

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IN ONE of those periodic flare-ups which have kept Hialeah near the political boiling point since its founding, J. H. Wendler was shot and at first believed fatally wounded in his Hialeah Herald office one day in the middle of July, 1925. The act brought acutely to public notice the struggle then in progress at the Curtiss-Bright development to give birth to municipal government.

Wendler's shooting was not directly connected with the fact that he had made himself mayor of the "Town of Hialeah" with 28 votes a short time before, his "town" being that part north of Seventeenth street. He fell before a revolver handled by William Simpson when Simpson and a companion called upon Wendler to make him return a special deputy sheriff's certificate which Wendler was reluctant to disgorge.

But while Wendler, the firebrand, was out of commission and nursing his wounds, the citizens south of the line incorporated the city of Hialeah and on September 10, 1925, formally elected Jack P. Grethen their first mayor. They feared Wendler's crowd would reach down and annex them, willy nilly, and more than one angry mass meeting had preceded the shooting. The charter was passed by the legislature in special session that fall.

We have observed that Hialeah was running a political temperature most of the time during its early years, and yet this section has never seen two more pacific and kindly men than its founders, Glenn H. Curtiss, the seaplane inventor, and James H. Bright, the rancher.

According to one of the sages of that day, Hialeah is a Seminole word meaning "best pearl in a heap." The townsite was platted on the banks of the Miami canal in 1921 from a part of the 16,000 acres of the Curtiss-Bright Ranch Company. Bright had come there looking for a place to fatten cattle and sheep and had met Glenn Curtiss during the war when the latter was training service fliers in and around Miami.

Aviation, horse and dog racing, movie studios, airplane factories, jai alai, bootlegging, gambling and many other activities made Hialeah a melting pot for divers elements during and after the boom. "Hialeah rye" became a standard grade of refreshment in south Florida. Old Hialeah Field was cut into lots in July, 1925, and the present municipal aviation field established by Curtiss on 160 acres north of Hialeah. His administration building on the bank of the canal cost \$75,000.

While Hialeah was the center of all sorts of amusements, Curtiss and Bright were laying out more quiet home sectors in Country Club Estates, just across the canal, and in Opa-Locka, north of the Tropical Radio Company towers. Country Club Estates in later years became Miami Springs, a debt-free community rapidly making its mark as a desirable homesite surrounding the

Miami municipal golf course, in which are located the wells supplying Miami and other communities with fresh water. The pueblo-type hotel which Curtiss-Bright erected during the boom has become the Battle Creek Sanitarium. Opa-Locka went in for a rather garish type of Moorish architecture, the first outpost to greet the Seaboard on its way into Miami. This city was laid out in July by Clinton McKenzie, who had designed Country Club Estates. It occupies what once was Cook's Hammock, west of the Little River slough.

Meantime, in Miami, the Baeder Properties, Inc., was formed to invest \$100,000,000 in Miami and Florida for the United Cigar Stores. H. H. Trice was vice president and principal buying agent. One million had gone for the Biscayne Hotel on the corner of Flagler and Miami avenue. Four hundred thousand had gone into three lots at N. E. First avenue and Sixth street. One lot the company still owns, 50 feet on W. Flagler street between Sixteenth and Seventeenth avenues, cost \$40,000. They offered \$105,000 for a 50-foot lot on Clematis avenue in West Palm Beach and \$240,000 for another 100 feet on Clematis next to the Stanley Theater.

Financial lightning was playing all around the Halcyon Hotel at this time, but it never struck. The property was bought in 1911 by Thomas J. Peters for \$388,000 and the owner is said to have refused \$5,000,000 for it in 1924 and more than \$6,000,000 in 1925. The income alone on the hotel for 12 months during the peak of the boom was \$519,000, but it finally went at forced sale in 1934 for \$333,600, and today is owned by the duPont-Ball group of Jacksonville.

The Royal Palm Hotel and its spacious grounds also came through the boom untouched. Located on land donated to Henry M. Flagler by Mrs. Julia Tuttle when she interested the railroad magnate in extending his railroad to Miami, the Royal Palm and the adjoining Royal Palm Park of his Model Land Company were a constant temptation to every big-moneyed character in the boom.

The largest offer for the purchase of the hotel site of which we have knowledge was made by a group composed of S. P. Robineau, L. T. Cooper, Mercer P. Moseley and their New York associates, who tempted the Flagler trustees with \$10,000,000. This was refused, along with all others, and the great Royal Palm, whose construction gave Miami its start as a winter resort, finally was torn down as unsafe a few years ago.

