

The Man and the Palace

by Jim Steffner

Once upon a time, a dapper man from back East decided to build a casino hotel way out on Highway 95. Unfortunately he didn't live long enough to enjoy his venture, since he was enjoying life too much before the Flamingo actually was completed.

After several years and a few changes of ownership an employee of the Flamingo by the name of Bill Capri joins with George E. Goldberg owner of the Midwest Hotel Company. George became President of the Flamingo Capri Corporation and the two announce on May 17, 1959 that they will build a motel just North of the Flamingo. If you didn't already guess, the motel will be named the Flamingo Capri. An arrangement is made with the Flamingo Hotel to provide hotel and room service and accessibility to all the hotel facilities for the motel guests.

The Flamingo Capri had about 200 rooms with television, phone, air conditioning, and 24 hour food service. The motel advertising referenced the Capri's own "Venetian Canal". A better term may be the "Las Vegas Wash" over which the Capri had been built.

Around 1964, the Ranch House Apartments were demolished to make way for additional parking space for George Goldberg's Riverboat Casino, which was just North of the Flamingo Capri. The Riverboat would later become the River Queen casino from 1972 to 1973, the Holiday Casino from 1973 to 1992, and then Harrah's, 1992 to present.

Backtracking just a bit finds a University of North Dakota ice hockey goalie named Ralph Louis Englestad. Ralph had graduated in 1954 and after turning down an offer to join the Chicago Blackhawks hockey team he started his own construction company. He promised himself that he would be a millionaire by the age of 30, instead that dream came true one year earlier while he was still a contractor in Grand Falls. Upon moving to Las Vegas in 1959 he secured several government contracts to build FHA homes and buildings at Nellis Air Force Base.

Ralph saw an opportunity to enter the motel business and he purchased the Kona Kai Motel way out past the Flamingo. Finding it was too far out to generate enough



The Flamingo Capri to the left of the Flamingo "silo".

income he sold it shortly after. The Kona Kai is the present day Klondike Hotel and Casino. His construction company's success allowed him to buy the Thunderbird Air Field in North Las Vegas, which he sold two years later to Howard Hughes. With the profits from the sale he purchased the Flamingo Capri, including buildings and 9 acres of land in 1971.

His construction company started construction of a three-story wing toward the East end of the motel, which is the present Imperial Palace East Building. The motel started with about 250 employees. Gaming began at the Capri in 1972.

By 1974, the East building was open as well as another addition to the North along with the Shangri-La pool.

On November 1, 1979, the name was changed, the Flamingo Capri name was retired, and the Imperial Palace officially opened with over 1000 employees and 650 rooms.



Front entrance of the Flamingo Capri



Ralph Louis Engelstad



Aerial view of the Flamingo Capri with the new Imperial Palace East building



Aerial view of the original Flamingo Capri

In June 1980 the Imperial Theatre, an 850-seat showroom was opened. This showroom would host many top name entertainers over the years and in 1983 the Legends in Concert opened. On December 1, 1981 Ralph, an avid antique car collector, opened his Auto Collection at the Imperial Palace to the public. His collection started with a 1939 Ford and grew to about 200 automobiles when the collection opened, and has since expanded to over 800 cars, trucks, fire equipment, motorcycles, jukeboxes, slot machines, and other memorabilia. Over 400,000 people tour the 65,000 square foot collection each year.

By mid 1982, hotel rooms had increased to 1500. 1985 saw the covered parking garage expanding to provide space for over 1000 vehicles. In 1986 the casino was enlarged and Tower 4 was completed to increase the room count to 2100. The new pool, and a 19-story tower with over 500 rooms were completed in 1987 bringing the total guest rooms to 2637. The front of the building was pushed to the sidewalk and housed a race and sports book, retail, gaming, and office space.

In 1992 the sports book was expanded to include six levels of tiered seating with color television monitors at each of the 230 seats, a major innovation at the time. By 1999 the IP covers almost 2.5 million square feet with 5-20 story towers and 75,000 square feet of casino space.

Ralph expands his casino holdings in 1997 by building

his second Imperial Palace in Biloxi Mississippi. He developed the famed Las Vegas Motor Speedway, which he later sold.

Ralph and his wife Betty had established a \$5 million endowment to the University of North Dakota in 1988 and the University renamed their hockey stadium the Ralph Englestad Arena. The Englestad family is recognized as one of the top 10 gift givers of all time to higher education in America. In 1998 Ralph built and donated a \$104 million hockey arena to the University and recently built and donated a \$10 million hockey arena to his hometown of Thief River Falls, Minnesota. He also donated the General George Patton papers, valued at \$1.4 million to the University's Fritz Library. *"Life is full of it's ups and downs in business and personally I have experienced both, but I have been very fortunate to land on the upper side more times than on the bottom, and it is my desire to share a portion of my good fortune with the UND hockey team"*, stated Ralph Englestad. Ralph was far from done helping those in need. He purchased 2000 wheelchairs for North Dakotans thru the Wheelchair Foundation, for which he also provided office and distribution space in the hotel complex. Since the Wheelchair Foundation began at the IP, over 4000 chairs have been provided free of charge to those in need.

The Imperial Palace has twice been named "Employer of the Year", as well as "National Employer of the Year"



Older photos of the Imperial Palace with the interior

and has been recognized by numerous State and National awards for hiring the handicapped.

In 2002 the Imperial Palace ranked as the 2nd largest sole proprietorship hotel in the world and boasted almost 2700 rooms and 2600 employees.

Ralph Englestad left us on November 26, 2002 at the age of 72, and will always be remembered by his two mottos for living that reflected his ambition and drive: “The harder I work, the luckier I get.”...and “No dream comes true until you wake up and go to work.”

On August 22, 2005, gaming giant Harrahs Entertainment made an offer to purchase the Imperial Palace, on an 18.5-acre site in Las Vegas for \$370 million. Plans are inconclusive at this time as to the fate of the hotel. By mid 2006 Harrah’s should have a plan in place as to remodel, or tear down the structure. The deal closed on December 22, 2005. Harrah’s will then own almost all the property between the Venetian and the Aladdin from Las Vegas Blvd back to Koval, barring only a few aging apartment buildings, the Weston Hotel and Casino, a convenience store and the Barbary Coast.



Imperial Palace, Biloxi



Imperial Palace pool construction and the original pool

