

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM 322: EARL A. & JENTRA BARKER

EARL A. BARKER, JR.
OCTOBER 7, 1928-SEPTEMBER 7, 2008

JENTRA JARVIS BARKER
DECEMBER 14, 1930-MAY 5, 2012

ROMANCE BRINGS NEW LIFE TO OLD HOTEL

Earl Barker Junior grew up as a very connected young fellow who was always on the lookout for good opportunities. He was the popular drum major at Durango High School and was known somewhat as a ladies man. Summers were spent working at the Strater Hotel which his father had invested in two years before Earl was born. After high school Earl enrolled in the University of Colorado where he studied for two years. He then enlisted in the U.S. Air Force where he learned to fly and became a supply sergeant. This turned out to be a great education and opportunity to learn business skills which would later serve him well.

Jentra was born in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, and moved to Durango as a young girl with her family. She met Earl while they were both students at Durango High School. After graduation Jentra left Durango to attend Stanford University. Earl had always had his eye on Jentra and soon headed west to make sure those slick California boys didn't work their magic on her. He worked small jobs to provide a living for himself and would visit Jentra on weekends. As she was nearing completion of her education Earl proposed—and Jentra turned him down—more than once in fact. But Earl was persistent and charming and finally Jentra

agreed to marry him.

The young couple was full of adventure and decided to work their way around the globe in the hotel business. Jentra had always had a desire to see the world and this would allow them to do just that. The St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco was Earl's first stop where he soon rose to the position of front office manager. After a time there they headed to Honolulu in 1953 where Earl had accepted a job at the famous Edgewater Hotel. Their time in that exotic setting was wonderful but when Earl Senior called to ask them to come back to Durango to help run the Strater, they returned home. Jentra was less than excited for their adventure to be ending but Earl was looking forward to being away from the large corporate world and having the freedom the family-owned Strater would offer.

Upon their return one of the first tasks facing them was the sagging infrastructure of the hotel. His brother-in-law, Robert Blomstrom, joined Earl overseeing the Strater's development. The two of them became important to the organizational structure since Earl Sr. did not have hotel management experience. So the massive job of upgrading heating, plumbing, and electrical systems was begun by the

two brothers-in-law and lifelong friends.

During this time, Jentra and her mother, Marion Jarvis had a very meaningful discussion about Jentra's life and happiness in this small town. Marion suggested that Jentra get involved in the remodeling which the hotel also needed. The American Victorian theme was planted and the energy for the restoration of the Strater Hotel was underway. On a business trip to Atlanta, Jentra found a beautiful half-Teaster bed and matching set that the Barker's decided would add to the hotel's return to Victorian elegance. Earl and Jentra cashed in their airline tickets and rented a U-Haul truck to bring that set and other furniture they found back to the Strater. This set off a full-fledged 20 year nationwide hunt for American Victorian walnut antique furniture, the kind that would have been used in the finest Victorian interiors in the country.

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- AFTER STUDYING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, EARL JOINED THE US AIR FORCE AND LEARNED TO FLY. BEING A PILOT WOULD PROVE TO BE VERY BENEFICIAL DURING THE STRATER'S RETURN TO VICTORIAN ELEGANCE WHEN THE BARKER'S TRAVELED THE COUNTRY IN SEARCH OF AMERICAN VICTORIAN WALNUT FURNITURE. THEY WOULD FLY, ALONG WITH FELLOW PILOT, JIM GREGG, TO THE EAST WHERE THE BEST FURNITURE WAS LOCATED. ONCE ENOUGH FURNITURE HAD BEEN FOUND TO FILL A 40 FOOT TRAILER, EARL AND JENTRA WOULD ENJOY THE TRIP BACK TO DURANGO WITH THEIR TREASURES, WHILE GREGG FLEW THE PLANE HOME.
- JENTRA WAS AN ACCOMPLISHED PIANIST, LIFEGUARD AND FIRST-RATE HORSEWOMAN. SHE WAS QUEEN OF THE SPANISH TRAILS FIESTA HER JUNIOR YEAR IN HIGH SCHOOL AND SHE LATER COMPETED IN THE MISS COLORADO PAGEANT.



EARL'S SURPRISE; THE DIAMOND BELLE SALOON

When winter of 1956 arrived in Durango, Earl Sr. and wife Elsie headed to Hawaii. The brothers-in-law, Earl Jr. and Robert, realized that this was the perfect time for an "upgrade" to the leased corner of the Strater building into a classy drinking establishment that would appeal to tourists and locals alike. Earl Sr. had been approached with this

idea before but felt that adding a bar on Main Avenue was a really bad idea that would attract heavy drinkers and wouldn't be as profitable as the lease. Imagine his surprise when he returned from his tropical vacation and found the new Diamond Belle packed with people, including his friends. This milestone marked a change from Durango being a commer-

cial town to an authentic Southwest vacation destination.

The Diamond Belle quickly gained fame for live music performed nightly by some of the country's most acclaimed entertainers, including Captain John Smith and the famous Al Rose Trio. And according to Earl Senior, it was all his idea.



BARKER HAS IMPORTANT IMPACT ON DURANGO TOURISM

Earl's leadership and sponsorship of Durango's Tourism was a key factor in the success of making Durango and Southwest Colorado the popular tourist destination it is today.

Early on in his hotel career Earl became a member of American Hotel and Motel Association and that connection to advances in the hotel business helped him stay on top of a rapidly changing industry. He chaired the small hotel segment of that association during the 1960's, and was president of the Durango Hotel and Motel Association, the Colorado Hotel and Motel Association and a member of the board of directors of the American Hotel and Motel Association. He was selected "Colorado Hotelier of the Year" in 1968.

In 1993 he was inducted into the Colorado Foodservice

Hall of Fame for his development of the Diamond Belle Saloon. Throughout his career, leadership was his hallmark. He served on a number of local, state and national boards and organizations devoted to promoting the hospitality industry, tourism and economic development, including the Durango, Colorado and American Hotel and Motel Associations, Colorado Chamber of Commerce, Colorado Visitors Bureau, Governor's Economic Development Council and Colorado Rural Development Council.

Always responsive to the needs of the community, Earl played a major role in the history of two other Durango landmarks. When the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad decided to exit the passenger train business, threatening the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Rail-

road with extinction, Earl was instrumental in finding a new operator. He was also one of the founders of the Colorado Trail, which runs along the Continental Divide from Durango to Denver.

He served on the boards of First National Bank of Durango and its predecessor, Burns National Bank, was the secretary of the Durango Industrial Development Foundation and was president of the Durango Chamber of Commerce. Earl was a member of the Rotary Club of Durango for more than 50 years.

Without his leadership and the Strater Hotel's development, Durango's tourism industry would be very different from what it is today.

EARL BARKER, JR. WAS INDUCTED INTO THE COLORADO HOTEL & MOTEL ASSOCIATION HALL OF FAME IN 1986.