The Miami banks were loaded with \$129,088,546 by the first of July, 1925, of which the First National Bank alone had \$40,898,000. At the same time in 1924 the combined bank deposits in Miami were only \$36,704,651. Reports current that the Miami banks were so busy they had been compelled to refuse numerous large deposits were emphatically denied, but it was not far from the truth because long lines were strung out all day from every teller's window like serpentine streamers in a ballroom.

Those were the days, it may be recalled, when E. C. Romfh of

the First National was openly discussed as a traitor to his community because he wouldn't lend money on real estate as did the Bank of Bay Biscayne, the Southern Bank and Trust Company, the Dade County Security Company and a dozen lesser institutions. If there was one thing that held Miami back, the citizens complained, it was Ed Romfh sitting up there with both fists full of money and too tight to turn it loose.

Well, when the First National reached its peak in September, Ed Romfh's fists bulged with \$66,798,221 in deposits and still he wouldn't pour it into the glamorous subdivisions crying for capital, nor into the skyscraper blueprints aching to be born. Instead, his bank at that financial crest had \$56,000,000 in cash and marketable securities, 89 per cent liquid, and was preparing for the long toboggan slide down hill.

The slide started swiftly and the First National reached the bottom of \$11,837,353 in deposits in September, 1931, and then was 92 per cent liquid, while the more generous members of the Miami banking fraternity were crashing with reverberations reaching into nearly every home in south Florida. The First National Bank has climbed up again to more than \$30,000,000 in deposits and presumably another boom will find Ed Romfh as president again holding with both hands to the money placed with him for safekeeping.

Perhaps it has no place in a story of the 1925 boom, but as we recapture the period when money poured into Miami from every watering place in the nation, memory skips down the few short years to those summer days when long lines of heartsick people waited in vain before the closed doors of the once proud Bank of Bay Biscayne and the City National Bank In Miami, while E. C. Romfh circulated among the equally anxious crowds in his own lobby and invited them to come get their money. It was all there, and he kept the First National open as long as lines were waiting to reach the windows.



EDWARD C. ROMFH

Last year before the Florida Bankers Association, President Romfh delivered one of his infrequent speeches, in which he said, "I have lived in southeast Florida for more than 50 years. I have seen this section grow from the wagon trails to the iron horse, the automobile and the airplane; from huts to homes and palaces . . . unless one has operated a

bank on this last of the frontiers of these United States, one has never felt the chill and the thrill of a flight into the financial stratosphere and the tailspin back to realities and headaches. . . . In a speech in Royal Palm park back in 1921, I made the statement that banks are 'busted' from the inside, not the outside, and that a bank with a board of directors of ordinary intelligence with an honest desire to obey the law does not fail."

It was such doctrine that convinced some of the excited public in Miami in 1925 that Ed Romfh was an old fogey who might better be retired on a pension so some young fellow with the right slant on local conditions could take hold and really make things hum.

While scores of young men and girls slept in Miami's city parks because they could find no rooms at any price, Miami suddenly sprouted its skyscraper skyline in July and August, 1925. Sixteen great hotels and office buildings were completed, from the News Tower to the McAllister Hotel along the bayfront. Fourteen others from the Roosevelt Hotel to the forest of steel girders in the center of the city struck their snaggle-toothed frames higher day by day.

The problem of housing was giving nearly every employe and the city fathers dancing black spots before the eyes. Chief of Police Quigg told the city commission they either should build apartments for the policemen or make an extra allowance in pay to meet jumping rents, otherwise he would have great difficulty keeping enough policemen. Several business houses bought or built whole apartment buildings so they might have help at normal wages. These costly appendages hung on for years to contribute grief to postboom liquidations.

E. G. Sewell urged the county commissioners to offer Comer-Ebsary Foundation Company a bonus to speed the widening of the viaducts on the county causeway, which finally were completed in February, 1926. Bob Simpson, the county tax collector, added his voice to the rest of the county chorus demanding more room. The city garbage department was placing from 20 to 35 cans a day in new homes. Carl G. Fisher put up 100 army tents at Miami Beach to house his workmen, all other accommodations failing. The noise of riveting, the dust from great trucks loaded with cement, the heat and rush and tension always in the air as men and women strained toward the acquisition of profits sent many to the doctor with nervous indigestion, while others escaped on their first—and last—trip to Europe, convinced that the boom still would be there when they should return.

Miami was saddened late in July by two deaths, both unexpected, both striking down prominent figures of the boom. William Jennings Bryan died in the little Tennessee town of Dayton, after winning a conviction in the famous evolution trial of John Thomas Scopes, the teacher. Mayor Parker A. Henderson died of apoplexy not long after he had joined Miami's banker commission.

