CHAPTER FIVE

LUSTY south Florida had outgrown its public utilities early in 1924. The American Power and Light Company answered the demand for outside capital and first moved into Miami in March with the purchase of the Miami Beach street railway and the electric plant at the bend of the county causeway. On this and later acquisitions it was to spend many millions for expansion and improvements, which only mountebanks during the depths of the depression contended were superfluous.

Purchase of the Miami Beach Electric Company by this great utility system was followed by double tracking across the causeway between Miami and Miami Beach, where the viaducts then were being doubled in width by the county. George C. Estill, who today holds the presidency of the Florida Power and Light Company, was head of the Miami Beach system when it was taken over from the Carl G. Fisher interests.

On the day when Calvin Coolidge was elected president of the United States the American Power and Light Company announced it also had bought the Miami Electric Light and Power Company from the Flagler estate, of which William R. Kenan, jr., was trustee. This small utility system was started 28 years before with a Diesel engine in the old Royal Palm Hotel, an engine that frequently required the combined muscle of many of the townspeople to start.

With the announcement came the further disclosure that American had bought the Southern Utilities Company with plants as far north as St. Augustine and Palatka and extending over most of the eastern part of Florida. The whole system became the Florida Power and Light Company on December 28, 1925, when S. R. Inch was made the first president. H. H. Hyman, eight years with the M. E. L. & P. Co., was made general manager of the southern division and Estill became general superintendent. In that same year Joe H. Gill came to Florida from Texas and was made vice president and general manager. He succeeded Inch to the presidency in the trying days of the depression.

As 1925 dawned the giant generating plant at Davie was yet unbuilt. The principal sources of power were the Miami river plant of the old company and the causeway plant at Miami Beach. Three substations, at Buena Vista, Coconut Grove and Little River, were constructed for $75,000. The two power plants were joined by cable, and high tension lines were laid up the beach and out to Hialeah. The white way on S. W. Eighth street from Miami avenue to Fourteenth street was started. The first street car was run down the new Second avenue line.

The Miami Gas Company was the second of the major utilities to be absorbed by American Power and Light. It was taken over from the St. Louis Central Power and Light Company, which held it only briefly after it got too unwieldy for the receiver, George Moore, the father-in-law of Banker James H. Gilman. The plant was started in 1906 by Howard M. Van Court, who operated it until war prices forced the company into receivership in 1919.

The new owners spent $650,000 in 1924, adding to the equipment and extending feeder lines through the north and west part of Miami, the pipes going down as the city paved the streets. A million dollars followed in 1925 and in 1926 the gas company expenditures rose to $1,500,000 as building created new demand.

But this was small change compared to the amounts required by the power company. About $1,250,000 was spent in the dying months of 1924, about $6,500,000 in 1925, and $28,000,000 was poured into Florida by American Power and Light for its new company in 1926. This 1926 budget was the largest construction program ever carried out in the United States by a single operating company. Shades of "Brewster's Millions!" In one week the company spent $1,700,000. The Davie plant, built in 1926, cost $5,000,000. Every source of telegraph poles from Texas to the Atlantic seaboard was sending its products into Florida. The railroad embargo forced the company to charter its own ships, and George Estill recalls today that nearly 10 per cent of these poles were lost as barges unloaded at sea the vessels shut out from the blockaded Miami harbor.

The South Atlantic Telephone and Telegraph Company began in 1924 to find its resources too limited to meet the demand. Frank B. Shutts, the president, had addressed a public hearing and received a favorable vote to increase telephone rates to permit expansion. But even that unprecedented response was not enough. Southern Bell, with its farflung facilities, took over the South Atlantic just before the new year broke, on December 6.

Amid much public impatience, the redwood water mains were connected in January, 1925, and soon after pure and unsalted water flowed through the mains of Miami and Miami Beach. Other localities, such as Coconut Grove, previously had established their own water systems. The town of Buena Vista was incorporated, said T. V. Moore, especially to obtain adequate drinking water, and incidentally to escape "heavy" Miami taxes.

Water storage tanks at N. W. Seventh avenue and Thirty-sixth street, where Moore park later was built, were started, to hold 2,500,000 gallons. Miami Beach began a 500,000-gallon storage tank.

Other utilities were on the move. Radio Station WMBF, whose call letters were translated by effusive announcers into Wonderful Miami Beach, Florida, was installed that winter in the new Fleetwood Hotel by Jesse Jay, son of Webb Jay, auto vacuum tank inventor. It was licensed as the most powerful station in the United States and was the forerunner of WIOD, which the younger Jay later set up on Nautilus island.

The Tropical Radio Telegraph Company, subsidiary of the United Fruit Company, let a contract for $237,000 to build the 437-

foot aerials at its station in Hialeah, the equipment which fared so badly in the hurricane two years later.

The city of Miami that winter decided to "radiocast" the nightly concerts of Arthur Pryor, who had returned for his eighth season of band concerts in Royal Palm park. Fred Mizer of the Electrical Equipment Company was to handle the radio work. Who can forget the heart-tingling voice of Rachel Jane Hamilton, soloist with Pryor, as she sang "Holy Night" to 6,000 children on Christmas eve, or "Dixie" or "Way Down Upon the S'wannee River"?

