

# Contributions of the White Castle and Ingram Family to the Quick Service Restaurant Industry

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Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) industry is a major part of \$440 billion restaurant industry in America. QSR industry also plays a significant role in American society both as a foodservice provider as well as a source of employment for many under represented groups. Currently McDonald's operates over 30,000 units over 118 countries. Thus, QSR units are seen as symbols of American culture in many countries. Interestingly, it all started when a young man named Billy Ingram wanted to serve inexpensive hamburgers to the working class of America in 1921 in Wichita, Kansas.

Edgar Waldo "Billy" Ingram is an American entrepreneur that built White Castle into one of the most successful quick-service restaurant chains in the history of the United States. He is acknowledged as the first restaurateur to offer this now universally accepted product "the hamburger" as the primary menu item. As a pioneer in the sprawling quick service industry, his magical influence transformed the lowly regarded hamburger into the most popular food item in America (Hogan, 2001). Before White Castle, hamburger sandwiches were primarily served at carnivals, fairs and amusement parks rather than in restaurants. At that time, hamburger

was not considered worthy of serving at restaurants. Prior to 1920s, most Europeans never perceived hamburger as a menu item at a restaurant as it is often thought as a poor man's fodder.

As the first hamburger chain and the second oldest quick-service restaurant chain in America, 85-year-old White Castle has outlasted many competitors by adhering to the inherited management philosophies established by Edgar Waldo "Billy" Ingram. Billy Ingram was followed as the head of the company by his son Edgar W. Ingram Jr. In 1978, representing the third generation of the Ingram's, Bill Ingram III became the president of the company. Over the past eighty years, the three generations of the Ingram family had a dramatic influence on the way



Americans eat their food and the hospitality industry especially the QSR industry. In the 2000s, the new leadership, 4<sup>th</sup> generation of Ingram family, is making their mark with progressive ideas and aggressive strategies at White Castle.

## Humble Roots of White Castle

Mr. Ingram grew up in a humble environment in Leadville, Colorado. He started his first job as a livestock reporter for the Omaha Bee newspaper in 1900. After unsuccessfully switching from one job to another; finally he decided to start an insurance company with a partner in 1908. In late 1910s, Ingram met Walt Anderson, who at the time operated three hamburger stands in Wichita, Kansas. With a \$700 loan, Ingram officially joined Anderson as a partner, and White Castle Inc., was formed in Wichita, Kansas, in 1921. Several months after getting involved with the hamburger business, Bill Ingram decided to sell his shares in the real estate business and to devote his passion to the development of White Castle.

As a professional cook, Anderson developed an innovative way of preparing hamburgers by flattening a ball of ground meat and cooking it with onions on a flat piece of iron griddle for a short period of time. Prior to Anderson's method of preparing hamburgers, the hamburger sandwich consisted of a thick ball of ground meat cooked slowly on a slotted grill for a very long period of time (Hogan, 1997). His innovative way of preparing hamburgers both marked the beginning of a new style for eating hamburgers, and regarded him as a pioneer for inventing the hamburger for many years to come.

As the first movers into the quick food restaurant business, both partners realized the potential for growth. By 1930s, consistent with the vision of expansion, the company extended its roots to twelve major cities in the Eastern part of the U.S. In 1933, Billy Ingram bought out his original partner Walt Anderson who was in charge of the day-to-day operations. As the White Castle continued to grow and expand geographically, a need to consolidate and operate from a centrally located corporate headquarters became apparent. As a result Ingram moved the company from Wichita, Kansas to Columbus, Ohio in 1934. Ingram thought that with a centralized control structure White Castle could keep firm control over its unit operations, costs and quality standards.

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## The Early Days

The basic premise of WC since its establishment is to provide high value to customers with best quality possible. Initially Billy Ingram and Walt Anderson targeted the working class customers at the manufacturing sites in Wichita, Kansas. Walt used to park his hamburger cart at manufacturing plants during lunch times and the shift change times. Soon Billy Ingram moved his operations indoors with a counter and castle motif white building called White Castles (WC). A typical White Castle restaurant architecture featured a white exterior with a crenellated tower at one corner to resemble a medieval castle. The "White" color represents WC's clean operations differentiating itself from the notoriously dirty restaurants of that era. In addition, a "Castle" represents strength, permanence and stability unlike the 'fly by night' shady operations of the early 1920s and 1930s. Thus, the name White Castle was meant to reflect the virtues of cleanliness and stability.

