

Ellsworth Milton Statler: Hotel Man of the Half Century

In 1950, the hotel industry picked the late E. M. Statler as the “Hotel Man of the Half Century.” By then, Statler had been dead for 22 years, but his impact on the art and science of innkeeping was so great that no one else even came close. In order to make this selection official, the magazine Southern Hotel Journal held a contest. Out of one hundred and four hotel executives polled, one hundred and two named E.M. Statler as the “Hotel Man of the Half Century.”

While Ellsworth Milton Statler was considered by many to be the premier hotel man in the industry, he did not look or sound like a successful executive. He was a plain, rugged self-made man who started to work at the age of nine. Even after he became successful, he still wore twenty dollar suits and four dollar shoes. Someone said that Statler looked more like Will Rogers than Rudolph Valentino.

When Statler began in the hotel business, the following practices were commonplace:

- Some hotels embarrassed nonpaying male guests by cutting off their trousers at the knees and making them parade in the lobby with sandwich signs that proclaimed them as “deadbeats.”
- One hotel specifically forbade guests from spitting on the carpets, lying in bed with their boots on, or driving nails into the furniture.
- Even the better hotels had shared bathroom facilities. Bathtubs were usually built on a platform, and hot water cost 25 cents extra.
- About 90 percent of hotels were American plan, with cheap, unlimited food included in the room rate.

- Believe it or not, smoking was usually not permitted in dining rooms, bars allowed no women, and more wine and beer were sold than liquor.
- Rooms were heated with stoves or open fireplaces. There were usually signs to remind guests not to blow out the gas jets.
- No hotel owner called his house full until all double beds were fully occupied, often by bedmates who were complete strangers. Talk about yield management.

Statler, therefore, was more interested in plain vanilla comfort in his hotels than fancy trimmings. He said, “A shoe salesman and a traveling prince want essentially the same thing when they are on the road- namely, good food and a comfortable bed- and that is what I propose to give them.” In response to criticism that Statler hotels were not luxurious enough, Statler said, “Look, if I wanted to, I could run a so-called luxury hotel or a resort hotel that would beat any damn thing those frizzly-headed foreigners are doing, but I just don’t operate in that field. To hell with it; I’m not interested in it. All I want to do is to have more comforts and conveniences and serve better food than any of them have or do, and mine will be at a price ordinary people can afford.”

Ellsworth M. Statler was born on October 26, 1863, the son of William Jackson Statler and Mary Ann McKinney. The Statlers moved from a farm near Gettysburg, Pa. to Bridgeport, Ohio which is across the Ohio River from Wheeling, West Virginia. Ellsworth worked for a short time at age nine at the La Belle Glass Factory in Kirkwood, Ohio alongside his older brothers, ages 11 and 13. The work, that of a glory hole tender, was hard and hot. Glory holes were small furnaces used in glass factories to heat and soften glass so that it could be formed into bottles or other glass products. At age 13, Ellsworth got a job as a night-time bellboy at the McLure House Hotel in Wheeling, West Virginia.

Statler’s father died when Ellsworth had been working for two years as a bellboy at the McLure House. Statler was paid six dollars a month, plus his board, a place to sleep and whatever he could earn in tips. In 1878, the McLure House had an elevator but it was reserved for guests and

the manager. Bellboys carried luggage up and down the stairs and did the same with ice and water, kindling for fires and hot water for guest baths. Guest rooms at the McLure House were barely adequate with a bed, one chair, a large hook on the back of the entry door hanging clothes. Plumbing consisted of a pitcher of water, a large bowl, a spittoon and shared toilets down the corridor. Apparently, the McLure Hotel's saloon was more in tune with guest needs. It offered free lunch with a buffet consisting of cold meats, hard-boiled eggs and rye bread. A large painting of a nude female hung over the bar.

