

In my opinion...

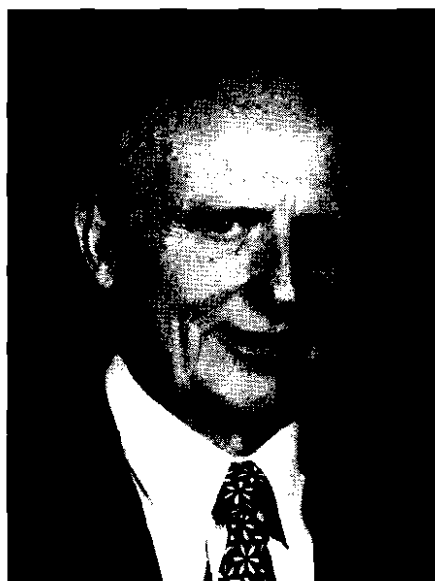
Michael E. Hurst: July 8, 1931 – March 22, 2001

by Anthony G. Marshall

My reflections of Michael E. Hurst are a much more modest enterprise than a memoir or biography. My portrait of him will only portray the images I observed and remember. As he was an adult when I met him, it is far from a complete picture of him. I was his academic dean, fellow professor, and friend. While fame has eluded most people I know, Hurst was the exception: everyone in the food service industry knew him.

“**M**ike Hurst is dying,” said Bill Fisher, president and CEO of the American Hotel and Lodging Association, to me. “Tony, I know he’d like to hear from you.” I felt a sickening sharpness in my guts. I thanked Bill for his phone call.

Hurst had called Fisher with the bad news. They had known each other for years. Hurst was elected chairman of the National Restaurant Association in 1992; Fisher was its president and CEO. They remained close, despite Fisher’s move to the American



Michael E. Hurst

Hotel and Lodging Association five years ago.

I met Hurst in 1972. “I want you to meet someone very important,” said Gerald W. Lattin, founding dean of Florida International University’s School of Hospitality Management. “Tony, welcome our first professor of

restaurant management," he said to me. I had just signed on as assistant dean. The school was scheduled to open in September 1972. Hurst had recently resigned the presidency of Don The Beachcomber, a California restaurant chain, and moved his family to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to build and operate Marina Bay Hotel, and the New River Storehouse Restaurant. It was obvious to me; he'd be sensational in the classroom.

Professor loved students

Every semester I made up the class schedules. "Merge my two classes of 50 students into one class of 100," would be a typical Hurst request. While most professors scolded me if I put too many students into their classes, he would harass me if I didn't assign him the largest classroom, and pack it with students. Once, to test the boundaries of his sanity, I assigned 200 students to his morning restaurant management class, knowing he'd come stomping into my office demanding relief. Sure enough, minutes later he marched into my office and said: "Put portable metal chairs in the front of the first row of attached seats, and I can take 25 more students."

"Best class I've ever taken, but his tests suck," several of his students told me. Hurst roared with laughter when I told him what they said. Hurst engaged in frequent testing to motivate students to complete their homework assignments on schedule. By

rewarding daily efforts rather than catch-up cramming for final examinations, he believed he was encouraging good workplace habits.

Hurst was a man of many faces: He was a full-time professor at the school, manager of his Fort Lauderdale businesses, and, later, a popular industry speaker around the world. He was happiest surrounded by a swirl of "business." He laughed at 14-hour workdays. Truth was, he loved being a man of crammed schedules.

Hurst was a key player in Dean Lattin's master plan: to assemble a faculty composed of industry executives as well as university scholars. While he respected both, he believed if either profession excluded the other, the school would fail to achieve greatness. So, despite skepticism by traditional university officials urging him to exclusively hire research-oriented scholars, Lattin hired Hurst. While Hurst lacked a research doctorate, and extensive publications, Lattin knew this man could put the school on the map.

Hurst's frequent visits to my office always carried a price - his "great ideas" for immediate implementation. And, more often than not, they were. However, as the school's assistant dean, it took me a while before I could tell when Hurst was pleased and when he wasn't. I soon discovered he disliked the ordinary, and loved the extraordinary. We worked well together for a quarter of a century. When Dean Gerald W. Lattin

resigned, Hurst was appointed the chairman of the search committee that got me his job. He was responsible for that, and many other splendid happenings in my life.

Excellence is legacy

Mike Hurst became one of the most significant restaurateurs of his time. The school piggybacked fame within the food service industry. While many gifted faculty members and countless other people contributed to the school's successes, it was Hurst who forged the school's reputation of excellence throughout the food service industry.

In 1979, Hurst felt he needed refreshment, so he opened a new restaurant, 15th Street Fisheries, on the ocean in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. "Smell the salt air," and "Seafood - none fresher," read his advertisement. Besides his preaching, "Serve hot things hot, cold things cold," he'd tell me, "Guests do not come to my restaurant to eat. They come to have a dining experience." And "experiences" he gave them. "Serve your guests bugs," he'd suggest. The "bugs" were actually a lobster-like crustacean from Queensland, Australia. "Or how about flying fish?" he'd say with a smile.

