

# Vizcaya

By ADAM G. ADAMS

The text of the plaque just unveiled is:\*

## JAMES DEERING 1859-1925

James Deering of Chicago, a founder of the International Harvester Company, a pioneer developer of South Florida, noted connoisseur of the fine arts and distinguished philanthropist, built Vizcaya and lived there from 1916 until his death in 1925. In the buildings and gardens of Vizcaya, an expression of the classic Mediterranean spirit of Italy and France, unique in America, Mr. Deering brought together many rare European art treasures, and inspired the designs which combine them so skillfully with local materials. Marion Deering McCormick and Barbara Deering Danielson, his nieces, made Vizcaya available to Dade County as a public art museum November 1952.

The purpose of this plaque is to keep green the memory of the persons and events which have made possible this magnificent heritage of Dade County.

The physical property is in wonderful condition. During the thirty years since Mr. Deering's death his heirs have kept constant vigilance against the ravages of time. And the Dade County Park Department continues careful maintenance and operation as a public museum.

But it is now a public place! Let's put our fingers on the throbbing pulse of a great private home of an artistic, perfectionist bachelor millionaire. Mrs. C. J. Adair, for 35 years the housekeeper, arrived in February 1917, two months after Mr. Deering. Her staff numbered thirty-two, among them two French chefs, four butlers, four house men, and six house maids. All the maid's uniforms were made in the house, as well as the men's summer whites. For morning work the maids wore fine blue and white striped cotton; in the afternoon black silk with white apron trimmed with lace and little bows in their hair. This staff straightened and cleaned the house every day. By eleven in the morning, floors had been vacuumed, (the handsome rugs were more delicately and carefully cleaned), and waxed, flowers arranged. The luncheon

---

\* Parts of this paper were read at the dedication of the marker at Vizcaya, December 1, 1954.

table was set at noon, Mrs. Adair having fixed the floral center piece which was changed for dinner.

In 1917 Eustis Edgcombe, lately from Nassau, was employed in the gardens at Vizcaya. In 1918 when the "draft" took some house men, he began working in the house where he has worked ever since. Eustis remembers the bustle and excitement of the great house in action: Mrs. Adair, up at six thirty every morning feeding the wild birds at the entrance patio, Mr. Deering's interest in small details, his orders issued in writing, his kindnesses and fairness but always exacting.

Mr. Deering arrived at Vizcaya for Thanksgiving and stayed until June. The house was usually full of company, mostly Chicago friends with a sprinkling of Easterners and foreigners, and, of course, the families of his brother and sister were frequent visitors. There were usually extra guests for lunch, local friends and distinguished visitors. Mr. Deering was abstemious in his eating and drinking habits, but his table and cellar were famous for their magnificence.

And, lying at the dock to be kept in order by Mrs. Adair, was the "Nepenthe". It was equipped with the same monogrammed French linens and beautiful china, food and drink, as were used in the house, and always ready for a cruise, either for an afternoon or up to ten days which was Mr. Deering's limit.

Sammy Sands who still works at Vizcaya was the flower boy. There were five acres in Allapattah six miles away across town where the best soil was found, devoted to growing annuals. In slat houses and glass houses on the place were orchids and many other flowers. Five or six men were cutting blooms regularly to keep the "cold room" sufficiently well supplied for a complete change of flowers every day and on occasion twice a day. Cut flowers were kept all over the place, in the halls, patios, on the terraces and by the green house door. No rose bloom was cut in the rose garden. Roses, required on eighteen inch stems, came from Allapattah. Constant budding of roses on Texas stock, propagating and seeding were necessary to keep up with the enormous demand. A failure of supply was unthinkable. And then three times a week Sammy mounted his bicycle and delivered large boxes of flowers to Mr. Deering's friends, among them the Winstons, William Jennings Bryans, and the John B. Reillys.

Milk, eggs, fowls and vegetables were produced on the place. There were sweet corn, beans, peas, cucumbers, and cantaloupe. Seed were most carefully selected, many being imported.

Water from an artesian well west of Miami Avenue was piped into a basin at the north end of a ditch now dry and grown over. The porous walls of the ditch were sealed with cement. A free flowing stream of beautiful water flowed southward and down a cascade, then underground to the lagoon. This water also supplied the fountains which ran continuously at the entrances.

