



An Interview with R. D. Musser II

R. D. (Dan) Musser II went to work at Grand Hotel as a college student in 1951. He eventually became president of the hotel and then chairman and owner, purchasing the hotel from his uncle, W. Stewart Woodfill, in 1979. Here are some of his observations on his years with this Michigan icon.

Q. What is your earliest memory of Grand Hotel?

A. I visited the hotel once before World War II when I was seven or eight years old. I remember my uncle made me put a tie on. My earliest real memory of the place was the summer of 1946. My Dad died that summer and my mother, who was Stewart Woodfill's sister, took my sister and me to the hotel and we lived there for a while. It was a real eye opening experience. My Dad was in the grain business in Ohio and ran a farm on the side with a dairy operation and a bottling business so I had never thought about going to work up here.

Q. When you started at the hotel in 1951 did you know Grand Hotel would be your career?

A. I worked up here three summers when I was in college, graduated, worked that summer and then went into the Army for two years. I started in the bar and moved around to the kitchen and other places. When I got out of the Army I came back, got married in November of 1957 and then started working at the Grand Hotel office in Chicago. Our winter office was in Chicago then. By that time I assumed I would make a career of it.

Q. How has the hotel changed from when you started in 1951 to what it is today?

A. It's a much nicer place today than it was in 1951. When I started there were 200-210 rooms. (Today there are 385.) About 100 of those rooms shared a bath, which could cause real problems. If you were in one of those rooms, you could lock the guests in the other room out of the bathroom. People would come to the desk complaining they couldn't get into the bathroom. We got rid of the last rooms with adjoining baths about 1970. During the transition I remember designing some of the new baths on the back of a matchbook. Fortunately, none of those baths are left.

We also had huge closets back then from the days that guests stayed five or six weeks. But guests weren't staying that long anymore, so we tore out those huge closets and made them into rooms. And I remember some rooms had a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

Q. How would you describe Stewart Woodfill?

A. He was very single minded. When he got something in his teeth, he didn't let loose. I don't think he really thought about much other than Mackinac Island and Grand Hotel. But I think that is how he survived some very hard economic times. He would figure out how to make a go of it, one way or another. I can't imagine how he survived through the 30s and through the war. He had no money. He would trade due bills for paint and meat. He hired a lot of employees for no pay at all. He would feed and house them and their pay was whatever they got tips. But then, times were tough and they were happy to have meals and a place to live. One summer he had 50 musicians and dancers that he didn't pay at all.

He could be a taskmaster to work for. He expected you to work hard. One summer I don't think I was out of the building for six weeks. At the same time, he would listen to you. Sometimes he would direct things in a way I didn't approve. I would tell him. He liked that.

Q. Did he get involved with other projects besides Grand Hotel?

A. As the years went by, he became very involved in the island and the Mackinac area. There would never have been a Mackinac Bridge without him. He spent four or five winters in Lansing full time lobbying that deal. Building it with revenue bonds was his idea. He persuaded the Legislature and Gov. Williams to go for it. He and Williams were very close. Then Williams appointed him chairman of the Mackinac Island Park Commission and he devoted himself to that. He used revenue bonds to start fixing up the fort and the rest of the island.

Q. How important is it to the continued success of the hotel to have the same family in charge for 75 years?

A. It's been very important. My uncle, myself and now Dan all have been dedicated to making it work in different ways. We all were effective in our time. Dan will do things that I never dreamed of. You have to do that. You can't just stand still. It's always been a plus that one of us in charge and there every day. A lot of properties around the country have been hurt because they don't have the day to day presence of the owner.

Q. Could you start from scratch today and create what exists at Grand Hotel?

A. I don't think there is any way you could finance a building of this magnitude for a seasonal hotel today. I don't think seasonality is possible any more. You demand too many things from a luxury resort. I don't see how you could do it.

Q. How do you walk the fine line between maintaining the hotel's character and ambiance and incorporating change in its operations?

A. It's an ongoing process. For instance, we talked about it a number of years before we put televisions in the rooms and didn't have unanimous agreement when we went ahead and did

it. We finally settled on smaller televisions. They were less obtrusive but still allowed guests to watch if they wanted.

Q. How do people react to your dress code requiring a coat and tie for dinner in a more casual age?

A. We've become a casual world and we're kind of an anachronism. But I think the great majority of our guests like it. It's enabled us to maintain a certain feel and ambiance that we might well have lost without it. With our families, the young children in particular seem to like seeing dad get dressed up for dinner. And the younger children, particularly the young ladies, seem to enjoy getting dressed up as well. Overall, I think it's a plus. My read is we'll do it as long as we possibly can.