



The Bradford Hotel on an old postcard from the early 1900s. The hotel was torn down in 1970. It was located where the Metabank building stands.

Life at the Bradford Hotel

BY RICK WIMER

From the time I was nine years old until I got out of the Air Force at age 24, Storm Lake was my home. My memories here are fond and frequent. Every time someone publishes a picture of the Bradford Hotel it opens up a flood gate of wonderful, life-shaping memories that I experienced working there from roughly late 1959 to the summer of 1963.

The Bradford was located on the northwest corner of Erie and East Fifth Street, where the MetaBank building has been sitting empty for several years.

In the late 1950s, I was a Des Moines Register paper boy. One of my customers, Mike Kelly, lived in a suite on the third-floor suite of the Bradford Hotel. I don't remember what Mr. Kelly did. I assumed that since he lived in a suite at the Bradford, he might have been a successful businessman. He befriended me and was one of my many

mentors in Storm Lake.

He would often ask me what I was going to do when I grew up. I don't remember what my response was nor if I even had one. However, as I was in and out of the hotel seven days a week, I got to talk with some of the staff members, especially the bell hop.

He was a rather portly young man and I knew him only by the name of "Slim." He told me about all the tasks he had to perform, how much he made in tips and how he worked with other staff members in the hotel. I found the whole operation very interesting and intriguing. Ultimately, in one of our many conversations, Mr. Kelly encouraged me to try to get a job there. So, I did.

A neighbor gave me a piece of advice that I followed then and my entire career. He told me that if I really wanted the job, I should frequently visit the manager to remind him of it. For at least six months, one or two times a month, I would stop by the hotel and let the



Rick Wimer, 80, has an incredible memory.

manager, Mr. Clarence Ahrens, know that I was interested in the bell hop position at the hotel. The current bell hop had been there for years, and it didn't appear that he was going anywhere. However, that was the job I wanted.

One afternoon, I was participating in a St. Mary's baseball game at White Cap Field. As always, at that time I was a bench warmer sitting in the dugout. My brother Lynn popped his head and excitedly told me that Mr. Ahrens wanted to see me right away.

Since there could have been only one thing he wanted, I didn't hesitate a moment. I didn't tell Coach John Murray that I was leaving. I just left, in my baseball uniform. I remember excitedly running all the way to the hotel (no small feat) thinking that I was going to get a job.

I found Mr. Ahrens. He said the bellhop had left the job and that the bellhop position was mine if I wanted it. I went home, changed my clothes, returned to the hotel and assumed the bell hop position immediately. I worked there for three or four years until I got a better paying job.

My experiences at the Bradford were a precursor to a business management career that I ultimately spent the next 50 years in.

The Bradford Hotel was part of the Boss Hotel chain; with headquarters in Des Moines. The Bradford was built and opened in 1899 by an early Storm Lake developer, Scott Casper Bradford. Early pictures do not depict it as it was while I was there. The Bradford was shaped in a "U." It consisted of three floors plus a basement. There was a courtyard in the middle and a parking lot in the rear. It was designed very efficiently.

The Bradford had 100 rooms, including two guest suites with adjoining rooms

and a multi-room manager's suite. It was a full-service hotel. It featured fine dining areas, a bar, four meeting rooms and a fully functional laundry.

Entering through the glass door, you passed through a very wide hallway with a huge bay window on either side leading to another glass door. The right window faced the hotel lobby; the left the dining room. This hallway was also used to keep packages and freight delivered by the Greyhound and Iowa Coaches bus lines for businesses in Storm Lake, and were forerunners to today's UPS and FedEx. There were times that it was almost impassable because of the multitude of packages.

Upon entering the second glass door, straight ahead was a 10-12-foot-wide wooden staircase with ornamental wooden railings and bannisters on either side leading to the rooms on the second and third floors. It was quite a piece of workmanship.