There were seven islands, where Mercy Hospital now stands, all to be kept spick and span. On Wednesdays and Sundays the public was invited to drive through the grounds. Mr. Deering was much interested in how many cars there were and had a careful count of visitors kept.

John J. Bennett, now a prominent engineer of Miami was employed to make the original boundary survey, and except for service in the army, remained until 1923. Altogether Mr. Bennett spent eight years with a crew of men doing the engineering work required for house and grounds at Vizcaya. He laid out the beds in the formal gardens by Mr. Chalfin's design. 6,000 pins were used to locate the border plants in one flower bed of intricate design.

William J. Broomfield was the head gardener. From a family of English gardeners and trained in the best school of that country's fine gardens, he found it difficult to apply knowledge of temperate zone horticulture to the semi-tropics. Trial and error and learning from natives, however, brought success.

Boxwood was first tried for parterre borders. Other plants also failed. Mr. Bloomfield at one time potted 30,000 seedling orange jasmin, *Chalcas exotica*, from the Brickell Avenue Plant Introduction Garden. But this plant was not satisfactory. Then by chance *Jasimum simpliciflorum*, a vine growing in the nearby jungle was tried. It was found that it was easily propagated by layering and then, although it was not known before, it responded beautifully to severe pruning. This plant is still the parterre border.

James Deering, although not so much interested in horticulture as his brother Charles, had a keen appreciation of the suitable. He imported from the western end of Cuba a cycad, *Microcycas calocoma*, one for each side of the main entrance. This plant is native to only one small area and is still extremely rare. In the entrance patio were four buccaneer palms, *Pseudo-phenix*, a native of Elliott's Key and now rare on account of indiscriminate exploitation in 1925. To insure agreeable growing conditions, these beautiful little palms were planted in large cypress boxes. Mr. Broomfield says that it took 16 men to move a boxed tree. The trees no longer survive at Vizcaya, but specimens may be seen at Fairchild Tropical Garden.

Mr. Deering was keenly interested in varieties and correct information and what he was told he remembered. Once he called "Billy" Broomfield to identify a cut rose. Billy identified it by "growth habit" as a William R. Smith but had never seen a bloom of that color. These roses had come from a florist who confirmed the identification and said that the color had been changed with dye. This outraged Mr. Deering. The roses were thrown out.

Events leading to the development of Vizcaya of course began with the natural endowments of the sub-tropical shores of Biscayne Bay. Then followed the discovery of those endowments and ' ' now but ever gathering interest in them by persons who had lived and thr many generations in temperate zones.

It may be interesting to recall some facts about the economy of the United States at the beginning of the 20th Century that produced men like Deering and places like Vizcaya. There was no income tax, no inheritance tax, no Securities and Exchange Commission. An individual's accumulation of wealth was his own. And, burgeoning industry was providing ample means for the money makers to accumulate in enormous amounts.

Frederick Lewis Allen says that Andrew Carnegie's personal gain in the year 1900 was over 23 million dollars. There were others rising in the world, still others enjoying their inheritances. It is reported that the Vanderbilt family spent (in today's money) the rough equivalent of 36 millions on seven residences on Fifth Avenue in New York in the middle eighties. And furthermore, this same family was building other great houses at Newport and elsewhere.

We are not forgetting the Goulds, the Astors, the Carnegies, the Morgans, the Goelets, the Belmonts, the Wideners, and others who had vast and princely residences. In those days, some fun was poked at the rich, not much, for being rich was a serious business. Anna Robeson Burr describes Henry C. Frick, the steel millionaire, "in his place, seated on a Renaissance throne under a boldacchine, and holding in his little hand a copy of the Saturday Evening Post."

But, with all of their foibles, most of the great business men and industrialists have perpetually enriched their country. The Henry Frick home on Fifth Avenue is a wonderful art gallery. John D. Rockefeller practically established the University of Chicago single-handed, and contributed to countless other humanitarian causes; Andrew Carnegie gave library buildings to all who asked and made marvelous contributions to education; and Marshall

Field and his associates were wonderfully generous in public works in Chicago. This is but a scanty list of public benefactors. All of the Deerings have made generous contributions to humanitarian and cultural organizations.

In this connection, no Floridian should forget the great boon of Henry M. Flagler, his pioneering spirit, his courage, his vision, without which our State might have been dormant much beyond its awakening about 1900.

