

Farm life couldnâ??t compete with the excitement of big cities and the challenge of the executive life

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In college, Bob Britt worked as a night auditor at a roadside Holiday Inn in Southern Illinois. â??Every night something different was bound to happen,â?• he said. â??It was such a contrast to life growing up on a farm.â?•

The hustle and bustle of hotel life was so seductive Britt decided to forge a career in the hotel industry. Over 35 years, he held a series of increasingly responsible management positions in cosmopolitan settings, including Chicago, New York, and Hawaii, with the opportunity to travel extensively and save for a comfortable retirement

He said he wasnâ??t particularly fond of farm life but the familyâ??s 200-acre spread in rural Southern Illinois provided a solid, if unglamorous, life of routine. â??I gathered the eggs, tended our vegetable garden, ran with my collie, and when I was old enough to drive a tractor, I would occasionally help my father in the fields, plowing and discing,â?• he said.

Filling in for Mom

When his mother went to work as a bookkeeper for the local bank after her third child was old enough, Britt, the eldest, was occasionally pressed into service as the dinner cook. He still likes to cook, and occasionally volunteers to prepare meals at Martin de Porres House of Hospitality in San Francisco.

It was a conservative upbringing, with â??Leave it to Beaverâ?• and â??The Beverly Hillbilliesâ?• often playing on the familyâ??s TV. Growing up gay in mid-America in the â??50s could have presented problems for Britt, but it didnâ??t, he said. There was one openly gay farmer in the community, and â??everyone just accepted him.â?• Brittâ??s parents were religious but also tolerant. â??I think they might have known, but they didnâ??t say anything,â?• he said.

Britt said he wasnâ??t in the closet in his early working years but â??didnâ??t advertise that I was gay.â?• He and his husband, Steve Mico, a teacher and an editor, have been together for 35 years.

Hotel work was anything but routine and opened the door to many places and cultures.

Farmers get up early, but hotel execs sometimes get to bed very late â?? if at all. â??A hotel is open 24 hours a day, every day, so I had little control over my hours,â?• Britt said. â??Before computers, I could be called in at 2 a.m. to deal with cash counting errors.â?• It was also common in the hotel industry to leapfrog often, and even boomerang back to an earlier company, to advance in position and pay. â??I liked changing jobs because there was always a new culture to learn, along with policies and procedures.â?•



Bob Britt on his deck in Mission Bay. (Photo by Steve Mico)

Britt, now 70, was able to retire at 57. He and Mico live in a Mission Bay condo with their small white rescue dog, Benji.

Farm life, said Britt, was a school that taught him many lessons. He learned how shared labor, working alongside his father, for example, made work go faster and better. Working with the local farm cooperative taught the value of bringing a community together.

And farm life had an impact on his career. Lending a helping hand was a value he strove to apply as a manager. When he could, he looked at people he hired for entry-level jobs as potential executives.

He used to joke that â??my work in luxury hotels was making it possible for rich people to get a good nightâ??s sleep,â?• but he also said hotels provided an opportunity for people who have limited education and skills, oftentimes immigrants, to work their way up the job ladder.

â??When I began in the hotel business, it was possible to start as a porter and work your way up to the general managerâ??s position,â?• he said. During one managerial stint, he promoted a bartender with a college degree in business to assistant controller. â??I helped him grow into the position,â?• Britt said, â??and 25 years later he contacted me to thank me.â?•

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Those small-town values are also evident in his penchant for volunteering over the years with a host of nonprofits and charitable organizations.

But his career remained his focus, and he was always ready to move to a new job to advance it.

Britt went to Kaskasia Community College in Centralia, Illinois, finishing his bachelorâ??s degree in 1977 in finance and personnel management at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston. While he studied, he worked as an auditor at a Holiday Inn, a chain that Britt said has launched the careers of many hotel executives.



Bob Britt and Benji take a stroll. (Photo by Robin Evans)

He was delighted after graduation, to get a job in Chicago with P&S Management Company, a franchisee of Holiday Inns. Growing up in a town with a population of 550, he â??wanted to know big city life.â?•

He caught a break after three years at P&S when a former boss, now a controller at a new luxury hotel company, Regent International Hotels of Hong Kong, asked Britt to come on as assistant comptroller in Chicago.

After less than a year, a controller position became available in Maui, Hawaii, in one of the best hotels in the world, he said. â??I got the job, and I was only 28 years old.â?• Britt was confident that heâ??d perform well, but he felt sad leaving Chicago, â??a fun, big happening cityâ?• where he had made a lot of good friends.

But Regent lost the management contract in Maui after a year and moved Britt to New York City. From there, three jobs and 17 years later, having moved to New Jersey and back to Chicago, Britt now had enough experience to move up to the ladder to a senior management position.

When after three years as a vice president at Strategic Hotels and Resorts, Brittâ??s then partner and future husband, Steve Mico, got a job in Washington, D.C. with National Geographic, they moved again.

Britt, who had also changed jobs, eventually â??boomerangedâ?• back to Strategic. â??This was my favorite job because my responsibilities were varied and stimulating,â?• he said. Strategic owned their hotels but didnâ??t run them, so Britt oversaw management operations, controlling expenses.

