

Within the towering ponderosa pine forest of Flagstaff, Arizona, lies a lodge that feels like a secret castle in the woods. Warm lights across the expansive lawn twinkle, while the cool mountain air and hum of Route 66 steadies the racing thoughts of restless travelers. The lobby is decorated with icy tones and dazzling geodes, inviting guests into a wonderland of the West. Any of Little America's rooms tells the story of how one family built a luxury hotel and a tradition of hospitality in the middle of the forest.

The Little America legacy started in 1934, when three brothers, Stephen Mack, Almon Andrew and Hyrum T. Covey, opened a modest two-pump gas station, 12-cabin motel, and 24-seat café in Granger, Wyoming. The brothers already owned apartment complexes around Salt Lake City in Utah, but excitedly ventured into tourism when they saw the chance. But this direction took root decades earlier. One night, in the 1890s, Stephen, who was only a teenager, was forced to spend a night bracing a blizzard in the wilderness of Granger and vowed to create shelter there so that no one would ever have to go through the same danger and discomfort. In 1934, he made good on that goal. The motel was aptly named "Little America" after the similarly barren research bases in the Antarctic.

Throughout the '30s and '40s, the motel attracted guests with its slot machines, 35-cent hamburgers, and a quirky penguin mascot (a wink to the Arctic expeditions it was named after). After the original building burned down in 1949, the Coveys rebuilt it in 1952 — but they needed help in managing it. They called on a longtime family friend, Robert Earl Holding.

Like the Coveys, Earl Holding had a Mormon background. When his family suffered from the stock market crash of 1929, his parents worked as custodians for the Covey family at one of their Salt Lake City Apartment complexes. There, a nine-year-old Earl Holding did yard work, where he earned 15 cents an hour. After returning from a stint in the Army Air Corps in 1944, he decided to attend the University of Utah, where, in 1946, fate had plans for him and he met Carol Orme. In 1949, he finished his degree, and the couple married.

The Holdings spent their marriage as diligent life and business partners, with their first venture as a married couple being a 25-acre peach, pear, and apple orchard in Dimple Dell, Utah. In 1952, the Coveys offered the Holdings a 10% stake in the newly rebuilt Little America property, as long as they agreed to manage the venue. The couple moved to Wyoming without hesitation and started flipping burgers in Little America's café. By the end of the year, the Holdings bought out the property from the Coveys, who were focused on their investments in Salt Lake City, as they were more profitable than the motel at the time. The Holdings took over the Wyoming motel and quickly built other Little Americas from the ground up. They brought their entrepreneurial spirit and quality service to Cheyenne in 1965 with a second Little America location. These locations benefited from the droves

of families taking to the road throughout the '60s. In 1972, the Holdings brought their expertise a little bit closer to Route 66, and the Arizona pine forest.

By the '70s, Flagstaff had become a prime tourist destination, with its proximity to Route 66, the red rocks of Sedona, the majesty of the Grand Canyon, and other natural wonders of the state. When Holding purchased vacant land in the city at 2515 Butler Ave, he saw an opportunity to provide motorists with a place to relax in style. By September 1972, after the arduous construction of digging through dirt and rock, 247 guest rooms were completed. One pool and main lodge later, and in 1973, Little America Flagstaff opened its doors.

An early stay at the Flagstaff hotel would have naturally had the hallmarks of the 1970s: intricate damask wallpaper, powder blue carpeting, and a rotary phone resting on a glass table. A stained-glass tree dangled over the bar in what was then called the Tiffany Tree Lounge. What separated it from other hotels in town, though, was not its interior design. It was the owners' dedication to service.

The Holdings were known to work directly in the kitchen, dining room, and guest rooms to make sure operations ran smoothly. They didn't just passively observe employees; when the Flagstaff location first opened, then-multimillionaire Earl Holding waited on tables in the hotel's restaurant, and Carol was often found making beds or bussing dishes. Well into their prosperous careers (Earl was even featured on the Forbes 400 in 1994), the couple exemplified the idea that money and titles don't exempt you from the grind.

Following the Nixon-era opening of the Flagstaff hotel, the Holdings went on to buy San Diego's Westgate Hotel (1974), created another Little America in Salt Lake City from existing hotels (1977), purchased the Sun Valley Lodge (1977) and the Snowbasin Ski Resort (1984), and opened the Grand America Hotel (2002). Through their hands-on approach, the Holdings transformed the Little America properties into a series of eight luxury hotels and resorts accommodating the old frontier. His work ethic would help Earl eventually become a billionaire: in addition to these properties, he owned the Sinclair Oil Co. and a 450,000-acre ranching operation in Wyoming and Montana.

Although the Holdings almost always had a new business venture, they never let the Flagstaff location feel like the forgotten middle child. In 2016, the hotel underwent a two-and-a-half-year renovation that upgraded all 247 rooms with LED-lit mirrors, down bedding, and granite countertops that look as though the ponderosa pines are camouflaged within them. They also replaced the dark, wooden Western Gold fine-dining restaurant with the light and airy Silver Pine Restaurant and Bar, which is much more appealing to the families staying there.

Today's Little America in Flagstaff is evidence of this hospitality, and a testament to the American dream. A dream where a boy from a poor family can become a billionaire and use his fortune to give others the feeling of finding a home along the road — even if it's just for a night.