

Recollections of the Calumet

By Dick Colby, Bellboy

I worked for the Calumet Hotel during my high school years (class of 1945) as bellboy. I thought it was the best job in town for a kid of my age.

In those days the hotel was busy during the week. Guests were mostly traveling salesmen on their periodic rounds. Weekends were slow, so I worked few of them. I would go to work after school, walk home for supper, then go back until 9:00 p.m., after walking to the Great Northern depot with the mail. Their 9 p.m.-or so- passenger train had a mail car with workers sorting the mail all the way to Willmar, at least. I suppose the mail was transferred, along with the two passenger cars, to a night train to Minneapolis.

My monthly salary was \$35.00, plus tips. On a good night I could make \$3.00 in tips which typically was about a dime per guest. It was pretty good money at that time for a kid.

After I had been there a while, I started taking the night shift at the front desk on Friday or Saturday nights. It was usually uneventful, but occasionally there would be a drunk to contend with, or a room call to make, telling a guy to get that girl out of there (hotel policy). Once in a while I would have to call Mr. Tatman, the hotel owner who lived upstairs, for help, and he would oblige. It's hard for me to imagine now, but there I was, a 16-year-old boy, kicking people out of the hotel and not getting threatened or into too much of a mess. By the way, the night clerk during the latter years there was Harold Lee, who had just been honorably discharged from the Army after serving in China for several years. He became my good friend and, later, Pipestone's city clerk.

The hotel was configured a little differently then, but the east entrance was pretty much the same it is now. I would lean against the railing above the steps leading outside where I could see cars stopping, and from there I could wheel around the railing, down the steps and help the incoming guests with their luggage.

As you entered the hotel, the front desk was where it is now, but there was a large lobby to the south with a wide, doorless opening opposite. There were several large leather lounge chairs with their backs to the windows and a couple of desks against the south wall for salesmen who stayed there to write their reports or whatnot.

The dining room, which was not open for business when I worked there (although I remember eating occasional Sunday dinners there with my family when I was younger), was beyond the lobby, with a wall in between and French doors as an entrance. The present dining room includes the space that was the lobby and the old dining room, with the wall between them removed.

There was a door on the west side of the lobby that led to another door, that one to the basement, which was dark and foreboding. The story is that Mr. Tatman used to shoot rats down there with his .45 handgun. I never saw it happen, but it is totally believable.

A left turn from that door to the then-unused kitchen. A right turn led to the closed coffee shop (now the main entrance to the dining room.) The coffee shop opened for a while during the time I was there, but it soon closed again, and believe that was that until after the renovation.

The main entrance on the north from Main Street has been changed. The steps were inside the front door then, and I believe the steps and lower walls were marble (is that possible...in Pipestone?) The door to an insurance office was there to the east.

I delivered newspapers for the Sioux Falls Daily Argus Leader when I was younger, and I remember gathering at that main entrance with two other paperboys (Eric Aslesen was one) to await delivery of our papers. We boys would sit at the top of the tree (?) steps, blocking the way, so that we'd have to move to make room for people to go by. The desk clerk would occasionally have to come out to angrily tell us, with a threat or tow, to quiet down. Well, I told you: Eric Aslesen was there.

Maybe here is where I should write a bit about owner George Tatman, in case you don't already have more and/or better information. He was a short man and very thin, with a curved back so that he had to hold his head up to see who he was talking to. His laugh or chuckle was very distinctive, a sort of a clipped "nyeh-nyeh." I'm shamed now that my best friend and I used to mock his laugh. He was a deputy sheriff, though seldom on duty, and always had a loaded automatic .38 handgun in the cash drawer. And he knew how to use it. He said it made him as big as anyone else. He was pleasant to talk to and to work for, but he didn't seem to be one of the community leaders. Mr. Tatman did not own the actual hotel building; it was the property of Lee Lockwood, not of Pipestone, but of Minneapolis, I think. I believe Mr. Tatman owned the business and paid rent for the building.

Back to the front desk. The gorgeous stone wall on the west wall was covered by a plastered (or whatever) wall. We had no idea that the stones were there. I was awestruck when I saw it for the first time after the renovation. It's breathtaking for me still, and I'm certainly glad it was preserved. The stairs to the rooms on the floors above were turned 180 degrees from their present direction. They went up going north to the landing, which must have extended farther north than the present landing. From there, I think the stairways to the fourth floor were as they are now, untouched in the renovation. That's good; they are impressive and historic. However, I'm glad there is an elevator now. I took lots of luggage up those stairways, and that's a lot of steps to the fourth floor.

