



WORKING OUT AT THE GEM

THE SAPPHIRE ROOM

RAUBI PERILLI, UC EXPLORER

The thought of a “Between the Sheets” may sound a bit risqué to some of us today, but during the 1930-50s, it was among the most popular drink choices of the rich, famous and powerful patrons of downtown Tampa’s Sapphire Room – the historic ground floor bar of the soon to reopen Floridan Hotel.

In its day, the Sapphire Room (nicknamed by locals as the “Surefire Room”) had a wild reputation. It was one of the most popular social scenes in the city – especially among World War II servicemen who were training at Drew Field (to fly B-17s over Europe) and barracking nearby under the bleachers of the original Florida State Fairgrounds.

In 1946, Gus Arencibia – a now 94-year-old resident of West Tampa – began working for the

Floridan as the Sapphire’s chief bartender. Even though he was earning just \$12 a week (not including a steady flow of \$.25 and \$.50 tips), he reflects on that time as “when a dollar was still a dollar.” He also says martinis were still martinis back then, scoffing at the thought of today’s fruit-infused vodka imitators.

“There is only one martini,” says Gus. “It’s dry vermouth and gin. That’s it. There is nothing else.”

BELLYING UP

Armed with only a few types of liquor (and only one brand each), Gus diligently worked for 18 years to satisfy the thirsts of his regulars; many of which were Tampa’s movers and shakers. Big names like Jimmy Swann (e.g., Swann Avenue)



Photo courtesy of State Library and Archives of Florida



Original Sapphire Room - Hotel Floridan. Photo courtesy of Hillsborough County Public Library

and Jack and Ruth Eckerd (i.e., Eckerd Drugs/Ruth Eckerd Hall), as well as many other business owners, would often grab a drink from Gus and scurry off to a distant table to discuss how they would mold Tampa's future.

But servicemen and businessmen weren't Sapphire's only customers. Superstars would often belly up and Gus remembers meeting several, including movie legend, Robert Wagner, and boxing phenom, Jack Dempsey.

"The Floridan was a very favorite place for everyone," says Gus.

HAVE ONE

Despite the Surefire's rowdy reputation and the fact Gus came face-to-face with Dempsey – the World Heavyweight Boxing Champ (1919-1926) – the place almost never hosted a bar fight. This may be because back when Gus was in charge, "having a drink" meant having one or two drinks; as opposed to the overindulgences seen in bars today.

On Gus' watch, he went out of his way to ensure his clientele remained respectful and well behaved. Even so, the rare occasion would occur when someone had one too many; but when that happened, Gus had no problem telling the offender about it.

"Oh, there is nothing worse than a drunk," says Gus. "They would go to my manager and say 'he cut me off.' And my manager would say 'yes he did, because you need to be cut off.'"

Stopping people from drinking more doesn't always douse their alcohol-fueled tempers. But even so, when asked just how many bar fights he had seen during his many years of bartending, Gus held up one hand ... then slowly extended three fingers.

"I saw three fights," he revealed. "And you know what caused those fights? Women." ▶

SIDEBAR

THE FLORIDAN HOTEL

905 N. FLORIDA AVE.

Construction of the 19-story, 316-room Floridan Hotel began in 1926 at a cost of \$1.9 million. When it opened in 1927, it was Tampa's first skyscraper and the tallest one in the southeast U.S. In its heyday, many business people and vacationers stayed at the Floridan; as did celebrities like Elvis Presley and Gary Cooper.

The hotel's popularity waned in the 1960s as modern, less expensive motels sprouted up in Tampa's outlying areas. And in 1966, the Floridan eventually closed to everyone except long-term renters.

Over the next 20 years, the once luxurious hotel became a slum full of low-income transients who were renting its rooms on a weekly basis. In 1989, due to fire code violations, the Floridan was finally closed to everyone and boarded up.

Luckily for the people of Tampa, in 2005 the hotel was purchased for \$6 million by eccentric hotelier and real-estate investor, Antonios Markopoulos. His team has been diligently working on its renovations ever since and it is expected (not promised) to re-open, fully restored, by the end of 2009.

GET 'BETWEEN THE SHEETS'

If you're 21-years-old or older, try out this classic concoction!

INGREDIENTS:

- * 3/4 oz brandy
- * 3/4 oz light rum
- * 3/4 oz triple sec
- * 1/2 oz lemon juice
- * Lemon twist for garnish

PREPARATION:

1. Pour the ingredients into a cocktail shaker with ice cubes.
2. Shake well.
3. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass.
4. Garnish with the lemon twist.



Floridan Hotel



ANOTHER ROUND

Admittedly, today women may still be the catalyst for a bar fight now and then, but – during the time Gus was slinging drinks – when they were in a bar, they had to mind their Ps and Qs. As customers, they could not sit up at the bar without a companion; and as employees, they could not step out from behind the bar or serve as its tender.

“I’ll never forget the first time I heard the term ‘barmaid,’” says Gus. “I had no idea what it meant.”

Gus points out that when you live for 90 years, a lot more things change than just the fact there are now female bartenders and fruit-flavored vodka “martinis.” But one of the most exciting changes he can think of is that the Floridan – once rumored to be slated for demolition – has been undergoing painstakingly slow, but historically accurate renovations and will soon re-open its doors to the people who live in, work in and visit downtown Tampa.

Knowing that the time nears when he may once again step through the Floridan’s threshold – and back into a time of his life that he cherishes – Gus sums up his enthusiasm in three simple words: “I’ll be there.” **UC**

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