

Growing Up in a Catskills Resort Hotel

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Introduction

One of the last times I walked on the grounds of the hotel my family owned—Stier’s Hotel—was about twenty years ago when I took my wife and some cousins to see it. That was also about fifteen years after we sold the hotel.

At the time, our hotel still functioned as a hotel, although much has changed and it is owned by Hasidic Jews. The day we showed up was Shabbos and I was reluctant to walk onto the grounds. So we just stood at one of the gates and looked in.

Soon a young boy, probably no more than 12 or 13, came up to us and asked who we are. I told him who I was and he said, “You, you are one of the Stiers?” I said, “yes.” And he said, “do you remember where the valve is that turns the water off in the Oak cottage?”

It turned out that I was meeting the son of the current owner—I was meeting myself thirty years later. So we walked onto the property and I showed him where the valves that turned off the water to the Oak were hidden in some tall grass not far from where there once was a sandbox in which I spent many happy hours and, also from, the “climbing tree,” an apple tree that had a convenient set of “steps” that helped small kids get high up into it.

I was invited to prepare this paper for a panel at a sociology conference by the leading historian of the Catskills, Phil Brown, because my family owned a hotel in Ferndale, NY for 53 years from 1920 to 1973. I should add, parenthetically that both sides of my family had hotel connections. My mother’s grandparents on the maternal side, Morris and Nettie Karp founded the Monika Lodge which they lost after a fire during the depression. The family tradition was to say that that the new owners cut down a whole stand of pine trees and renamed it The Pines.

I grew up in the hotel business. I spent all my summers there, except for parts of two summers when I went to sports camp until I was 16. (Unfortunately one of those years was 1969 and, although Woodstock happened ten miles away from my house, I couldn’t get sprung from camp to go to it.) It was a hotel very similar to Delmar, which was owned by the family of one of my best friends, Jerry Jacobs, who gave another paper on the panel.

The Hotel and Me

We had about 85 rooms and could be full with anywhere from 125 to 150 guests, depending upon how many singles and children we had.

We had, and were widely known for, great Jewish food at our Hotel. Someday I hope to find the tape of one of comedians who started at our Hotel on the Tonight Show talking about our hotel and Johnny Carson saying, “that’s the place with the great food.”

My Grandfather, who ran the kitchen, had very high standards and made clear to the chefs what our meals was supposed to taste like. There was no artificial anything in our hotel. And we

typically had a bigger staff of cooks than other hotels our size—a head chef who worked all day preparing dinner and a breakfast / lunch chef along with a baker, salad man, and a kitchen man or two.

Given my culinary tastes today—and my concern for my cholesterol levels—I don't eat the fatty Jewish food of my youth all that often. And I've learned that vegetables do not need to be killed by hours of boiling to be safe to eat. Funny enough, I learned that from my grandmother who loved to feed me and a few times each summer would make me fresh, lightly cooked green beans on which I put lots of butter. But I still love the Jewish delicacies from our kitchen, especially the dairy ones—blintzes and kreplach and all kinds of beautifully prepared fish. And I even love the Jewish “Chinese” food and the corn soup we served on Saturdays.

I worked in a variety of jobs at different times in the sixteen years I was at the hotel. Everyone in the family had to be prepared to do almost everything. There were many days when my father, who had a busy law practice in the village of Liberty, would have to come up in the middle of the day to fill in for a salad man who was ill or a dishwasher who was in the tank. I began to help him as soon as I could, probably when I was 9 or 10.

At various times I ran the small store or concession; worked as a kitchenman (when I loved to wash the Oak kitchen floor with a light chlorine solutions); short order cook, dishwasher, pool boy, busboy, waiter, salad man, and office assistant. But I only held three jobs for very long.

I was the hotel handyman from the time I was about 14. I fixed room locks and restrung Venetian blinds. And most of all, I got rust out of faucets and shower heads. This was a constant problem for summer resorts. No matter how well you drained the pipes over the winter, you couldn't get all the water out and the older pipes rusted. Our plumber, Harry Swengler, a gruff but sweet man, was so tired of running up to the hotel to get the rust out of a shower head or faucet that he gave me a two hour lesson in the tricks of the trade and told me not to call until him until I tried all of them.

One or two summers I was the bell hop which was an incredibly intense and lucrative job on Sunday, the weekly check-in and check-out day.

