

CHAPTER FOUR

BILLED as "Miami's Master Suburb" in 1924, the present city of Coral Gables was the achievement principally of one man, George Edgar Merrick. This same George Merrick has beaten his way back into a dominating position in the greater Miami real estate field today, after the collapse of the boom and several years of adversity had condemned him, some thought, to the limbo of developers.

Coral Gables was the largest single unit in the boom. Roughly speaking, \$150,000,000 in real estate sales were made there, and \$100,000,000 was spent under the personal direction of George Merrick to create it. It was a city fully planned, and its essential features committed to paper by Merrick himself five years before a lot was sold and nine years before it was incorporated. To that one fact alone, the creator today attributes the city's steady progress.

It may interest those who play over the Coral Gables Country club or the Biltmore golf courses to know that those once were glades where the Merrick vegetable fields were located. Long before he became one of the central figures of the boom, George Merrick and the Coral Gables plantation of 1,000 acres were the largest producers of fruit and vegetables in south Florida.

The name "Coral Gables" has its history. His father, the Rev. Solomon Greasley Merrick, bought the original homestead of 160 acres between what is now Ponce de Leon Plaza and Balboa Plaza. He was a great admirer of Grover Cleveland, whose home, Gray Gables, was famed throughout the country. When the elder Merrick named his home, built out of what they called coral rock, it became Coral Gables, after the residence of the former president. The plantation, then the subdivision, then the city, inherited that name.

George Merrick was educated at Stetson, and spent one year in New York studying law. But his father began to fail in 1903 and he returned to manage the plantation. He gradually evolved the belief that in Coral Gables was the place to build homes for the average person who wanted to live in south Florida all the year, as opposed to the other school of resort thought being worked out in the winter estates of the wealthy along the ocean's edge.

That idea was translated to



GEORGE E. MERRICK

paper about 1916, soon after his marriage. A city for permanent residence by the average man was laid out in detail. At first, in keeping with the name, all houses were to be built of rock, not actually coral rock but what can loosely be called that. Later, however, the lack of sufficient masons forced a change. The style was Spanish, the young Merrick having observed in trips through the West Indies and to Cuba that this type had been evolved for all-year residence in tropical countries.

To him, as he began the moulding of Coral Gables, George Merrick drew Denman Fink as artistic adviser and Phineas Paist as architectural director. These were the first of a large group of nationally known architects and artists who were to have a hand in the production of the hotels, homes and business district of that city.

Ever a naturalist at heart, Merrick already was making the place "blossom like the rose" and 100,000 trees and shrubs were taking root. The original grapefruit and orange groves were maintained as much as possible, and even today, where the trees have received any care, they bear profusely.

Around Merrick in the winter of 1924 were the principal figures of his development. There was "Doc" E. E. Dammers, who was real estate counsel for Merrick and first mayor of the city. In full page advertisements he predicted that in eight years the center of the metropolitan Miami district would be west of Coral Gables. He died as his dream of empire stretched north, not west. There was Telfair Knight, first president of the Bank of Coral Gables, and chief financial lieutenant to Merrick. There was Stafford Caldwell, who had come down from north Florida to become assistant general sales manager.

F. W. Webster, Miami Goodyear manager today, had quit the telephone company to become executive manager of Coral Gables, after opening an exchange there with 300 initial customers. Alexander Ott, probably the best showman south Florida has, was made sports director of Venetian Pool, newly opened.

In the new Coral Gables Country club, Jan Garber and his orchestra made many a heart flutter with "When the Moon Shines in Coral Gables," one of the theme songs of the boom. Pete Desjardins was showing the patrons of Venetian Pool how he won second in diving at the Paris Olympics. Five-year-old Jackie Ott, now a student at Miami Senior High school, was back from appearing with Bert Lytell in the motion picture, "Born Rich," and was continuing his sensational (for that age) diving and swimming. Ann Booker was another of the young stars of that pool, the girl who came home not long ago to die with a broken back, price of high-diving fame in Vienna.