At age 15, Ellsworth became head bellman with the nickname of "Colonel". By the time he was 16, he learned how to keep the accounting records and at 19 became the hotel manager. The McLure lobby had marble floors, brass spittoons, heavy oak chairs and tables and mounted heads of bison and mountain sheep on the walls. Baseball scores were posted in the lobby and the atmosphere was charged with talk about cockfighting, prize fighting, gambling and steamboat races on the Ohio river. Enterprising and innovative, Statler leased the McLure Hotel's billiard room and railroad ticket concession and made them into profitable ventures. He got help from an unexpected source when he realized that his younger brother Osceola had developed an amazing talent for billiards. Osceola's fame spread all over town which brought people into the hotel to watch the local champion defeat all comers from out of town. Statler bought out the company that had been operating the nearby four-lane Musee Bowling Lanes, added four additional lanes and installed eight pool and billiard tables. Statler then organized a city-wide bowling tournament with a grand prize of \$300 for the winning team.

To accommodate the crowds, Statler started the "The Pie House" in the Musee building where his mother's pies and minced chicken and minced ham sandwiches were served on egg-shell china and quadruple-plated table silver. In anticipation of the Starbucks phenomenon, Statler used the best coffee he could get not only for pleasing his customers' taste but for attracting them with delicious aromas. The place was so busy that the pin boys in the bowling alleys had to spend their spare time turning cranks on the ice-cream freezers. However, the *piece de resistance*, from which the restaurant derived its name, were the lemon meringue, fruit and custard pies which were baked by Statler's mother and sister at their home.

And so it developed that the entire Statler family was involved in business in Wheeling: Ellsworth brother Osceola was partner and manager of the billiard room. Another brother, Bill, had charge of the Musee bowling lanes. Mother Statler and sister Alabama were turning out sandwiches and pies. As for Ellsworth, he was enjoying an income of \$10,000 per year which made him affluent and eager to own and operate his own large hotel.

His oft-expressed wish at that time was to own and operate a 1000 room hotel in New York City. Ultimately, Statler fulfilled his dream but not until he followed a standard vaudeville performer's line that "to get to New York City, you had to go by way of Buffalo."

After his success in Wheeling, Statler used to go fishing each summer with a couple of friends in the St. Clair River at Star Island in Canada. In 1894, during his return, Statler stopped in Buffalo where he observed the new Ellicott Square building under construction and billed as the "largest office building in the world". He learned that the building's management was looking for someone to operate a large restaurant in part of the main floor and basement for \$8,500 per year rental. Statler struck a verbal agreement with the renting agent to lease this space provided he could raise enough money to furnish a large restaurant. That same summer, Statler married Mary Manderbach whom he had met in Akron eight years earlier. They moved to Buffalo where on July 4, 1895, Statler's Restaurant opened amidst a blaze of fireworks and an outpouring of patriotic oratory. But, Buffalo had never been noted as a festive place or a center of fine dining. Despite heavy promotion and efficient operation, Statler's creditors closed in after he changed the name from Statler's Restaurant to George E. House's Restaurant (House was one of Statler's Wheeling friends who had underwritten his lease). Statler then rushed to Wheeling to change title to his mother's house to prevent it from being foreclosed.

Statler staked everything on the coming encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic which was about to bring thousands of Union Army veterans and their families to Buffalo. Statler advertised widely the most amazing menu ever offered at "All you can eat for 25¢." For just a quarter, patrons could eat the following: bisque of oysters, olives, radishes, fried smelts with tartar sauce and potatoes Windsor, lamb sauté Bordelaise with green peas, roast young duck with applesauce and mashed potatoes, Roman punch, fruit or vegetable salad with Russian dressing,

cream layer cake, Metropolitan ice cream, coffee, tea or milk. What's more, you could eat as much as you liked! The veterans and their families loved Statler's menu and made the restaurant profitable.

Statler's dream was to have his own hotel and in 1907, that dream became a reality. He opened the Buffalo, N.Y., Statler and offered "a room and a bath for a dollar and a half." He proceeded to establish a chain of middle-class hotels which set standards for comfort and cleanliness at moderate prices.