White Castle management has considered but abandoned the idea of franchising as it didn't want to lose control of the operations. This decision was based on the philosophy that franchising invariably leads to dilution in operational and product quality controls dearly cherished by the founders. As a result, it remained a family-owned business even after nearly 90 years of existence.

As the concept of White Castle became popular, many White Castle look-alike restaurant chains have entered the market, both competing with the White Castle directly in some markets and becoming the sole provider in cities where White Castle did not have operations.

Among these chains were the White Tower Company; the Kewpee Hotel Hamburgers; Little Tavern of Louisville, and the Krystal Shops of Chattanooga, Tennessee (Hogan, 1997). White Castle was successful in closing some of the copy cat operations through legal means and the others have folded from lack of conceptual integrity and expertise. Krystal Shops are the lone survivors of those imitators. White Castle was not interested in spending its limited resources on legal battles with those companies that did not compete in the markets where WC operates, and Krystals Hamburgers is concentrated mostly in the southern states where WC has few or no operations.

Crisis during the Great Depression and World War II in terms of labor and food shortages put pressure on Ingram to change his leadership style from proactive to reactive. Interestingly Mr. Ingram made the decision to hire women to address the labor shortage resulting from men leaving to join the army during the World War II. Mr. Ingram initiated the open cooking procedures where all employees work in view of the customers unlike the full service restaurants with separate kitchens and dining rooms (Hogan, 1997). Since customers could see women at work in their view at WC, it was an not issue for many women to work at WCs. In the 1920s and 30s, often only women of ill repute used to work at restaurants behind the kitchen doors. Mr. Ingram was able to address that concern with his innovative lay out of the WC restaurants with open kitchens. As soon as the war ended, some giant hamburger competitors (McDonald's and Burger King) entered the market taking away business from WC. At this point Ingram realized that he did not have the financial resources to compete with these new and big competitors, and his management approach became a reactive one.

## Contributions of Billy Ingram "The Founder" to the Quick-Service Industry Operations

Since the opening of the first restaurant, Billy Ingram introduced the idea of standardization of operations. This standardization of White Castle restaurants determined exactly how every task is done and imposed rules about pace, quality and technique (Hogan, 1997). He was able to impose his strict standards on his management team in all restaurants without stifling their creativity or passion (Hogan, 1997). Ingram had also created and pushed an operating system of unusual attention to details. Additionally, Ingram insisted that to control the entire operation, all Castles follow corporate directives from

the head quarters on food preparation, purchasing, store design, employee appearance and many other details. To accomplish this goal; he maintained direct ownership of all restaurants; all restaurants are duplications of the original; all operations are standardized to the last detail.

Since WC's operates 24 hours a day, its employees and customers are susceptible to crime and its properties were vulnerable for malicious destruction. In an effort to reduce crime rate and violence at WC and in order to enhance the safety of employees as well as the customers, he installed phones in all WC stores in addition to phone booths in their parking lots. Most of the restaurants had well lit parking lots and strong cash control policies with locked safes. Furthermore, most of the WC operations close their dining areas late night and operate only drivethru operations to reduce crime inside the premises.

## Marketing

Mr. Ingram was innovative in terms of implementation of successful marketing strategies. From the beginning, he had a goal in mind to promote his hamburgers by targeting the blue-collar customers. In the early 1920s, he introduced the menu booklet which included all WC locations nationwide, provided nutrition information for all menu items, and suggestions of food to serve with White Castle hamburger.

Ingram proved to be a pioneer when WC became the first quick service restaurant to offer discount coupons in the local newspapers as a way to attract customers. Millions of coupons "five hamburgers for a dime" were advertised in local newspapers in every city WC operated (Hogan, 1997). Ingram learned that

that selling more at discounts by offering coupons would result in loyal customers and long-term profits. Mr. Ingram adopted this technique of couponing from the retail grocery industry of that era.

In addition, later Mr. Ingram innovatively developed the "Give Mother a Night Off" poster to market WC's products and carry-out service to the nation's housewives. Housewives were introduced to WC through well planned tours of WC restaurants and sampling of company products, hamburgers by the sack.