Our last summer at the hotel, when I was 16, I took over for my 75 year old grandfather who ran kitchen. He had fallen off a roof at the front of the main building while trying to clear gutters from leaves after freak hailstorm in June. Why was my grandfather on the roof? Because the 82 year old handyman was too unsteady on his feet to do it.

I did many things that summer in the kitchen. I ordered food from our suppliers, helped plan menus, supervised the dining room staff, served cereal and made hard, medium and soft boiled eggs for breakfast. My favorite job was taking the uneaten slices of rye bread and pumpernickel that came back from the dining room and reassembling them so that, when we served them the next meal, the strays pieces looked like they came from the same loaf. This was an art form at which I became very good.

The Busboy's Perspective

I was not invited to be on this panel because I have written about the Catskills before. It actually has never occurred to me to do so and I am not terribly inclined to do so. I don't really think about our hotel very much, though it played such a big part in my life and I have very fond memories of my time there. But these are mostly private memories that don't have much significance for anyone else but me.

And, in truth, I haven't read that much about the Catskills. I admired the book on the Catskills written by Phil Brown, the Brown professor who organized this conference panel. I've dipped into my friend Eileen Pollack's novel, which is set at a hotel much like Pollack's, which was down the road from our hotel. But that is about it.

Perhaps there is something to be learned in why I don't have any particular interest in going back to this part of my life. Growing up as the son of an hotel owner I think creates a sense of comfort that actually disinclines one to look back.

If you look at Phil Brown's background you will see an important contrast with my own. His family owned a hotel at one time but his formative experiences were at hotel's owned by others. The result, I think, is that Phil's book is in many respects a busboy's view of the Catskills. I don't say this with any disrespect: that view is an important one—perhaps more important because there were a lot more busboys than hotel owners.

But it isn't the only one. And my point is that someone who was a busboy is much more likely to be energized about the Catskills. For we are energized most about that which we are ambivalent. I don't see how anyone could not be ambivalent about life in the Catskills if one worked in a dining room for more than two weeks. I don't think I ever worked in the dining room for more than five weeks consecutively. I hated it

The Owner's Son

As the son of an owner of a hotel, however, one is pretty much protected from the worst of the Catskills. To be honest, I grew up pretty much as the young lord of the manor. Everyone from my grandparents and parents to the staff to the guests doted on me and, when I was young, let me get away with some pretty obnoxious behavior. I "fired" staff members who gave me a hard from a very early age.

Our business never made much money, but it didn't matter much since my father earned a good living as a lawyer. We were tied to the Hotel, though: my parents had to work very hard to keep it running just to pay off the mortgage. There were times I fiercely I resented the hotel because I thought my parents worked too hard and because we couldn't take summer vacations like normal people. And it was especially disturbing because, with the growth of my father's practice and career in small town politics, my family did not need in-kind or cash income the hotel produced.

But, for me, most of the time, life at the hotel was great. When I was very young we always had a lot of kids around and an active day camp. That kept me entertained. In early sixties our children's dining room would have 30 or so screaming kids. Absolutely the worst job in the hotel was to be the waiter in the children's dining room. I did it for a few days as a fill-in. My wife

could never understand why I would get so uptight when my own daughter would get up and run around in restaurants. She didn't understand that I had flashbacks of small children underfoot as I was carrying a tray or of kids reached up to grab things off the tray.

Even when didn't have many kids as guests, we had the one of the first and largest pools in the mountains with water that never warmed up. I could stay in the pool for three or four hours in an afternoon inventing fantasies and games that mostly revolved around a popular TV show of the time, Seahunt. I did, however, have to wait 45 minutes after we ate, so that, as a grandmother once put it, I wouldn't get the bends from swimming so soon after I ate.

There was live music. I am very sad I can't share live music with my daughter more often than I do. Our bands were sometimes good and sometimes just ok. We had a pianist who didn't like to play loud for a few summers. And one drummer couldn't keep a beat to save his life but was having an affair with the female saxophonist. Still there is nothing like hearing live music, and that was an experience I had most summer nights for 14 years. It was as great introduction to the wonderful songs by Porter, Rogers, Gershwin, Kern, and others we call "standards." I heard most of them so often that that I've long been able to improvise on the trumpet by ear because the harmonies of the standards are second nature to me.