Seeking a competitive edge, he designed a common shaft known as the "Statler plumbing shaft" that permitted bathrooms to be built back to back, providing two baths for little more than the price of one, and allowing him to offer many private rooms with adjoining baths. These shafts, besides carrying water and waste lines, also contained heating pipes and the electrical conduits for each room.

Starting in 1908 Statler's preoccupation with guest comfort and operational efficiency brought about the following innovations, among others; ice water circulating to every bathroom, a telephone in every room, a full-size closet with a light, a towel hook beside every bathroom mirror, a free newspaper each morning, and a pin-cushion with needle and thread. In 1922, at the Pennsylvania Statler in New York City, Statler introduced the Servidor, a bulging panel in the guest-room door where the guest hung clothes needing cleaning or pressing. The valet could pick up the clothes and return them without ever entering the room. The Pennsylvania Statler was the first hotel to offer complete medical services including an x-ray and surgical room, a night physician and a dentist.

Statler was also concerned about making certain that the staff focused on guest satisfaction. When he established the first Hotel Statler in Buffalo, he said it this way: "A hotel has just one thing to sell. That one thing is service. The hotel that sells poor service is a poor hotel. It is the object of the Hotel Statler to sell its guests the very best service in the world."

Later, as he built more hotels, Statler made certain that they operated on the same principle. He wrote: “Statler Hotels are operated primarily for the comfort and convenience of their guests. Without guests there could be no Statler Hotels. These are simple facts, easily understood. It behooves every man and woman employed here to remember this always, and to treat all guests with courtesy and careful consideration.” Statler could be seen on the top floor of a new hotel, stop watch in hand, timing to the second how long it took the toilet to flush or a bath to fill.

Statler’s precepts eventually became the “Statler Service Code,” which outlined for employees the founder’s ideals. The code aroused so much interest that it was made available to guests and became a Statler tradition. New employees learned from it what was meant by “Statler service” and guests gained a better understanding of what Statler service meant to members of the organization.

In the days before the word “empowerment” became a cliché, every Statler employee signed off on the following pledge:

1. To treat our patrons and fellow employees in an interested, helpful, and gracious manner, as we would want to be treated if positions were reversed;
2. To judge fairly—to know both sides before taking action;
3. To learn and practice self-control;
4. To keep our properties—buildings and equipment—in excellent condition at all times;
5. To know our job and to become skillful in its performance;
6. To acquire the habit of advance planning;
7. To do our duties promptly; and
8. To satisfy all patrons or to take them to our superior.

Statler’s greatest contribution may have been forgotten: his formula for planning hotels so that smaller staffs could deliver services conveniently and efficiently. Statler departed from the customary practice of locating the kitchens in the less valuable basement area. Rather, he positioned a three-sided kitchen to simultaneously serve the restaurants, ballroom and meeting areas.

Apparently, operating genius ran in the family. His widow, Alice Seidler Statler, managed to stay solvent during the Depression, the only major hotel company to do so. She operated Statler Hotel Co. until 1954, when she sold it to Hilton Hotels for \$111 million, merging Statler's 10,400 rooms with Hilton's 16,200 units. It was the greatest hotel merger and largest private real estate transaction in history.

An insight into his character is revealed in an account of a trip he made in the middle 20's to visit the newly formed Hotel Administration Program at Cornell University. Though not in favor of college education for hotelmen, he made the trip as a favor to an old friend. Seeing what was being done, he liked it. His curt comment: "Give Professor Meek anything he wants". Later, he set aside one-sixth of the Statler stock as an educational trust fund.

The Statler Foundation today has assets of many millions and has made grants totaling well over \$12 million. The School of Hotel Administration at Cornell has received more than \$10 million for teaching facilities—Statler Hall and the Statler Inn and for scholarships, faculty salaries and research. San Francisco City College has a Statler Library. The Statler Foundation matches funds raised by regional hotel and restaurant educational foundations.