Ingram's was credited for developing the paper carryout cartons to keep the sandwiches from being crushed in bags. He also developed containers especially designed for carryout of hot and cold drinks, pies and their other menu items (Hogan, 1997). By the year 1950, his marketing campaign has moved from the blue collar workers to the middle-class families of America. These marketing strategies were proved to be very successful as Mr. Ingram moved hamburgers from an unwanted restaurant menu item to the most preferred menu item in America by the late 1940s.

## Human Resource Management

Billy Ingram believed that the human element is very important for successful operations. He strongly believed that the attainment of a consistently high level of quality is dependent upon the employees. According to Mr. Ingram, paying generous salaries would enhance the quality-oriented approach. As policy and practice, he offered more than the prevailing market wages to both unit employees and unit General Managers. A philosophy very similar to that of another legend in America

- Mr. Henry Ford of Ford Motor Company. Even today, WC has the reputation of paying higher than market wages resulting in one of the lowest employee turnover rates in the industry. WC restaurant rarely uses help wanted signs as the need for new employees is extremely low.

Also, to further motivate employees he instituted a plan to help pay all or part of the health care costs for both employees and their dependents (Hogan, 1997). As a believer in providing liberal workers' benefits, Ingram started a cash bonus plan for all employees based on gross sales. The company also awarded yearly bonuses based upon longevity. He later added other innovative benefits such as group life insurance to all employees, loan fund, sick benefits and a pension plan.

Under his presidency, WC became the first restaurant chain in America to offer such benefits to all of its unit-level employees. Being able to satisfy employees, Ingram was successful in overcoming the high employee turnover problem that became the trade mark of the restaurant industry. By offering better benefits and reducing employee turnover, Mr. Ingram was able to maintain highest standards of cleanliness in the industry. It is not a surprise that WC still enjoys one of the lowest employee turnovers in the industry today. WC has long list unit-level employees with a tenure record of 25-30 years at the unit level. It is a remarkable achievement in the QSR industry which often reports over 140% employee turnover.

Ingram was confident that nothing is more critical to the success of WC than the effective utilization of internal marketing. He worked from the philosophy that, in order to make WC successful, the company must satisfy its employees. Additionally, he enhanced the positive communication within WC and helped to overcome any personality conflicts. Ingram also focused on human resource training and hired the Research Institute of America for this purpose (Hogan, 1997). It is an indication of Mr. Ingram's proactive philosophy of investing in people.

In addition, to improve employees' working conditions, he insisted on installing air conditioners, exhaust vents and some showers wherever appropriate. WC is the first company to install telephones at all operating restaurants so that employees and customers may call for rides. It was essential as all WC restaurants were open 24 hours and employees needed at late hours. WC offered free meals to all employees that worked pre-determined number of required hours per day. All employees are required to purchase non-skid shoes provided by the company at discounted rates to minimize employee injuries (Parsa, 2004).

Mr. Ingram's goal was to make employees feel more positive about the company. The company constantly reminded its employees of the benefits of working at White Castle. It also printed numerous booklets outlining the extent of its insurance coverage, describing the retirement system, and urging everyone to participate in the savings plan (Hogan, 1997).

## Contributions of Edgar Ingram II to Quick-Service Industry

After Billy Ingram, the founder died in 1966, his son Edgar became the CEO of WC operations. Edgar didn't change the direction of the company rather he maintained his father's management philosophy. Although his father managed to survive through the Great Depression and War World II; Edgar's era was confronted with unprecedented challenges. During the 1960s and the years to follow, the battle among quick-service restaurant chains has risen. Many quick service restaurant chains opened outlets in towns across the country, offering standardized products, consistent service, convenience, and low prices. Edgar Ingram realized that as a smaller chain with only 90 Castles it is almost impossible to keep up with giant franchised chains growing at meteoric speed. The problem of increased competition left Edgar with only limited choices: expand the chain and modernize it, improve the product, lower the costs, or go out of business. With these options available, he decided to reexamine his position and capitalize on White's Castle unique strengths. Edgar announced the criteria for the construction of new Castles: high volume traffic areas, accessibility and vis-

ibility, competition from the other brands in the area, household income within that area, and the potential for growth (Hogan, 1997). Under his leadership, White Castle held on to its existing market share and even extended it gradually.

