotel, then under construction, but there was still enough room between the boxes for two beds. These were occupied by a couple of summer interns from Cornell Hotel School, Chuck Feeney and Chuck Rolles.

Chuck Feeney later went on to found the worldwide retail giant called Duty Free Shoppers. The tale of his life, how he became a billionaire and then gave away almost all his wealth to charity was recently published in a book titled *The Billionaire Who Wasn’t: How Chuck Feeney Made and Gave Away a Fortune Without Anyone Knowing.*

Chuck Rolles married my sister Jean, and the two of them started the Chuck’s Steak House chain of restaurants, with its first location in the Edgewater Hotel. Chuck’s Steak House in the Outrigger Waikiki is still one of Waikiki’s best restaurants and is now undergoing renovation.

Gradually, Roy and Estelle replaced the cottages along Lewers Street and Saratoga Road with taller, concrete buildings, including the Coral Seas, Waikiki Village, Waikiki Tower, Reef Lanais and Reef Towers. Other individuals built the Royal Islander, Edgewater Lanais, Malihini Hotel, and Islander Waikiki. For the most part, property owners in the Lewers area were on friendly terms and would frequently drop in to each other’s offices for coffee and a chat. It was a pleasant, peaceful way to conduct business and quite a contrast from today’s world of Internet, text messaging, and e-mail.

As the owners of the Lewers Street parcels retired and passed on, Outrigger Enterprises Group gradually acquired their projects to put together the land parcels that now make up Waikiki Beach Walk.

As you look at Waikiki Beach Walk today, it might be difficult to imagine the halcyon days of Lewers Street 100 or even 50 years ago. But for me, having personally witnessed the early growth of this area in the heart of Waikiki, it is easy to visualize the cottages and Roy’s scratch pad, and even hear the keys of Estelle’s manual typewriter tapping away.

I wish Roy and Estelle could see it now. I am sure they would approve.