

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A BRISK northeast wind was blowing over the bustling Miami harbor on the morning of January 10, 1926. It caught the four tall masts of the barkentine Prins Valdemar, temporarily grounded at the entrance to the turning basin, and gently turned the boat on its side, blocking the harbor entrance.

The barkentine pivoted as it slowly rolled over, so that its 241-foot length stoppered the ship channel completely. The masts and rigging lay out over the water and into the harbor, like the outstretched arms of some spent runner who has made one agonizing leap to break the tape and then falls extended on the cinders.

It was to be 25 days before anything bigger than a rowboat could move in or out of Miami harbor.

The Prins Valdemar was the largest sailing vessel that had entered Miami harbor when it was brought up the channel November 8 as the property of Cliff Storm, owner of the Ta-Miami Hotel, George Riesen and R. J. Walters, to be outfitted as a 100-room hotel ship. It was held outside for a week waiting for absolute calm because the pilots were afraid to bring such a large vessel down the narrow channel.

Ready at last to begin its hotel experience, the Prins Valdemar was being towed out of the Miami harbor to Miami Beach when bungling tugmen ran it aground. A receding tide left it high, if not dry, and the whistling wind found the ship easy prey.

Eighty men were working on the Prins Valdemar when the warning came she was listing. A card game on deck broke up in such confusion that one of the players discovered after he had swam to shore that he still clutched the 59-cent "pot" he had grabbed. But there was no need for panic, as the boat lay half out of water on her side.

The passenger liner George Washington was just ready to leave for the North. Ten other big boats were getting set to move out of the harbor and give their places to the scores waiting outside. The blood pressure on bridge and dock, and the profanity accompanying it, passed all known highs as the masters of the high seas looked out upon the vast bulk that blocked their paths to freedom.

The city commission at once began plans to dredge a channel around the Prins Valdemar, pending efforts to right it. The commission also wired Gov. John W. Martin urging that George E. Manson, the harbormaster, be replaced by someone more competent, preferably Capt. Melbourne Cook. Captain Manson retorted that the criticism of his handling of ships was due only to political enemies, but as his commission already had expired, Governor Martin soon put Captain Cook in as harbormaster.

After a week of ineffectual dabbling, the federal government sent Lieut. Col. Gilbert A. Youngberg from Jacksonville to clear the Miami harbor. Working with Maj. George E. Brown of the local

office, two dredges were started on an 80-foot channel around the recumbent Prins Valdemar, and the four masts were removed with ax and acetylene torch, so the dredges could get on with their digging.

While this was taking place, as many freighters as possible lined the causeway. Some even cut holes in their bows to remove the merchandise to the shore. When the channel was nicely filled, the steamer Lakevort grounded for several days across the outer channel, preventing any further movement east of Fisher's island, where many boats were unloading onto lighters. Fifty assorted schooners and steamers assembled along the edge of the Gulf stream opposite Miami Beach. Several went aground on reefs trying to edge in to land.

Just as it appeared the new channel around the Prins Valdemar would be completed, and all the captains had steam up to leave the harbor, both dredges broke down. Then it was discovered that dynamite was needed to break the last hard rock ledge, and the captains let their steam die down for another week while owners paced their New York offices, and the remainder of the boats reconditioned for a run to Miami were regretfully hauled back to the yards.

As soon as the blockade took place word went forth to every shipping point not to send more boats to Miami. But before it was ended, 45,000,000 feet of lumber badly needed in Miami construction was floating at anchor outside the harbor, and the investments tied up in materials, hardware and furniture began driving many a harassed developer toward insolvency.

The glad day when the dredges completed the new way around the Prins Valdemar saw the Georgeanna Weems leading the procession out of the harbor. Fifteen other big boats followed, some grounding temporarily here and there, one even striking the Prins Valdemar as though in rebuff for the delay it had caused. The Nancy Weems got caught on a sand bank near the mouth of the jetties but fortunately didn't block the way for the others.

The Prins Valdemar ultimately was refloated and towed away in disgrace to the P. & O. channel. Ironically enough, it righted itself as soon as the masts were removed and the hold pumped dry. It was the only vessel in Miami harbor to ride out the 1926 hurricane undamaged.