As his father did, Edgar also believed that loss of operational control through franchising is not in the best interest of WC, and all expansions must be supported from the internal cash only as he never believed in borrowing for expanding restaurant operations. His leadership style could be best described as cautious, conservative, risk averse and basic (Hogan, 1997). Not the promoter and motivator of people that his father was, Edgar Ingram was known instead as a careful and detail-oriented manager, always planning and looking ahead (Hogan, 1997). Edgar turned the power over to his son Bill Ingram III in 1978.



**Bill Ingram III**

### **Contributions of Bill Ingram III to Quick-Service**

When Bill Ingram III assumed the CEO position in 1978, he maintained the management strategy that his grandfather adopted em-

phasizing White Castle's basic strength of cleanliness, quality food, and motive service. With the increasing intensive competition from the big hamburger competitors, Ingram III clearly understood that the rules of the game have changed and the demands for higher standards are the main challenges to survive. In addition to updating the buildings and improving the hamburgers, Ingram decided to improve the employees training and motivation programs.

Today, White Castle remains a privately held company owned by the Ingram family and operates close to four hundred restaurants located in 12 states in the U.S. All restaurants are built on the same foundations: service, quality, cleanness and reasonable prices and with the same goal: fully satisfied customers. Company is vertically integrated extensively from building its own restaurants to making its own buns.

### **Company's Culture**

Many of the employees have worked for White Castle their entire lives and knew Ingram from the time he worked there as a teenager during school vacations. One of the family traditions that Ingram observes is to visit every White Castle restaurant once a year and meet all the staff (Richardson, 2004), a tradition begun by his grandfather. Additionally, Ingram III recognized the importance of decentralized management structure at WC's environment. Rather than forcing the operation staff at each restaurant to comply with the change, WC has a different set up where company HQ make recommendations to the field and explain to them the benefits gained after the adoption. It is against Ingram's policy to force employees to accept change without explaining the reasons behind it.

QSR restaurant industry has tremendous turnover rates, but at WC turnover is one of the lowest in that category. Among General Managers, the turnover rate is below 6% and General Managers have on average 15.5 years with WC. Additionally, the turnover rate among team members is below 40% (Richardson, 2004). Several explanations are offered to understand this phenomenon including strict promote from within policy; the family atmosphere; excellent employee benefits including healthcare for all unit level employees; better than prevailing market wages; celebration and promotion of diversity; always taking long term view than a 'market reaction' approach as a privately held company; high levels of decentralized decision making; and open communication policy between up-

per management and employees.

According to Ingram III, as a family owned company, the human element is of paramount importance. He enhanced the family atmosphere as the prevailing organizational culture in all operations. One of WC's big celebrations is the 25 Year Club Celebration; a program that was initiated by the founder Billy Ingram in 1946 (Kelly, 2005). To qualify for the program, team members must have 25 years of uninterrupted service in any of the company's divisions - restaurants and corporate offices, bakeries, meat processing plants, and the manufacturing division. The inductees are treated to luxury hotel accommodations, lunch and tours at the White Castle's Headquarter. Employees and their families are brought to the company head quarter in a limousine. Additionally, in a special celebration, each honoree receives a gold watch as an appreciation of his/her loyalty.

Being a family owned business, WC is not driven by Wall Street pressures. Company executives can take sufficient time to make decisions since the company does not have to react to stock price fluctuations. There are 11 family members who own stocks in the company and very actively involved in many aspects of WC operations.

### **Recruitment**

For Ingram, the purpose of recruitment at WC is to buy in and retain the best available human resources to meet WC needs. Therefore, it is important for every employee to be familiar with: What WC stands for? What qualities are required to do the job? And what incentives are required to attract and motivate the right employee?

Employee selection, according to Mr. Ingram III, involves many procedures to identify the most appropriate candidate to fill each post. Ingram III has implemented an effective procedure that takes into consideration the following: keeping the cost of selection down, making sure that required skills and qualities have been specified and developing a process for identifying them in candidates, making sure that the candidate selected will want the job, and will stay with WC (Bartley, 2005).

