MEDIA PACK

“Long Ago and Now”

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ARCHITECTURALLY, Venice, Calif., was meant to emulate its Italian namesake when it was molded more than 50 years ago, but it had a garishness no Italian city could equal.

To Abbott Kinney’s dreams of building a city that would have added the civic enterprise and boosting peculiar to any small American town. With such help the city flared to brilliance for a few years after August 15, 1904, when the first spadeful of earth was turned, attracting millions of visitors a year.

The carnival atmosphere of the city has dissipated, but the structure of the “Atlantic City of the Pacific” (as one magazine of that day labeled it) still stands in interesting antiquity.

Still interwoven with the back streets are several miles of canals dug by the city’s founder to give validity to the city’s name. Visitors once boarded gondolas imported from the Italian Venice, for a cruise along the canals that radiated from the Grand Canal, which was one-half mile long, 70 feet wide and four feet deep.

The Grand Canal was filled in 1927, and the United States Post Office now occupies a portion of the site. But across the traffic circle, where cars travel the same route gondolas and boats did, still stands the Antlers Hotel, then a lake-side spa.

Along Pacific Avenue from Ballona Creek to Venice Boulevard the canals rest in disuse. Hundreds of waterbirds make their homes there, undaunted by traffic a few yards away. Varieties of wildflowers bloom and complete their seeding cycle untouched. At high tide the Pacific still creeps up the mouth of Ballona creek and spills into the canals, raising and lowering the water level as it has since June 30, 1905, unmindful of the passage of time.

The high-vaulted footbridges stand delaying over the canals. Inadequate for traffic, their only utilitarian use is in supporting and utility lines serving adjacent oil fields.

Westward, along the two blocks from the Grand Canal location to the beach, still stand the buildings fashioned after Venice, Italy. Sidewalks are recessed into the buildings and enclosed by ornate arches and pillars. Pigeons make their nests in the cupolas and ornaments adorning the buildings.

Most businesses of a resort nature have given way to restaurants, stores, etc., but still in use is the proud old St. Mark’s Hotel at Windward and Ocean Front. An exact replica of its namesake in Venice, it was one of the most exclusive hotels along the coast during Venice’s earlier days. On the third floor was a ballroom, overlooked by oaken staircases and balconies decorated with brass filigree. Partitioning turned most of the dance floor into rooms, but the balcony, stairway and skylight giving it a regal elegance are still there.

North and south along the beach the homes formerly owned or rented by movie stars and sports figures now house less publicized but more permanent residents. The wide porches and scrollwork are a bolder to keep up and the neighboring oil wells crowd the houses, but they still reflect past plushness.

The site of the famed Venice pier, torn down 10 years ago after it decayed to a point of danger, is marked only by a few concrete pillars rising from the sand.

In 1905 high waves damaged Kinney’s first pier, along with the confidence many followers had in his plans. But with typical determination he financed the building of a rock breakwater 500 feet long, the only private breakwater in the United States, to tame the tides.

The breakwater is still there, but man, pursuing the commerce that did so much to change the character of the rest of the city, presents the rock formation with an incongruous situation. Sand from the excavation for Los Angeles’ Hyperion Sewer project was transported through a series of hoses and deposited along neighboring beaches. Venice acquired a beach 450 feet wide, extending from Ocean Front to the breakwater.

Fishermen walk out to the massive rock pile and gain a strategic spot from which to cast their lines. The surf flows around the two ends and meets in the center on the other side, giving bathers a rare treat of two surfs at the same time.

Razed along with the pier were such attractions as the Ship Cafe, a replica of the Spanish ship Cabrillo, the sea-water plunge, scenic railroad, fun house, aquarium, and the thrilling rides Kinney imported from Portland and Chicago fairs.

But, bigger than ever, is the beach, which brought glory to Venice after the canals had fallen out of favor.

The motoring age was bound to make the Grand Canal obsolete. Abbott Kinney intended visitors to walk over the bridge or catch a gondola in order to get to his city. A network of streetcar tracks and the narrow “Speedway” were his only concession to vehicles. But these methods of transportation were too slow for a generation on wheels.

In the auditorium they could hear band concerts or see the best shows. The nation’s sports stars competed in the city’s swimming, tennis and boxing facilities. Venice even entered a team in the Pacific Coast baseball league. In 1912 the city sponsored the world’s first bathing beauty contest, and for many years Miss California was chosen from among the girls who paraded before the crowds on the beach. Bathers enjoyed, besides every convenience, the safety of the only life guard south of San Francisco. Fishermen caught mackerel, halibut, perch and other varieties from the end of the pier. It was truly, as one writer described it, “The most delightful spot in the world.”

The carnival lasted until the twenties. The depression kept visitors home, and the city, whose entire economy was based on the vacationing class, fell upon especially hard times. Seeking security (and water) the citizens were annexed in 1926 by Los Angeles, one of whose first acts was to fill the Grand Canal and release automobiles onto Windward, which was no longer jammed with curious fun-seekers.

Association with the big city brought hardships. Los Angeles law forbade dancing on Sundays, and the dance halls at Venice and neighboring Sunset Pier with its taxi dancers were still a lure to residents of neighboring cities. The Los Angeles law was eventually changed, but too late to rescue the city.

The bathing beauty contests and other beach festivities and their attendant publicity stunts still kept Venice occupied—at least during the summer—into the thirties. But a lethal blow was the quarantining of the beaches from 1942 to 1950 by the State because of pollution from the Hyperion Sewer outlet. By the time Los Angeles could finance a remedy Venice was in real difficulty.

Bingo, a form of legalized gambling played at great length and fervor, brought a brief recovery. The gamblers moved into the once-elegant ocean front establishments. Today many signs still bring that era to memory.

The physical features of Venice’s days of greatness remain, but the many oldtimers in the city like to think of the ornate buildings, canals and breakwater as monuments marking the final resting place of a man’s dreams of a beautiful resort.
By Roger Holmes

- The once elegant St. Marks Hotel with its graceful arches is a copy of an Italian hotel.

- At right, a 1924 aerial photo shows canals and recreation pier of Venice in its heyday.

- A few concrete bridges still span the 53-year-old canals beside towering oil derricks.

- Gondolas were imported from the Venice in Italy for cruising the canals and the lagoon.

- Only these concrete blocks rising above the sand give evidence of the once glittering amusement pier at Venice.

- Palms and cottages lined the canals in the residential section. Though picturesque, travel by water was too slow.