(And that reminds me of the time my Uncle Phil, who was a little strange complained that a singer, Alan Chester, was singing "Negro spirituals" likes "Ol Man River." I tried for a day but could not convince him that two Jewish guys, Kern and Hammerstein wrote that song.)

When I was older I got to take on the kind of responsible job I would not have had if my parents did not have the hotel

And I always had an extended family around. Between my grandmother and grandfather's family I had about 16 great aunts and uncles and lots of third cousins. I saw many of these lovely and loving people a few times a year. It was very sad not to see them so often after we sold the hotel.

My only regret was that we sold the hotel a little too soon: The attractive women—I guess they were actually girls—who worked in our office or the dining room were always a little too old for me and I was too young to do much with the occasional young women who came to the hotel with their grandparents. A few more years and I would have had my own room at the hotel and life would have gotten a little more exciting. When I first drafted this paper I thought it might be funny to say that I remember the number of every room in which I was alone with a girl. But the truth is I remember not only the number but the color of the bedspreads in pretty much every room in the hotel.

So, I grew up in loving circumstances in which I was a center of attention. And I more or less got his own way much of the time. That made me somewhat insufferable at times. But it also made me confident and secure. And I think it has also made me disinclined to see other sides to the Catskills Hotel experience or to think about it in a terribly analytic way. One does not go to the lord of the manor or his son to get a reflective view of what manor life is about. Calling the life of the Catskills into question requires a leap of imagination that one is not likely to find in the son of a hotel owner

Thus I find myself utterly incapable of taking a reflective or distanced view of the Catskills resorts life. So, instead of doing that, let me tell you some stories that perhaps point to some of the challenges of running a hotel

Those challenges come in three categories: guests, staff, and the external world.

The Guests

Let me start with the guests. To be honest, they were not my favorite people. To do well, a hotel family had to someone who could run the front office and mix with the guests. You need someone who could figure out who to sit with whom in the dining room and who could pick entertainers that appealed to the guests.

And you need someone else who can run the kitchen and keep the physical plant going. I definitely preferred the back of the house. I never liked the fact that I had to “on” for the guests and make them feel welcome. Especially when I was young, they seemed like intruders in my space and I didn’t see why I had to go out of my way to be nice to them. And I certainly didn’t like the extraordinarily crazy demands they made on us. So I tried to stay away.

Of course, without the guests, there would be no hotel, so we should start with them. Our guests were often very strange and / or difficult. Let me tell you about one of the oddest a Mrs. Teitelbaum. Mrs. T would for a goblet full of hot water at the beginning of the meal. She would carefully dip her silverware in it, to make sure it was sterile. Odd behavior yes. But not entirely insane. However, at the end of the meal she would ask for a tea bag and put it in the same goblet and drink the water.

Mrs. T. was always too hot in the our air-conditioned dining room. While the dining room was cold at start of meal, it did gradually warm up. Mrs. T insisted on sitting in one particular seat in the dining room, where one of the two air conditioners would blow frigid air right on her. No matter how cold the dining room was, she always complained in her high pitched wine. I can still here her saying “Harry—her waiter—turn down the air conditions, I can’t breathe.” Harry—whose embellished “help” signs were famous in the mountains, would rush to do it, or pretend to do it when everyone else in the dining room was already too cold. Mrs. T eventually caught on and would say, “Harry, I know what you are doing. Now go turn down the air conditioner, I can’t breathe.”

Guests, like Mrs. Teitelbaum, had to be managed. It was important to give them things that would make their vacation special. But you also had to be careful not to give them too much or their expectations would begin to rise.

Sometimes it would be possible to accommodate them. We had a guest who would constantly grumble at having to wait for his food. His wife told us should put everything on the table for him at the beginning of the meal. So we did. He would walk into lunch and his fruit, salad, main dish, desert, and coffee were all there before him. He would eat in 3 minutes and leave.

Sometimes you had to be careful not to accommodate guests too much. My father claims to be the one who invented the midnight lox and bagel on Saturday nights. We did it one week, and everyone loved it. It was a big success. We did it a second week and it also was big success. The

third week my father was walking across the lawn and heard one old lady turn to another and say, “Nu, do you think we are going to have lox and bagels Saturday at midnight.” The other said, “Of course we are. It is a tradition.” My father decided that this was one tradition we could not afford.

