

# 90 years ago, KMI changed Venice dramatically

## Kentucky Military School bought 2 Venice hotels

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VENICE — The city of Venice will celebrate a milestone tomorrow in that it was 90 years ago on January 5, 1933 that the first trainload of Kentucky Military School (KMI) cadets and their instructors arrived and began what would become a nearly four-decade long tradition.

Having the “City on the Gulf” serve as the military prep school’s winter quarters was a special treat for both students and staff.

And when the “KMI Special” rolled into the Venice Train Depot on that Wednesday evening, it provided much-needed revenue for the community on the brink of financial ruin.

After the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE) pulled out of the Venice construction project in 1928, followed by the Great Depression a year later, the city was left a proverbial ghost town.

Its population dropped from some 3,000 residents in 1928 to just 309 people two years later. The city turned off the street lights

on moonlit nights to save electricity and one old-timer said he used to hunt rabbits on West Venice Avenue.

Most families survived by whatever they could fish or shoot.

Founded in 1845 in Frankfort, Kentucky, KMI was the oldest military school of its kind in the nation. It also was one of the first secondary schools in the country to affiliate with the Army’s Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program.

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**The Kentucky Military Institute battalion can be seen on the Venice parade ground (circa 1935). The arrival of KMI doubled the city's population and helped the city pull out of the Great Depression.**

# BOUGHT

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KMI founded a winter campus in Eau Gallie, Florida in 1906, believing the tropical climate would stimulate learning as well as facilitate more rigorous outdoor activity. The school would arrive shortly after the Christmas holiday break and would return to its Kentucky campus, by then located in a suburb of Louisville, shortly before the Easter recess.

The winter tradition continued until 1921 when a fire destroyed many of the campus buildings.

In late spring of 1932, Sarasota resident Ray Richardson, who had graduated from KMI in 1906 and served as the school's commandant in 1909-1910, contacted the school's owner, Colonel Charles Richmond, and informed him of the two vacant hotels in Venice — the Hotel Venice and the San Marco Hotel — that might serve as a suitable winter campus.

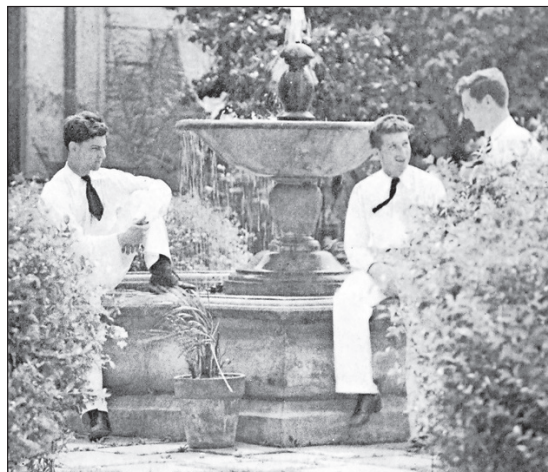
Richmond arrived in Venice on a scouting expedition later that spring. Accompanied by representatives of the BLE and the Seaboard Airline Railroad, he reportedly saw only three cars on the streets, one of which was "fixin to leave."

During the visit, Richmond told a local reporter that he could not have designed the two Venice hotels better to serve as KMI's new winter campus, complete with 25 well-lit classrooms on the first floor of the San Marco.

The banner headline in the June 1, 1932 edition of the Sarasota Herald-Tribune announced the good news to a depressed Suncoast, that exciting times were on the way.

The paper noted that Richmond was, at that very moment, in meetings at the BLE's headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio to sign a 9-year lease on the two vacant hotels.

His decision to bring KMI to Venice, he said,



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## Kentucky Military Institute students pose for a photo on the Venice campus.

was influenced by the availability of local fresh vegetables and modern rooms as well as the beautiful nearby beach, a 9-hole golf course, open landscape suitable for a parade ground and, of course, perfect chamber-of-commerce weather.

In announcing the news, the paper said: "KMI at Venice is the beginning of a new era of prosperity." Bud Wimmers, who was left behind as the appointed receiver for the BLE's holdings in Venice, said the announcement was "like a shot of adrenaline to a fellow with a heart condition."

For three months before KMI's arrival, work began to prepare the hotels, which had been closed for years. Furniture was "borrowed" from nearby vacated homes. Rosa Lee Smith was one of about six African-American workers who were paid \$11 per week to clean the rooms.

The cleaning crew was under the direction of Carmen Cousins, the wife of building contractor and future mayor, Mitt Cousins, who also was hired by KMI to maintain the winter campus.

The Cousins were the parents of the late Julia Cousins-Laning and her older brother, Jim Cousins, who became a cadet in 1935.

The first KMI Special, consisting of "five

sleepers and a baggage car," left Kentucky with about 175 boys, averaging 16 years of age, as well as some of the 25 faculty members and administrators and 25 staff members.

The train arrived at the Venice Train Depot at 5 p.m. on Jan. 5th, and was met by an estimated 1,500 people who turned out to greet the city's newest residents.

The paper reported it was the largest turnout of its kind in many years and possibly the largest ever in the history of Sarasota County.

When that first train arrived 90 years ago, it effectively doubled the city's population. Once all had departed the train, the cadets fell into formation on the station platform and then marched through town to the San Marco Building.

The paper reported that "the crowd of people who walked along with the cadets and the long line of automobiles that followed had the resemblance of a military parade."

The school wasted no time settling in. Classes were held the next day. Cadets who completed four years of study at KMI were granted the provisional rank of infantry captain in the U.S. Army upon graduation, while 3-year students were able to qualify as lieutenants.

The first formal dress parade of the season was

held on the afternoon of Sunday, Jan. 15th. The formation was held on Tampa Avenue in front of the San Marco since preparation of the parade field (today's Centennial Park) had not yet been completed.

The battalion was reviewed by members of the faculty and was under the leadership of Cadet Major Cramer.

It's little wonder that, along with the benefit of winters spent in Florida, the school's enrollment increased to 275 cadets in just four years.

With KMI's future intact, Richmond purchased the two hotels in 1939, along with the former Orange Blossom Garage, which would serve as KMI's gymnasium and armory. That building today houses the Venice Theatre.

KMI's tuition in 1933 amounted to \$950 per year, which included the cost of meals and train travel to Venice.

The relationship between KMI and the city of Venice continued to strengthen during the next 37 years. Cracks began to appear in the spring of 1970, however, when the March 26th edition of the Venice Gondolier confirmed the rumor that KMI might not be returning to its winter home.

Although no formal announcement was forthcoming, the school's director of athletics sent letters a month later to all area high schools, informing them not to put KMI on their schedules for the following year.

KMI formally closed in the spring of 1971, a victim of the increasing anti-war sentiment against the Vietnam War. During its 126-year history, more than 12,000 young men passed through its hallowed gates.

And for those cadets, they cherished the memories of their time spent in Venice.

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