

The Ghost Hotel

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Just 90 days stood between John Ringling and his vision, by many accounts.

That vision was a Ritz-Carlton hotel on the south end of Longboat Key that would look more like a waterfront castle than a hotel.

Construction began in March 1926 on the parcel of land near the present-day Chart House building.

Ringling poured \$650,000 of his own money into his dream.

By late 1926, the exterior of the structure was complete. So were the first of three planned golf courses and the first of the 350 rooms the hotel was to hold.

But that year, as the hotel neared completion, the Florida land boom bubble burst, and Ringling's huge holdings that included real estate, banks and circuses began to rapidly dwindle. The land boom ended just as the city of Sarasota had increased its taxable land to include the southern tip of Longboat Key, effectively quadrupling the circus magnate's taxes between 1925 and 1926.

Ringling halted construction on the Ritz-Carlton and other projects in November 1926. The stoppage was supposed to be temporary. But, for the next three-and-a-half decades, Ringling's failed vision of a seaside castle haunted the south end of the Key.

Many locals called it "the Ghost Hotel."

Weeds covered the property.

The ornate bronze plumbing and fixtures that had been left around the property when work stopped disappeared quickly. (In Longboat Observer founder Ralph Hunter's 2002 book, "From Calusas to Condominiums," he wrote that some fixtures were reportedly still used in Sarasota homes.)

Visitors came to the property, but they weren't the luxury hotel guests Ringling envisioned. Many were teenagers who used the site for parties, romantic trysts and fraternity initiations. Some teens dressed as mummies by covering themselves with ACE bandages and scaring those who dared to pass near the area.

The site was especially popular on Halloween.

Adults also visited the site, often out of curiosity.

"We used to come out and if we'd get company, we'd take them out and show them the inside," said Longboat Key Historical Society President Shirley Beachum, who visited her mother and stepfather on the Key when the hotel was still standing. "It was a little eerie because you could go up the steps but there was nothing on the side."



An aerial view of John Ringling's Ritz-Carlton Hotel in 1952. Demolition of the hotel was completed in January 1964. A local Realtor proposed making the hotel a convention site in 1962, but Arvida opted to tear it down.

Longtime resident Bud Freeman remembers visiting the hotel.

“We weren’t supposed to be there,” he said. “It was off-limits.”

Teenage boys would race their cars in the sand dunes nearby, where high-rise Islandside condominiums now stand.

Because construction stopped abruptly, the staircases were in place but the railings were never finished.

According to Sarasota County historian Jeff LaHurd, as many as eight people fell to their deaths in the abandoned hotel.

Visitors would later claim to have seen the ghost of Sarasota High School student King Richter, who was one of those teens who died in the hotel, calling out the names of his friends.

After Richter’s death in 1954, officials placed a steel fence around the building. But it didn’t keep the trespassers away.

A July 11, 1962, article in the now-defunct Sarasota Journal reported on a fire at the hotel that police believed trespassers who entered the fenced-off grounds by boat caused.

The hotel’s final chapter came in January 1964. The parcel had been part of Arvida’s 2,000 acres, including the south end of Longboat, along with its surrounding keys.

Before its demolition, the Sarasota Chamber of Commerce and Manatee Committee of 100 sponsored an eight-minute documentary film by Hank Swain, of Sarasota, titled “The Ghost Hotel.”

Much of the fill from the hotel site was used to create City Island.

Over the years, Kim Cool, author of “Ghost Stories of Sarasota,” has received reports of ghost sightings around the old hotel’s location, although she hasn’t heard of a sighting in more than a year.

“Some people hear things or some say they see people or shadows,” Cool said. “It depends on the people doing the reporting.”

Cool never tries to convince readers that ghosts haunt sites, but, instead, approaches the paranormal from the perspective of a reporter and a scientist.

If ghosts do, in fact, haunt the site, she doesn’t believe they’re the spirits of those who fell to their deaths in the hotel.

“Maccabre people like to dwell on that sort of thing,” Cool said. “I like to put a happier slant on it, that if we do have ghosts and we get to choose where we go, why wouldn’t we go to a happy place?”

She cites John and Mabel Ringling as an example: She hears of many sightings of their ghosts around Ca’ d’Zan, their winter residence.

For the couple, the home carried happy memories of their travels that helped inspire its design. It makes sense their ghosts would return there, rather than to the site of the failed hotel, she says.

So, if you believe that ghosts haunt the hotel property, whose spirits could they be?

“I would think it would have been some of the people who were involved in building the hotel, the people who were really hoping it would get built,” Cool said.

Still, many of the building's past visitors and current tenants are skeptical that the site was or is haunted.

"I was never haunted by ghosts at the old Ritz-Carlton," LaHurd said.

Roger Pettingell, a longtime broker associate for Coldwell Banker's Longboat Key office in the Chart House building, also said he hasn't heard of ghost sightings.

"I've worked a lot of late nights here," he said, "but I've never seen a ghost."

Neither has Debbie Stannick, whose store, Exit Art, has been at the Chart House building for 17 years, although she notes that she feeds a spooky black feral cat that visits the business each morning.

"I've never really felt any kind of ghost presence here, although it's not necessarily that I don't believe in that type of thing," Stannick said.

Then, she thinks back to recent events in the building. There have been floods and a fire last week that caused approximately \$25,000 worth of damage.

"Then again, we have had our share of crap," she said, joking that the occurrences could be supernatural signs.

SPOOKY SAGA

March 1926 — Construction began on the Ritz-Carlton hotel on the south end of Longboat Key.

November 1926 — John Ringling ordered construction to stop on the hotel.

Dec. 2, 1936 — John Ringling died in New York City.

1954 — The death of a Sarasota High School student prompted officials to place a steel fence around the hotel.

January 1964 — Arvida completed demolition of the hotel.

1988 — Construction of the 18,549-square-foot Chart House building near the site of the old hotel was completed.

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Note: Historically inaccurate: King Richter died in 1958

Contributed by classmate Cindy Friedman Clark

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