Ingram III has supported both the internal and the external recruiting; 99% of his General Managers and Assistant Managers are recruited internally rather than externally, therefore less training is needed since the candidate already knows the job (Ingram, 2005). Also, the unit manager himself carries out the recruitment of personnel for the restaurant and communicates the standards to all new hires.

## Training

Training is a top priority to Ingram because the success of the company depends on dedicated, well-trained people and uniform operations from restaurant to restaurant. An ongoing commitment to the state-of-the-art training is a fundamental part of WC's corporate focus. WC stresses on the importance of providing the best possible training and career-long learning opportunities to achieve its vision. He is also committed to developing employees at every level of the organization from restaurant crew to executives.

Found in 2002, WC University is a tool that Ingram established as a training facility. The University was designed exclusively to

instruct personnel employed by WC. Up to this point it only targeted store general managers where General Managers come to corporate HQ to attend various training programs. General Managers are trained on: leadership coaching, how to conduct performance appraisals, bonus structure tutorial, income statements interpretation, how to do minor repairs to fix the daily problems with the system, how to administer the hidden camera system, HR and labor laws. Also at WC University there is a training program for some information that changes frequently like HR laws, sexual harassment, and discrimination. Finally, trainees are also exposed to applications such as labor scheduling software and supplies ordering software.

## Information Technology Implementation

Investing in IT plays a major role in the success of White Castle. Ingram III understood that White Castle must invest in IT at a rate consistent with competitors, and find applications that will reduce overall costs or improve customers' service and quality. Successfully WC has benefited from information technology for point of sale analysis, inventory-management, food cost analysis, employee training, general business administration and franchise billing (Bartley, 2005).

The grandson of the founder Bill Ingram is forward thinking as an individual and thinks that the adoption of information technology puts WC as a smaller chain at the cutting edge compared to some larger competitors. Under his presidency, WC created a dedicated department (IS/IT) to begin looking at IT solutions and incorporated that into a business model. According to Bill, the drive for IT solutions is the desire to improve the operational processes.

Ingram's approach is conservative; expanded only when he had the necessary capital on hand, never wanted to expand on loans. Ingram is hesitant to make big IT investment decisions, rather he invested on IT solutions that maximized return and increased productivity. For instance, labor scheduling benefited restaurants in terms of maximizing quality of service and lowering labor costs. With regard to security, rather than relying on security guards on premises, the company now has hidden camera systems that provide information online to the supervisors at office or home. According to Ingram III, IT implementation at WC has been a source of problem solving in terms of operational issues, it is also has been a force for creating a more customer friendly environment.

With competition increasing, Ingram is always seeking the necessary marketing strategy that would enable WC to survive. As a small brand, Ingram allocates a good percentage of WC's budget for IT investments. He feels this is the base for WC's future sales. In an effort to improve the speed of service with a strong support from Ingram, WC has begun a chain-wide installation of Geac's integrated credit card system. This system is fully integrated to the quick service point of sale system allowing transactions to process over high speed connections resulting in a payment process that is faster than cash.

## Lisa Ingram & Kim Bartley: Leadership for the Next Generation



Lisa Ingram

### Lisa Ingram

Lisa Ingram is the Vice President of Restaurant Operations for WC systems. Lisa obtained her MBA degree from The Ohio State University. She was nominated for the "Top Forty Under 40" award; an award to recognize the rising stars that superbly represent the vitality and ambition of business community.

As a Board member of Vil-

## Contributions of Four Generations of Ingrams to the QSR Industry

### The Founder: Billy Ingram

- First quick-service restaurant in America who ran his operations indoors
- Transformed the low regarded hamburger into the most popular food item in America
- Maintained centralized control structure over unit operations
- Instilled the idea of standardization of operations
- First to initiate the open cooking procedures
- Maintained direct ownership of all restaurants
- Installed phones in all WC stores in addition to phone booths in their parking lots
- The first to introduce the menu booklet
- The first to offer discount coupons to attract customers
- The first to both develop the paper carryout cartons and the containers for carryout of hot and cold drinks
- First to hire women in operations during World War II
- In an effort to maintain the quality standards, he kept turnover rates at a lower pace than competitors
- Offered more than the prevailing market wages to both unit employees and unit General Managers
- As a believer in worker benefits, Ingram started a cash bonus plan for all employees based on gross sales
- All units had air conditioners, exhaust vents, showers, telephones for the employees' comfort
- Meals were supplied to all employees while working