The rooms on the second and third floors had a lavatory, as I remember, but no bath, shower or toilet. I don't remember any rooms with those facilities, though there may have been a few at the north end. The ladies' restroom was north of and facing the stairway. I don't remember where the men's room was. Maybe the "ladies' room" doubled as a unisex bathroom when not used by the lady bus passengers.

The basic room rate was \$1.50 a night. The rooms on the fourth floor were \$1.25, as I recall. There was a door on the fourth-floor hallway that opened into a parallel hallway to the west and leading south to the four rooms that were cheaper yet. They were called the "annex" and were

seldom used. One man from Minneapolis who sold National Batteries would take a \$1.50 room and send his driver to the cheapest rooms in the annex. Nothing was said at the time, but I have since wondered if the original idea was that those rooms were for “Negros.” I don’t remember any house rules about lack people being guests, nor do I remember there every being any black guests.

The hotel was the bus station then, and the buses were *usually* busy. Greyhound came in from Minneapolis at 3-something in the afternoon, connecting with Jackrabbit Lines from Fargo. They exchanged passengers here, with Greyhound continuing to Sioux City and Omaha, and Jackrabbit to Sioux Falls, heading to Fargo. I generally helped with luggage transfer between buses. I hope I didn’t make too many mistakes. People like to have their luggage with them when they reach their destination.

There was also a Greyhound coming in from Minneapolis at about midnight. Pipestone was the terminus for that bus, so it had “Pipestone” on the sign over the windshield, an occasional topic of conversation about town. Usually destination signs on busses had a large city’s name, and here is Pipestone with its own sign. My brother Chuck was always particularly impressed. That bus stayed overnight and left for Minneapolis via New Ulm at about 7:30 a.m.

The afternoon buses were a big daily event, with tickets needing to be reissued because the originating point got them wrong, or whatever, and with people using the rest rooms. Women had to walk upstairs to the second-floor rest room. There was often a line. Men went downstairs to the relatively large tiled men’s room with pay toilet booths that cost a nickel. (I, and others, crawled under the doors.) The barber shop was down there too, with two or three chairs and a penny gumball machine that would give 1, 2 or 3 gumballs in consecutive order. The stairway to downstairs was north of the main staircase going up to the rooms.

The buses were occasionally late, often due to snowstorms, and the lobby and front desk areas would be full of people waiting for them. With no mobile phones back then, there was no way to know where the buses were, of course. One of the lasting memories- and it got to be a standing joke with me and the desk clerk who doubled as the bus ticket maker-outer, Al Drysdale- was a time when the buses were late in the middle of winter with a blizzard outside and the place was full of people. The taxi arrived and Al Drysdale yelled over the din, “Taxi! Did someone order a taxi?” A lady in one of the leather chairs in the lobby jumped up, came running with her luggage, and was halfway down the steps to the outside when she stopped and said, “Oh, no. I’m going to Breckenridge.” It was things like that that made life interesting there.

People would sometimes call to see if the midnight bus from Minneapolis was on time, and, of course, we didn’t know- at least we didn’t usually know. But sometimes on a slow Friday or Saturday night when I was at the front desk, I would call a girlfriend, Donna Drumm, who was working at the switchboard upstairs at the telephone office across the street, and she would call the long-distance operator in Slayton or Tracy and ask that operator to call the bus depot there to find out if the bus had been there yet. She would then report back to Donna who would call me. Oh, the days before cell phones. I’m sure that was totally against Northwestern Bell’s policy, but it was fun and Ma Bell never found out...

I got to know the bus drivers, especially the Greyhound drivers, because they stayed overnight, and one of them in particular, Al Dittes, became a good friend. An aside: Several years later, my wife-to-be, Betty, and I were on our way from Chicago to Pipestone for her first Christmas with my family about a year after I graduated from college. Our overnight train pulled in late to Minneapolis, and taxis were on strike, so we walked the six or seven blocks to the Greyhound depot, baggage in hand, over the newly packed snow. It was just about departure time as we came to the bus depot, so I told Betty to continue to the front door and get our tickets, and I would go to the bus area in the back to see if I could hold the bus. There were several buses nosed into the gates as I walked into the loading area. One bus at the far end started backing up to go out the exit. I knew I couldn't reach it in time. But then it suddenly stopped...the bus doors opened...and waited for me to get there. The driver was my friend Al Dittes. He recognized my red hair, he said, even after those several years. We came within ten seconds of missing our bus to Pipestone. The only other bus left 10 hours later, with arrival at midnight. But I digress.