To the left, through a set of double glass panel French doors was the main dining room/restaurant, two banquet meeting rooms, a full-service kitchen and small office containing an investment company run by E.C. (Bing) Ingram (he asked me once if he could invest some of my earnings for me. At that age I had no clue what "invest" meant. I said no I'm saving for a car when I turn 16. In retrospect this might have been a good opportunity missed at age 15) and finally, the kitchen.

To the right was an L-shaped lobby, the front desk, a hallway paralleling Erie Street to the manager's office and the first-floor guest rooms.

There were no business phones or cell phones then. All incoming calls to the hotel, whether to a guest room or hotel department, went through a switchboard and

would have to be answered, calls transferred and messages taken by whomever was on duty. On any given day and night, it could test one's endurance and sanity.

On the Erie Street side of the front desk was a glass enclosed, waist-high counter containing cigarettes, cigars, candies and various sundries for sale. Unfortunately, this is where temptation led me to buy my first of many packs of cigarettes at age 14. My brand of choice was Kent. I chose them only because they had a redeemable coupon in each pack; but have no recall of redeeming them for anything. I did quit smoking... 40 years later.

The hotel also served as the bus depot for both Greyhound and Iowa Coaches bus lines. The tickets were stored on the wall behind the glass enclosed counter. We could sell tickets and ship packages to all points in the United States. If customers were going for a short trip to Omaha, Sioux City or Fort Dodge, there were premade tickets assigned to each of those destinations. They were easy to sell. However, if someone wanted to purchase a Greyhound bus ticket to New York City, they could walk out with a ticket 10 feet or more long.

A two-part section had to be filled out for each significant destination on the way and these sections could only be separated at each of the destinations; and all sections were attached together. It sometimes took 30 minutes or more to fill one of these out. If the passenger arrived just before departure time, we would sell them a quick ticket to the first significant destination and have them fill out the rest of the ticketing.

The front desk, day in and day out, was the pulse of the hotel. Monday through Friday we could have as many as 200 check-ins and check-outs daily. While many of our guests had weekly standing reservations, we still needed to field the phone calls for the rest.

The lobby was fully carpeted but for eight feet of tile surrounding the front desk. The carpeting was very dark in color. The walls and elevated ceilings were off-white. Dark drapes adorned the five or six ceiling-high windows. I believe it was lit by chandeliers. It was furnished with several settings of dark, lavish sofas, chairs and end tables.

There was one black and white television in the lobby. There was always a small crowd gathered to catch the evening news with Chet Huntley and David Brinkley or Walter Cronkite. There were no TVs in the guest rooms.

THE ROOMS

The 14 rooms on the first floor were a bit larger, not as compact, than the rooms on second and third floors. The

furnishings were a bit nicer and the rates a bit higher. The views were the best... the courtyard and the landscaped courthouse across Erie Street. Each room had a small compact restroom with a shower/bath.

The second and third floors each had an unusually wide U-shaped hallway system; and just as the lobby, very high ceilings. So large that they often attracted children of our guests (and I now know, children of our non-guests) to use them as a playground.

The second level had a manager's suite. It was L-shaped facing Fifth Street and the alley separating it from the businesses on Lake Avenue.

THE BASEMENT

The basement contained public restrooms, a small meeting room, a small bar, maintenance room, storage rooms, laundry and a tunnel.

Also, on the Erie side of the hotel was a small set of concrete steps leading into the basement. Immediately to left from the doorway was the entry to the bar. It was nestled into the corner of Erie Street and East Fifth Street. Entering presented a very, very dark and smoky scene. Smoke so thick at times that a non-smoker might get addicted to smoking just being there. You could barely see the bartender behind the counter. There were only two or three barstools and maybe three tables with two chairs in the whole place. Music was coming from somewhere unknown. I cannot describe the décor because it was just too dark. The bar was just "a hole in the wall bar." It was not at all up to the standard set by the rest of the Bradford. Patrons were a mixture of hotel guests and locals. During my employment at the Bradford, I had very little need, if any, to be in the bar at all. But it did serve a purpose for me when I turned 16; in that I was able to buy an occasional underage six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon (PBR), Schlitz or Bud.