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Generations: Edgar Ingram

- All expansions must be supported from the internal cash only
- Never believed in franchising
- Cautious leadership style
- Known as a careful and detail-oriented manager, always planning ahead
- Not the promoter and motivator of people that his father was

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation: Bill Ingram III

- Maintained the management strategy that his grandfather adopted
- More focus on employee training and motivation; WC University establishment
- Maintained a tradition to visit each restaurant once a year and meet all the staff
- Recognized the importance of decentralized management structure at WC's environment
- Enhanced the family atmosphere as the prevailing organizational culture
- The 25 year Celebration Club that was started by his grandfather
- Maintained the lowest turnover rates in the category through excellent working conditions and excellent benefits
- Conservative and careful approach to the expansion of the White Castle

### Leadership for the Next Generation: Lisa Ingram and Kim Bartley

- New revolution at White Castle - new logo, new colors - new branding
- Opening of White Castle University
- New emphasis on training, professionalism and management development
- White Castle goes Hollywood with "Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle"
- Introduction of new products - highly successful Crave Case
- Standardization of products and procedures
- More centralization in decision making procedures
- More women in executive positions

lage to Child program; a program to help students receive tutoring, mentoring, and cultural enrichment, Lisa participates in the program to help kids to stay in school and graduate. Additionally, Lisa is involved with Junior League, Lutheran Social Services, Village to child, and the American Cancer Society.



Kim Bartley

### Kim Kelly-Bartley

Kim is Vice President of Marketing and Site Development for White Castle restaurants. Her responsibilities include all activities associated with marketing, advertising and public relations for the brand and the brand's image. In addition, she balances this with engineering and construction site development responsibilities. As one of the largest franchisees of Church's Chicken, Kim is also responsible for supervising the co-branding efforts with Church's and is chair of the Church's Franchisee Association marketing committee. For over 20 years, Kim has been involved with marketing and advertising of restaurants, both company and franchise. As the Vice-president of Marketing for WC,

Kim is credited in collaborating with the Hollywood which resulted in the now well known movie "*Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*". As a brand, the WC has received maximum exposure at little or no cost when this movie was released. Later a new packaging innovation, Crave Case, was introduced that can hold 24 hamburgers and some french fries too and looks like a brief case with strong handles to hold the food.

Kim is a former trustee of the Central Ohio Restaurant Association, and a member of Junior Achievement and Rotary. Kim also is active with Women's Foodservice Forum, Children's Hunger Alliance and Ohio State University Food and Hospitality Advisory Board. In addition, Kim serves on industry advisory boards for Technomic and Food Packaging Institute. She is the past-President of Central Ohio Restaurant Association.

### Conclusion

Over the past 85 years, White Castle has stayed focused on the simple product "the hamburger" that Ingram the founder created. Although the new stores feature more products and modern operating systems than the oldest stores did, in a world where bigger chains like McDonald's and Burger King grew to dominate and set the pace of competition, WC was slow in reacting.

Part of the company's survival is due to the successful implementation of Ingram's I desire that the company remain private and family owned. This strategy assisted WC not to get caught up in some of the mistakes made by competitors that have grown too fast. Additionally, WC is not interested in competing with McDonald's or Burger King, is another factor that helped WC to stay in business. Finally, Ingram's conservative and careful approach to the expansion of the White Castle may account for why it is still thriving today, whereas hundreds of other hamburger chains have come and gone (Hogan, 1997).

To day, Ingram's dream of keeping White Castle in the family is still a reality, and the company continues to grow as the fourth generation Ingrams are already working for the company. White Castle also remains as one of the few quick-service companies that does not franchise and privately owned. It remained concentrated in the Midwest and Northeast with over 400 restaurants in 12 states and growing though steadily ([www.whitecastle.com](http://www.whitecastle.com)). The company continues to grow at a constant rate by adding 15 new

units per year.

It is refreshing to learn that as White Castle deliberately expands at a steady pace, it is also rediscovering itself. In 2005, White Castle has introduced new logo and new design for its restaurants. It also took bold new steps in credit card usage and new information technology. It is also experimenting with new menu introductions while maintaining old, time-tested good human resource practices and policies, the foundations of the White Castles management philosophy.

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