

Historically Speaking.....

Kay Smith Larson, History Chairman 2002-2010

March 2010

Can you tell me about the Arizona Biltmore where the 2010 General Convention will be held? The Biltmore is just as much an experience as it is a place – and its rich ambiance and stylish attitude have gracefully stood the test of time. It has a seven-decade legacy that tells about Irving Berlin lounging at the Catalina Pool, penning the words, “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas...”

Its history tells of many famous couples from Clark Gable and Carole Lombard to Ronald and Nancy Reagan who spent their honeymoons at the resort. There are remarkable stories – like guests peering down from the second-story promenade to discover the “noise” they had been complaining about was actually Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Lisa Minnelli performing their own impromptu concert in the piano bar downstairs. Or, Clark Gable’s elation over the word that a diligent concierge had retrieved his wedding ring that he had lost on the golf course. It’s a history of respect for the hotel and guests that touches everyone who stays there. Celebrities still come – and they are afforded privacy with the utmost in staff discretion – as do savvy travelers from around the globe who want to enjoy the good life. TV talk show hostess Kelly Ripa and her family stayed at the hotel in June 2008.

It is no wonder that the Arizona Biltmore has been an Arizona landmark since its opening on February 23, 1929, when it was crowned the “Jewel of the Desert.” It was Phoenix’s first resort and would spark the development of the tourism industry. It was built in grand style and scope – and constructed to last for a long, long time – with the influence of America’s premier architect of the era. And through the years, as it was expanded, improved and renovated, it has remained true to this storied legacy that made the hotel a favorite playground of the powerful and famous.

In 1910, Chicago brothers Charles and Warren McArthur moved to the warmer climate of Phoenix. Among their ventures, they operated an auto dealership in the prospering Valley of the Sun. In the mid 1920s, the McArthurs joined forces with Bowman Biltmore Hotels (based at the Los Angeles Biltmore Hotel) and charted plans for the Arizona Biltmore, set to be the 16th of the famous Biltmore-Bowman chain. In addition to the McArthurs, the Arizona Biltmore board also included John Bowman and William Wrigley, Jr., the chewing-gum magnate.

“There is a subtle mystery in moonlight, in desert fragrance, in ancient tradition and when these are found in one of the beautiful spots of the world, in a place apart, and yet close by, the call is doubly strong. Such is the lure of Arizona, land of large horizons, an oasis where those who seek can find themselves. Here in this ideal winter playground, in the peace and quiet of the desert and the mountains, will be erected the Arizona Biltmore Hotel...”

Frank Lloyd Wright served as the consulting architect for the Arizona Biltmore, and he collaborated with former student Albert Chase McArthur. It was Wright’s first hotel project and remains the only existing hotel in the world to benefit from his renowned influence.

The spirit of the dramatic Wright style favoring indigenous materials and influences is imbedded through the design of the hotel. The Arizona Biltmore was erected entirely of “Biltmore Block,” a variation on the textile block first used by Wright to construct private homes. The pre-cast blocks made from desert sand on site, inspired by the trunk of a palm tree, were designed by Emry Kopta, a prominent Southwestern sculptor. Blocks of glass, built into the walls, brought natural lighting. A reminder of Arizona’s stature as the Copper State, the hotel was adorned with a glittering copper roof and the lobby boasts a gold-leaf ceiling, second only to the Taj Mahal’s in size.

The construction was exceptional but costly. With the original construction estimate of \$1 million doubling, and the misfortune of the 1929 stock market crash, the McArthur brothers soon lost the hotel to one of the original investors. In 1930, Chicago chewing-gum magnate William Wrigley, Jr. became the sole owner. During the course of the next 43 years, the Wrigley family owned and operated the Arizona Biltmore; and under their direction, it became world-renowned as a preferred luxury oasis for celebrities, heads of state, captains of industry and other famous travelers. With the adjacent Wrigley Mansion, the Wrigleys often entertained guests at the Biltmore. The Wrigley Mansion can be seen from the hotel property today. It stands on the top of one of the mountains near the hotel and is currently a private club.

June 23-27, 2010, the Biltmore’s tradition of entertaining guests at this beautiful property will continue when 1,000 Kappas meet in Convention.

Historical information from A History of the Arizona Biltmore