

Biographical Note
by Octavio Perez, 1976

Fisher's life-long involvement with the automobile industry (as salesman, racer, impresario, innovator, manufacturer, and good-roads advocate) was closely connected with his city building accomplishment in Florida. Automobiles were the basis of his fortune (Prest-O-Lite, Indianapolis Speedway) and brought about the vast influx of tourists and settlers that made Miami Beach possible. His friendships and influence among the leaders of the industry, brought to Miami Beach money and national attention, as the new tycoons of the Midwest found there a playground designed by one of their own for the brash conspicuous consumption and sports-oriented informality that characterized the period.

The flair for publicity shown by C.G.F. from the beginning of his career was one of the main ingredients of his success. He advertised by making news. In the early days he accomplished this by astonishing the public with physical and mechanical exploits. The attendant fame made his business enterprises prosper. Later, he sought media coverage for his undertakings by associating them with the world of celebrities--wealthy industrialists, politicians, entertainers, war heroes, socialites, sports champions--as well as by their sheer magnitude (Lincoln Highway, Miami Beach, Montauk).

He first envisioned Miami Beach as a new Palm Beach, a tropical garden of winter houses for the rich to relax in an atmosphere of luxury, refinement and leisure. He tried conventional methods (advertisements in newspapers and magazines, direct mailing of handsome booklets and brochures, etc.), with little success. He soon changed his tactics. Miami Beach was going to be a place to play rather than to rest. A sportsman himself, he was well fitted for the task. To encourage sports he built tennis courts, golf courses, polo fields, swimming pools, yacht and fishing clubs. He organized regattas, brought over entire polo teams and their mounts from England and Cuba, had a fleet of hydroplanes, speedboats, cruisers, luxurious yachts. By 1923 he was spending about \$350,000 a year promoting sports in Miami Beach. This novel approach generated a steady stream of news stories from Miami Beach worth millions of dollars in publicity for his real estate ventures:

- 1874 Jan. 12 Born in Greensburg, Indiana, to Albert H. and Ida Graham Fisher.
- 1886 Drops out of school in the sixth grade due to poor eyesight. He is, in fact, half-blind. Goes to work in a grocery store.
- 1886-1891 Works as messenger for a bank, clerk in a bookstore, and selling peanuts, magazines and books to train passengers.
- 1891 Moves to Indianapolis, and, with \$600 in savings, opens a bicycle repair shop with his two brothers, Rolly and Earle. Promotes bicycling by organizing two bicycle clubs, racing professionally through out the Midwest, and by spectacular stunts, such as riding a bicycle across a tight

- rope stretched between two tall buildings, and making a 20-foot high bicycle and riding it through town, etc.
- 1893 Is given a bicycle dealership and \$50,000 worth of stock without security by a leading manufacturer who recognizes his precocious promotional talents, which often succeed in bringing advertising to the level of news.
- 1903 Becomes an automobile dealer, opening the Fisher Automobile Co. (agent for Reo, Packard, Stoddard Dayton). As he did earlier with bicycles, he promotes car sales by racing, and getting free publicity with sensational acts, such as riding a Stoddard-Dayton hanging from a balloon, dropping one from the roof of a tall building, etc.
- 1904 Sets world's speed record for automobiles (two miles in 2:02 minutes) in the Harlem dirt track in Chicago.
- 1904 Organizes Prest-O-Lite Corporation of America to manufacture carbide gas headlights for automobiles, in partnership with James Allison, future designer of the Allison aircraft engine.
- 1905 Goes to Europe with the American team to compete in the James Gordon Bennett Cup Races. The Americans make a poor showing, due to the inferiority of their cars.
- 1909 Builds the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, a profitable business venture as well as an invaluable testing ground. He wants to make American cars supreme and Indianapolis the center of the industry.
- 1909 Oct. 23 Marries Jane Watts, 15, of Indianapolis.
- 1910 Jan. Visits Miami for the first time. He and Jane stay only a week, but plan to return and buy a winter home.
- 1911 Sells Prest-O-Lite Corp. to Union Carbide for \$9,000,000.
- 1912 Buys his first Miami residence, "The Shadows," on Brickell Avenue, through the mail.
- 1912 Impressed with John Collins' half-finished wooden bridge across Biscayne Bay, loans him \$50,000 to complete it. As part of the agreement, he acquires from Collins 200 acres of beach and mangrove swamp. Loans \$150,000 to the Lummus brothers for their Ocean Beach development and acquires from them 210 acres and a mortgage on all low lands west of what will be Washington Avenue.
- 1912 Oct. Convinces leaders of the automobile industry to raise \$10,000,000 to build the first intercontinental paved road, "a coast-to-coast rock highway," to be known later as the Lincoln Highway.
- 1913 June 12 Collins Bridge is inaugurated. Fisher is in Indianapolis preparing to go with the "Trail Blazers" motorcade along the proposed route of the Lincoln Highway.