It was sweet, that is, unless a seaplane was warming up its motor on the near-by bay front, or one of the planes was swooping down over the bandshell with a mighty roar. The Miami Beach city council finally passed an ordinance to keep aviators from spoiling the Lummus park concerts. The conflict in Miami between aviation and aesthetics vanished with the new Bayfront park and the coming of more mature aviation.

Miami was preparing then for her future greatness in the air. Congress enacted a law allowing the post office to contract for carrying air mail at 10 cents an ounce. The government had tried unsuccessfully to run the mail across country through the winter, on planes equipped with skiis. Congressman Joe Sears announced from Washington that an air mail line from New York to Miami might be obtained.

Francis M. Miller and some air enthusiasts formed the Miami Chapter of the National Aeronautical Association and laid plans to get the 1926 international air meet for Miami. The association asked Dade county for a landing tract preparatory to seeking an air mail line into New York. The Greater Miami Airport Association, which has been responsible for most of Miami air meets, was not yet born.

Edmond David Girardot, who called himself an airplane manufacturer from England, told Miamians that he would manufacture $2,000,000 worth of planes here in 1925, and would establish a line to Cuba. Two great dirigibles, the Shenandoah and the German ZR3, excited the ambition of those who ultimately got a dirigible base located here—after both these ships of the air had been destroyed. The ZR3 was being flown to the United States, which had purchased it from Germany. The Shenandoah was just completing a cross-country flight.

Edward S. Huff, inventor of the magneto used on 4,500,000 Ford automobiles up to that time, was thrown out of court when he sued Ford for royalties. At his home in Miami, he was told that his action for $10,000,000 came too late to be entertained seriously.

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In a Florida land boom there was advertising enough for any kind of publication, even a tabloid. The addition to the population of restless people in a strange setting provided the soil in which a sensational press could exist. In 1924, as now, Miami was open for the temporary "white mule" jolt of the tabloid.

Cornelius Vanderbilt, jr., who turned informer on his own social set, arrived here unheralded one drenching night in October, 1924, when more than eight inches of rain fell in 12 hours. It was a memorable downpour, flooding the sidewalks knee deep, filling the nearly completed Kress basement in Flagler street, short-circuiting power lines and stopping nearly every automobile that tried to brave it.

In The Herald office when young Vanderbilt appeared, work was going on by candlelight until electrical connections could be restored. He was a sensation five minutes after he walked in. For he promised that he and Barron G. Collier, advertising magnate and owner of 1,700,000 acres in Lee and Collier counties, would build a railroad through the Everglades from Miami to Fort Myers and would start a steamship line from Miami to New Orleans. Collier previously had proposed one-day passage to Nassau on his Florida Interisland Steamship Line.

In those days the name of Cornelius Vanderbilt still was linked in the public mind with the family's wealth. He published two tabloid newspapers in California and was held likely to make money in his own right. He was 26 years old.

He even went so far that rainy night as to declare that 200 miles of steel rails and six locomotives already were loaded for delivery to the Florida Navigation and Railroad Corporation, headed by Collier, who controlled the street car advertising of the nation. Vanderbilt estimated that $2,000,000 would be spent on the enterprise. Only Collier's word was needed, he declared, to start the actual railroad construction. The word never came.

But a month after the Vanderbilt arrival, while Miami was still buzzing about the incipient railroad, Vanderbilt announced he would start a tabloid in Miami, and he began to advertise a prize of $1,000 for a name for the new publication. While waiting for the name to materialize he occupied himself in soothing the chamber of commerce with stories about what he and his friend, Barron Collier, soon would be doing. Incidentally he got numerous citizens interested financially in his newspaper venture.

In between times, when he was not motoring at high speed back and forth across the continent with a companion and financial adviser, John W. Brodix, Vanderbilt was penning pieces for his California papers that had an inimical effect when reprinted here. Chiefly he "panned" the Florida climate and expressed the view that Miami real estate values were "inflated." A particularly apt touch was the statement that "it's dangerous to go swimming here (Miami) because of the sharks rushing through the foam," and "it's hot-hot-hot, just as though the ocean were boiling at midday." Such expressions, duly recorded in the Miami press, caused Vanderbilt to explain that he was suffering from a bad cold and was not really himself when he wrote the offending articles.

The Vanderbilt newspaper, called The Illustrated Daily Tab, began publication January 12, 1925, with 40 pages. The front page carried the picture of the winner of first prize for the name, Mrs. Floris Lambert, shown starting the presses. The plant was in the former home of the afternoon Metropolis, just east of the Central fire station on Flagler. The Miami advisory board consisted of J. O. Harley, Lon Worth Crow, E. C. Gaunt, Clarence M. Busch, C. C. Ausherman and T. B. C. Voges. The national advisory board of Vanderbilt Newspapers, Inc., was headed by Alfred I. duPont, who recently died at his Jacksonville estate.