We would often go out of our way for guests. There was a man in the 1930s who got into a card game with some serious gamblers. My grandfather warned him not to do so but he lost a bundle anyway. He came to my grandfather and said that he would have to leave. But my grandfather told him he could stay the rest of his two weeks without paying. It was a good business decision as the man came back to our hotel every summer for the next thirty five years. And he stopped playing cards.

Some guests were incredibly generous. There was an elegant man named Al Taber who would bring my parents a drink at the end of the day. And he would tip me five dollars for taking his bags to a ground floor room at a time when the standard tip for taking a cart full of luggage was a dollar. There was Jerry Frank, who had come over on the boat from Europe with my grandfather and would also give me five dollars to go to the front room in the Rose Cottage.

And sometimes they were incredibly cheap. There was a couple who came to the hotel with their clothes in paper bags or laying with hangers on the back seat of their car. They would take a room without a bath or shower—what we called a bath on the floor room—two flights up in the main house and tip me a quarter. And yet they were worth millions. One of my predecessors as a bellhop, my cousin Larry Weininger later became an IRS agent and audited their returns once and was shocked to discover how rich they were. He was so shocked that he broke all the rules and called my dad to tell him how much money they had.

Sometimes you had to police the guests. There was a Canadian couple who came by bus. Every day a roll of toilet paper would disappear from their bathroom. They were planning to take 14 rolls of toilet paper back with them. The day before they left, my mother went into their room and took the toilet paper back. That wasn't the only time my mother did some second story work. There was the famous towel lady, who would steal sheets and towels and wrap them up and put them in the suitcase. The chambermaids would report that each day another sheet or towel had disappeared. So, while they were eating dinner on the day before they left, my mother went to their room and removed all the sheets and towels from their suitcases.

There was another couple who came with their grandchildren. They had adjoining rooms—two rooms that shared a bathroom—in the Oak cottage. When they said on the first day, “How come there are no sheets on the bed” my mother asked them to take down their suitcase.

It would take even more effort to catch another thief: Mr. and Mrs. Klein used to come to our hotel with one grandchild. Mrs. Klein would come thin as a toothpick. Eight weeks later she would leave looking like an apple. Her grandson would spend time in camp. And everyday counselors would lose materials from the craft closet, which, when not in use, was locked with a combination lock. My mother noticed that Mrs. Klein often ate lunch in a hurry. So one day, at lunch time, one of the counselors locked himself in the craft material closet. Mrs. Klein got quite a shock when she unlocked the combination lock and walked in.

One in a while we would have to protect the guests from something that would disturb their vacation. My sister and I once were walking down a sidewalk when there was some snow during an early Passover. We saw some teeth on the ground and looked over to see a quite dead man lying on the ground. A guest then walked out of the side door of the hotel and saw all of us and began screaming. The body was hurriedly removed.

This was not the only time a body had to be disposed of carefully. We had a steward who worked with us for many years—until long after he died I thought his name was Stuart—whose room was on the second floor of the main building, where he died. So as not to upset the guests, my grandfather and Dr. Kozower “walked” him down the steps and out the main building on the way to the doctor’s car.

Sometimes guests would be just annoying. When I worked as a busboy, there was a brother / sister couple who were particularly troublesome. The brother never asked for anything. He would make me wait while he mumbled to his sister. And then the sister would do all the ordering. And then, one day the woman called me over and said, my brother noticed that you ran your hand through your hair and later used that same hand to serve us applesauce. I really wanted to remind her that I washed my hair but also used the same hand to pick up the dirty dishes from the table. But as I so often did, I just gritted my teeth and thanked her for the advice.

Sometimes guests would be dangerous. A Mrs. Lieberman claimed to be a help when her screaming woke everyone up when our newest building went up in flames. She neglected to point out what we very quickly concluded: she was the first to know of the fire because an iron she left on the floor caused it.

And sometimes guests could be a little perverse. My parents slept on the third floor in room 12 for one summer and every once in a while would hear the screen door slam and see one of the dining room staff leaving the bedroom of one the hotel guests.

