

MODULE 21

LIGHTS, CAMERA,
ARCHIVES!

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The Hospitality Archives and Hilton Collection Work with AMC's *Mad Men*

By Mark E. Young

The Hospitality Industry Archives at the University of Houston, home of Conrad Hilton's papers and the Hilton Hotel Collection, assisted the writers of AMC's *Mad Men* when researchers for the show telephoned and asked what Conrad Hilton was like and what the company was doing in 1963. From the archivist's perspective, the writers could not have picked a better year to highlight. Hilton opened more than thirteen hotels in 1963, an unheard-of number of hotels for that time. That accomplishment, along with a boom of travel and tourism, landed Conrad Hilton on the cover of *Time* magazine. Furthermore, 1963 was the year Hilton Hotels changed advertising agencies. This



Figure 3: Conrad Hilton on the cover of *Time*, July 19, 1963. Courtesy of The Hospitality Industry Archives at the University of Houston.

was fortuitous timing for the *Mad Men* writers, who prized historical accuracy.

Similar to the JFK Library's experience, the questions the *Mad Men* staff posed were exacting, including their first question: What was the precise advertising budget for Hilton, and how was the money allocated? This level of desired detail was unusual, but fortunately the company controlled hotels' spending—if not other activities of individual hotels—so it alone determined how the funds were expended. What surprised the *Mad Men* researchers was the fact that Hilton changed advertising agencies in 1963; they thought that McCann Erickson was already the advertising agency of record by that time, but for domestic Hilton hotels, McCann Erickson was not hired *until* 1963. This detail gave the television show an opportunity it had not anticipated but that the Archives was able to step up and assist with.

The Hospitality Archives sent *Mad Men* images of Hilton print advertisements that predated 1963 and images of advertisements reflecting the period after McCann Ericson took over the account. While the show did not use actual advertisements, they did recreate the feel and texture of the different advertising styles. One of the original advertisements was of the new Rome Cavalieri Hilton. When Betty and Don Draper visit the Cavalieri Hilton, a similar image was used for the view from their hotel room.²⁵

Mad Men staff also sought to understand Conrad Hilton's life and character. They were interested in everything from his humble beginnings in San Antonio, New Mexico, to the type of hat he wore. Hilton did not always wear a hat, but when he did—usually when he arrived at hotel openings—it was part of his big signature wave. *Mad Men* knew nothing of Hilton's hat, assuming it was just a cowboy hat. While it was a Stetson, it was more like a homburg. Hilton had several of these hats, which are now in the Archives with their distinctive travel case. The iconic hat became a well-used prop during *Mad Men* episodes about Hilton. By working with the Archives staff, the researchers came to understand that Hilton was more Western and less Wall Street in character, ultimately depicting his openness and unpretentious nature perfectly. While he may have made his name synonymous with hotels around the world, he was still the man born

25 *Mad Men*, season 3, episode 8, "Souvenir," directed by Phil Abraham, written by Lisa Albert and Matthew Weiner, aired October 4, 2009, on AMC.

and raised in territorial New Mexico. Yet when he was disappointed with Don Draper, like he would have been with any Hilton Hotel executive not living up to their potential, he let him know it. *Mad Men* nailed Conrad Hilton's personality, with one small caveat. In one scene, he is shown sitting uninvited in Don Draper's desk chair. That would have been an invasion of a person's privacy and would have been out of character for Hilton.

The only other mistake that *Mad Men* made in their portrayal of Conrad Hilton occurred when the researchers did not consult the Archives. The story line that Hilton wanted to build hotels on the moon was a surprise to me. Only later, after reading one of the articles about *Mad Men* and their zeal for historical accuracy, did I hear about how the mistaken story of Conrad's supposed mania for a hotel on the moon came about. A Hilton executive gave the show's creator Matthew Weiner a copy of a Hilton reservation for the Lunar Hilton. The dummy reservation was made in conjunction with a speech Barron Hilton, Conrad's son, gave in 1967 about space travel and hotels. Barron was by this point serving as president of Hilton Hotels and running the company. He was also passionate about aviation. The Lunar Hilton was Barron Hilton's vision. Unfortunately, *Mad Men* never asked the Archives.

The image shows a vintage-style reservation form for the "LUNAR HILTON". At the top, there is a black and white illustration of a satellite or space station in orbit, with a bright beam of light directed towards the Earth. To the right of the satellite is a large, detailed image of the Moon's surface. Below the illustration, the text "RESERVATION" is printed in a bold, sans-serif font, followed by "(SUBJECT TO CONFIRMATION)" in a smaller font. The main title "LUNAR HILTON" is prominently displayed in a large, bold, sans-serif font. Below the title, there are several lines for personal information: "NAME", "DATE", "00-0000-01 M", "ADDRESS", "CITY", "STATE", and "ZIP". Further down, there are checkboxes for "Accommodations: ☐ single ☐ double ☐ cloud suite (two rooms)" and "☐ Check here if your trip includes transfer to interplanetary express". There is also a line for "Length of stay (earth days):" followed by a blank space. At the bottom, there are lines for "After 1980 arrival" and "departure" with "DATE" labels. The Hilton logo, a stylized "H" with the word "HILTON" underneath, is located in the bottom right corner of the form.

Figure 4: Fictional Lunar Hilton ad copy. Courtesy of The Hospitality Industry Archives at the University of Houston.