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fine hotel named for an opera star

Hampton Dunn

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



THE FINE HOTEL NAMED FOR AN OPERA STAR

By HAMPTON DUNN

ST. PETERSBURG BEACH --- Thomas J. Rowe was a shrewd, courtly and frail New Englander who came to St. Petersburg during the Florida Boom who escalated a "kitty" of \$21,000 into a fortune of over a million dollars.

There stands today on St. Petersburg a landmark that was the proud accomplishment of the professional building decorator who wanted to give this community an elegant hotel in return for all it had given him.

The pink stucco castle is the Don Ce-Sar, named for Rowe's favorite opera star, Don Caesar de Bazan in the opera "Maritana." The nine-story structure rose on the beach in 1925, just as the boom itself started its decline. It started out to be a five story building, but Rowe ballooned his plans as he discovered the architect had failed to include a sweeping, impressive staircase. Thus came a quick redesigning, additional building, and added costs. The final tab was \$1,150,000, about \$300,000 more than originally planned by architect Henry DuPont.

Rowe's own real estate adviser, Walter P. Fuller, had advised him against building a hotel at this lonely spot. He pointed out that Pass-a-Grille was served with a precarious nine-foot brick road and access to the island was by a frail, wooden toll bridge, that the hotel business usually lost money, that the islands had no water, and other problems. Fuller quit as his agent; Rowe went ahead. The hotel never made money. It served as a hospital during World War II and later as Veterans Administration offices until 1968.

