

CHAPTER ONE

THE most spectacular real estate boom of modern times was getting ready to sprinkle its heedless millions over the state of Florida in 1924, and Miami, at its very heart, was entering upon a decade of growth that has made it headline material wherever newspapers are printed.

The very obvious fact that the dark years of the hang-over from that spree are ended, and Florida again is being seeded with the dollars of rich Yankees and hopeful natives, makes it desirable, perhaps, to recapture the days of 1924, 1925 and 1926 when Miami was transformed from a sleepy little town on the edge of Biscayne bay into a Magic City of modest skyscrapers and legendary real estate profits.

From Miami, the nerves of the boom spread out into every corner of Florida. No land was too poor or too remote to attract buyers or to be subdivided, so long as it was within the confines of the state of Florida. The coasts where pirates under Morgan and Lafitte once plied their evil trade sprouted such riches that in one place ocean-side developers actually abandoned a pirate chest they could feel with their dredges, to get on with the more remunerative work of building a subdivision to sell. Pirate gold was nothing but museum antiques in the days when the binder boys had money flowing into Florida at a rate that would have put even the New Deal to shame.

Just what is a boom such as Florida lived through? How long did the boom, as such, last? What marked its limits? What makes a boom?

"Building activities," says Kenneth Keyes, president of the Keyes Company. "Profits," asserts G. D. Brossier, who has dealt in Miami real estate since 1893.

Continues Mr. Keyes, who today ranks as one of the largest and best realty operators in the Miami field:

"In my opinion the real estate boom which reached its climax in the summer of 1925 began to get under way in the spring of 1923. Building permits in April, May, June and July of that year totaled \$5,723,695, almost a million and a half dollars monthly. Gaining momentum more rapidly in early 1924, building permits increased to almost \$4,000,000 in the single month of August.

"The all-time high was reached in October, 1925, when Greater Miami building permits for a 31-day period totaled \$15,787,539, slightly more than the permits issued for Miami, Miami Beach, Coral Gables and the balance of the present Greater Miami area for the entire year of 1935.

"It is my personal belief that the climax of the boom was reached in the fall of 1925, but few of us realized it at that time.

By January or February, 1926, it was apparent to many that the boom was over."

Mr. Brossier places the beginning of the boom in July, 1925. "The upward trend in Florida real estate values began as early as January, 1924," he believes, "when investors could purchase property and realize a quick turnover at a small profit. The selling gathered momentum and was at its highest from July until October 31, 1925. In November there was a noticeable slackening of investing and the stock market crash of November, 1925, was really the finish of Miami's boom.

He recalls that about October, lots which ordinarily were offered for \$2,000 to \$3,000 each were being sold for as much as \$50,000, and it was not unusual for people with as little as \$1,000 deposit on a "proposition" to sell their option for \$60,000.

The full story of the Miami and Florida boom has never been written, and so we shall venture into those uncharted waters with our readers as partners in an effort to fix its boundaries and the meanders, to the end perhaps that we shall be able the next time to recognize a boom and to navigate it without so many wrecks.

As Miami and Miami Beach and Coral Gables and many another Florida city took a fresh purchase on life from the 1925 boom, so The Miami Herald entered into a new phase of existence at that time. It was the newspaper of the boom, dwarfing all other Florida publications, and leaping into a national prominence from the boom that has kept it ever since the largest newspaper in the state.

Under the guiding hand of its owner and publisher, Frank B. Shutts, The Miami Herald for more than 13 months in 1925 and 1926 became the largest newspaper in volume of business in the entire world. It made The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune and even The Los Angeles Times appear skimpy and undernourished by comparison. The Herald reached its peak in January, 1926, when it carried twice as much advertising business as in any month of the preceding year.

Ah, those were the happy days, when customers with cash in their fists pleaded in vain for page advertisements that couldn't find space even in an 88-page daily. A woman told a Herald circulation man: "I'd like to take The Sunday Herald, but I'm afraid it would fall on me." It was not unusual for the harried staff to turn down as many as 15 pages of advertising in one day. Principally in The Miami Herald the purchaser and the speculator found listed the opportunities they sought so avidly, not only in Dade county property, but in land from Key West to the far-off Perdido river. For as Miami was the heart of the boom, The Herald was the main artery through which the life blood of those pulsing times poured.

Equipped in early 1924 to turn out a 24-page newspaper comfortably, The Herald was as unprepared for the crest of the boom as were the railroads, the steamship companies and the public utilities and government itself. The principal press on which the

paper was printed had run night and day for 20 years in the plant of The Denver Post before it was moved here. To supplement that, another second-hand press was set up in a garage across Second street from The Herald building while new presses were being built.

