EST. 1922

MIRA MAR

*Residences*

SOUTH PALM AVE

As a local historian deeply rooted in the rich cultural tapestry of Sarasota, I am proud to present this historical supplement as a companion to the development of the city's newest architectural landmark. This supplement offers a lens into the stories, people, and places that once occupied this site—layers of history that inform and enrich the foundation of what is to come.

Jeff LaHurd

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Amid the plethora of downtown condominiums, the Mira Mar stands apart, for it was at this South Palm Avenue site that the foundation for modern Sarasota was laid over 100 years ago.

Seaward Development immediately recognized the importance of the Mira Mar Apartments and the former Mira Mar Hotel to the history of Sarasota. The Mira Mar Apartments were the catalyst to Sarasota's rapid transition from a fishing, ranching, and agricultural community into a stellar destination known nationally for attracting residents and tourists, a reputation still enjoyed. With overwhelming citywide support, Seaward Development will preserve the iconic apartment and return the building to its original condition. Thus, Mira Mar Residences will link Sarasota's colorful Roaring 1920s past to today's vibrant downtown for future generations.

In the early 1920s, the Mira Mar Apartments and Mira Mar Hotel and Auditorium were constructed. As a result, Sarasota's growth exploded. A.B. Edwards, the city's first mayor, estimated that it would have normally taken 50 to 100 years to duplicate what happened in Sarasota in less than a handful of years.

The community had always offered an abundance of natural ingredients to be a go-to retreat for wealthy Snowbirds and tourists: the highly touted "Salubrious Climate," the sparkling jewel of Sarasota Bay at its downtown doorstep. Add the unblemished tropical beauty of palm trees, moss draped oaks, annual verdant foliage, unmatched white sand beaches, and a veritable cornucopia of game, fish, oysters, and clams for fishers and hunters alike.

Visitors characterized Sarasota as follows: "This is a tranquil village that provides limited appeal for those seeking fashionable pursuits and entertainment. However, individuals seeking respite from the demands of daily life will find its peaceful atmosphere conducive to rest and rejuvenation."

In 1922, Mayor Everett Bacon and the city council met with Canadian born businessman Andrew McAnsh. Determined, indeed, this gentleman was the real deal, renowned as a "town builder."

Underscoring his bona-fides, Wichita Falls banker Charles Davidson was quoted in The Sarasota Times, "The buildings Mr. McAnsh constructed in Wichita were better in every way... and are bringing in more revenue today than when built seven years ago. And we want McAnsh back there and we'll give him anything he wants. That's the kind of man he is." That same sentiment was

shared by John F. Smulski, President of the Northwestern Trust and Savings Bank of Chicago, stating, "I am confident that Sarasota has significant potential for future growth. Andrew McAnsh is assuredly going to put it on the map..."

Expectations ran high, and The Sarasota Times generated much excitement, regularly focusing on McAnsh, and his grand plans for Sarasota. As to why he chose Sarasota: "You ask me why I did not choose St. Petersburg, Miami, Palm Beach or some other place in Florida? All beautiful spots, but I like Sarasota above all else. And I have seen them all...Money is only a matter of convenience. I have all the money I need. But to know Sarasota and its people is to love both. No more cordial people could be found anywhere. That is honestly how I feel about it."

When Sarasota broke away from Manatee County to form Sarasota County in 1921, the downtown area was defined by boarding houses, a hotel established in 1887 that had long since lost its former prestige, and a collection of one- and two-story wood or rusticated block structures housing residences and businesses. Near the foot of Main Street, the area around the bayfront suffered from the nascent fishing industry, marked by rundown shacks, old boats, tangled nets, flies, the smell of decaying fish, and whatever else washed onto the shore.

McAnsh sought major concessions before he would proceed—and got them.

Ordinance No. 312-A, "The City agrees to furnish water and electric service to the said Miramar Hotel and Miramar Apartments at no charge for a period of ten (10) years from the date of completion..."

Sidewalk and street improvements were also promised.

Increasing expectations and illustrating what could lay ahead, on September 14, 1922, an architectural rendering of what his million-dollar hotel, temporarily called the Tamiami Inn, would look like, were revealed. Fronting Sarasota Bay, the elegantly beautiful hotel, incorporated the Mediterranean Revival style on a scale commonly associated with Miami and Palm Springs. The brick hotel would be fireproof, and "follow the Spanish and Italian style of architecture which lends itself so admirably to the enhancement of the tropical beauties of this section."

The style was popularized throughout the state by the colorful architect Addison Mizner in Palm Beach. As the hotel offered an unobstructed view of Sarasota Bay, it was christened the Mira Mar—sea view. The Times put it: "[After]Years of hopes and rumors of a large modern tourist hotel for Sarasota, the indications now are that these hopes and rumors are to become realities."

