Former Hot Spot Given Second Chance at Life
By Allison Savage

The exhausted L-shaped building slumps on the corner of Park Street and Central Avenue, where it has sat for nearly 100 years. The roof sags, the paint peels, the front porch rocking chairs are uninvitingly still. It is difficult to imagine that this seemingly decrepit granny was once a grand dame of St. Petersburg.

But there is life left in her yet.

Built in 1915 by locally renowned architect George Feltham, the Sunset Hotel was a social magnet in the roaring 1920s. The property catered to wealthy Northerners who flocked to the Sunshine State for the winter season. With unobstructed views of Boca Ciega Bay, the newly completed Jungle Country Club and Golf Course close by, and a trolley line connecting them all to downtown, the Sunset is credited with bolstering St. Petersburg’s tourism industry and bringing new residents to the west side of town. These contributions to the city’s development merited a local historic landmark designation from the City Council in 2007.

In the Sunset’s hey-day, regular clients reportedly included celebrities such as Babe Ruth, Al Capone, and The Three Stooges. Although there are no surviving hotel guest logs to provide confirmation, these characters turn up repeatedly in newspaper articles and books on the area - particularly when the subject revolves around otherworldly activity.

Venice author Kim Cool devotes an entire chapter of her book, “Ghost Stories of Clearwater & St. Petersburg”, to the Crystal Bay Hotel, as it was called from 1996 to 2006. Her claim that it “may be the most haunted hotel in St. Petersburg” piqued the interest of a local group of paranormal investigators.

The group’s founder, Brandy Stark, took her team in for a closer look in 2006. Tenants told tales of televisions operating by themselves and sounds of cocktail parties that never took place. But a series of mishaps botched their study and the results were inconclusive. Attempts at a second investigation have so far proved unsuccessful.

“The hotel itself was a very strange place,” Stark said.

As the decades progressed the grandeur of the Sunset declined. In 1971 the property began a long stint as a retirement home, changing names to the Sunset Bay Senior Residence in 1981. As the Crystal Bay Hotel, it functioned as a long-term way station for the down and out. Guest reviews on TripAdvisor.com warn of cockroaches, vagrants, and “ladies of the night”.

So what is the next chapter in the life of this former gem?

A large yellow banner hangs from the third floor balcony, proudly proclaiming a renaissance:
“Coming Soon......Historic Luxury Hotel!”

The land was purchased in January 2007 by Norman Kerr, a Florida based real estate investor with an affinity for restoring venerable buildings. Under the new title Parkview, his vision is to retain the old world charm while upgrading to modern amenities and 5-star service.

“We’re into taking what’s there and giving it back to the community; making it a useable structure again,” explained Kerr’s assistant, Tonya Aldredge.

While the basic architecture will remain unchanged to preserve its historic integrity, the inside has been completely gutted. Years of neglect require all new plumbing and electricity. The hardwood floors were leveled wherever possible, but the main hallways creak and undulate underfoot.

56 rooms and suites will be swathed in a palette of soft blues and splashes of red, outfitted in dark wood furniture with chrome fixtures. In true boutique style, no two rooms will be exactly alike.

The grounds will boast a swimming pool as well as a large lawn for hosting special events. Although earlier plans to bring in a large chain restaurant have been thwarted by insufficient parking, the hotel will offer light meals and a bar for the enjoyment of guests and locals alike.

“We want to be part of the neighborhood.”

Aldredge expects renovations to be complete by September and to go well past the million dollar mark. Plans for a grand opening party are in the works.

One St. Petersburg resident looking forward to the reincarnation of the Sunset Hotel is council member and former employee, Herb Polson. Polson worked the night shift as a desk clerk back in the 1960s and was disappointed in the deterioration of the landmark in recent years. That is, until he took a tour of the remodeled show room.

“I thought, wow! What it could be when they finish!”

For more information, visit www.parkviewhotelflorida.com.