The Staff

As I said, the back of the house and the staff were much more fun for me than the front of the house. My favorite place was the kitchen. When I was very young I used to eat while meals were being served and would always sit so that I could watch how happen. The speed and pressure and grace and memory of the waiters and chefs always fascinated me. (Waiters didn’t write down orders in those days). I liked the lingo of the kitchen. I liked the way the chef would say “watch your back” when he picked up a big pot of something hot. I still call the various parts of a chicken the top and the bottom as we did in the kitchen.

And I loved the way my grandfather kept watch on everything as he worked with the chef and kitchen man to fill the plates as they went out to the dining room. He usually did the starch, the kugel or the potatoes. And he would point out when portions were too large or, much more frequently, too small. He would be the one to tell the waiters not to try to serve two large tables at once, partly because he didn’t want the food to be cold and partly because he didn’t want the waiters to get hurt. When I was ten or eleven I started to help my grandfather do this

While I liked being in the back with the staff, in the mind of most people, the staff were something of a lower order, far below the guests. There was once a Mrs. Gilman whose two sons

worked at our hotel, one as waiter and the other as a musician. Mrs. Gilman lived in a bungalow colony down the road but spent much of day at the hotel pool. One day she ran screaming into the lobby saying, “Someone is drowning in the pool but don’t worry he’s on the staff.”

My favorite staff members were the bakers and salad men, mostly because my favorite foods came from those two places. Bakers tended to be shy men. They went to work much earlier than everyone else and spent much time alone. My favorite was Steve who made all my birthday cakes until I was 12 when he died. He was a sad looking man who reminded me a bit of Stan Laurel. He had bad feet—the story was it was due to a long march during World War II—and shuffled when he walked. I adored him for his kindly smile, for his wonderful chocolate in the middle cookies and fruit pies, and also because always let us rummage in his cookie closet.

That got me into trouble with our next baker, Alec Nagy, a Hungarian who was by far the finest and most elegant of our bakers. I’ve never had rugallah to equal his. And his Viennese delicacies brought something special to our dining table. However, did not like the idea of children rummaging in his closet and started yelling when he caught me. But we reached a compromise, I stayed out of his closet and he left a tray of cookies for me every day.

The final baker we had during my time at the hotel was Harry Starr. He was enormously energetic. He was the only baker who baked white bread—with other bakers we had to buy it along with rye and pumpernickel from Katz’s bakery. Harry made the best jelly rolls and his famous wonder marble cake. But, amazingly enough, he had no conception how to cut a pie for a hotel. Instead of cutting across, then across three or four more times, he would try to cut each piece one at a time, which took forever and led to uneven slices—something that could cause real problems for the waters with the guests. I couldn’t understand how who had been a baker his whole life and who was now in his sixties or seventies had managed not to learn how to cut a pie or cake. But I couldn’t manage to teach him how to cut cakes and pies and had to relieve him of that duty.

Salad men were typically among the nuttier employees—just one or two steps below drummers, most of whom seemed to be from another planet. Eddie Collins, a salad man who worked at our hotel for about five years had a Muhammad Ali act. He would proclaim that, “I am the greatest salad man in the mountains.” And he used to want me to time him while he filleted a herring. (He could average about a herring every nine seconds.) He actually did do the work of two people, almost never missed an order, and had some creative ways of saving money. He taught me that you make tuna salad that was almost one-third gefilte fish without anyone knowing if you put a little lemon on the gefilte fish first. Unfortunately for our bottom line, my grandfather discovered he was doing this and put a stop to it.

He was far better than the last salad man who replaced. Izzy was so slow that the waiters and busboys called him wuzzy.

After people in the kitchen my favorite staffers were the entertainers. I was especially partial to George Kuttin, who booked the entertainers. He was a short, stocky, cigar smoking man who was very funny and had a good sense of what would play at our hotel. He had a good stable of comedians who I loved. most of the jokes they told had risqué conclusions which were told in

Yiddish even if the rest of the joke was told in English. So now, the only Yiddish I know is what I call punch-line Yiddish.