It was about the time that Henry M. Flagler and John D. Rockefeller were setting up The Standard Oil Company. So fast did Flagler make money that he was active in the Company for only 13 years. He, Rockefeller, and others had done well for a few years prior to incorporation in 1870. But, by 1883, Flagler had 10 million dollars and an ill wife, so he decided to retire from business. During the next 29 years, that is until his death, it is variously estimated that he spent in the development of his railroad and hotel properties in Florida, 50 million dollars, including a home at Palm Beach which cost \$2,500,000 in that day's money. His estate was appraised at 100 million dollars, and, since 1883, he had apparently done nothing but spend money.

And, at this time of ostentation by the very rich, the working man had not yet begun to share in the benefits of the Industrial Revolution. Let us look at the other side of the picture. About the turn of the century, the "average" annual earnings of American workers was about \$500 a year. The work week was 60 hours. Many children had to work for their daily bread, industrial accidents were very common, and unemployment was fearful. Labor unions were hardly known. The President of the A. F. of L. was a cigar maker. And, in 1907, 1,250,000 immigrants arrived in the United States to compete for work.

It was felt by most that one could expect a depression and consequent added burdens every ten years. There were depressions — 1887, 1897, 1907, 1914, 1920; you know the rest. Times were different then.

Let us have a quick look at 1912. The most important event of that year in Dade County was that Mary Brickell sold 130 acres to James Deering, where he proposed to build a grand dwelling.

Early that year the Key West Extension of the FEC, a wonder of the world, had been completed by Henry M. Flagler.

In April of 1912 the unsinkable Titanic went down, shocking the world.

In June, Governor Woodrow Wilson of New Jersey was nominated for President of the United States in a long bitter fight with Champ Clark. I was

a spectator at the 1912 Democratic Convention. A political convention is one thing that has not changed.

Theodore Roosevelt formed the Bull Moose Party, which defeated the Republicans.

The Income Tax Amendment having been initiated under William Howard Taft was ratified by the states. It is said that a proposal was made to limit any income tax to 10%. But the suggestion was "pooh-poohed". "No such enormous rate would ever be levied any way. Why bother with a ridiculous limitation."

Woodrow Wilson was elected in November, a liberal Democrat.

In 1913, the first income tax was levied as a part of the tariff bill; 1% on income up to \$20,000, with a personal exemption of \$4,000: tax \$160.00. Recently, LIFE magazine reported that Lou Wolfson turned down a \$60,000 bonus. He would have netted only \$6,000 after taxes anyway. Times were different in 1912.

A personal experience will further point up the tempo of the times. After Governor Wilson's nomination, I had lunch with him in New York City. There were three of us wishing to talk of politics in Tennessee. Gov. Wilson was noncommittal on that subject, but a charming conversationalist on other topics. Now, one marvels at the simplicity of that lunch, in a midtown hotel dining room where no one stared, and no one asked for autographs. There were no "assistants", no "secretaries", no reporters, no photographers, just a governor of a neighbor state, running for the Presidency, who was able to lunch quietly with friends. Times were different then.

Government was only beginning to take an interest in business. On one occasion when William Rockefeller was being questioned by Government Counsel, it is said he replied all afternoon to a long series of questions, "I decline to answer, on the advice of counsel". It is further reported that no one took the matter very seriously. In fact, the session was considered rather amusing by everyone present. But, by 1912, the Federal Government had begun suit against the Sugar Trust; the "Bath Tub" trust was dissolved and the Supreme Court Board of Arbitration awarded locomotive engineers a minimum wage and general wage increase. Theodore Roosevelt's anger at the "Malefactors of great wealth" and his "Big Stick" philosophy were taking effect in Government.

But, the world was peaceful, outwardly at least. In 1912 we had not heard the cry of "Hun", no complaint, "I did not raise my boy to be a soldier",

no "Over There". But, world shaking events were not far off. It is amazing to consider how naive, how simple we were. Few suspected we were sitting on a "powder keg". Yet in 1908, Cecil Spring-Rice, a British diplomat, was writing, "Our philanthropists have again appealed to the Kaiser to stop arming! As if they had any chance of succeeding except by arming themselves. The new German forces by the end of 1911 will be so great by land and sea that there will have been nothing like it since the time of Napoleon. The nations of Europe are in a quiver of anxiety. In fact, peace depends on the will of one man."