Bryan fell victim to about the only form of intemperance he

did not fight—overeating. His passing took from Florida a great national character, who had come to the state 25 years before when his cousin, W. S. Jennings of Jacksonville, was inaugurated governor. For 15 years, Bryan had been a Miami resident, living quietly in the bayfront home he and Mrs. Bryan first made famous, Villa Serena, and later at Marymont, in Coconut Grove. He taught America's largest Bible class in Royal Palm park, which opened its eighth season in 1925 with 8,000 members.

Probation of Bryan's will revealed that he had spoken the truth several months before when he sent a public denial to The Tampa Tribune's statement that he was already a millionaire. Between \$500,000 and \$600,000 made up the Bryan estate, most of it going to the widow, some to what is now Bryan Memorial Church in Coconut Grove, the former Grove Temple.

Parker Henderson left nearly \$1,500,000, as values were computed then. The Miami commission forthwith called on Banker E. C. Romfh to come back and be mayor again, which he finally agreed to do.

The pleasant publicity which had started the boom in the North had turned to gall and wormwood by August, 1925. The Indianapolis Times, for instance, complained: "Literally thousands of persons are leaving the state in search of something for nothing in the land of oranges and speculators." Storage warehouses in Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Pennsylvania and New York were bulging with the household effects of those who had pulled up their stakes and gone to Florida, hoping they would become so wealthy they need never come back. Bankers, newspapers and real estate interests of the Middle West viewed this wholesale departure aghast, and were not long in taking more direct means of putting on the brakes.

Another novelty greeted the arrival of August. Large signs began to appear on houses and choice property: "This Corner Not For Sale," "Not Interested In Selling," and the like. Some home owners by then were afraid to sell, no matter how fancy the price, because they knew they would have to pay even more to get another roof over their heads. Not a few figured that by holding on until the tourists came back, they would realize even more than the "summer vacationers" were offering.

The new Railey-Milam hardware building was nearing completion on the site of Miami's first livery stable. Two New Yorkers bought the William Penn Hotel at Miami Beach for \$750,000. Within three days, Roy Wright and Hugh Anderson made definite announcements of construction of the \$2,000,000 Venetian Arcade and the \$2,500,000 Shoreland Arcade, each to be three stories that year, and 15 stories more in the near future, Jerry W. Carter's state hotel commission set a new record by approving \$8,000,000 worth of Miami hotels and apartments in 48 hours. Fifty freight carloads of portable one-room school houses were ordered by the Dade county school board to take care of 1,500 new pupils that

fall, as the board contemplated attendance of 30,000, almost what it is today.

The largest order for homes ever signed up to that time was placed on the first of August by George E. Merrick of Coral Gables with the American Building Corporation of Cincinnati, in a contract involving \$75,000,000 worth of completed houses and property. The American Building Corporation was to construct 1,000 homes in Coral Gables, many to retail at \$100,000 each. R. K. LeBlond of Cincinnati headed the company, and the construction firm of Myers Y. Cooper, former Ohio governor, was brought in for the building.

Merrick gathered 12 of the finest architects in the country to plan the houses, which were to be Persian, Dutch South African, French, Italian, Chinese, Spanish and many other national types. It was an undertaking that dwarfed the activities of Lindsey Hopkins of Atlanta who then was putting 100 houses into Coral Gables.

Actually, 100 houses were completed by the American Building Corporation, including the Italian, French, Venetian, South African Dutch and Chinese villages in existence today. Between \$3,000,000 and \$4,000,000 was spent on them before the boom started to fade, selling at from \$20,000 to \$100,000. It is no wonder that Coral Gables is a place of magnificent residences, even though some of them are pretty far out in the country.

While whole clusters of houses were going up, Coral Gables acquired two of the outstanding white elephants of this whole area, in the Coliseum and the million-dollar Douglas entrance gate. The entrance archway was built by the John B. Orr Company and designed by Denman Fink and Phineas Paist, the head architects of Coral Gables. The Coliseum was a promotion of a group led by J. K. Dorn, and it also was reputed to cost \$1,000,000. Built to seat 7,200 people, the acoustics and arrangement were such that it was virtually discarded for years, and only recently it and the Douglas entrance have come into better days.

While these great activities were boosting the boom onward and upward, the big money boys got another jolt about the first of August. The United States commissioner of internal revenue ruled that the entire amount of the purchase price for real estate must be reported as income, not the 25 per cent first payment, as Miamians had believed all along. That put a new light on the fast approaching time for income tax payment, and sent many a high financier off into a corner—preferably out of Florida—to think matters over.