Hurst was a man of many faces: professor, restaurateur, and professional showman. In the 1980s, he was appearing on the corporate and state associations' speaking circuit. I sneaked into a performance, not telling him I was there. Well, he was extraordinary.

From the moment he was introduced, he instantly took command of every square inch of the stage, in constant motion this way and that, his voice shattering the silences, then falling to whispers, as he captured and enthralled his audience. For one hour and a half, he never referred to a note, nor experienced a memory gap. His "show" ended with a crescendo of crisp ideas, and a hardy thank you. Following the uproarious applause, the audience surrounded him, anxious for a personal word.

Hurst is tireless

I joined the speaker circuit in those days, too. While I never matched his skill, I got a big kick out of traveling with him, as we occasionally were booked by the same organizations. Many a night, I'd fly home from an engagement and go home to bed; Hurst would go to his restaurant and work a few more hours. He'd beat me to the school the next morning and greet me saying, "I've been here two hours. Where have you been?"

Deans are supposed to raise money from the industry to support education. I did it, but never enjoyed doing it. "Don't ask them for scholarship dollars," Hurst would lecture me, "get funding for faculty development." His rationale was: "A scholarship helps one student; a faculty development dollar benefits all of the students taught by the teacher."

As Hurst became a man of wealth, he began to discreetly fund school activities. He always sought

opportunities to invest his dollars where they would have a broad impact. He established, funded and solely administered the "Dean's Lecture Series." It was the dean's in name only; it was totally his show. He thrilled in exposing the assembled student body to the industry's stars. Calling in his IOUs, he brought 65 of them to campus.

One of his last speakers was John Russell, chairman of the American Hotel and Lodging Association. "I considered Mike's invitation a command performance," said Russell. "When I saw him on campus that day, it was obvious he was ill. He pushed himself to be the perfect host. He wouldn't have it any other way."

Glad you're here

Today, many people remember Mike Hurst as the man who always said: "We're Glad You're Here." It all started in 1992, when Hurst, as the elected chairman of the National Restaurant Association, decided to distribute tens of thousands "We're Glad You're Here" buttons to restaurateurs across the country. "Wear them proudly as you greet your customers," he'd urge. At podiums throughout the nation, at the conclusion of his speeches, he'd strip off his jacket and tie, revealing a T-shirt with "We're Glad You're Here" printed on it. Often, they'd all yell back, "We're Glad You're Here." What a show-stopper. Until his death, every time he caught me not wearing

"his" button, he'd pin one on me.

I left the school in 1998 to become president and CEO of the Educational Institute of the American Hotel and Lodging Association. Once again, the university asked Hurst to be chairman of the search committee. They selected Dean Joseph West. A year later, when Hurst retired, West honored him with the coveted "Professor Emeritus" title.

People who knew Mike always have a favorite Hurst story. Mine centers on Hurst, the Michigan State graduate, who went to work at Win Schuler's Restaurants in Marshall, Michigan. While at Schuler's from 1956 to 1970, he was promoted to executive vice president, fathered five children, and built a new house. One day, as the house neared completion, he packed the kids into the car to go see it. As he pulled up to the new house, the kids bolted from the car screaming. There, to their utter amazement, was a red caboose. Hurst had bought an old train caboose, had it trucked to the house, where a crane placed it at the end of the swimming pool. His kids couldn't wait to invite their friends to see their new playhouse.

Top awards received

I called Mike on March 1, 2001. I didn't know it would be the last time we'd talk. "I've been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer, and have begun hospice care at home," he said. After a momentary pause, he excitedly said: "Did you hear the news? The 15th Street

Fisheries won the International Foodservice Manufacturers Association's Silver Plate Award this year." I offered my congratulations. "I'm hoping to make it to the ceremony in Chicago on May 25." Sadly, he didn't get his wish: Mike Hurst died at home, surrounded by his family, on March 22, 2001.

In May, at the National Restaurant Show, the Hurst family accepted on his behalf the Silver Plate Award, and the Educational Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award. Then came the big surprise: Mike Hurst was named the 2001 Foodservice Operator of the Year and Gold Plate Award recipient. The hall erupted with cheers.

Hurst was one of the nicest men I ever met. It's not too much to say that I adored him. Regynald G. Washington, class of 1974, and the future elected chairman of the National Restaurant Association, and I drove to Fort Lauderdale. That evening, I stood before Mike Hurst's closed casket at the funeral parlor. The room was crowded with faculty, former students, business associates, family, and friends. I reached into my pants pocket, and grasped the small, rounded, white button, with red letters: "We're Glad You're Here." I pinned it on my jacket, whispered a quick prayer, and said goodbye.