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Innkeeper Clarene Law Thrived on Jackson Hole's Boom

Entrepreneur, who has died at age 89, bought a motel in the early 1960s and kept adding properties and rooms



Clarene Law jumped into the motel business just in time to ride a long-term boom in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

PHOTO: LAW FAMILY

By [James R. Hagerty](#) [Follow](#)
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Clarene Meadows, later known as Clarene Law, was a working mom with a problem in the early 1960s: When her children got sick, who would take care of them?

As a hotel bookkeeper in Wyoming's Jackson Hole valley, she heard that the Antler Motel was for sale. It wasn't fancy but offered mountain views. Her family could live at the motel, meaning she could work from home long before that was a familiar option.

She borrowed money from her parents and other relatives to put together a down payment on the \$125,000 asking price. She thus became an innkeeper in an era when rooms often cost less than \$10 a night and free TV was a selling point.

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At the time, Jackson was a little-known town where people might stop on the way to Yellowstone National Park. Over the next few decades, it blossomed into a [luxurious year-round attraction](#) where visitors could hike, ski and get an inkling of the Wild West. The valley began hosting an annual retreat for central bankers and academics.

Clarene Law, as she became after her 1973 marriage to Creed Law, expanded the family business to include several more lodging properties with a total of 477 rooms, whose daily rates range from around \$225 to \$500 in high seasons. She became one of the best-known entrepreneurs in her area and served as a Republican in the [Wyoming House of Representatives](#) for 14 years.

Ms. Law died Sept. 21. She was 89.

In the early years, she cleaned rooms and washed sheets. Until recently, she still helped oversee the business.

Though Ms. Law believed in friendly service, she had her limits. In a memoir, "And I Had Fun," she recalled this exchange with one customer:

"This is a lousy place."

"Well, you don't have to stay here."

"There aren't any rooms in town."

"Maybe you should go, then, and not come back."

She slapped another customer—but only after he threw a paper weight at her and spat in her face.

"Of course you get some jerks," she wrote, "but 99% of people are not jerks."

Early on, a local banker told her he could make loans backed by cattle, but not motels. She found more amenable lenders in Casper, Wyo., and Chicago.

Born Alta Clarene Webb on July 22, 1933, she grew up in Idaho and was the third of five children. Her father managed road-construction crews. The family moved frequently and slept in homemade trailers. They had moved about 20 times by the time she settled down in Twin Falls, Idaho, as a teenager. She was a tomboy who played baseball and made snow sleds out of old car fenders.

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Aiming to become a pharmacist, she attended what is now Idaho State University but stayed only a year and a half. At age 20, she married Franklin Meadows, who was heading into a career as a teacher and guidance counselor. She tried a variety of jobs, including writing stories and selling ads for newspapers.

A guidance-counseling job for Mr. Meadows brought the family to Jackson in 1959. Family finances were tight. She remembered frequent meals of elk burgers with creamed peas.

The motel business gave her a growing income and stature in the community and, eventually, the state. Mr. Meadows wasn't as fond of the business and missed the cultural attractions of cities. They divorced in 1973, and she married Mr. Law, who had been in the restaurant-franchising business.

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Mr. Law "could build, move buildings and fix about any old wreck of a building," she wrote later. When they bought an inn in Worland, Wyo., he broke it into pieces and hauled them more than 200 miles to Jackson, where the reassembled building became part of the Elk Country Inn.

Gradually, she began passing management of the business to her children. Her role, she said, became chief greeter and gabber.

Elected to the Wyoming legislature in 1990, she served seven two-year terms. Though a teetotaler, she supported legislation allowing brew pubs to operate. They proved to be "great economic stimulators," revitalizing downtowns "by taking an old building and making a brew pub out of it," she wrote.

She taught Sunday school for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Though her motels thrived, some other investments, including farms and a dude ranch, didn't work out.

Ms. Law's survivors include her husband, Creed Law, along with three children, seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

The Jackson Hole News & Guide quoted one of her self-assessments: "I just stand here behind this desk 14 hours a day. There's nothing unusual about me."

Write to James R. Hagerty at bob.hagerty@wsj.com

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