The terrible fire that burned up a good portion of the hotel happened on Valentine's Day in 1943 (?) when I was working. The front desk was covered by an older couple. That was unusual, but they had just retired from the farm, I think, and wanted to work together. I imagine they were paid as one person. The Tatmans were at the Orpheum Theater for a movie. I think it was about 8 p.m. when we thought we smelled smoke, so I went through the lobby to the door leading to the kitchen, the coffee shop and the basement. I opened the basement door and the smoke was much heavier there, so I shut the door and reported it to the couple at the desk.

They called in the fire to the telephone operators, who were working in office above a store on the north side of Main Street. They then went to the hotel's PBX board and started to ring the room telephones. I found out later that they got no answers. I guess it was decided that the telephone lines in the basement were among the first things to be destroyed. I ran up the stairs and started banging on the doors and yelling for people to get out because of a fire. There was no alarm system in the building at all, just me. I didn't get to the fourth floor because the hallways were getting smoky. I ran downstairs to the desk and we all left the building, as I recall.

The Fire Department was just across the street where the Museum is now. The town siren was wailing its deep up-and-down fire call. I think that siren (we always called it the whistle) was probably the only way Pipestone had to notify anyone, including the Fire Department's volunteers, of a fire. It seemed like it took forever for the trucks to roll out of their garage next to city hall, but they finally came across the street and the firemen started to do their job. I'm sure they didn't dally, of course; it just took a while for the folks in their homes to get themselves ready, get their cards started on that cold February night, and get up to City Hall where the fire trucks were. It also just *seems* longer when one is anxiously waiting for help in an emergency like that.

Luckily (that's the wrong word, I know) the school fire a few years earlier had shown that the city didn't have equipment or pressure to get water to the top floor. Consequently, a mechanism was purchased that let three fire hoses be connected to one big nozzle which enabled water to get to the top of the hotel. I think there were trucks here from Luverne and a few other towns as

well. I still remember the expression on the midnight bus driver's face when he pulled in. The next morning the south side of the hotel was completely covered with what appeared to be 5 or 6 inches of ice, maybe more.

George and Mrs. Tatman were paged at the theater, so they immediately left and were taken to City Hall. They both seemed rather calm and collected. I talked with them a short while and then went out to watch the excitement. I saw two or three hotel guests jump out of their windows into the big round canvass net held by several firemen on the sidewalk. They all seemed OK afterwards, so far as I knew.

As you know there was one death from the fire. He had been a guest for a few days. His room was on the west side of the hotel, and his window looked out over the roof of the building next door. A bar (Dressen's?) was on the first floor of that building, and there was a second floor with apartments, so the deceased man's room must have been on the third floor of the hotel. It's a shame that he didn't seem to realize that he could have opened his window and stepped to the roof just below. He was middle aged and seemed relatively able physically. He did not seem to be a very sociable man. At least I didn't get to know him. I just remember him walking past the front desk to the stairway and up to his room without saying much. We thought he had probably been drinking. I'm sorry I can't add much more information about him at all. I understand his room is haunted today. Well, that's a good story.

After finishing high school I went on to graduate from Drake University with a general business major and then tried to find my place in the small town hotel business. That line of work eventually went the way of most main streets, and I ended up as the administrator of a church-sponsored retirement home in Washington, Iowa, retiring in 1992 after 27 years. My wife Betty and I have been living at that same retirement home for the past 23 years, with at least a few more to go, we hope.

My mother, Marion R. Colby, was born and raised in Pipestone and was a math teacher at Pipestone High School for 30 years. She died in 1997 at the age of 102. My grandparents, Edward and Nellie Reader, were pioneers in Pipestone. He was a plumbing and heating businessman (the Reader Company) until his death in 1943. My grandmother was the high school principal at the time of Pipestone's first graduating class. She died in 1956. My uncle Harry Kirkham came to manager the Reader Company from 1943 until his death in 1960. His wife, the former Madeleine Reader, died in 1984. All of them are now interred at Woodlawn Cemetery, so they really haven't left Pipestone.

I've stayed at the Calumet several times since it was renovated and was delighted each time. It is quite nostalgic for me. I hope the townspeople realize the jewel they have to anchor the downtown Main Street. Not many towns of 4,500 have such a place. And I hope that the new folks managing the hotel and its dining room can make it profitable enough to keep the building properly maintained. Having another big empty building on Main Street would be a disaster for the entire town. I was buoyed to see the ad in the Star that the Calumet has opened a buffet on Sunday. That's a really good start. I hope the food is good and the people from all around come to dine.