Wednesday’s announcement that the OHANA Waikiki Beachcomber is to be reflagged as the Holiday Inn Waikiki Beachcomber Resort – which Outrigger will continue to manage, with all the hotel’s employees keeping their jobs (see adjacent article) – set me to learning a bit more about the history of our partner in this venture, Holiday Inn.

The more I learned, the more I was struck by the amazing parallels between Outrigger founder Roy Kelley and his counterpart at the Holiday Inn chain, Kemmons Wilson.

Both were children of the same era. Roy was born in 1905, Kemmons in 1913.

Both grew up in poor homes. “We lived by the skin of our teeth,” Roy was quoted as saying of his boyhood. “But some way or another we always got by. I always had enough to eat.” Roy’s parents divorced when he was still in his early teens, and he later helped support his mother even while working his way through college, where he studied to be an architect.

Kemmons was only nine months old when his dad died; his mother was just 18 at the time. At times they survived just on beans. At the age of 6, Kemmons began selling magazine subscriptions. At 17, during the Depression, he dropped out of high school and went to work full time, bagging groceries, delivering newspapers, and working as a soda jerk to support himself and his mother, who had lost her job. By the time he was about 20, he was in business for himself, selling popcorn in a movie theater and, later, running pinball machines. With the money he managed to save, he built a house for himself and his mother.

Both Roy and Kemmons became builders. Roy originally got into the business as a sideline to his architectural work, putting up buildings with affordable apartment units near our family home in Waikiki. He and my mother, Estelle, rented those units out to supplement their income.

While Roy was putting up apartment buildings, Kemmons went on to build more houses. After military service during World War II, he started a homebuilding business and before long hooked up with a partner, Wallace E. Johnson, who, according to an online biography of Kemmons, “owned the largest and most successful homebuilding business in the South.” The partnership lasted 35 years and made them millionaires.

As it happened, both Roy and Kemmons completed their first hotels within a few years of each other. Some of Roy and Estelle’s apartments were rented out on a short-term basis, which they found profitable, and this

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led Roy to design and build his first hotel, the Islander, on Seaside Avenue. He completed it in 1947.

Just five years later, in 1952, Kemmons opened the first Holiday Inn in his hometown of Memphis, Tennessee. The story of how he came to build it is quite amazing. In 1951, he, his wife and their five children went on vacation, driving the nearly 900 miles from Memphis to Washington, D.C. Traveling without air conditioning in the muggy August heat took even longer in those pre-Interstate Highway days than it does now. Several overnight stops were necessary, but the family found they had to stay either in expensive downtown hotels or take their chances in “second-rate” boarding houses and motels.

Kemmons later recalled, “In those days, you wouldn’t dream of renting a room without inspecting it first.” The other discovery was that most hotels charged extra for children, making traveling with kids unaffordable for the average family. Kemmons decided that what travelers needed was a clean, comfortable, air-conditioned room with TV, an on-site pool, and restaurants nearby. He also wanted hotels people could depend on, with no extra charges for kids – “no surprises.” He later recalled, “I wanted to create a brand that people could trust.” The Holiday Inn formula he created became the industry standard.

There’s still another similarity between Roy and Kemmons. They both believed in building hotels that catered not to the wealthy, but rather to everyday, middle-class Americans. Roy and Estelle’s formula – independently arrived at, but much the same as Kemmons’ clean, comfortable rooms at a price that included “no surprises” – proved the ideal complement to the 1959 introduction of jets on Hawaii routes. Middle class visitors could now get to the Islands in just five hours, and thanks to Roy and Estelle, they didn’t have to spend an arm and a leg to stay in high-priced, high-toned lodgings. As a result, they came in droves and powered Outrigger’s growth.

Kemmons’ expressed this philosophy simply: “You can cater to rich people, and I’ll take the rest. The good Lord made more of them.”

Other parallels between my father and the founder of Holiday Inn: They both believed in the value of exceptional customer service, and they both believed in hard work. My dad was famous – some might say notorious – for the high expectations he had of himself and his employees. As for Kemmons, he is widely quoted as having said, “Work only a half a day; it makes no difference which half – it can be either the first 12 hours or the last 12 hours.”

The similarities go only so far, of course. One big difference between the two men was that Kemmons, living in the heart of the continental United States and motivated by his experience of driving a long distance and finding few good lodging options, had a vision of bringing clean, affordable motels to the entire country. Roy, on the other hand, was comfortable with continuing to build hotels in Waikiki. He liked being able to visit them personally every day and talk to the staff. He couldn’t conceive of trying to operate hotels across the entire country. He was even reluctant to expand to neighbor islands, although I finally convinced him to do that, beginning with the Royal Waikoloan on the Big Island.

What’s interesting is that these two pioneers, each cut from much the same cloth, were working at the same time at opposite ends of the country to develop great accommodations that everyday families could afford. And now, the two companies they founded some six decades ago are joining forces in a marketing agreement that creates exciting new opportunities for both the Holiday Inn and Outrigger brands.

I hope this will prove to be just the beginning of further fruitful cooperation with Holiday Inn and its parent company, the InterContinental Hotel Group. I am almost certain that Roy and Kemmons are watching what we are doing from above, smiling and nodding their heads in approval!

Photo Credits:
(1) Patricia Kelley
(2) http://www.lifeinlegacy.com/2003/WIR20030215.html