Comedians could push the edge a bit so long as the punch line was in Yiddish. But some went too far. Lenny Bruce worked at our Hotel for \$50 in 1958. When we sold the Hotel my sister found a bill from George Kuttin and on it, scrawled in my grandfather's handwriting was the word "dirty"

Henny Youngman worked at our hotel a few times in the sixties. During those times, comedians often worked three shows. They would do an early show as a warm-up at one of the bigger hotels, then headline a show at our hotel, and then do a late night show at a bungalow colony. One evening my father heard Youngman screaming at someone in the phone booth around the corner from the front desk. When he left the phone booth he said to my Dad, "my agent thinks I'm doing a third show at one of the bungalows. That's not for me." Later that night at the end of Youngman's performance on our stage, two big guys walked through the house and backstage. A few minutes later, they walked out with Youngman between them and got into a car together. Youngman played a bungalow colony that night.

My favorite entertainers were a couple, Sam Shaw, who was a comedian and master of ceremonies and his wife Ruth Miller, who was a singer and taught dance classes with Sam. Sam and Ruth lived at the hotel and were there most days except Thursdays which was movie night. Sam was also what was known as a tumbler. He would walk around the lawn or the pool and kibitz with the guests or hold a session of Simon Says or a shuffleboard contest. Sam would do a comedy warm-up for the singers we generally had a Sunday night while Ruth would do a singing warm-up for the comedians we had on Saturday night. (If I remember correctly Monday was game or bingo night. Friday we had a dance team—just like Dirty Dancing. Wednesdays we had novelty acts: jugglers or puppeteers.) Both of them were lovely, friendly people who loved to spend time with me and who I adored.

The waiters and busboys were the staff members I hung out with most. Most of them were male Jewish college students who increased their tips by talking about how it would pay for their college tuition. Even when I worked in the dining room, one good summer of tips could pay for a year's college tuition of \$3000. I think it was common, by the way, for waiters and busboys who said that they wanted to be doctors to get better tips for that reason.

When I was really young I would hang out at the softball games our staff had with the staff of the seven or eight hotels around us. Or I would just volunteer to help them set up for the next meal. When some of the dining room staff discovered I didn't mind doing this, they would often pay me to do so when they had a hot date that night.

Some waiters became like a temporary older sibling for me. (Busboys were definitely not older sibling material. I was snobbish that way.) But they were often a lot less interesting to me than the other staff members for that reason. Sometimes, however, they would do very funny things.

When Robbie Riesenber, the son of our family doctor first started working in our hotel he was asked to get some buttermilk for a guest. He went to the refrigerator and got a bottle of buttermilk out, opened it up and smelled it. It smelled so awful that he assumed it had spoiled, so

he poured it out. He then got another bottle, smelled it, too and poured that one out. He did this two or three more times. My grandfather was watching him and finally, thinking that the poor boy had gone totally off his rocker, yelled at him to stop.

I had my own run-in with buttermilk. I was on my first day on a temporary assignment as a waiter when one of the guests on my state asked for buttermilk. Another guest did the same. And then a third. Finally, our pianist, who was eating at the table said, “buttermilk for all of us.” I was furious at the pianist both for making extra work for me and for wasting our money. That didn’t help me and, as I walked angrily through the door into the dining room I dropped all eight glasses of buttermilk all over myself. I took three showers that afternoon to get the stench out of my hair.

Working in the dining room was hard. Until the last three or four years, when we hired an extra “relief” person, waiters and busboys worked three meals a day, seven day as a week. The work day started at 6:30 in the morning and dinner rarely was over, and the dining room reset for breakfast until about 9:00. And then most of the staff wanted to drink and other wise party. So they were up late. There was time for some sun and swimming and napping during the day. But it was still a long, tiring day.

I hated the work. Guests were obnoxious and far more demanding than they needed to be. Far too often their requests seemed to be more about exercising power over us peons than about actually getting something they wanted to eat.

After a day in the dining room I wanted to do nothing but have two or three beers with my friends from town—since I lived in town year round, all my friends were close by.

As I mentioned, the longest I worked in the dining room was about five weeks. I became fairly misanthropic after those five weeks. The only time in my life when Ayn Rand’s libertarianism appealed to me was for about three months after my stint in the dining room ended

It was also hot in the kitchen and dining room. And chefs were pretty temperamental to begin with. Sometimes the tension of work in led to real strife. Every once in a while fists—or a knife or two—would be thrown .

One time, my cousin, Shel Schenkler—the son of my father’s first cousin Irene—was working as a waiter and got into a fight with the dairy chef. It quickly escalated and one of them had to leave. And there was no question that it would not be the chef as a really good dairy chef was hard to find. He was a really good waiter, and part of the family, but Shel had to go. He was man enough to understand that and not hold a grudge. A week or so later he got a job driving a van for the company that did our sheets and towels so I still saw him every day.