The third door led directly into the laundry area. With 80 to sometimes 100 rooms turning over daily, the laundry was quite an extensive operation. A typical room needed two sheets, two pillow cases, two each towels, hand towels and wash clothes. On an average day, there was quite a work load. I recall that there was a large, wide two or three roller apparatus that took up a large part of the laundry area. It was called a mangle. While I saw sheets rolling full length through it and being folded as they came off of it, I really wasn't sure what its full purpose was and how it worked.

GUESTS

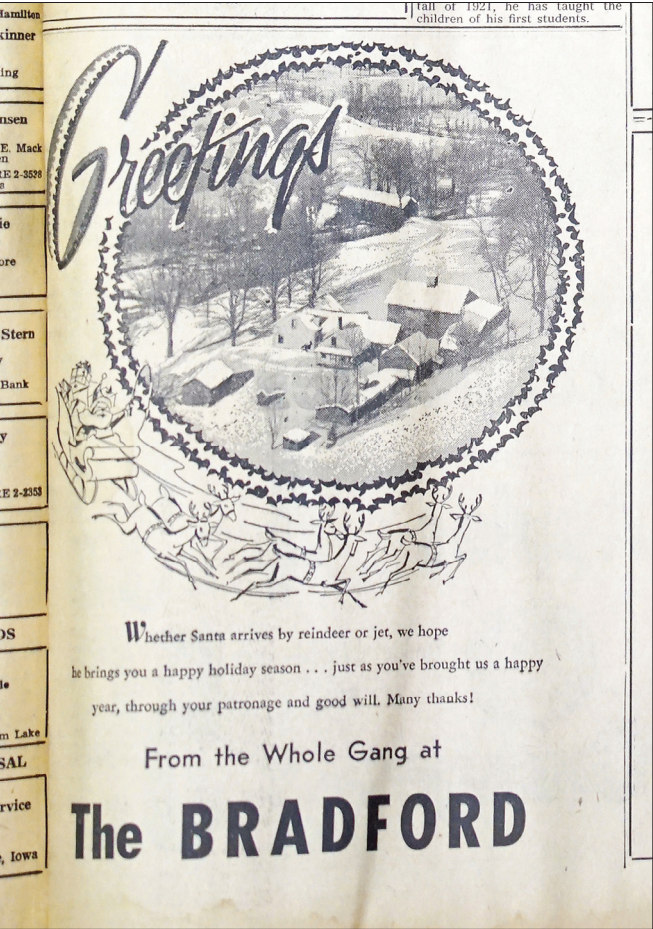
The Bradford was way ahead of its time. The décor, customer service, fine dining and various services it provided might be the equivalent to a 4-5 star hotel today. The Bradford, at that time, was the business and social hub of Storm Lake.

Our guests came to the Bradford for a myriad of occasions. It was the overnight stop for traveling salesmen representing household goods, farm equipment, supplies for the local businesses, vacuum cleaners, Fuller Brush, clothing, drugs, medical, car dealers, school courses, restaurant and hotel suppliers and many others.

I'd guess that 75% of our nightly guests were salesmen. Some guests were management representatives from major retailers like JC Penney, Sears, Montgomery Ward and Firestone. Many of them were weekly repeating guests staying 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 days a week. Most of these professional working people were "early to bed, early to rise." Not a whole lot of partying with these folks.

THE SHRINERS COME TO TOWN

One year the Shriners came to Storm Lake. They took up many of the rooms for three or four days. I'm not real sure what they were there for (I speculate fundraising), although I do recall them participating in a parade down Lake Avenue in their clown outfits, wearing red fezzes and driving their crazy zig-zag cars. They were a real bunch of characters hell-bent on having a good time. One of them would walk down the sidewalk in a clown suit on Lake Avenue during their parades and offer each lady he met a rose. Each would gladly reach out and grab the stem, only to get just the stem, not the



A Christmas ad from The Bradford.

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Rick Wimer working at the Bradford Hotel at age 15 or 16.



