The Plains Hotel
A Look Back
Into History
By Richard Kelley

While my wife Linda and I were in Cheyenne, Wyoming, recently to attend Frontier Days events (see my article in last week's Saturday Briefing), we stayed at the Plains Hotel and had a glimpse into what it may have been like to be in the hospitality industry in the “Wild West” a century ago.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the town of Cheyenne was still just a small, if important, stop on the Union Pacific Railway’s transcontinental route. Buffalo and wild game were still plentiful even though their numbers had been greatly reduced by hunters such as William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody (1846-1917), who had been hired to harvest the animals to feed the workers building the railroad. There were other hunters, too, such as Ireland’s Lord Dunraven who, in 1877, also built the famous Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado, about 75 miles south and a little west of Cheyenne.

The Union Pacific had built a small rooming house in Cheyenne, but in December 1909, a group of local citizens decided the town needed a truly first-class hotel. A local architect quickly drew up some plans and, after work continued through the winter of 1910-1911, the Plains Hotel was opened on March 9, 1911, just across from the railroad station and on the Lincoln Highway, the main transcontinental automobile highway at the time.

As described on the hotel’s Website, the Plains Hotel was state-of-the-art at the time. Marble and mahogany touches gave a feeling of great luxury. There were three elevators, and each of the approximately 100 guest rooms had a telephone! The total project cost, including furniture, fixtures, and equipment, was $250,000 – a lot of money in those days!

The opening party was a grand affair attended by men in “full evening dress and gorgeously [sic] gowned ladies who all tripped the light fantastic until the wee hours of the morning.”

The Plains Hotel rapidly became THE place to stay and hosted cattle barons, oil tycoons, and numerous travelers on their way to Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, today about an eight-hour drive northwest of Cheyenne.

The Website continues: “Guests raved about the amenities and service provided at the hotel. But for one

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couple, their stay would end in tragedy. According to legend, a bride named Rosie and her new groom checked into the hotel on their honeymoon. As the story goes, the bride caught her new husband with a prostitute and shot them both before turning the gun on herself. Rosie, the bitter bride, allegedly wanders the hotel’s second floor in a blue gown.”

“In 1915, Chief Little Shield, an Arapaho, brought some of his people to Cheyenne for Frontier Days. He was an Indian guest of The Plains Hotel, but his friends stayed in teepees at Frontier Park. Chief Little Shield always washed up and dusted off at the horse trough across the street before coming inside The Plains to visit with his friends. So handsome was the young chief that the image of him sitting in regal style in the lobby has always been associated with The Plains Hotel. Each year during Cheyenne Frontier Days, The Plains Hotel is honored by continued visits from Chief Little Shield’s descendants.”

With that history in our minds, we arrived at the Plains Hotel about 9 a.m. on Saturday, just before the Frontier Days Parade was to pass right in front of the building. The sidewalks were full of people awaiting the first units of the parade. Our car must have been one of the last allowed on the street.

We quickly unloaded our luggage, carried it into the lobby and looked around. Our first thoughts were that the lobby had probably not changed much over the past century. By today’s standards, the Front Desk, which I am certain was considered deluxe when the property opened, looked more like a bank teller’s station than a hotel reception area.

A young lady, who appeared more than a little stressed, greeted us pleasantly. I discounted the terror I could see in her eyes, because I knew this was one of the biggest weekends of the year and, if I were in her shoes, I’d probably be stressed too.

She told us that our room, number 427, was ready. Silently, I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that we were not going to be on the second floor with Rosie.

The lady at the desk then told us that none of the hotel’s elevators were working. She said she would try to get us some help with our luggage, but it was not guaranteed, and we might have to carry our bags up to the fourth floor.

She added that there was no parking available at the hotel and said I would have to move my car to a parking lot a block away, adjacent to a Carl’s Jr. fast food outlet, as quickly as possible before the parade started.

Linda did get some help with the luggage while I parked our car. Throughout the day, we got very familiar with the marble stairway. It wound around the shaft of one of the original 1911 elevators and was so narrow that two people could pass only if they were not too much overweight, sucked in their stomachs, and turned sideways. The elevator itself looked as if it had been abandoned and locked off decades ago.
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Still, everyone, guests and staff, was very pleasant during our stay. We greeted each other as we turned to pass going up or down the stairs and offered to help each other with baggage.

I really had to admire the spirit of the staff. They were pulling together and making the best out of a very difficult situation. One member of the Housekeeping staff confirmed my suspicion that there was no service elevator and that they were hand-carrying clean sheets, towels, and supplies up as many as five floors to the guest rooms and then hauling dirty laundry and trash down the same distance. She quietly whispered that she had been told the elevator would be out of service until Wednesday, at least.

In the early evening, as we passed through the lobby again, I stopped and looked. A piano player, whose tattered Levis were held up by a pair of suspenders, was pounding out cowboy tunes on the keyboard, surrounded by patrons who were singing along and enjoying libations. Had I slipped back a hundred years and into the days of the Wild West? Was I in a dream, much like the characters in the current hit movie Inception?

Then I glanced over at the Front Desk. The lady who checked us in at nine that morning was still on duty and, with the best smile she could muster, was telling late arrivals about the elevators, the parking, etc. That told me two things: I was still in 2010 and that she, and a lot of other fellow employees, had had a very, very long day.

Congratulations to the staff of the Plains Hotel! You did a magnificent job of meeting a challenge and providing excellent hospitality and services to your guests. Linda and I had a great time during our brief stay. We are looking forward to a return visit some day soon—and maybe a chance to meet Rosie too! 😊

Photos: The Plains Hotel courtesy of The Plains Hotel
Lord Dunraven courtesy of rockymountainparanormal.com
Frontier Days Parade courtesy of Dr. Richard Kelley

John Deere tractors in the Frontier Days parade
Patrons on Hell’s Half Acre float were having FUN!
The old one-room schoolhouse
Now that’s what you call sharp lines!