Outrigger Waikiki Memories

The Outrigger Waikiki Hotel celebrated its 40th birthday this week, and I am sorry that my schedule kept me from taking part in the festivities. My sister Jean Rolles was there and spoke to all those gathered. As she prepared her remarks, we spoke on the telephone and had a great time telling “remember when” stories about the development and early days of that beautiful hotel. I thought that readers of Saturday Briefing might also enjoy a few of those memories.

Today, it is hard to imagine what Waikiki was like back in 1963. Hawaii hosted only 429,000 visitors that year, less than 6 percent of today’s 7.5 million. There were just four beachfront hotels in central Waikiki — the REEF, Halekulani, Royal Hawaiian, and Moana. Between the Royal Hawaiian and the Moana stood the Uluniu Women’s Swimming Club, the Outrigger Canoe Club, and a parking lot. As a teenager, I had often parked my black 1947 Chevrolet in that lot, given a quarter to an attendant — for the whole day! — and stepped onto a sparsely populated beach.

The Outrigger Canoe Club site had two distinct sides. There were one-story retail shops on the mauka (mountain) end; and the club’s volleyball courts, locker rooms, canoe storage area and dining room were located on the makai (beachfront) end. I have an old club menu listing a mahimahi plate lunch for about $1.25.

That year, the Outrigger Canoe Club’s lease expired and it was in the process of moving to its current location near the foot of Diamond Head. The Sheraton Corporation thought it had a verbal agreement to lease the land for a new hotel, but negotiations stalled at the last minute. The representative of the company that held the master lease, Ron Deisseroth, left the negotiating table, called up fellow Rotarian Roy Kelley and said, “Roy, would you like to lease the Outrigger Canoe Club site? Here are the terms ....” Roy promptly said yes. Deisseroth returned to the negotiating table and tersely announced that the Outrigger property was off the market!

Not too many weeks later, when the paperwork was signed, I accompanied my father as we walked onto the property we now had under lease. The Outrigger Canoe Club had moved out, leaving behind empty buildings. As we were standing on the beachfront boundary, surfing legend and Olympic swimming champion Duke Kahanamoku came up and said, “Mr. Kelley, I’ve had my canoe stored on this land for years. Would you mind if I continued to keep it here until you start construction?” Roy replied, “I would be honored if you would do that.” And he made sure there was always a spot for Duke’s canoe even through the construction period.

Then Roy put on his architect’s hat and got down to designing the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel. He patterned it after a Hilton hotel he had visited in Hong Kong with shops on the ground floor and the lobby on the second floor. The concept was turned into architectural plans by a young draftsman who worked long hours in a small room in the basement of the REEF.

What happened next was typical Roy Kelley. He called on his friends and family members to assist in the construction and operation of the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel.

My sister Jean and her husband Chuck Rolles, graduates of Cornell Hotel School, were asked to keep some sort of temporary food and beverage operation going in the dining room of the old club building.

Bob MacGregor of Trade Wind Tours was asked to select an interior designer and work with him to choose the décor of the rooms, lobbies and restaurants.

The responsibility for the lobby food and beverage facilities was split between two operations. REEF Hotel Food & Beverage manager Al Batz planned the Malolo Kai Grill, where the Hula Grill Waikiki is now located. Jean and Chuck Rolles designed and later opened an upscale restaurant, Chez Charles, where Chuck’s Steak House now operates.
Chuck Machado would do a luau on the beachfront patio. Coleman Perry would do a beachfront buffet called Perry Boys Smorgy where Duke's is now located.

Friends and family members were also asked to design and operate shops in the lower lobby. My sister Pat set up an activities desk there. My former brother-in-law Dick Norstrom and I were asked to build three shops — a pharmacy, a gift shop and a liquor store. Bob MacGregor and I were also asked to run the parking lot under the hotel. Many of us had little, if any, experience in these areas, and we all had other full-time jobs.

Roy’s decisions were consistent with his entrepreneurial spirit. He did not trust large, bureaucratic organizations and their managers, who, he believed, just sat behind their desks and barked orders. In addition, there was not much experienced local talent available. Few national companies had yet seen Hawaii on their radar screens. So, Roy conscripted friends and family members with whom he was comfortable, figuring they would be up to the challenge.

Forty years later, it’s clear that Roy’s approach was the right one for the times. While there has naturally been a great deal of evolution and turnover of the companies and individuals involved, some of the original shops and concessions have had ownership continuity, with children and grandchildren of the original tenants still involved in the operations.

Since the opening of the Outrigger Waikiki in 1967, there have been a lot of changes in Waikiki. The Royal Tower of the Royal Hawaiian was built on the Uluniu Women’s Swimming Club site. The Surfrider Hotel was built on the parking lot between the Outrigger Waikiki and the Moana Hotel. Parking there and anywhere in Waikiki is now considerably more than 25 cents a day!

However, one thing that has not changed is the hospitality found at the Outrigger Waikiki. I receive e-mails, letters and telephone calls almost every week complimenting the hotel’s staff on their wonderful friendliness and service.

Altogether, it’s been a great 40 years, and the story continues.

Happy Birthday, Outrigger Waikiki!