The time Rick was put in charge of the entire hotel, he “invited a couple of my buddies to come see everything I was doing, especially the room.” From left: Ardan Dirkx, Ed McKenna and Alan Dirkx.

flower. He had a pocket full of stems and only a single rose. Everybody laughed when this happened.

One Shriner at the hotel called down to the front desk and complained that there was no furniture in his room. I was sent up to the room to check is out. As I approached the room, I recalled that I had carried bags to it earlier and that there was furniture there then.

I entered the room with the guest and, sure enough, there was not a single piece of furniture visible; not a bed, night stand, lamp or dresser. The room was simply void of all furniture. I was shocked, excused myself and ran down the hallway to go report it to the manager.

I got halfway down the steps when the guest stopped me. He had this huge grin on his face and several other guests around him were laughing heartily. He beckoned me to come back. Just before we got to his room, he opened the door of the room next to it. Lo and behold, it was packed with all the furniture. They all got a good big laugh at my expense.

I remember being very confused with the whole situation. However, the guest handed me a \$10 bill and laughingly said that they would put it all back. That was the biggest tip I ever received while I worked at the hotel. In fact, I made over \$150 during their stay.

The Bradford included a chef on staff. Many community groups held their weekly, monthly and annual events there. Local business people held a weekly morning coffee meeting to discuss city issues. Groups like the Chamber of Commerce, The Wan Tan Ye, Kiwanis and several others used the Bradford where the setting was elegant, professional and the service, second to none.

The Bradford serviced multiple wedding receptions, family and class reunions, holiday parties galore and an occasional small convention. These functions were wonderfully decorated.

THE BRADFORD
HOTEL STAFF

The staff at the hotel consisted of a husband-and-wife management team, Clarence and Thea Ahrens. They were supported by a bookkeeper, a maintenance staff, front desk clerks, a bellman, night auditors, chef and sous-chefs, pastry chef, food preparers, dishwashers, wait staffers, laundry supervisor, laundry workers, maid staff (one for each floor), bartenders. Additional staff was brought in when the hotel

was full and busy with meetings, parties, banquets and various other gatherings.

Mr. and Mrs. Ahrens were a management team. I know, from the experience of occasionally hiring husband and wife teams in my business, it takes an exceptional couple to be able to work together and live together 24/7, 365 days a year and raise two children at the same time. I believe they were in their late 30s or early 40s.

They had two kids, Timmer and Nicky. Timmer was the oldest and was the more serious of the two. Nicky on the other hand was a young mischievous, rambunctious little girl. From time to time she would try to hide from her mother. Mrs. Ahrens would look for her all over the hotel, loudly calling out her name: “NICKY, NICKY, NICKY, where are you?”

One evening I got caught up in her shenanigans. Nicky was running through the dining and kitchen areas hiding from her mother. Somehow, she persuaded me to help her find a place to hide. So, we went to the back dining room, turned off the lights and hid behind the piano in the corner. Mrs. Ahrens came to the doorway of the dining room in the dark and loudly called out for Nicky. She was only about 10 feet away from us. I realized, fearfully, that I could be in a lot of trouble if she found us. What a relief it was when she left. Never did that again.

Mr. Ahrens was the manager of the hotel. I was in awe of him. He was the face of the Bradford to the community of Storm Lake. I was always asking him questions about the hotel and asking for more things to do. As time passed, my knowledge and tasks and how I completed them must have impressed him. So much so, that on two occasions the family left for a long weekend and he would put me in charge of the hotel. Imagine that — a 15-16-year-old was running the Bradford — at least everything but the office. I was allowed to pick a room to stay in while they were away. It was a hoot! I invited a couple of my buddies to come see everything I was doing, especially the room. You might add “showing off.” I’m sure my ego was telling me that I was a “big deal.”

Mrs. Thea Ahrens had a total commitment to excellence and set the highest of standards in every aspect of her areas of responsibility. She was a class act. She was always meticulously dressed and coifed.

