Memories
Saying Goodbye to the Edgewater Hotel

This week, my sister Jean Rolles, my son Dr. Chuck Kelley, and I stood on the upper floor of a nearby parking garage and watched as a huge mechanical arm started to chip and nibble away at the concrete on the upper floors of what used to be the Edgewater Hotel. The operator was an artisan. A bite here, a bite there. A balcony disappeared. Then a wall, followed by a floor, and soon a room was gone.

The process will continue until all of the 200 rooms, lobby, shops, and restaurant are turned into a pile of rubble and twisted steel ready to be hauled away.

It was a bittersweet moment, and we all felt a mixture of joy and sadness as we shared memories. Jean and I recalled the opening the Edgewater as though it were yesterday. The year was 1951. World War II had ended, and, in spite of the new war in Korea, early peace talks were in progress. The mood in Hawaii—and throughout the nation—was one of optimism and hope. A record 50,000 visitors were expected in Waikiki, a dramatic increase from a total of just 22,000 visitors in 1929, the year our parents Roy and Estelle Kelley came to Hawaii. And, the stunning, six-story, 100-room Edgewater Hotel—the first modern building to go up in Waikiki after the war—was ready to serve them.

The Edgewater was truly a first-of-a-kind hotel in many ways. It was the first Waikiki hotel with an automatic elevator and a huge swimming pool—an idea Roy Kelley was told would never work since the hotel was less than a block from the beach. No air conditioning was needed. The trade winds blew through the hallways and into the rooms through louvered doors.

It was also the first hotel to offer a relaxed, Hawaiian-style alternative to the rather stuffy Royal Hawaiian Hotel, where the dress code called for jackets and ties in the evening. The Edgewater’s lush gardens created an authentic tropical ambiance, and legendary Hawaii entertainers—such as beach boy Splash Lyons—performed poolside nightly, creating a festive, aloha-filled spirit that permeated the entire hotel.

In short, the Edgewater Hotel quickly became “the” in place to stay in Waikiki and was the hotel of choice for many VIPs, dignitaries, and movie stars.

My sisters and I watched as our parents poured heart and soul into turning their dream—a quality hotel featuring Hawaiian-style hospitality that was affordable for working families—into reality. They succeeded and immediately started to add a second 100-room wing.

As we watched the demolition proceed, Jean and I laughed and shared a few tears recalling some of the events that marked the Edgewater’s first decade.

We talked about John Wayne, who stayed there several times when he was in Honolulu to vacation or make a movie. One night he found himself locked out of his room in a rather embarrassing state of undress. My sister Pat came to his rescue and got our father Roy to let him back into his room.

In 1953, while the second 100-room wing of the hotel was under construction, my father and I were in a terrible automobile accident on Diamond Head Road. I was patched up and returned home in a few days, but Roy had a broken leg and faced weeks of hospitalization with traction. He was undeterred and ordered a hospital bed installed in one of the rooms in the not-quite-completed new wing of the Edgewater. (He did not want to use a room in the completed wing that might be rented to a paying guest.) From there, he
could keep in touch with his construction crew and his office in the lobby. As president of the Hawaii Hotel Association, he addressed the membership at its annual meeting by telephone from his bed.

My sister Jean, still in high school, took up residence in the room next to Roy's. One night, with Roy still only slightly mobile and reliant on a cane, Jean was hanging up her clothes in her closet when she saw the eyes of a peeping Tom staring at her through the louvered door. She screamed, ran, and jumped over the balcony rail to Roy's room. Roy leaped out of bed, limped out the door, and started down the hall bellowing, “I'll get the #%%&*.” Only then did he realize he was not going to get very far given the pain in his leg, the lack of a cane, and the fact that he was stark naked!

Later, as Roy's leg healed, he needed exercise and physical therapy to restore his strength. He achieved this with daily swims in the Edgewater pool. Not wanting to waste time, he scrubbed the pool's tile, brush in hand, as he worked his way around the perimeter.

Young Bob Herkes, then in his 20s but now a member of the state House of Representatives, worked at the Edgewater Hotel. He recalls that he was put in charge of renumbering the rooms to accommodate the new wing. Bob drew up an elaborate plan that included guest notification and would have taken several days to complete. Roy, in his usual direct style, said sharply, “Throw that *%%&* away. Get a screwdriver and just go and change the numbers.” Bob meekly did just that and had the job finished by the end of the day.

My future wife Jane and I both worked in the Edgewater during summer breaks from school. I manned the Front Desk, while Jane handled the old-fashioned plug switchboard nearby. I can also recall the two of us working in the basement, unpacking and assembling the lamps for the new wing.

Down the corridor, Norma Nishimoto operated a small barbershop where labor leader Eddie Tangen and I had our hair cut for decades. (I am sorry to report that Norma passed on about a year ago.)

In the mid-1950s, Jean and her future husband, Chuck Rolles, attended Cornell Hotel School, and in 1958, after Chuck was discharged from the Navy, the pair vacationed in Hawaii for a month prior to Chuck's starting a job in Binghamton, New York. The newlyweds had second thoughts about returning to the long, bitter winters of upstate New York. They convinced Roy that he should allow them to start a small restaurant in the corner of the Edgewater lobby used primarily by card players in the afternoon. Roy agreed, and the Chuck's Steak House chain was born.

The young couple lived in one of the Edgewater's penthouse units, and after their son Scott arrived, Jean would take him downstairs to the restaurant in the afternoon where she could keep an eye on him in his scooter while she prepared the salads, scrubbed the potatoes, and made everything ready for the evening's business. Shortly after 5 p.m., when Chuck finished his day job at the Reef Hotel, he would arrive at the steak house to set up the salad bar in time for the first diners to appear at 5:30. At this point, Scott was taken to a crib in a quiet room in the basement to go to sleep, and Jean would start hand-washing dishes.

With that background, it is not surprising that 47 years later, Scott is still in the restaurant business as part-owner and manager of Chuck's Steak House at the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel and, with Wolfgang Puck, a soon-to-open outlet in the Waikiki Beach Walk complex.

The $460-million, eight-acre Waikiki Beach Walk redevelopment will transform the heart of Waikiki into a premier leisure destination featuring name-brand hotels, shops, restaurants, and an entertainment center in a Hawaiian-style, pedestrian-friendly setting.

Is tearing down the Edgewater really necessary? The answer is a resounding “yes.”
Waikiki can—and must—change if we are to remain competitive with other resort destinations. By revitalizing Waikiki, we are helping reinvigorate the entire state!

My parents taught my sisters and me many valuable lessons in life, including the need to constantly improve and look for ways to do things better and not to be afraid of change. The Waikiki Beach Walk plan embodies these principles.

While there are many great memories from the early days, I believe our parents would be very proud, indeed, to see the Edgewater make way for this important development that marks the beginning of an exciting new era in Waikiki.