These two valiant old relics were run until they shed bolts and loose parts like a love-sick maiden's tears. They kept rolling, somehow, on a 24-hour schedule through those weary months, until a new four-story printing plant equipped with a modern battery of presses took over the job in 1926.

But alack-a-day! The boom was ended by then. It has only been in the last two or three years that the complement of printing equipment ordered in the fullness of 1925 hopes has caught its stride. Now the plant again is crying for expansion as The Herald leads the state in circulation all the year, and tops the newspapers of all but eight states in the nation in advertising during the winter and spring.

The business that made The Miami Herald what it is today also made Miami and her sister cities. We shall not bore you much with statistics, for no tables or charts can give us the story of the boom. Men and women, what they said and did, made the Florida land boom. Many of them are here today, ready again to take up the fight for profits and fame. In the ensuing chapters we shall attempt to give you a chronicle of the lives of those who dealt in millions back in 1925, of the mansions they built and the towering buildings they put up, the hopes they so freely expressed for publication and the dream of empire they nursed as the floodgates of credit and cash turned Florida sand into gold.

The famous banker commission headed Miami's government in 1924, having been re-elected the preceding year on the popular assumption that Miami in the hands of its five leading bankers could not fail to assure capital of a safe haven. How well founded was this belief!

The mayor was Edward Coleman Romfh, president of the First National Bank, and today the only one of that group whose institution has survived. The mayor before him was Commissioner Charles D. Leffler (Miami Bank and Trust Company), and general agent in Miami for the Gulf Refining Company. The other commissioners were James H. Gilman (Bank of Bay Biscayne), J. E. Lummus (Southern Bank and Trust Company), brother of the first mayor of Miami Beach, and J. I. Wilson (Dade County Security Company), now dead.

Nineteen twenty-four was the first of three big building years for Miami, when \$17,038,154 in construction was started. The city then covered 8 1-3 square miles, about one-fourth its present land area, with the towns of Silver Bluff, Coconut Grove and Buena Vista clustered about it. The county offices were housed in a two-story stone building, begun in 1904, on whose bare and cheer-

less site the present 27-story city-county building rests. The city government was conducted in the stone building now devoted to the police department, a structure designed in 1909. Two bridges spanned the Miami river within the city, one at Miami avenue and the other at Flagler street.

Across the county causeway, Miami Beach was concluding its tenth year of corporate existence. It had first been linked to Miami by the long wooden bridge begun by the late John S. Collins in 1912 and completed the following year at a cost of \$90,000 with the financial aid of Carl G. Fisher of Indianapolis, the same Carl Fisher who had come to Miami to loaf but who remained to help fabricate out of mangrove swamps the foundations of today's Miami Beach.

Miami Beach in 1924 dangled between bay and ocean at the end of a narrow strip of land, since cut through and bridged at Baker's Haulover to permit the tides to sweep upper Biscayne bay clean. Its municipal functions revolved about the wooden building north of Fifth street which houses the Miami Beach Athletic club. Smith's and Hardie's casinos drew the bulk of the bathers at south beach, while the Roman Pools, formerly the Casino St. John, caught the winter crowds from the two Fisher hotels, Lincoln and Flamingo, from the Wofford, the Breakers and the Pancoast.

Louis F. Snedigar, former Stetson athlete, had succeeded T. E. James as mayor. John H. Levi, who handled the engineering when Fisher was filling in the beach and who later became president of the Miami Ocean View Company, headed the city council then as now, directing its affairs with infinite humor and good

sense. Although its growth had been exceptional since 1920, Miami Beach building really took the biggest spurt in 1923 with \$4,185,600 in new construction, mounting to \$7,014,750 in 1924. The Miami Beach which added 19 hotels in 1935, was beginning then to fear it was slightly overbuilt.

During August, 1924, Miami had its best building month of the year with \$3,578,980 in new permits, second in the South. The Clark Dredging Company began pumping in 1,000,000 cubic yards of sand and rock to form Bayfront park out of the bay bottom whose waters lapped almost at the front steps of the McAllister Hotel. Dozens of houseboats too infirm to move were burned or buried at



JOHN H. LEVI

their moorings along what then was N. Bay Shore drive.

Elser Pier, fishing and loafing center for years at the foot of Flagler street, finally was bought by the city under condemnation proceedings from Locke T. Highleyman for \$375,000, although the owner bitterly protested the site had a speculative value of \$1,000,000. The pier was leased for the season to Jack Cleary for \$25,000, then destroyed. Meantime the white sand poured in under it, and the whole fill was finished by November. J. Gerry Curtis soon began to plant grass over portions of it, to still the clamor which arose from eating houses and homes into which the fine white sand was blown. Parking on the fill was started in January, 1925.

