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ened to the public on Dec. 10, 1926, the San Marco Hotel offered 92 rooms for just \$3 per day with space on the ground floor for 13 shops.

The San Marco – a gem in Venice’s crown

By LARRY R. HUMES
GUEST WRITER



Looking east from the former San Marco Hotel to adjacent St. Augustine Road and North Nokomis Avenue crossing what is today West Tampa Avenue.

The burgeoning city of Venice received an early Christmas present on Dec. 10, 1926, when the San Marco Hotel formally opened its doors to the public.

The second of three hotels that would eventually be built by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the three-story hotel encompassing an entire city block in the center of town was described by a local newspaper as “one of the most beautiful yet planned for Venice.”

The first building constructed in the emerging city was the adjacent Hotel Venice because the BLE needed a place for potential home buyers to stay when they visited. Constructed in just three months at a cost of slightly less than \$500,000, the Hotel Venice formally opened to the public on June 21, 1926.

Work on the San Marco began two months later. Constructed at a cost of \$350,000 and completed in just three months, the hotel contained 92 rooms with space on the ground floor for 13 shops.

Designed in the Venetian architectural style, the San Marco differed from the city’s other early buildings in that it was constructed of concrete block, covered with stucco, and reinforced with steel columns. The hotel’s owner, R.W. Wishart, was a widely

To learn more

While the Venice museum remains closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, visit venicemuseum.org.

known contractor at the time and was also responsible for much of the development on Davis Island in Tampa.

“Everybody in town knew that the hotel was strong,” said Julia Cousins-Laning, who moved with her family to Venice when she was 6, about the time that the San Marco was built.

“Whenever bad weather threatened the area, local families would be invited to stay there to ride out the storm. We children would run up and down the hallways, gathering the little soaps and shampoos.”

The San Marco featured a modern steam heating system with radiators offered in each room. The Dec. 10 edition of The Venice News also mentioned that the hotel featured patented water softening equipment for the comfort of its guests. Plumbing, electrical work and furnishings were provided by various Tampa-based contractors, and the elevators were provided by the Otis Company. Linens were furnished by E.E. Allen of New York.

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GEM

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Tenants on the first floor of the San Marco varied. Included in the offering was a barber shop, a dentist, insurance and real estate offices; and a retail shop selling a variety of merchandise and also providing a rental library. A local physician, Dr. W.C. Page, maintained an office in the San Marco. Western Union offered a telegraph office there. The spacious Venice Café was located at the eastern end of the building. And two lobbies with working fireplaces were located on either side of the building.

An advertisement in the Feb. 6, 1930 edition of the Sarasota Herald Tribune stated that rooms in the San Marco were available for \$3 per day, each available with bath.

The collapse of Florida's land boom of the 1920s, coupled with the Great Depression, sounded the death knell for the growing City by the Gulf. After the BLE pulled out of the project, the city's population dropped from some 3,000 residents in 1928 to about 300 in 1930. The economic collapse eventually forced the city's three hotels — The Park View Hotel, located on the present site of Venice's post office, opened in February 1927 — to shutter their doors.

The San Marco building remained empty until June 1932 when it was announced that the Kentucky Military Institute (KMI) in Lyndon, Kentucky would be leasing the San Marco and Hotel Venice buildings to serve as the school's winter quarters.

Founded in 1845, KMI originally established a winter campus in Eau Gallie, Florida, in 1906, but the campus was largely destroyed by fire and abandoned three years later. A later owner of the school, Col. C.B. Richmond, was encouraged to consider Venice as an alternative by Ray Richardson, a 1909 graduate of KMI who served as commandant of the school in 1909 and 1910.

The first class of cadets, about 250 in number, arrived at the Venice Train Depot on Jan. 5, 1933, aboard a special Seaboard Air Line train called the KMI Special. It was said at the time that when the military school arrived, it roughly doubled the population of the town. Townspeople enthusiastically met the

