In a 1676 letter to scientist and architect Robert Hooke, renowned English physicist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton, who ranks with Albert Einstein as one of the greatest scientific geniuses in human history, modestly minimized his phenomenal achievements, writing, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Now, some 339 years after Newton wrote to Hooke, in locations spanning more than half the globe, many members of the Outrigger ‘ohana, friends and guests will gather to honor our company’s inspirational founders, Roy and Estelle Kelley. It is our good fortune to have “stood on their shoulders” and benefited from the vision, fortitude and determination with which they built our company’s first hotel, the Islander, at 351 Seaside Avenue in Waikiki, Territory of Hawaii, and opened it in September 1947. The opening of the Islander Hotel did not happen overnight. Roy and Estelle, my parents, had been building and renting apartment units in Waikiki for over a decade before that. They probably started around 1933 with the rental of a small room in our family home at the corner of Seaside and Kūhiō avenues in the heart of what was then a quiet, sleepy and largely residential neighborhood.

Not long afterward, perhaps in 1934 or 1935, they built some two-story, wood-framed units called the Monterey Apartments next door on property leased from the Queen Emma Estate. That marked the beginning of the Kelley family tradition of providing “clean, comfortable and affordable accommodations.”

In 1936, Roy and Estelle completed a 20-unit apartment building, the Town House, at the corner of Royal Hawaiian and Kūhiō avenues. It was three stories tall, which in those days qualified it as a “high-rise.”

The 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and the declaration of martial law in Hawaii during World War II put a halt to all civilian construction in the Islands. In addition, Roy had lost his eyesight because of cataracts (thanks to the doctors at the Mayo Clinic, he later partially recovered sight in one eye), and in 1942, our family and many others were evacuated to the West Coast in advance of a widely expected invasion of Hawaii by the Japanese military.

Our family returned to Hawaii in 1944, and Roy and Estelle almost immediately began building single-story apartment units on another Seaside Avenue property. Material and labor were hard to find, but with the help of some off-duty Navy Seabees and students from Kamehameha Schools’ manual arts class, several units were completed and the foundation laid for a larger building next door. As materials and labor gradually became more available, additional cottages were completed and a five-story hotel – the Islander – began to rise on that foundation.

An October 1947 bulletin from the fledgling Hawaii Visitors Bureau said, “The Islander, newest Honolulu hotel, opened last month. Located in the tourist center of Waikiki, the handsome,
modern building has 40 rooms and a penthouse. Operated on the European Plan [i.e., meals not included], the hotel, however, offers a snack bar for its guests.” (The “snack bar,” a small kitchen and a couple of tables with chairs, was located in one of the adjacent Islander cottage apartment units.)

The December 1947 issue of Paradise of the Pacific, predecessor to HONOLULU Magazine, said, “Manager of the Islander hotel . . . is Gwynne Austin, an experienced hotel man, well-known to thousands of visitors who have come to the islands. Rates (European Plan) are: Guest room for one person: $5 per day and up. Guest room for two persons: $6 per day and up. A ‘budget vacation’ is the specialty of the Islander.”

While Roy and Estelle may have rented out some of their apartment units on a daily basis before 1947, the Kelley family today considers the Islander Hotel, with its front desk, telephone switchboard, snack bar, hotel brochure and nothing but daily rates, to be Roy and Estelle’s first stand-alone hotel. Its opening in late September 1947 marked the birth of the company known today as Outrigger Resorts.

There was not much business that year. It is estimated the Territory of Hawai‘i greeted only 50,000 visitors in 1947.
• Most visitors came by steamship in a voyage that took four or five days each way.
• Pan American World Airways had been flying to Hawai‘i since 1938 with aircraft capable of carrying 25 to 30 passengers on daily flights from Los Angeles and San Francisco, plus about four additional flights per week from San Francisco that went on to either Australia or the Philippines. California-Hawai‘i flights on those lumbering, propeller-driven “flying boats” – Pan Am’s legendary “Clippers” – took about 19 hours depending on whether you encountered head- or tailwinds.
• United Airlines began regular passenger service from San Francisco on May 1, 1947, using propeller-driven aircraft capable of carrying 40 to 44 passengers. Until replaced by jets beginning in 1959, prop planes took 10-12 hours to link the Islands with California – again depending on winds. Everything changed very quickly as our country began to recover from World War II. From 1950 through the early 1990s, Roy and Estelle almost always had a hotel under construction – if not a brand new one, then a major renovation of a property acquired from someone else or a renovation and upgrade of one of our own.

Particularly after Hawai‘i became a state in 1959, and the nearly simultaneous advent of jet aircraft and group tours, the demand for hotel rooms grew exponentially. When a guest room in a hotel under construction was “adequately completed” for occupancy, it was usually rented out.

“Adequately completed” in the minds of Roy and Estelle – and others of that era – was when the room had electricity, running water and a bed. Doors too had usually been installed, but not always. I recall sheets temporarily taped to the doorframe in at least one property. Arriving guests often walked through a lobby still under construction, with workmen almost everywhere.

Opening day parties at our hotels in those early days, when there were any, were usually scheduled for several months after the first guests checked in. I don’t remember many details of the Islander’s opening, but I feel certain it was on a “rent-as-rooms-become-available” basis. I was 14 at the time and would definitely remember an “opening party” at which I would surely have been
pressed into service – if my parents had bothered to throw one.

This is the second consecutive year that our company has set aside a day in the last week of September to honor Roy and Estelle Kelley and the Outrigger legacy they left us. If they could have been with us this year, Roy would have celebrated his 110th birthday in August and Estelle would be preparing for her 109th in October. They would have marked their 89th wedding anniversary this past May.

Roy and Estelle were wonderful people – honest, kind, enthusiastic, bold, hard-working individuals who never forgot their humble beginnings in Los Angeles. They cared deeply about everyone who worked with them to build a better company and a community that offered residents many more opportunities than the old plantation economy.

Along with a number of my parents’ descendants who work in the business or are investors in the company, I am honored to “stand on their shoulders” and carry their spirit forward. We hope to continue doing so for generations to come.

FOOTNOTES:
1 Sir Isaac Newton is widely recognized as one of the most influential scientists of all time and as a key figure in the scientific revolution. His book Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica, first published in 1687, laid the foundations for classical mechanics, describing the laws of motion and gravity. Newton also made seminal contributions to optics and shares credit with Gottfried Leibniz for the development of calculus.

2 Today, that property, which formerly held our family home and the Monterey Apartments, has been incorporated into the Waikiki Trade Center complex. It abuts a separate strip of land known as Duke’s Lane, which is filled with shopping kiosks for almost the entire distance between Kūhiō and Kalākaua avenues.