Ground was broken for the “Half Million Dollar Apartment House,” on October 5, 1922, and three weeks later a contract for the first unit of the new apartment house was let to the Carman Co., in what was the largest contract in the city’s history. Work began immediately and subsequently, the Mira Mar Apartments earned the moniker “the 60- day wonder” due to the continuous, round-the-clock effort required to complete.

The modern apartments were available in one, two, or three-bedroom units with optional maid service. While the hotel would be operated seasonally, the apartments were available year-round. McAnsh and his wife Bertha lived in one of the three-bedroom apartments. Their son Byron stayed there during his visits to town. Residing on site enabled McAnsh to welcome new guests, and chat with them which he found rewarding. All 25 apartments received annual updates.

The process which commenced with the apartments might have concluded there as well. The sought-after prize of a world-class hotel had not been finalized. The city council balked at some of the concessions, with The Times reporting, “City fails to accept final proposal.” As the apartments were nearing completion, McAnsh briefly left for business in Chicago. Upon his return, he was greeted at the Rubonia train station by a delegation of the city's leaders, including Mayor E.J. Bacon, former Mayor A.B. Edwards, and several prominent business figures. There was no doubt where the sympathies of the community stood. McAnsh was given a “royal parade” from the station to downtown Sarasota by car.

The procession was met by the Sarasota Band which serenaded him down Main Street to Palm Avenue. The fire siren wailed and the signal whistle was turned on. Flares illuminated both sides of the street, "creating a soft glow over the scene which lent the effect of a truly gala occasion.” Homes and businesses along the route displayed banners supporting Mr. McAnsh. They read: “Flagler built the East Coast; McAnsh will build the West Coast; another, Flagler West Palm Beach, Fisher Miami; McAnsh Sarasota”

As 1922 came to an end, and the apartments were nearly completed, the paper stated that thanks to McAnsh, “Sarasota has been brought to the threshold of a new epoch of growth.” The paper reported, “The sleeping giant has awakened and has cast aside its swaddling clothes,” promising, “The name Sarasota will be upon the lips of thousands, a name [connected] to all that is desirable for health, wealth and happiness.”

Having received an outpouring of community support, concessions were granted and the hotel project moved forward, transforming the centrally situated 200 x 200 foot former cabbage patch site on Palm Avenue. Although the hotel had begun welcoming guests, the official grand opening

of the Mira Mar—billed as "The Aristocrat of Beauty"—was a memorable event held on February 28, 1924.

Nearly 200 guests were invited to a formal dinner featuring an epicurean menu:

Canape de Caviar

Florida Fruit Cocktail

Green Turtle Soup

Lobster a la Newburg

Fresh Mushrooms, Sauté on Toast

Julienne Potatoes Green Lima Beans

Imperial Punch

Shrimp Salad, Mayonnaise

Neapolitan Ice Cream, Strawberry Sauce

Petite Fours

Roquefort Cheese and Crackers

Demi Tasse

After dinner, dancing until the wee hours completed the evening.

Immediately businesses sought to rent space in the apartments' 18 storefronts. Catering to affluent snowbirds, Abercrombie & Fitch opened a winter-only shop for each season. With fishing still a major tourist attraction, and golf becoming more popular, Gardner-Noble, a sporting goods store opened at Mira Mar. Their large tarpon sign became a point of reference for directions to other merchants. Harry Green, a writer specializing in advertising materials, was among the lessees, alongside Manning and French who provided clothing which included dress shirts, arrow collars, and a comprehensive selection of men and women's apparel.

Well-known surgeon, Dr. Jack Halton, who specialized in diseases of eyes, ears, and throat relocated his office to the Mira Mar, as did a beauty shop, which offered "A becoming bob," the latest style for the younger set. A. B. Edwards relocated his real estate and insurance firm there. So too, real estate man, C. E. Rowland, "Choice Property---Sterling Values."

The Mira Mar Café opened with an advertisement that emphasized modern dining preferences, mentioning that customers would be attracted by the scent of Maxwell House coffee and freshly prepared eggs with Beech-Nut bacon. Dissatisfied with the food provided? "If you have any kicks coming, see us."

Shortly after the Mira Mar Hotel opened, the adjacent Mira Mar Auditorium debuted on January 19, 1924, quickly becoming Sarasota's social and cultural hub. Its grand opening, billed as "The Event of the Season," featured coloratura soprano Josephine Lucchese, known as "The American Nightingale," baritone Robert Ringling of circus fame, and acclaimed concert pianist Margaret Carlisle.