It makes me wonder, if in this peaceful setting, this contentment which most of us enjoy, there may be other cataclysmic events not far off. We pray for great leadership and intelligent understanding.

It was in such times that James Deering announced his intention of building a great house in Brickell Hammock. A contemporary says: "One must remember that, at the time, Miami's population was only about 10,000. There were over 1,000 people employed on the job, 10% of the population. It can readily be seen that the building of the Deering Estate was a major factor in the economy of the community during those early days of its history (Miami was 16 years old).

Now, what about the Deerings? William Deering of Portland, Maine was a millionaire dealer in woolen cloth. He became interested in harvesting machinery through a friend to whom he loaned money. After having loaned at different times, 30 or \$40,000.00, he decided to go to Illinois to investigate what was becoming of his money. There he became so interested in the new business that he gave up his interests in Maine and moved to Illinois.

Mr. Deering began the manufacture of harvesting machinery in 1873. In the early '80s he had with him in the business his two sons, Charles and James and a little later his son-in-law, Richard Howe. All of the boys worked at times in all departments.

James Deering was a man of brilliant mind. He had a fine engineering education, having been graduated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He worked many years for Deering Harvester Company and for International Harvester Company. He was particularly a technical man, a "trouble shooter" and conducted trials of new machinery. It is said that he never really liked this work, and that he did it as a matter of duty. It is plain to see that his real love was art, and it is for this interest that we have most to thank him.

In 1901, William Deering retired and in 1902 the Deering Harvester Company was combined with McCormick Harvesting Machine Company to form International Harvester Company.

William Deering came to Miami about 1903. He resided at 3621 Main Highway where his grand-daughters still maintain a residence.

Mary Brickell's first deed to James Deering bears the date 31st day of December 1912 — it was about 130 acres of the Polly Lewis Donation, described by metes and bounds, and also by lot and block of a certain unrecorded plat . . . “now in the possession of the grantor”. There is no indication of the amount paid for the property. There were no revenue stamps required at that time.

But Henry Talley of Miami was present on the occasion of a transfer of deed by Mrs. Brickell in 1916 to Mr. Deering for another piece of land, being 1200 feet, starting at what is now the north boundary of the Rickenbacker Causeway Entrance, and extending south. The deed recites that Mrs. Brickell, “For and in consideration of the sum of Twenty-five Thousand Dollars and other valuable considerations, to her in hand paid”, etc., but the deed also carries a notation that \$139.00 in Internal Revenue Stamps were attached. This would indicate that Mr. Deering paid about \$115.00 a front foot for this property. The interesting part of Mr. Talley's connection with this transaction, was that he called on Mrs. Brickell by invitation. Mr. Deering came in and Mrs. Brickell handed him the deed whereupon Mr. Deering proffered a check. Mrs. Brickell, however, asked Mr. Talley to take the check. After Mr. Deering's departure, Edith Brickell, a daughter, and Mr. Talley took the check to the Bank of Bay Biscayne, where Mr. J. E. Lummus and Mr. James Gilman were waiting at the door. Edith then took the check and presently came back with a paper sack containing the money. Mrs. Brickell did not like checks any way, and certainly did not want to keep a check overnight.

Mr. F. L. McGinnis who was Mr. Deering's secretary says that Mr. Deering sold to his friend Winston the southerly two of the above lots at the price he paid for them. That deed, dated 13th day of December 1919, carries \$23 in stamps indicating \$115 a front foot, which verifies the preceding price.

From the beginning Mr. Deering was fussy about destroying any plants. It is still evident that no “bull dozers” were used to “clean up”. After the boundary survey and before any plans were made for building, engineers made a topographical survey and located every tree of over 6 inches in diameter. There was no hacking through the woods with a machete to carry a line

or sight a transit. If a bush or tree was in the way, it was tied back with ropes. Trees were located by coordinates from 100' squares bounded by cords stretched as well as possible without disturbing the trees and bushes. Mr. Deering even required that mules employed throughout the grounds be muzzled to prevent browsing on leaves as they passed.

As a final tribute to Mr. Deering's order not to cut a tree, the gate to the residence was located and a tree just had to be cut. It was a large tree. Mr. Chalfin, the architect, assembled a crew to wait until Mr. Deering left for the night. Then the tree was cut down, (it was too large to move) and taken out root and branch. The hole was filled and the place covered with leaves so that no sign was left of the depredation.