The color line in our dining room was broken, I believe, in the late 1950s. But most of the waiters and busboys remained white and male into the 1960s. In the late 1960s we hired a young man from a black college in the south, Cornell Sneyd, to work as a dishwasher. Corny was a wide receiver in college and all that summer while I was at sports camp, my parents, told him that I was an aspiring quarterback and that for the last two weeks of August I could work out with him. When we finally met I was impressed by how strong and fast he was even though he was not much taller than me. He eyed me with a great deal of suspicion, however. But to his

surprise, I turned out to have a very good arm and we did spend a few weeks working out. He was a good coach, too, and taught me a lot especially about keeping the ball high while dropping back and developing a quick release.

That winter, he called my father and said he wanted to come back but only to work in the dining room where he knew he'd make substantial tip money. My father was a little hesitant and told him that there was no guarantee about tips, implying of course, that a black waiter might not do as well. But my dad ultimately said yes and Corny worked for us for another year or two and made substantially more money. And race did not seem to be a problem.

After Corny, our dining room was almost always integrated as we would hire a few of my friends from my high school in the dining room. The only time I recall a guest objecting to a black staff member was when my friend, Ivan Richards, worked as life guard at the pool. One of the guests went to my father to complain because he didn't want to be rescued by a black lifeguard. My father told the guest he had three options: he could find another hotel, he could agree to be rescued if necessary by a black lifeguard; or we could just instruct Ivan to ignore any trouble that involved him in the pool.

The External World

I'm going to say less about the external world because it didn't impinge much on my life. There were the food suppliers from whom I ordered food when I ran our kitchen. Most of them were really friendly when I took over for my grandfather without really know what I was doing. They often reminded me to order something they knew we might need or told me when I was ordering too much. One was a favorite cousin Dave Schenkler, Shels' father who owned K&S, our canned goods distributor. I never met the man at the dairy whose thick Yiddish accent I loved to hear as he repeated my order every day "one farmer cheese, three cases whole milk...."

The people who drove me crazy, however, were the state health inspectors. If I have an anti-government regulation streak it was from my experience with them. They were, first, unfair and, I think, bought off—but not by us. There was a chicken farm next to our hotel and once a summer the chicken farmer violated the law and spread manure on his fields. This created a horrible stench that, rightly, upset our guests. We would call the health department inspector and he would promise to come, but would somehow always wait a few days before showing up. I never forgot one of them who came and started sniffing while his grey mustache twitched and then announced that he couldn't smell anything.

Then there was the variation from one inspector to another. Wooden cutting boards were kosher with one inspector while another insisted on plastic. This went on for a few years until the state came to an agreement on plastic because they were easier to clean—which made no sense to me then or now. Ten years later, of course, there were concerns that small pieces of plastic sometimes got into food and was harmful and then state started requiring wooden cutting boards again.

And then there was the simple insanity. We had a great oak floor in our kitchen and, during the anti-wood phase that also led to plastic cutting boards, the health department decided that they could not be thoroughly cleaned. So they insisted that we replace the wooden floor with vinyl. Of

course, this was crazy for a business that closed all winter since the vinyl would have badly cracked during one unheated winter and would have then be impossible to clean thoroughly. We put off pressure to put in a new floor for a few years until we sold the hotel.

And then there was the demand to put in fancy new hoods on top of the stoves to stop any threat of fire. This was a sensible idea in most kitchens. But our kitchen had a fifty foot high open ceiling and it was highly unlikely that a fire from the stove would reach it. But “rules were rules” and had we stayed in the business we would have to have invested in expensive duct work.

In lieu of a conclusion

I don’t really have a conclusion, any more than I have a theme or thesis.

But perhaps I have been successful in giving you a sense of what it was like to grow up as the boss’s son in a Catskill resort.

A Catskill resort was a hard place for many people—for our staff and for my parents most of all. The work day was long and intense and the pressures of making guests happy and managing the staff could be intense.

But, for me, it was an by and large an extraordinarily warm and confidence building place to grow up, one which gave me contact with a wonderful family, and an education in food, in music, in business, and most of all in people.