William Jennings Bryan had returned to Miami from the turbulent 16-day Democratic national convention which nominated John W. Davis and his brother, Charles Bryan, for president and vice president. In a colorful speech from the Royal Palm Park bandshell, he predicted progressive Democrats and progressive Republicans would defeat Calvin Coolidge, and recounted his successful efforts to prevent the Democrats from condemning the Ku Klux Klan. Before leaving on a speaking tour, he sold 280 scattered acres in Dade county for \$72,250, retaining 90 acres.

Fred L. Weede, Miami Chamber of Commerce secretary, was planning a 68-page booklet of 150,000 copies to mail during October. E. G. Sewell, president of the chamber, advanced the slogan, "The Season Opens In November." A hurricane killed 80 on the Virgin islands. There were no further advisory notices. Van C. Swearingen, attorney general under former Gov. Sidney J. Catts, delivered the Labor day address in Royal Palm Park. Gus' Bath opened its new 930-foot pier at Palm Beach. It was destroyed four years later.

Miami in September, 1924, was quick to shake off its customary summer sloth. George E. Merrick sold five lots in five days for \$5,500 in the former Merrick plantation west of Miami where the city of Coral Gables was born eight months later. The Miami-Palm Beach Company divided 1,000 lots within two blocks of the depot at Boca Raton and announced 5 and 10-acre farming tracts on 3,000 near-by acres

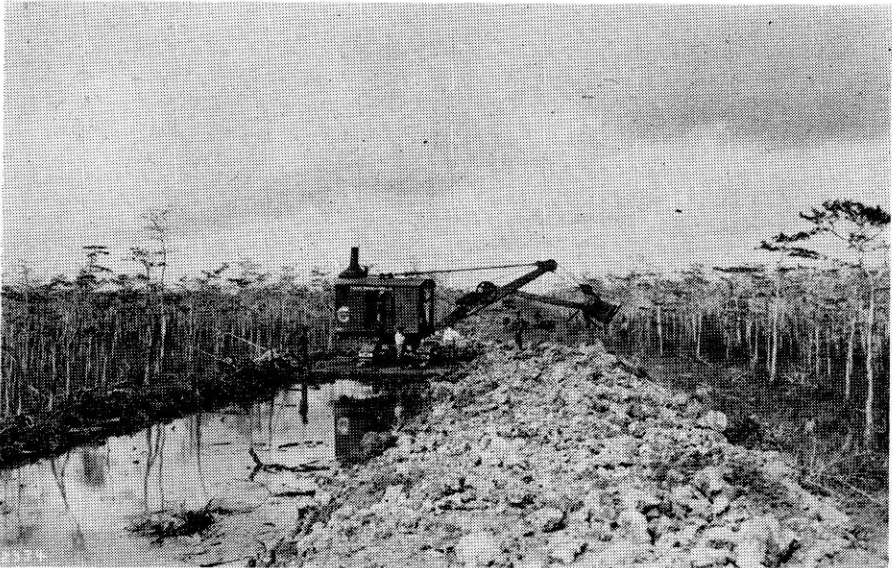
United States Senator Duncan U. Fletcher, guest of John Gramling, opened Avocado week in Miami, predicted President Coolidge would not receive a vote of confidence from the people in November. The Herald editorially deplored the occasional wearing of golf knickers in the business district; was answered by two heated letters from knicker-addicts. The Sweetwater Hotel, \$2,000,000, was announced for construction just west of Luna park on Flagler street by T. R. Knight and William G. Just. Dr. and Mrs. John DuPuis planned an \$80,000 home in Lemon City.

Miami was groaning about Florida roads. Parts of the Dixie highway, complained The Herald, "are paved only with good in-

tentions." An antique ferry blocked the Melbourne-Kissimmee road, later forming the basis for the removal of the state road department chairman, Judge H. B. Philips, when John W. Martin succeeded Gov. Cary A. Hardee. The "Miami Theater" was begun by Paramount Enterprises on the old Airdome site. We know it as the Olympia Theater, 10 stories.

Ground was broken for the First State Bank of Hialeah. Plans were prepared by Architect Martin L. Hampton for a \$50,000 yacht club building on "filled land east of the Royal Palm Hotel." (The present Royal Palm club.) Five acres near the Florida East Coast railroad at Arch creek were sold for \$10,000. Sixteen thousand acres in Brevard county changed hands for \$220,000. Tatums advertised Grove Park lots for as low as \$3,000. The \$90,000 Kreuger building in Stuart was started.

Miss Laura Cushman announced the building of her private school at N. E. Thirty-eighth terrace, Buena Vista. Henry Copping, pioneer Miami horticulturist, died on his Miami river estate. The Belcher Asphalt Paving Company got a \$23,119 permit for its present office building near the causeway.



. . . and for 75 miles the Tamiami Trail was blasted out of rock and swamp, as George F. Cook and the Chevelier Corporation are doing here.