The Tab tried all the tricks of the tabloid press to gain a foothold and while business was on the upgrade, of course, it held both advertising and circulation. It began to fade, however, in February, 1926, and on June 16, 1926, it vanished with the announcement that E. A. Inglis, then a real estate operator and now an official of the First National Bank, had been appointed receiver.

Vanderbilt passed quickly from the Miami mind and the sensationalism which his kind of paper retailed left only a dark brown taste in the public mouth. He is chiefly recalled as a pretender, trying to use his tabloid to compel respect, and failing. One outgrowth of his efforts was the increased use of local pictures in The Herald, decided upon by O. W. Kennedy, the managing editor, as a policy which has remained to this day.

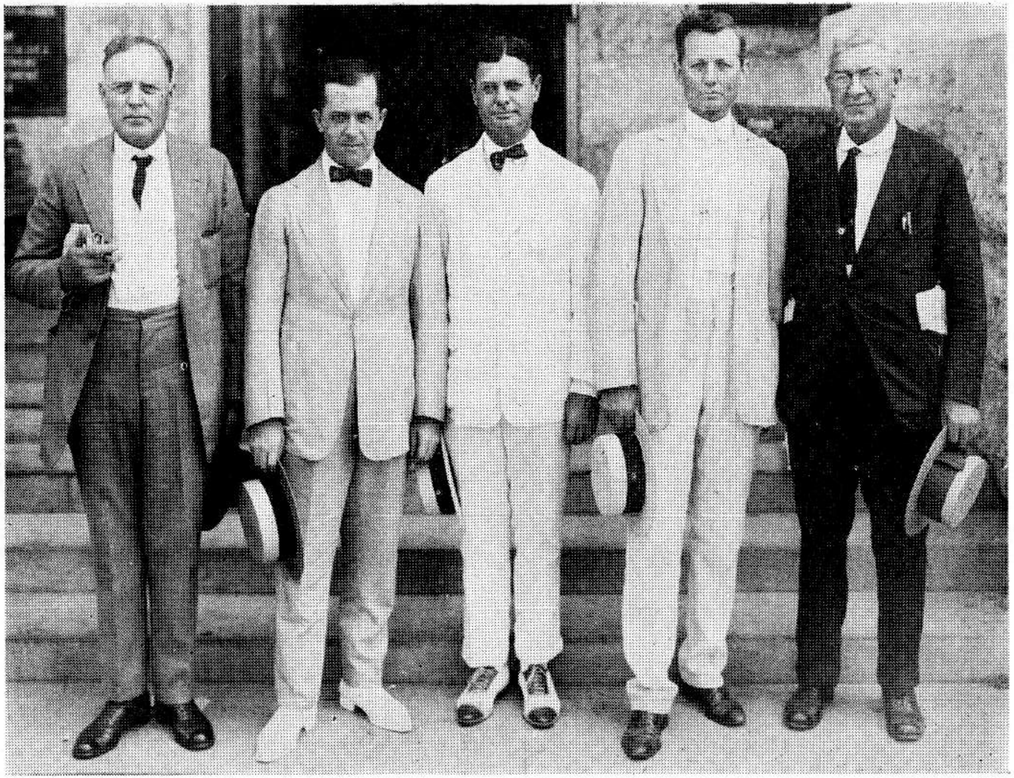
Another boom journalistic product was the afternoon Miami Tribune, recently reincarnated into the tabloid daily of the present prosperous period. It is a far cry from the scholarly efforts of Clayton Sedgwick Cooper, first editor of The Tribune, to the current output under The Tribune name.

The Miami Tribune started early in 1924 with N. B. T. Roney as its first backer. Mr. Cooper, today president of the exclusive Committee of 100 at Miami Beach, occupied the editor's chair and Leo F. Reardon was president of the publishing company. It had its plant in the two-story building in First street north of the courthouse and carried the designation, "The People's Paper," at the masthead. It was gentle, readable, but never able to overcome the commanding position in the afternoon field of the News-Metropolis, acquired by James M. Cox of Ohio from S. Bobo Dean, long-time foe of Florida East Coast domination in local politics.

R. M. Monroe, now handling advertising and publicity for the city of Coral Gables, ran a widely read column in The Tribune under the title of The Lyre. Frank P. Fildes succeeded Mr. Cooper in charge of The Tribune and through 1925 it seemed to prosper.

The chill winds of November, 1926, withered The Tribune to tabloid size, and in February of the following year it shrank to a weekly, ceasing publication entirely in August, 1927. Subsequently the name was reborn on Miami Beach on a weekly schedule and became a standard tabloid daily in November, 1934.

These publications, with such exotic flowers as Miami Life, under Wen Phillips and Fred Girton, helped The Miami Herald write the saga of the boom. But none of them, not even The News with its one 504-page special, could approach The Herald's lofty place at the very top of the world's newspapers.



. . . famous Miami banker city commission which reassured boom-seeking capital: C. D. Leffler, James H. Gilman, E. C. Romfh, J. E. Lummus and J. I. Wilson.