

MAYFAIR MEMORIES ARE STILL FRESH

[Final Edition]

Seminole's PAST article written by Jim Robinson

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Sunday, January 9, 2005

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The three-fold brochure, now about 65 years old, advertises a “quiet, restful hotel” on the St. Johns River and offers a choice of American and European plans and “steam heat in every room.”

It was found recently in a box of love letters and old photos exchanged between a young bride and the Army Air Corps lieutenant she married in 1940.

They were married in her parent’s hometown of Vero Beach and boarded a train for their honeymoon, spending that first night in Sanford.

Room 222 at The Mayfair was on the second floor of the west wing. Double windows on the south side looked out at the palms lining Sanford’s First Street. The windows on the east side took in the sweeping driveway of the entrance porch of the Spanish-influenced hotel on Lake Monroe.

Today, the hotel rooms have been converted into apartments for missionaries and other staffers living at the world headquarters of New Tribes Mission.

But in the early 1940s, The Mayfair was a “truly Southern institution,” advertising itself as “A Haven of Rest” on the St. Johns River.

On each anniversary, the couple - my parents - went to The Mayfair. And, each time, the desk clerk remembered them as the honeymoon couple and gave them the same room.

In 1943, as the nation prepared to send more of its soldiers and sailors to carry on the fight in distant lands, my parents returned to The Mayfair’s Room 222 for the fourth time.

A photo taken that year shows my father in his uniform, leaning against a palm. At the time, he never wore civilian clothes. In the background are vintage cars parking at The Mayfair. Another shows my mother, posing as she sits on the giant roots of a fallen tree in front of another palm along the lakefront.

This would be their last anniversary at The Mayfair. By the next year, he was shipped off to military duty in India for the balance of World War II while she waited at home in Vero Beach.

When he returned in 1946 and my parents sought to begin their family, the last place he wanted to be was under his father-in-law’s roof, so they took the train to Miami and a vacation in Havana.

This year, my parents will celebrate their 65th anniversary and will recall those early days at The Mayfair.

My parents have wonderful memories of The Mayfair, including the Kirchhoff family, who ran the hotel at the time. Mother recalls that each of the lady guests was presented with bouquets of flowers, cut from the family's nursery nearby.

The Mayfair's World War II era of my parents' memories is just a small portion of the heritage of the hotel built during Florida's real-estate boom and continuing today as a missionary training center.

Then-Sanford Mayor Forrest Lake and his business partners in 1925 announced plans to build a resort hotel along the city's lakefront. First named the Forrest Lake, the three-story hotel with its Spanish stucco exterior, airy veranda and palm-lined view of Lake Monroe cost \$5 million to build, an investment expected to turn a quick profit during Florida's dizzy real-estate boom days.

It soon drew celebrity guests, including Tallulah Bankhead, Arthur Godfrey, Victor Borge, H.L. Hunt, Thornton Wilder and even Al Capone, who, according to legend, hid his vehicles from sight in the hotel's garage across First Street.

The winter season offered chamber-music concerts, tea dances and cocktails on Sunday afternoons. Guests came from New York, Chicago and Boston to escape the crowds in Miami.

But it took a lot of money to keep up the ballroom, which was lined with antique black glass and imported mahogany and lighted by crystal chandeliers.

When Florida's boom of the 1920's went bust, the hotel went into bankruptcy.

During the Great Depression in the 1930s, flower grower W.E. Kirchhoff Jr., father of former County Commissioner Bill Kirchhoff, leased the neglected Mayfair, reopening with a gala on Feb. 12, 1935. Kirchhoff bought The Mayfair in 1937.

During World War II, the Navy rented the hotel to house officers stationed at Sanford Naval Air Station.

Postwar guests at The Mayfair included New York state actresses and entertainers and baseball great Leo Durocher.

Playwright and novelist Thornton Wilder spent the 1946-47 season at the hotel. He had his own linen-covered table set off from others in the dining room, and the hotel stocked his favorite wine. He wrote a portion of the *Ides of March* during his stay.

The Giants baseball organization bought the hotel when it ran its farm club and spring training in Sanford.

In the early 1950s, expansion of the Navy base took over the grounds the Giants used for farm clubs. Spring training moved to Phoenix, and the Giants' farm clubs moved to Melbourne. The Giants, though, kept The Mayfair, which was usually booked for the season well in advance.

The Giants left New York for San Francisco in the late 1950s and began selling off the organization's properties east of the Mississippi. The Mayfair was sold in 1961.

Ben Ball, who owned hotels in New Hampshire for 20 years before moving to Miami, bought The Mayfair from the Giants, but by the mid-1960s it was closed.

It never reopened as a hotel. In 1963, The Mayfair became the Sanford Naval Academy for boys ages 14 to 17. The Kasbah Cocktail Lounge, its bar lined with bookshelves, became a classroom.

And Room 222 became a dorm room.

Renovations in the mid-1970s turned all of the old hotel rooms into apartments for the new owner, New Tribes Mission.

Still, memories of Room 222 remain fresh for a bride in the latest in New York fashions from her mother's Vero Beach dress shop and the crew-cut lieutenant leaning against a palm.

This brochure shows how The Mayfair Hotel in Sanford looked in the 1940s, long before New Tribes Mission bought it.