

## *THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS*

# ROOM 404: MAURICE (MORRIS) LEVEY

### MORRIS LEVEY'S TIFFANY MERCANTILE STORE A PLACE OF WELCOME FROM 1911-1954

For more than forty years, from 1911 until 1954, Maurice Levey owned and operated the Tiffany Mercantile Company store in Tiffany, Colorado. Levey was one of a growing number of pioneering merchants and small businessmen to come to the rural southwest and help it grow. But, the Tiffany Mercantile Company store was more than just a store; it was the “heart” and community center of Tiffany, a small town southeast of Durango. He was, for many, the only Jewish person they had ever met and he worked hard to earn the respect and friendship of his customers and to make his store a place of welcome for them.

**“COME TO TIFFANY, COLORADO !” read a newspaper ad in 1909. “THE DEEPEST, RICHEST AND MOST PRODUCTIVE SOIL IN COLORADO.”**

Tiffany, CO, only a short distance from Durango, surely was the Promised Land to a young man like Morris Levey from Titusville, PA. It was a land of milk and honey, sugar beets, potatoes, alfalfa, clover, wheat, tomatoes, apples, peaches, cherries, abundant sunshine and opportunities. Morris saw that ad and came west, bringing his widowed

mother with him. Her husband Isaac had been a prominent businessman in Pennsylvania until he was killed trying to stop a runaway team of horses. Morris would care for her for the rest of her life.



Levey Bros. Store Ignacio, c 1920's.  
Photo Courtesy of Dr. Ives Murray

For a while Morris worked at Kruschke's clothing store in Durango, but in 1911 he bought the Tiffany Mercantile Store from Mr. Linebarger, Tiffany's original “booster.”

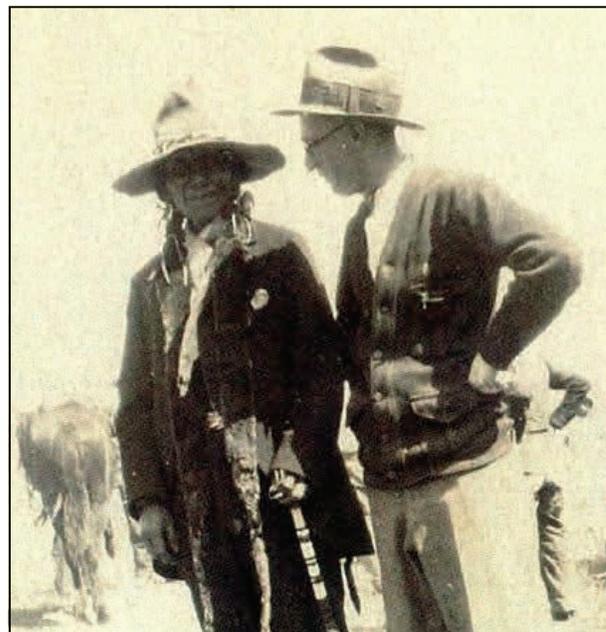
It was said of Morris that “if he didn't sell it, people didn't need it.” The store was the real heart of Tiffany. In the back, near the wood stove, the locals gathered on the couch to reminisce and tell stories. One of their favorites was this: In 1946 a man ran into the store yelling **“They're shooting off V-2 rockets from Los Alamos and some have gone astray! They're going to land in Durango in 15 minutes!”** There was a big commotion as some of the regulars roused from their naps on Morris's couch. **“Call the mayor of Durango!,”** they cried. So Morris did and when

the mayor heard about the rockets there was a long, irritated silence before he replied **“So, what the hell am I supposed to do about it??”**

## SANCTUARY

Most people felt the Tiffany store was a sanctuary, including one very famous man. On a hot day in 1956, while filming "Around the World in 80 Days," producer Mike Todd drove up to the store in a big car and a cloud of dust. "Do you sell beer here?" Morris told him he didn't. "I don't like the crowd it brings in." Seeing some bologna on the counter Todd asked for a sandwich. From then on, for the rest of the shoot, Todd came in every day for lunch. One day he pulled Morris aside and asked if he could "sack out" on the couch in the back by the woodstove, saying no one knew where he was and the store was the only place he could get any peace. He napped there every day until the filming was over and stayed in touch with Morris until his untimely death in 1958.

Maurice and Chief Ignacio c. 1913



## PAID BY GOD

There was a family outside of town, decent hardworking people who struggled to make ends meet and Morris always let them buy on credit. Winter came and the family needed to stock up on staples like pinto beans, lard, flour and chili powder. Morris said "Take what you need and I'll put it on your tab," In the spring, the wife came to the store and told Morris she was sorry she hadn't come sooner to pay the bill but her husband had died and things were hard. Morris was visibly upset, her husband had been his friend. "How are you fixed for food?," he asked, and she told him they had none. He said "Don't worry, take what you need and I'll add it to the tab." She did and Morris wrote the amount into his book. He helped her carry the parcels outside and while she packed up the wagon, he went back in the store, gathering more things for her, extras like



Maurice (Morris) Levey on horseback. Photo Courtesy of Ives Murray

candy, toys and peaches, quietly putting them in her wagon. When she drove away, Morris nephew watched him go to his ledger book, scribble something across the bill, tear it up and throw it into the waste basket. When his uncle left, the nephew pulled out the crumpled piece of paper.

On it Morris had written:

PAID BY GOD.

Morris had simple pleasures. He was a man comfortable with his life, with no ambition to be other than what he was. He loved his ranch, his cattle, his dog Sport, his friends and customers who to this day still remember his generosity and kindness always. His life was defined by the small, often unremarked gestures that revealed a gentle humanity and kindness to everyone. Sometimes it's good and right to remember the seemingly unremarkable