Mrs. Ahrens was in charge of the dining room operations including Sunday brunch and

banquets. She was responsible for all wait staff hiring and training. Her dining rooms were impeccable. All tables were covered with white linen table clothes with white cloth napkins. Each had four place settings, a silver napkin holder and salt and pepper shakers.

While Mr. Ahrens managed the chef and his staff, I believe both collaborated on the level of the quality of meal-plating that was served to dining customers. I recall both of them observing the meal plates as the waitresses picked them up; rejecting occasionally one that wasn’t up to standard. Mrs. Ahrens also supervised the maid staff. I don’t recall ever seeing an unkempt, dirty room in all the time I was there.

Mrs. Ahrens also oversaw the laundry operations and achieved the same level of excellence. However, the laundry room was actually supervised by Shirley. She had a hard-working staff that had a huge task each and every work day. The hotel operated at high occupancy four to five days a week. That meant that 90 to 95 of the rooms had to have maid service daily. Sheets, pillow cases, bathroom towels, et al had to be stripped, sent to the laundry, laundered, meticulously folded and returned to the maid closets daily. It was no small task.

Mr. and Mrs. Ahrens were my first exposure to quality and efficient management. While I wouldn’t say they were raging workaholics with type A, multi-tasking personalities, they were certainly exemplified a strong commitment to excellence.

WHAT I DID THERE...

My typical weekly schedule included:
Monday through Friday: 4-9 p.m. Bellman
Saturday: 7 a.m.- 3 p.m. Dishwasher. From 3-5 p.m. mop/strip/wax the dining room floors, set up the tables and chairs for Sunday dining. 7 p.m.-7 a.m. Sunday, night auditor.
Sunday: 4-11 p.m. Front desk clerk
I started at 50 cents per hour, plus meals, and ended at 75 cents, plus meals and plus tips.
As the bellman, I started each shift getting the laundry from the basement to the maid’s linen closets on each of the three floors. There were no elevators in the Bradford. So, using two canvas slings (one for each hand) loaded with the linen, I would lug them up every stair step from the basement to third floor. (Whew!) On a busy night, 50 to 100+ times up and down the steps,

carrying nothing but linens, guest luggage and room service up those stairs was quite a workout.

Many guests, in addition to their luggage, brought their salesman kits; which could mean making two to three trips to their room per guest. For this they would tip me, usually 25 cents a bag, occasionally 50 cents and sometimes, no tip at all. For a high school kid, I made pretty good money over the week and probably more than my buddies who worked at various hourly paid jobs.

Robert Gage was the Night Auditor of the Bradford for all the time I worked there. Bob was in his late 60s, early 70s. He was a sweet old man. He trained me in the night audit process. He was exact and precise in everything he did. He would always come in a few minutes early and routinely arrange the front desk area the same way each time before he would start working; pens in one place, night audit paperwork in another, phone headphones hung the same way. He did the same thing to the small room behind the front desk. Everything had to be in the same place, always. I would guarantee, even to this day, that his completed night audits were flawless. And that’s just what he trained me to do. He checked my work during training and was not shy pointing out an occasional error. And once I was

on my own, he would check my work the following day to insure correctness. He taught me the value, in business, of the importance of financial accounting. Throughout my career and even to this day, I have been Bob-like ever since. Thanks Bob!

On Saturday night, once the night audit was complete, there was not a whole lot to do until the end of the shift at 7 a.m. Sunday. There might have been an occasional check-in or phone call, or someone buying a bus ticket. There was always the Iowa Coaches bus dropping off or picking up passengers or freight. Occasionally a customer looking for the bar would go through the lobby instead of the exterior entry. And of course, at closing time, a bar patron who may have had a bit too much to drink would in an un-gingerly way, make their way through the lobby and out the front door. Television viewing shut down with the playing of the Star-Spangled Banner at midnight. That left doing homework, touching up the lobby, smoking a cigarette or two (bad), napping in that overstuffed chair in the back room. I’m not sure there were child labor laws back then that might have prohibited a young teenager from working the kind of hours, but if so, I’m glad they were never enforced.

