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Introduction

Marriott International stands today as a global icon of hospitality—a company whose story mirrors the evolution of the American Dream itself. What began as a single root beer stand in the sweltering capital city of Washington, D.C. in 1927 has, over nearly a century, grown into the world’s largest hotel company, with more than 9,300 properties in 144 countries and territories. At every step, Marriott has been defined by a willingness to innovate, a dedication to service, and an ambition to build something lasting—not just for its guests, but for its associates and the broader communities it serves.

This book is both a chronicle of Marriott’s remarkable rise and a lens through which to view the broader development of America’s service sector and global travel industry. Marriott’s journey begins humbly with J. Willard and Alice Sheets Marriott’s entrepreneurial plunge into the restaurant business, their keen understanding of customer needs, and an early willingness to take risks—a mindset that would come to define the company. Through strategic pivots, calculated expansions, and a focus on operational excellence, the Marriott family and its leaders steered the company from bustling D.C. diners to luxury hotels that dot the world’s skyline.

The Marriott story also traces the evolution of modern hospitality itself. From pioneering in-flight catering to democratizing travel with mid-priced and economy brands, the company has anticipated, shaped, and at times even invented, the trends that drive global tourism today. Along the way, its leaders have grappled with the challenges inherent in balancing rapid growth with service quality, maintaining a consistent culture amid international expansion, and staying true to a legacy of integrity and care in an ever-changing world.

Equally important to the company’s history is its relentless focus on people—both as customers and as associates. Marriott’s foundational belief, that taking care of employees will naturally result in superior guest service, is as relevant today as it was in the early 20th century. This philosophy has created a workplace culture lauded for its inclusivity, ethical standards, and employee development, earning Marriott widespread recognition in business and human resources communities alike.

As we chart the company’s path into the 21st century and beyond, we will see how Marriott has adapted to unprecedented challenges—from technological revolutions to the changing landscape of global travel, from the COVID-19 pandemic’s disruptions to industry-wide reckonings around sustainability and social responsibility. Each adaptation, acquisition, and innovation has built on the foundation laid by the Marriotts, shaping a company that continues to lead, not just through size, but through

vision and values.

In exploring the full arc of Marriott International's story, this book seeks to illuminate not only the milestones of a major American company but also the strategies, decisions, and principles that have allowed it to thrive. Readers will gain insight into the people who shaped Marriott, the business environment in which it operates, and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for an enterprise still guided by the simple but powerful belief that excellence in service begins with care for others.

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CHAPTER ONE: Origins: Root Beer and the Roadside Revolution (1927-1936)

The year is 1927. Charles Lindbergh has just completed his historic solo flight across the Atlantic, Calvin Coolidge occupies the White House, and the Roaring Twenties are in full, exuberant swing. Amidst this backdrop of innovation and optimism, a young couple, J. Willard Marriott and Alice Sheets Marriott, arrived in Washington, D.C., from Utah, carrying with them an entrepreneurial spirit and a keen observation about human nature: people in the sweltering D.C. summers craved something cold and refreshing.

Their answer was simple yet profound: root beer. Specifically, an A&W Root Beer franchise. In May 1927, they opened a modest, nine-seat root beer stand at 3128 14th Street, N.W., in the heart of Washington, D.C. This unassuming venture, tucked into half of a bake shop, was the humble genesis of what would one day become Marriott International. J. Willard, then 27, and his new wife Alice, played integral roles from the outset, with Alice handling the bookkeeping and demonstrating her invaluable partnership in the nascent business.

The initial focus was clear: quench the thirst of a city grappling with humid summer days. The frosty mugs of A&W root beer, sold at a nickel apiece, quickly gained popularity. However, as the hot D.C. summer began to wane and the cooler autumn months approached, the Marriotts realized a stark truth: cold drinks alone wouldn't sustain their business through the colder seasons. They needed to adapt, to offer something warm and hearty to attract customers when the mercury dropped.

This realization sparked the first major pivot for the fledgling business. A&W franchises typically prohibited the sale of food, but J. Willard and Alice secured special permission from A&W headquarters to expand their menu. Alice, ever resourceful, found inspiration close to home. She learned to make chili con carne and hot tamales from the cook at the nearby Mexican Embassy, adding a distinctive and appealing flavor to their offerings.

With the addition of hot food, the nine-seat root beer stand transformed overnight. The transition was so swift and well-planned that they managed to convert the store in just one night, reopening the very next morning as "The Hot Shoppe." This name, inspired by the new hot menu, perfectly captured the evolution of their establishment. It signaled a broader ambition beyond mere beverages, laying down the guiding principles of "good food and service at fair prices" that would define the company for decades to come.

The Hot Shoppe concept resonated immediately with Washingtonians. The promise of hearty, affordable meals coupled with courteous service attracted a loyal following, especially as the Great Depression began to cast its shadow across the nation. The Marriotts' business flourished, driven by their intuitive understanding of customer needs and their relentless pursuit of efficiency. They soon opened more locations, expanding their footprint in the D.C. area.

A significant innovation came in 1928 with the opening of their third Hot Shoppe, located on Georgia Avenue at Gallatin Street. This establishment boasted "curb service," effectively becoming the East Coast's first drive-in restaurant. This pioneering move catered directly to the burgeoning automobile culture, allowing customers to enjoy their meals without leaving the comfort of their cars. This drive-in model, with its cheerful "curbettes" providing car-side service, proved incredibly popular and cemented The Hot Shoppe's reputation for innovation and customer convenience.

By 1932, the Marriotts owned seven Hot Shoppes in the D.C. area. The company's growth during the early 1930s was steady despite the challenging economic climate of the Great Depression. The Marriotts even offered "food for work" to some of the hard-pressed individuals seeking employment, demonstrating an early commitment to their associates and the community. The "Running Boy" logo, a depiction of a drive-in waiter with a tray held high, became an emblematic symbol of the Hot Shoppes' dedication to serving Americans on the move.

The year 1929 also marked a formal milestone: the business was officially incorporated in the state of Delaware as Hot Shoppes, Inc. This step signaled a more structured approach to their rapidly expanding enterprise. The foundation was being laid, piece by piece, for a much larger and more diversified company than a simple root beer stand. Though their journey into hotels was still decades away, the principles of customer service, innovation, and strategic expansion that would define Marriott International were already firmly in place.

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