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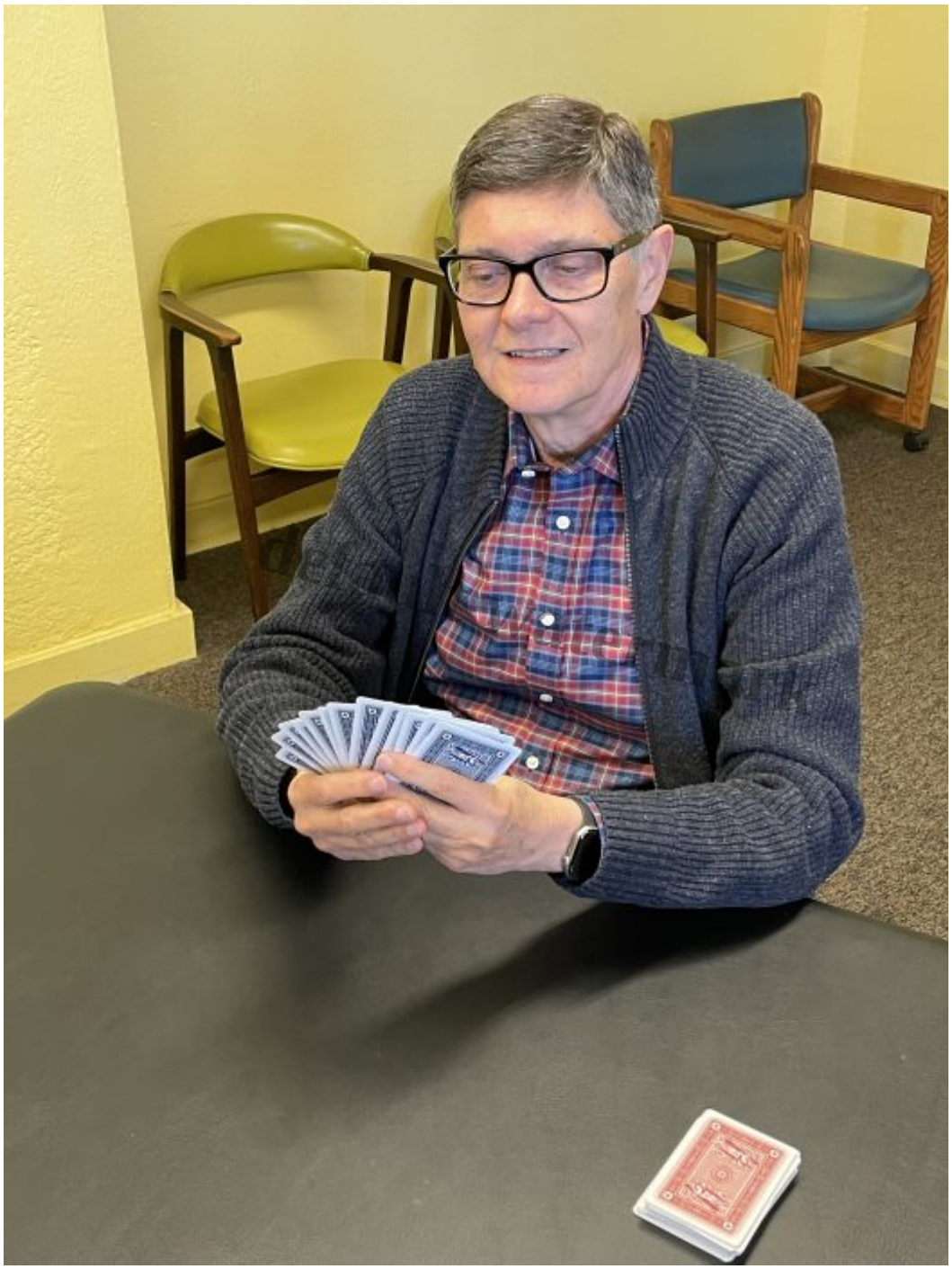
Paris and beyond

Working in luxury hotels gave Britt a taste for an elegant lifestyle and extensive travel. â??Iâ??ve been to Paris over 10 times for work and loved it so much I went back with Steve another 10 times,â?• Britt said. â??We liked getting to know the residents and really learn about life there.â?• The couple has visited every continent on earth, except for Antarctica.

For Britt, part of living the good life includes helping others. While working at Strategic, he decided to jump in and volunteer with a nonprofit called Arts of Life in Chicago to gain knowledge of how nonprofits work and what they might need.

Arts of Life just celebrated its 25th anniversary. Britt put it on the road to solvency by helping it create a board of fundraisers and nudging the executive director to ask corporations for money. â??I think I helped them when they needed help the most.â?•



Bob Britt enjoying a game of bridge at the Aquatic Park Senior Center. (Photo by Steve Mico)

Britt volunteered with several food-related nonprofits in Chicago, and when he and Mico moved to the Bay Area, he did pro bono accounting work for Aspire Education in Oakland.

He ushers once a month at the progressive Calvary Presbyterian Church and with a group from the church occasionally cooks meals at the Martin de Porres House of Hospitality.

Britt and Mico made their way to California after retirement, spending winters in Palm Springs. After realizing the desert community wasnâ??t for them, they moved to the East Bay, where Micoâ??s mother was living. But they missed city life and moved to San Francisco in late 2022.

A tall, slim man with salt and pepper hair, Britt is clearly loving his retirement, and heâ??s delighted to see the Mission Bay neighborhood growing up around him.

He spends at least an hour a day researching his family tree. He discovered that his 4th great-grandfather worked for a shipbuilder in Philadelphia and died in a shipwreck off the coast of Indonesia. â??Itâ??s been fascinating,â?• Britt said.

He looks forward to a cruise starting in Bali and ending in Singapore in January. What about Antarctica, that last continent to visit? Nope. Too cold, he said.

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