I loved working at the Bradford. I worked with an amazing staff and met many interesting people from all over the United States. I received excellent guidance in operating a business and developing quality, customer service skills from both Mr. and Mrs. Ahrens.

I will always be grateful and appreciative to Mr. Mike Kelly, my unnamed neighbor, the Bradford Staff and Mr. and Mrs. Ahrens. Thank you all!

BRADFORD VIGNETTES

A Friendly Gun

Thinking back to this situation, I marvel at the fact that I remained calm, didn’t panic and maintained in complete control of the situation. I was working the front desk at the time. A rather indigent, scruffy looking man of about 30, carrying a non-descript black bag entered the hotel and approached the front desk. I’m sure I greeted him and asked how I could help him. I remember that we talked for a few minutes or so. Abruptly, he reached into that black bag, pulled out a pistol and pointed it at me. It looked sort of beat up and old.

He just stood there, pointing it at me, saying nothing. I remember no alarm, no panic, nothing seemed to be upsetting to me. I am clueless as to why not. So, I calmly said to him, “That’s a nice-looking gun, can I look at it?” Without hesitation or comment he handed it over to me. I asked him to have a seat in the lobby while I looked it over. I didn’t give it back to him. While he was sitting there peacefully waiting, I called the Storm Lake Police Department. Since their station was located right behind the hotel, they were there in a flash. I gave them the pistol. They escorted him peacefully from the hotel. As my father might often say, “I never saw hide nor hair” of him again. Game over!

I think this was a learning

experience for me. Throughout my life, when faced with a traumatic situation, I have always been able to remain calm and in control; blessing, indeed!

MY BRADFORD
PHARMACIST FRIEND

His name was John Dahlke. He was young, single, good looking. He drove an awesome (1962 or 63) bright red Cadillac convertible. I loved that car! He was the newly hired pharmacist at Constable Drug Store. And, he moved into the Bradford as a permanent guest.

I got to know him quite well, giving him messages at the front desk, delivering him room service from the kitchen or just chatting with him in the lobby or a hallway. So it comes to pass that it was 1963, the year of my senior prom at St. Mary’s. My date, amazingly, was the same Judy Wolff who rejected my marriage proposal at age 10, and who has been a longtime friend ever since. In one of the occasional conversations with John, I jokingly asked him if I could borrow his Cadillac to take my date to the prom. Surprisingly, and without hesitation, he said yes. Talk about “music to my ears.”

So, on the evening of the prom, properly attired in a suit and tie, I picked up the Caddie from John at the hotel. His parting words were “Don’t wreck it and bring it back with a full tank of gas.”

“Don’t wreck it” was with me every minute that I was behind the wheel of that boat. So off I went to pick up Judy and to start our evening at the prom. Arriving at her house on Russell Street, I walked suavely up the steps to her porch and tapped on the door. I’m sure she was waiting my arrival, the door opened quickly. There she stood in a beautiful dress of blue lace that her mom had made. I presented her with the biggest corsage of red roses that she had ever seen.

The rest of the evening was sort of fuzzy. I’m sure I drove to the front entrance of the St. Mary’s gym. I’m sure there were oohs and ahhs from classmates as we pulled up. I’m sure we had a great time. I’m sure we danced a lot. Judy and I could really cut a mean rug back then. I’m sure that we scooped the loop several times before going home.

As good as my memory is, I think it was overshadowed by my preoccupation with John’s parting comment about wrecking it. Once I had dropped Judy off at her home, I dutifully went to a gas station to fill the tank, per John’s instructions. I remember this so well because I filled the tank with regular gas instead of Ethel. Big oops!

The next day at the hotel, John approached me and told me that because I had used the wrong gas, he had to drain the tank and fill it again. It must have pinged like crazy. I’m sure my face was as red as the Caddie from embarrassment.

He was not angry. He did not ask me to pay for the gas. Our relationship continued on as it was before. John was still a guest after I had left the Bradford and I often wonder what ever happened to him. He was such a cool guy.

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