- 1913 Lincoln Highway Association organized, with Arthur B. Joy as president and C.G.F. as vice president.
- 1913 Announces that he will spend the next two years and \$250,000 to develop his section of the Beach into a winter resort city, "a tropical garden" with electric lights and telephones by 1914 and city water and sewerage by 1915.
- 1915 Lincoln Highway is completed. It will help selling automobiles beyond the wildest hopes of its backers in the industry.
- 1915 Begins campaign to build the Dixie Highway, which, besides further stimulating motor transportation, will bring tourists and settlers to Florida by the millions.
- 1915 Mar. 16 Miami Beach is incorporated as a town, with J. N. Lummus as its first mayor.
- 1915 Oct. Arrives in Miami at the head of the Dixie Highway Pathfinders' Tour caravan from Chicago, through Indianapolis, Louisville, Nashville and Chattanooga.
- 1915 Buys J. N. Lummus' land west of Washington Avenue for \$500,000 in partnership with James Allison, A.C. Newby and James A. Snowden, and organizes the Miami Ocean View Co. to handle its development.
- 1915 Begins building another residence, also called "The Shadows", this time on Lincoln Road in Miami Beach.
- 1916 Builds Lincoln Hotel, a 32-unit apartment hotel to accommodate overflow guests from "The Shadows", Cocolobo Club, a millionaires' fishing club on a small key near Caesar's Creek, and the Roman Pools, for some time the social center of Miami Beach.
- 1916 Sells a few lots (\$40,000).
- 1917 April U.S. declares war on Germany. C.G.F. proposes using Speedway as a military airfield. His proposal is rapidly approved and he is appointed to the National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics, and made chairman of the Landing Fields and Flying Routes Subcommittee of the Civil Aerial Transport Committee.
- 1917 May Miami Beach is incorporated as a city.
- 1917 Sells \$52,000 worth of lots.
- 1917-1918 Builds Star Island, first completely artificial island in Biscayne Bay.
- 1918 Sells \$132,000 worth of lots.
- 1919 Sets up the Miami Beach Bay Shore Co. in partnership with the Collins family (Fisher 51%; Collins 49%).

- 1919 Aug. Buys a 30-acre island south of Government Cut and sets up a new corporation, Peninsula Terminal Co. with the idea of enlarging the island and making a deepwater seaport. This plan is bitterly opposed by E.G. (Ev) Sewell and the Miami Chamber of Commerce. The controversy continues through the '20s and '30s and isn't settled until 1965.
- 1919 Sells \$300,000 worth of lots, after deliberately raising prices by 10% and announcing that he will continue to raise prices at least 10% each year. "We try to give our customers an investment that substantially and steadily grows in value".
- 1920 Builds the 150-room, \$2,000,000 Flamingo Hotel. The building of the Flamingo and the completion of the County Causeway account for the high volume of sales (almost \$2,000,000) during the year of tight money that preceded the 1921 depression.
- 1921 Jan. President-elect Warren Harding spends a weekend in one of the Flamingo's luxury cottages as his personal guest. The genial Harding obliges posing for publicity pictures on the golf course with a baby elephant for a caddy and with game fish at Cocolobo Club, where C.G.F. takes him in his yacht, Shadow K.
- 1921 June Albert H. Fisher dies.
- 1921 Nov. 13 After 12 years of marriage a son is born to the Fishers. The child dies 26 days later. C. G. F. and Jane drift apart. Begins to drink heavily.
- 1922 Sells "Blossom Heath," his Indianapolis home, and buys a house in Port Washington, Long Island, N.Y. Also rents an office in Manhattan to be near "where the big money is."
- 1922 Agrees, then declines, to adopt a three-year-old boy. Jane adopts the child on her own.
- 1922 His funds nearly exhausted by years of dredging, clearing the mangroves, filling the swamps, bulkheading the new shorelines, creating artificial islands, building roads, utilities, golf courses, polo grounds, yacht clubs, hotels, schools, a church, a theatre, homes, sponsoring sporting events, etc., his great gamble begins to pay off: lots begin to sell well. The Florida real estate boom is on.
- 1923 Builds the luxurious 189-room Nautilus Hotel at a cost of about \$2,000,000.
- 1923 Sells \$6,000,000 worth of lots.
- 1924 Sales reach \$8,000,000.
- 1925 Sales reach \$23,000,000 despite the fact that, unlike many Florida boom realtors and speculators, he adheres to a conservative, scrupulously honest sales policy. By now his fortune is estimated at \$50,000,000 to \$100,000,000.

- 1925 Looking for a new, bigger challenge, buys 10,000 acres on the sandy eastern end of Long Island, N.Y., with the idea of developing Montauk, "the Miami Beach of the North" as a summer resort and deep-water transatlantic port.
- 1925 Ida Graham Fisher dies.
- 1926 Florida real estate boom collapses.
- 1926 Sept. Hurricane causes severe damage to Miami Beach properties. C.G.F. halts all work in Montauk and proceeds to clean up and reconstruct Miami Beach.
- 1926 Jane goes to France and divorces him.
- 1927 Sells Indianapolis Motor Speedway to a group headed by Eddie Rickenbacker.
- 1927 June Marries his private secretary, Margaret Collier. Drinks heavily, gains weight, health begins to fail.
- 1929 Stock market crashes. C.G.F.'s main source of cash, payments on contracts and debts, fails as notes mature and go unpaid. Montauk bonds come due. Rather than letting down his friends and fellow investors, he makes good from the proceeds of sale of Speedway and Miami Beach funds.
- 1930-31 Various schemes to refinance Montauk fail. Montauk bonds go unredeemed.
- 1932 Montauk Beach Development Corporation goes into receivership.
- 1934 Bankruptcy proceedings are filed.
- 1935 The Carl G. Fisher Co., a holding company comprising 21 other Fisher corporations, is taken over by creditors. Personal bankruptcy is avoided, but he is no longer a wealthy man. The Bayshore Co., controlled now by the Collins family, gives him a salary of \$50,000 a year, later reduced to \$25,000, then to \$10,000. Personal property (houses automobiles, yachts, club memberships) are all sold to meet obligations.
- 1935 Separates from Margaret and moves to small house on 51st Street. Continues to drink, despite a deteriorating liver condition which requires painful weekly tapings of about 20 pounds of excess fluid from his abdomen.
- 1939 July 15 Dies at St. Francis Hospital, Miami Beach, from a massive gastric hemorrhage.