Today it sits primly beside its pier at the north end of Bay-front park and houses Miami's only aquarium. One of its stubby remounted masts supports a string of lights at night and flags by day, but its seagoing days are over. Its spectacular act marked the end of the speculative gold rush to Florida, a strange role indeed for this former Danish naval vessel. Like many another Homeric hero, it ends its days quietly with children playing about it, and idlers paying scant attention to the marks of former glory.

In retrospect, it does not seem that many of us felt the bottling of the Miami harbor would play a permanent part in the progress

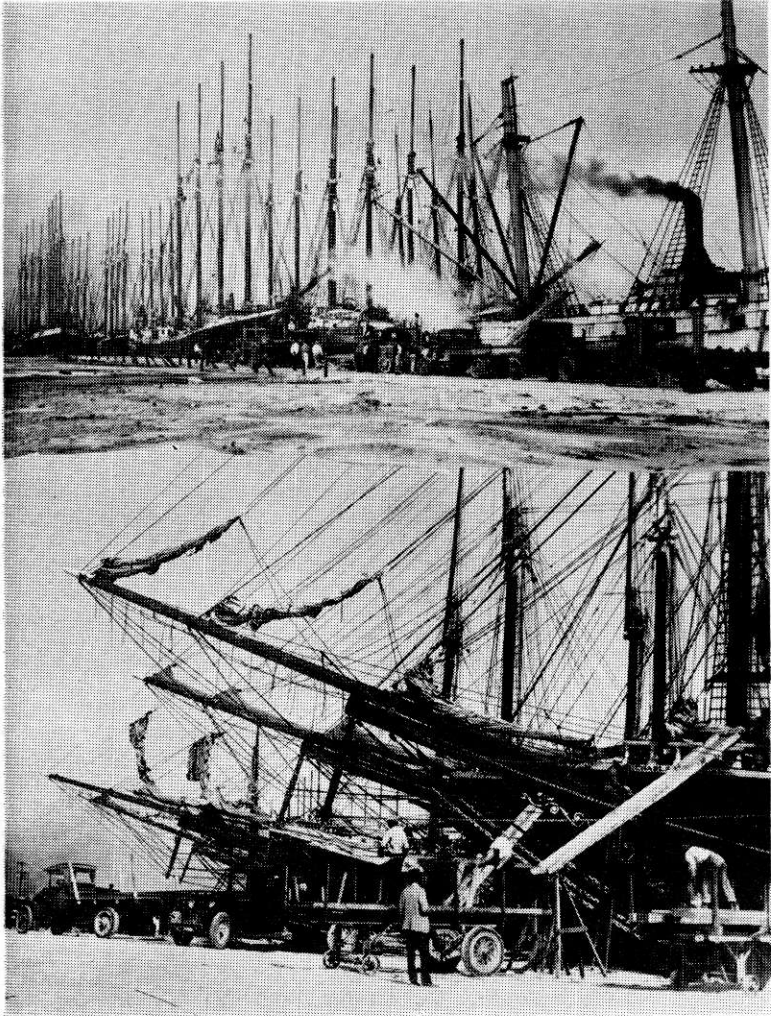
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of the boom. Certainly ships grounding in the channel were regarded as ordinary hazards until the new federal dredging could start. The Mary A. Diebold, for instance, shut up the channel for a day until it was finally yanked off into deep water by six tugs that nearly tore her deck out. The five-masted schooner Robert L. Linton followed the Prins Valdemar and was an even larger boat, but it was not grounded.

Like many other features of the boom, it may seem to us today that the Miami harbor could have been managed better. But in the furious melting pot where Miami was being made, there was scant time for orderly planning, and no precedent for the demands put upon the skimpy facilities of those days.

The Prins Valdemar saved people a lot of money. In the enforced lull which accompanied the efforts to unstopper the Miami harbor, many a shipper in the North and many a builder in the South got a better grasp of what actually was taking place here. A great deal of expensive bric-a-brac that would have been represented later by red ink was held at the factory, and many a bankroll was saved from its own folly.

So perhaps the Prins Valdemar deserves its position as a Miami institution.



. . . scores of schooners lined Bayfront Park with cargo for the boom, and were he'd there by a bottled harbor during the embargo.