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Pink hotel's storied history reaches back 85 years

The year 1927 was a historic one for Honolulu. Several important buildings opened that year, including the Hawaiian Electric building, Bank of Hawaii (at King and Bishop streets), the YWCA on Richards Street, the Academy of Arts and St. Francis Hospital in Nuuanu.

The grandest of them all was, and still is, the Royal Hawaiian. The Pink Palace of the Pacific opened 85 years ago this week with a dinner for 1,200.

The sumptuous black-tie affair cost \$10 per person and featured a re-enactment of Kamehameha the Great's arrival on the site in 1795 with 12,000 warriors.

Since 1927 the Royal Hawaiian has been a symbol of oceanfront luxury on Waikiki Beach and the favorite resort for royalty and sophisticated travelers alike. The famous pink facade, vaulted Spanish archways and gardens offer a unique ambience found only at the Royal.

An earlier Royal Hawaiian Hotel existed downtown, but I'll save that for a future column. When it closed in 1917, Matson bought the Royal Hawaiian name.

Capt. William Matson saw the possibility of building luxury ships to bring people to luxury hotels in Hawaii,

much like New Yorkers visited Europe.

Matson manager William Roth and Ed Tenney, who headed Castle & Cooke, secured 15 acres on the beach where King Kamehameha I and Queen Kaahumanu previously had a summer palace.

The New York architectural firm of Warren and Wetmore chose a Spanish-Moorish style that was popular in the 1920s, partially due to the popularity of Rudolph Valentino movies.

No other actor has spawned an architectural style, but the Arab-Deco craze spread to Hawaii where it also inspired Honolulu Hale, HECO, the Academy of Arts and the C. Brewer building.

A golf course was built in Kahala for hotel guests. It later became the Waialae Country Club. Greens fees were \$2.50 on weekends at opening.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt stayed at the Royal Hawaiian, and it was the first place to be dubbed the "Western White House."

Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Clark Gable, Rockefellers, DuPonts and Fords came with their cars and servants for monthlong holidays.

The Shirley Temple drink was invented at the Mai Tai



STAR-ADVERTISER / 1958

This photo of the Royal Hawaiian was taken before the Sheraton Waikiki and many other hotels were built. Across Kalakaua Avenue from the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, the old Waikiki Theatre can be seen.

Bar in 1935 when the child star came for her first visit. Of course, it was pink.

Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio began their honeymoon there. Duke Kahanamoku met his wife, Nadine, at the Royal Hawaiian.

More recently the Brothers Cazimero headlined at the Monarch Room for more than a decade. But before World War II it was called the Persian Room. Harry Owens conducted the orchestra there from 1934 until 1941 and wrote the song "Sweet Leilani" for his

daughter.

Bill Sewell, who had been chief purser on Matson's White Ships in the 1950s, recalls that the Royal was a stunningly beautiful oasis in the middle of a gigantic garden.

"The times I stayed at the Royal," Sewell says, "one had the feeling of being in the middle of a well-kept jungle. The grounds stretched to Kalakaua Avenue and to Lewers Street. The low-rise, unobtrusive Outrigger Canoe Club was next door, and beyond it, the Moana."

During World War II the

Navy took over the Royal Hawaiian and used it for R&R. The hotel staff sealed the wine cellar with concrete, making it look like the wall of the underground tunnel it was part of.

After the war they returned to see whether the Navy had found it, and lo and behold, it was still hidden. For four years the Navy never discovered the secret

cache of fine wine.

By the mid-1950s more than half of all Hawaii tourists stayed in Matson's Moana, Royal Hawaiian, Surfrider and Princess Kaiulani hotels. In 1959 the hotels were sold to Sheraton for \$17.6 million. Sheraton sold the hotel to Kyo-ya in 1963 but still manages it. Today it is called the Sheraton Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

Bob Sigall, author of the "Companies We Keep" books, looks through his collection of old photos to tell stories each Friday of Hawaii people, places and companies. Email him at Sigall@Yahoo.com.