The auditorium anchored a thriving arts scene that blended sophistication with modern flair. It hosted touring orchestras, jazz bands, and theatrical productions, drawing national and international talent. Highlights included Frieda Hempel, the "Jenny Lind of Today," and Russian bass Fedor Chaliapin, hailed as the "World's Greatest Opera Singer." Adventurer Lowell Thomas captivated audiences with his lecture "With Lawrence in Arabia," while the Tennessee Serenaders brought spirited dance music to flappers and hotel guests alike—complete with a novelty left-handed banjo player.

For certain guests, the second floor offered a complete gambling room, operated by Conrad and Locke which ran the Golden Horseshoe in Chicago. Locals were banned, but snowbirds could freely gamble their money away. The auditorium, anchored on Palm Avenue, became the site of choice for local entertainers, fashion and flower shows, meetings, political rallies, fund-raisers, card parties, lectures, and art exhibitions.

After the Mira Mar complex was completed the rapidity of downtown Sarasota's growth was truly breathtaking. Indeed, the capitalists that were promised to follow McAnsh's lead to invest in Sarasota, came.

Construction immediately began on multi-storied banks and hotels, along with churches, schools, improved roads and highways, a much-needed hospital (now Sarasota Memorial), automobile

dealerships, residential developments, upscale restaurants, and the opulent Edwards Theatre (presently the Sarasota Opera House).

Those wishing to make money on the escalating real estate market were set upon by the numerous high-pressure real estate agents who came for the same purpose. Capitalizing on the boom, the Sarasota Herald started its presses in October of 1925, and This Week In Sarasota followed suit.

Full-page advertisements filled all the newspapers. By 1925, the Chamber of Commerce issued a booklet calling Sarasota the City of Glorified Opportunity. The county became a combination of the California gold rush, the Oklahoma land rush, and the Bear stock market. Prominent real estate man and civic leader, Roger Flory recalled, "There were stacks of checks by every cash register, smiles on every face, money in every pocket."

However, the devastating hurricane that struck Miami in September 1926, coupled with the onset of the Great Depression and the rationing restrictions of World War II brought Sarasota's booming growth to a halt. Banks closed, retail stores shut down, and newspaper ads were replaced by bankruptcy notices, going out of business sales, and public auctions. Concurrently, newcomers slowed to a trickle and city records indicated that more than half the taxes between 1926 and 1929 had not been paid. McAnsh and the Mira Mar complex were adversely affected, going into foreclosure and changing hands several times. In 1928 or 1929, he relocated his principal residence to Chicago, where he managed his business operations.

But the foundation he and the Mira Mar laid was firmly set, awaiting the end of the war for the inevitable resurgence. After the war, returning service men and women came with their families looking for stability, not a quick way to make money. The look of Sarasota changed dramatically as a result of the new modernist movement established by the Sarasota School of Architecture, which garnered international recognition. Once again, Sarasota became a go-to destination for tourists and newcomers wishing to start their lives anew - young couples with families to raise and retirees wishing to spend their remaining years in the sunshine.

To effectively manage the city's forthcoming growth, the city commission decided to implement a new system of local government led by a qualified city manager. In 1950, Ken Thompson was sworn in as city manager. For the next 38 years he channeled the city's growth in a manner which rejuvenated downtown Sarasota by beckoning the wealthy. Thompson's mantra became, "Keep your industry, send us your industrialists,"

Street improvements—widening, resurfacing, renaming, and re-routing became a major goal.

To offer newcomers driving through town an opportunity to view beautiful Sarasota Bay, and, hopefully, entice them to stay, U.S. 41 was re-routed along the downtown bayfront on fill dredged up just west of Gulf Stream Avenue. Unfortunately for the downtown area, the growth into the county which offered national stores, took much of their business. Huge shopping centers and strip centers offered free parking and convenience. Luxury hotels such as the Mira Mar and John Ringling Hotel saw a shift in demand too as beachfront lodgings and modern upscale motels became more prevalent.

The Mira Mar Hotel, its sea view blocked by new buildings, took guests into the 1970s. After a short stint as a retirement facility and its age showing, the city believed the costs to renovate it too high. In 1982, it was demolished. The Mira Mar Apartments were converted to office and retail use, which remained for more than a century.

The building was preserved from demolition by Seaward Development who have committed to an extensive rehabilitation of the building and the restoration of its place along South Palm Avenue.

Andrew McAnsh, known as a town builder, died in Chicago on October 23, 1946.

If he were alive and could walk through portals of his “60-day wonder,” and into the revitalized Mira Mar, this visionary gentleman would marvel at what has transpired since his first Sarasota appearance—oh, so long ago.