The Hammock did not quite reach Miami Avenue after passing the gateways. Many oaks were planted to give the effect of continuing woods around the entrance and this plaza and quite a large area east of Miami Avenue had to be planted to complete the present Hammock.

Miami Avenue had not been opened beyond Broadway (15th Street). One crossed the River on the turning Miami Avenue Bridge, then turned east to Brickell Avenue. There, barely wide enough for one Model "T", was a tunnel through the hammock on the site of the east lane of present Brickell Avenue. This track through the woods in 1912 extended through the present Vizcaya grounds, on the location of the lagoon which one sees between Miami Avenue and the house. The road continued south and came out to the present Bayshore Drive at the south entrance to Mercy Hospital and thence under the "bluff" to Coconut Grove.

This road was closed by agreement with the County Commissioners when Mr. Deering dedicated and built Miami Avenue between his walls as you now see it.

The dwelling was finished late in 1916. Mr. Deering was of rather a retiring nature. In many conversations, persons who knew Mr. Deering in his home, without direct questioning have expressed themselves as wanting it recorded that Mr. Deering was not of "wild" habits, that he had no "wild" parties, and that the reports that he did were pure gossip and do him a grave injustice.

Although the dwelling was finished by Christmas 1916, the gardens and the southern part of the property were not completed until some years later. All work ceased in April 1917 because of the war and very little was done until the early part of 1919.

Joseph J. Orr, a building contractor of Miami, was engaged on the construction of Vizcaya. Joe was a plaster's apprentice in 1913, and worked with his brother, John B. Orr, on the plastering and stucco work. The firm of John B. Orr, Inc., was the only contracting organization to serve from the inception of the work until completion. Joe Orr's first assignment was to work on the construction of the concrete and stucco wall which still surrounds the property. Mr. Orr says that the mechanics working on the fence wall, having been schooled in strict mechanical discipline, were using the finest of engineers' levels and other modern tools to do a perfect job. Mr. Paul Chalfin, the architect designer, upon observing the methods being used by a group of workmen, ordered the modern tools discarded, his idea being that the results would much better simulate the work of artisans who belonged to that architectural period upon which the planning and designing of the Deering Estate was based.

Mr. Orr says: "It was necessary to recruit artisans from all over the United States. Eventually, we had working on the job, (and I must say harmoniously) Americans, Scotch, English, Irish, Italians, French, Germans, Spanish, natives of British West Indies — in fact, from practically every nation under the sun. We had athletic clubs, soccer football teams, cricket and basketball teams, and many other social activities. Needless to say, Mr. Deering took a great interest in all of these programs, and, in many cases, donated prizes."

Roger L. Sullivan, now of the Insurance Department of the State of New York, writes that he was employed in New York by the electrical engineers when he was 19. He came to Miami on the Clyde Line. His first-class fare for the three-day trip including meals was \$24.75. He got a room at the Lenox Hotel on 10th Street near Avenue "C" (near Gesu Church). Mrs. Sturgis, the landlady, gave him a room and three meals a day for \$7.00 a week. One of the meals was a lunch packed for him to take to the job.

Mr. Sullivan rode to work with Eddie DeBrauwere, a plasterer, who had a Model "T". The fare was 10c each way. He had so many customers, Mr. Sullivan says, that it became necessary to reinforce the fenders and running boards so that the riders could stand, sit or hang on. It is also remembered by many that there were hundreds of bicycles belonging to the workmen on the grounds each day. Mr. Sullivan also remembers that he worked alongside Dan Moody, who afterwards became Governor of Texas. Mr. Sullivan makes a significant remark. He recalls that "Moody spent his spare time in study."

Thus from almost an entirely different world, comes to the people of Dade County, this property, the dream of a rich man of taste. His dream is executed in the grand manner, spacious, beautiful and inspiring. One may easily assume that Mr. Deering had in mind that the day would come when the public, the people, would have full enjoyment of these grandeurs. In no other way than through Mr. Deering's great fortune, and industry in artistic pursuits, and through the generosity of his heirs, could the people of Dade County have Vizcaya.

There are many persons living in Miami now who were employed in the construction of Vizcaya. Among them is the Chairman of the Dade County Commission, Mr. I. Douglas MacVicar. Mr. MacVicar, the Historical Association of Southern Florida takes great pleasure in dedicating this plaque and now commends it to your care.

This Page Blank in Original  
Source Document