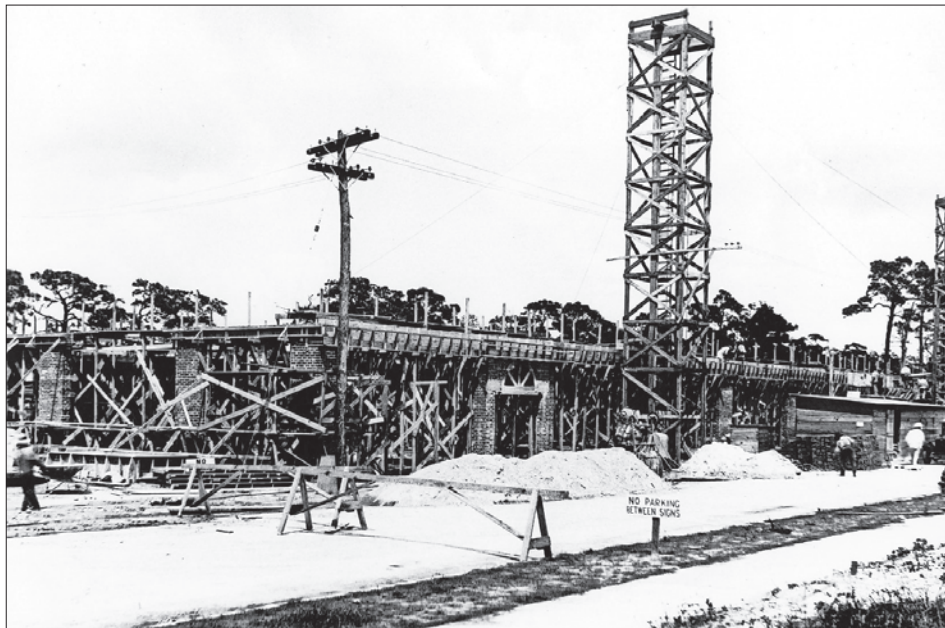


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The San Marco was different than most of the early buildings in Venice in that it was constructed of steel reinforced concrete. It was built in just three months at a cost of slightly less than \$500,000.

train in their vehicles and transported the cadets to their newfound barracks. The school would return to its Kentucky campus after the Easter break.

Classes were held in the former shops on the first floor of the San Marco while cadets were housed in the hotel rooms on the second and third floors. Younger students, faculty and staff were housed in the adjacent Hotel Venice. Formal dress parades were held every other Sunday afternoon on the school's parade ground (Centennial Park today), and thousands of onlookers from all along the Gulf Coast would come to watch.

Throughout the week, cadets marched to meals in the Hotel Venice dining room.

KMI leased the two buildings from 1932 until 1939, at which time they purchased the former hotels as well as the former Orange Blossom Garage (Venice Theatre today), just east of the San Marco. The Depression did not severely affect the school, and having a Florida campus was a marketing strategy that boosted the school's attendance. Annual tuition in 1933 was \$905.

Ben Kaufmann, Class of 1961, shared a room on the second floor with a fellow cadet his sophomore year, but was assigned a third-floor room with a balcony overlooking downtown Venice his junior and senior years.

"Having classrooms on the first floor was great,"

he said, "since you never really had to get out in the weather when it was raining."

Life in San Marco could be challenging, Kaufmann added, when a cadet on occasion would throw a cherry bomb into the hallway. "When it would explode, the noise was deafening."

KMI continued to winter in Venice every year until 1970 when it was forced to discontinue the visits due to declining enrollments. The school formally closed its doors the following year, largely due to anti-war sentiment against the Vietnam War.

Following KMI's departure, the two hotels were once again empty except for vagrants who occasionally took up residence. The buildings were sold in 1973 to local developer Boris Kaye, but was resold to a consortium of local businessmen who were intent on saving the historical buildings from the wrecking ball.

David Farley, retired owner of Farley Funeral Home, partnered with his father, local developer Don Morgan and a local architect to create KMI Developers. Their intent was to convert the San Marco, renamed the Venice Centre, into 44 condominium apartments on the second and third floors with 20 boutique shops located on the first floor. Plans also called for converting the adjacent Hotel Venice into 35 two-bedroom condominium apartments, complete with a recreation complex.

Unfortunately, the national economy slipped into a recession in 1974 and all but one of the sales contracts for the San Marco building evaporated. Each of the units was eventually resold and the Hotel Venice was sold to a private company that converted that building into a retirement community.

Current residents of the San Marco completed a renovation of the San Marco last year. The second and third floor units were outfitted with new wind-resistant windows, and the first-floor grand hallway was re-plastered and painted to reflect some of the hotel's original grandeur.

And with support from the KMI Alumni Association, a museum-quality display of memorabilia showcasing the San Marco's unique history is being designed with plans for installation later this year on the first floor of the building.

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