Nobody Asked Me, But… No. 22

Smart Elevators, Tony Marshall's Memorial, Women in the Hospitality Industry

By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC

1. Smart Elevators- If you look at the elevators in the newly renovated lobby of the Marriott Marquis Hotel in Times Square, you'll notice something unusual. Instead of a button to call the elevator, there's a keypad. Punch in the number of the floor you want, and the computer will direct you to a particular elevator. There, you will find a group of people headed to your floor and those close to it. When the elevator arrives, it whisks you and the group directly to your floors.

You've just taken a ride on the Schindler Elevator Corporation's Miconic 10, one of a new generation of "smart elevators." The system is based on a simple fact: when an elevator contains a group of people going to many different floors, each person's ride becomes longer than if traveling alone. By sorting people into groups headed to nearby floors, each person's journey becomes- on average- 50 percent faster. Though it might also be 50 percent more annoying. A recent visit to the Marriott Marquis suggested that the system's ingenuity is lost on some riders. At one point, a group of people who were waiting for their elevator noticed that two other elevators had already come and gone. "What's taking ours so long?" one rider complained. In truth, the elevators were moving far more efficiently than under the previous system. But because the riders didn't have control over their fate, it felt longer.

Officials from Schindler say they haven't heard many complaints. "People find the system very intuitive," Michael Landis, a vice president, says. Schindler has installed the Miconic 10 in more than 200 sites in Manhattan. Virtually all new high-rise buildings built in America with Schindler elevators will use the new system. All of which means we will simply have to learn to endure our faster, more puzzling rides. Smart elevators don't care if they're carrying dumb riders.

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2. Tony Marshall's Memorial- the Florida International University School of Hospitality is planning a memorial service on January 17, 2007. To celebrate Tony's life, wear a bowtie on the 17th no matter where you are.

3. Women in the Hospitality Industry- Whether the earliest hospitality was offered in a cave or a desert tent or a prairie tepee or a hut made of mud or even ice, it was largely women who maintained that home. Over time, inns emerged to accommodate travelers throughout the Mediterranean world. A husband usually centered himself near the door, where he poured drinks, socialized with customers, and took the money. His sons, when they were old enough, usually cared for visitors' horses or donkeys or camels – but his wife and daughters worked much harder, toiling in the kitchen, the dining room, the bedchambers, and wherever else there was "women's work."

This continued to be the case for centuries, especially in the New World, where the model was repeated as the frontier moved west. As time passed, it became increasingly obvious that this was a business a woman could run alone, without help from a husband. Over and over again, widows, spinsters, and deserted women turned to boarding houses and hotels as a way to support themselves in agricultural economies that offered few income-earning choices to women.

With careful management, women in the hospitality business secured far better returns than the earnings of poorly-paid teachers, milliners, or seamstresses – about the only other occupational options open to women outside of industrial cities. If a woman owned a big house or had the capital to obtain one, and if she earned a reputation as a good cook and a clean housekeeper, she realistically could expect to find traveling businessman eager to reward her enterprise. The large houses that sit (usually vacant) near small-town train tracks today once were filled with travelers who sat down to a common supper, chatted on the porch in the evening, and filled the boardinghouse bedrooms.

In the post-Civil War South, city mansions were transformed into hotels and plantations into resorts, as genteel women found the strength to lift their families out of the poverty to which the war had reduced them. Some were war widows, others had husbands who survived but were

disabled. Although few such women actually had cooked or cleaned prior to the war, they knew the standards to which they wanted their household run, and they had long experience as hostesses. From New Orleans to Richmond and especially along the Gulf Coast of Mississippi and Alabama, they opened their formerly exclusive mansions to paying guests. They competed with each other to set the best table and provide the most luxurious rooms. The ambiance of cities such as Charleston and Savannah, known for hospitality today, can be traced to these women.

Other women served a market of semi-permanent guests. Because housework was so much more demanding prior to electricity, the era's few professional women often lived at boarding houses or hotels, where other women would cook their meals and take care of their laundry. An upper-class groom who could not yet acquire the servant-filled home that his bride expected instead would opt for a hotel suite. Indeed, until after World War II, it was not uncommon for small wealthy families to place convenience over privacy and make their permanent residence in a hotel.

Many more women targeted much poorer clientele, especially in immigrant communities. Around Pittsburgh, for instance, a Slavic woman who knew the language that steelworkers spoke and knew what they wanted to eat would find herself busy beyond measure. Some such boarding houses operated on the same shifts as the steel mills or coal mines, with men occupying the beds at all hours of the day and night. Again, though, it usually was the husband who was considered the "boarding master," even if he had another job and his wife did all of the work for boarders often including scrubbing the impossibly dirty clothes of coal miners. Women from eastern and southern Europe were severely exploited as boardinghouse keepers – to the point that Catholic priests began preaching against allowing women to do such work. The effect, of course, was to make it harder for other women to obtain the capital and community support that they needed to run their businesses.

Boardinghouses declined as cars replaced trains and as the nation severely cut immigration in the 1920s. The Great Depression of the 1930s made it much more difficult for women to get bank loans or any kind of credit. Although there was huge need for hotel rooms during World War II,

there also was a tremendous shortage of everything necessary to operate them. Nor was there much positive change for such entrepreneurial women when the 1940s turned to the 1950s, as chain motels made their appearance along with superhighways. African-Americans in the industry ironically suffered as racial integration made it possible for their best-paying customers to move up the accommodation ladder.

The decades since mid-century have reinforced these negative economic factors for women who want to run their own enterprises, but many continue in small-business tradition by replicating Europe's bed-and-breakfast establishments. Importantly, the civil rights legislation of the 1960's and 1970s has made it possible for women to insist on their right to promotion within the giant new hospitality corporations.

National Women's History Museum
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