Cyrus F. Wicker returned that fall from Spain and Morocco with 100,000 pieces of Spanish tile for the houses and buildings. New construction worth \$4,696,000 was going up, including the Casa Loma Hotel, the bank building, the old post office and the

administration building of the Coral Gables Corporation, where Sam's filling station, the new post office and the new George Merrick offices hold forth today. The million-dollar entrance gate at Douglas and S. W. Eighth street was yet to come, but plans were even then drawn for additional hotels, in which were to be housed the thousands brought to Coral Gables from Northern cities by busses, by special Clyde Line boats and Seaboard Air Line trains.

Coral Way at that time extended east as a street only to Douglas road. It was made a white way from Douglas to Le Jeune road, and late in 1924 Merrick began to cut the present Coral Way through toward Miami, to join with Third avenue. It followed a path beaten long before by Indians into the trading post of Fort Dallas, and later followed by early tourists eager to see the vast Merrick groves.

As the year 1925 opened, Merrick was putting down the rails for the Coral Gables street car system which he had to extend from a point on Flagler street in Miami out to Ponce de Leon boulevard and then around a loop within Coral Gables. The swan's neck curve in the boulevard as it goes from Tamiami Trail to Flagler street was caused by Merrick's inability to buy his way straight through the Stadler grove, which was then being subdivided. The rapid transit line down Coral Way, put out of business by a storm last November, was joined to this system by Merrick during 1925.

Originally 3,000 acres, the Merrick development was to grow to 10,000 acres at the peak, reaching far down to the bay and surrounding Coconut Grove. The Coconut Grove section was put on sale about this time at \$1,290 a lot and up. Announcement of the new Biltmore Hotel and Country club was followed by the opening of several sections near it, in the Country club district. The Crafts section south of Coral Way and east of Ponce de Leon boulevard was being reserved for a colony of artists and craftsmen.

In Miami W. E. Walsh and Frederick Zeigen were talking about an open-air university, to whose palm-shaded classes some 20,000 students might come. Such conversation later was translated into the University of Miami, in Coral Gables. Gen. Gerardo Machado, newly-elected president of Cuba, was visiting Alberto Ruiz in Coral Gables, awaiting his inauguration and the "Tragedy of Cuba."

Sightseeing boat excursions from Elser Pier down the bay and up the Coral Gables canal were preliminary to the "40 miles of inland waterway" with which home-makers were soon to be lured. Sales amounting to \$10,613,854 had been made in the first 10 months of 1924. George Merrick, returning late in the fall of 1924 from a financing and sales trip to New York, hoped to do better the next year, but even he, dreamer that he was, had no conception of the fantastic heights to which he was to lead his followers in 1925.

Today, nothing but pride plays on the face of George Merrick as he talks of Coral Gables. It is turning out as he planned it 20 years ago, a city of homes. His hair is white, and the recent years have not dealt kindly with him, but the great frame which

was hardened on the rocky groves of his father has not drooped. He, like his city, has had to change his sights a little, but he's still there on the firing line.

The return of Calvin Coolidge to the presidency of the United States with the largest Republican majority in history was like a spur on a fresh horse to the Florida real estate market. Dull and uninspiring even in the hour of his great triumph, President Coolidge somehow opened the spigots of national buying to a golden flow that was to continue until 1929 dried it up.

Several other factors gave Florida new headway in November, 1924. John W. Martin, thrice mayor of the bustling city of Jacksonville, was elected governor to replace Cary A. Hardee, conservative small-town banker. Martin was elected on a promise to build highways, then the crying need of the state.

In these same November elections Florida changed her constitution to prohibit income and inheritance taxes, in a frank bid for wealthy immigrants from other states. She also voted for a reapportionment of the legislature, giving south and central Florida more representation, Dade county three representatives instead of one.

The very air was electric with promise of good times. The stock market soared, with men rioting in their scramble for stocks. General Electric hit 300. Alfred E. Smith was governor of New York. Franklin D. Roosevelt was fighting for his life in the warm waters of a Georgia spring. The Miami Herald sent Paul D. Mason to open a Jacksonville office and report on the steady stream of important men and women coming through that single entering gate, bound for Miami. Fred L. Weede of the Miami Chamber of Commerce also opened a Jacksonville bureau. On one Sunday The Herald advertised for sale real estate worth \$17,650,000.

In the middle of December the Simmons Holding Company sold 2,170 acres north and west of the old Dixie highway for \$1,085,000, the largest sale in Miami since the original formation of Miami Shores, which the tract adjoined. The Donnelly Realty Company, buyers of the Simmons tract, refused \$3,000,000 for the property at one time, with \$1,000,000 in cash, finally saw its



GOV. JOHN W. MARTIN

values dwindle into 1927 and 1928. The tract lay between Opa-Locka and Biscayne park, along the Biscayne canal, and part of it is under development now as Brandon Park. Associated with J. P. Simmons in the venture were John Brand and E. W. Bebinger, newly located at that time in the Gramling building on Flagler street under a 99-year lease at \$44,000 a year.

After a visit and the proper build-up, John McEntee Bowman, principal figure in the great Bowman-Biltmore chain of hotels, announced at a banquet for civic leaders and newspapermen that he would build a \$10,000,000 Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables. George E. Merrick was to be associated with him. The hotel was to be started in January, to open the following year. It was the fate of the Biltmore to go up in the face of ruinous prices and a building material embargo and to open as the boom collapsed. New Orleans bondholders of the hotel finally found an answer to their prayers for succor in Col. Henry L. Doherty, whose organization has concluded its third year of successful management.

Gov. Cary A. Hardee cut the ribbon that opened Gandy bridge, linking Tampa and St. Petersburg, under the admiring gaze of 16 state governors accompanying him on a tour of Florida. A crowd of 75,000 viewed the ceremony, as the longest toll bridge in the world eliminated a 60-mile drive between the two principal cities of the West Coast. The governors came on then to Miami, were properly feted, left singing its praises. We did things up right in those days, with a bottle of Scotch under every pillow and cases of champagne and sparkling Burgundy at every banquet.

Fulford-by-the-Sea was beginning its herculean feats of publicity with double-page advertisements from M. C. Tebbetts, president of the Florida Cities Finance Company, declaring that the ultimate cost of the project would be \$60,000,000. He addressed the Miami Ad club on "Truthfulness in Advertising," was duly applauded.

This development is only a memory today, along with Fulford University and the million-dollar auto speedway. Its name has been changed to North Miami Beach.

Another monster development was that of G. Frank Croissant, late of Calumet City, who acquired 1,193 acres south of Fort Lauderdale for \$1,250,000, began Croissant Park with ornate gates and wide streets. Opening sales the last of December were announced as \$3,184,000.

George H. Earle, jr., president of the Pennsylvania Sugar Company, was fighting desperately against the issuance of \$1,770,000 in Dade county bonds, part of which was for extension of the Tamiami Trail, then only a stub out 15 miles or so beyond the present Miami limits. Earle, father of the present governor of Pennsylvania, insisted the Trail would flood his land unless many openings were cut. He was joined by W. I. Evans, young attorney then beginning the Everglades fight that was to last nearly a decade. The

Pennsylvania Sugar Company was described by Fred Weede as "the biggest industry in this section" and there was a disposition on the part of some to stop the Trail rather than to endanger the sugar company "and put its \$5,000,000 investment in danger."

Citizens protested bitterly against green fees on the municipal course being hiked from 75 cents to \$1.50. T. W. (Tubby) Palmer, then a noted player and member of the city golf board, admitted rather brutally that the increase was planned "to keep the dubs off."

The largest all-cash sale in Miami up to that point was when Val Duttonhofer, shoe manufacturer of Cincinnati, bought the Clyde Court apartments for \$500,000 from the Sailors brothers, who had built it in 1917. It was named for Clyde Sailors.

H. H. Mase paid \$200,000 for the Gralyn Hotel about this time, the owner having been O. B. Sailors. Built in 1907, it was originally named the Everglades.

Heavy rain in north Florida isolated Miami for two days. Claude C. Matlack hinted darkly that "influences" were holding back the building of the Dixie highway. W. S. Maxwell, secretary of the Miami Motor club, finally reported it was possible to get through the Dixie from Jacksonville to Miami by daylight only. The other route, over the Conner's highway, south from Okeechobee around the east side of the lake, was made passable with the help of J. W. Young's Hollywood equipment. Conner's highway, costing \$2,000,000, was just opened, linking West Palm Beach and Okeechobee.

Hollywood started the fourth miniature golf course in the United States. Ernie Seiler became head coach at Miami High school and the football team began to improve. James E. Ingraham, president of the Model Land Company, a Flagler subsidiary, died in Atlanta. The present Ingraham building was named for him.