



Larry Semes, 16, just before he left Dania to return to Plainfield, New Jersey, to find work. 1926.  
Courtesy of Robert Louis Semes.

# The Boom, the Blow, and the Bust One Man's Memories

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With Comments by Robert Louis Semes

## Editor's Introduction

Time is passing when the children of parents who moved to South Florida in the 1920s are now well into their seventies, and many of the passed down memories of the area's Boom of the Twenties, the Blow of 1926 and the Bust of 1929 are disappearing into the past. My father wrote his "life story" as part of a writing class that he and my mother attended in a California retirement community where they had moved from Florida in 1985. Writing in the late 1980s, Larry Semes reflected back on his youth, but with special interest and focus on his teenage exploratory trip to South Florida with his father in 1925, and his and his parent's subsequent move there from North Plainfield, New Jersey, later that year. It is a compelling and fascinating story of first-hand experience of the great South Florida Land Boom of the 1920s, the horrific hurricane of 1926, and the Stock Market crash of 1929, which was followed by the Great Depression. As Larry's son and a professional historian, I understand the importance of sharing the story of a time now slipping out of living memory so that present and future generations can appreciate the significant experiences of this generation of pioneers who participated in creating what was to become "America's Riviera."

## I. Going to Florida

In June (1925), my father<sup>1</sup> decided it was time to go to Florida. My mother<sup>2</sup> and I<sup>3</sup> wondered where this urge came from—why give up a thriving business for a "wild goose chase." Florida was considered to be the last frontier: with a wild and crazy land boom in progress. The urge to travel, to pioneer and take a gamble on making a quick fortune was

strong. At times, late at night, I heard bitter arguments between my parents, but my Father diplomatically won out. He already had a contract to build a garage apartment on a lot in a place called Fort Lauderdale. Payment was all on a cost plus basis, provided we started construction in a month.

Dad had gathered all the information he could, as well as all the available maps. People who had returned to Plainfield from Florida amplified the stories of easy money and the madness of buying and selling real estate. Soon my father bought supplies from the Army-Navy store and the plan took shape. We loaded the Ford station wagon<sup>4</sup> with a four-man tent, blankets, quilts to sleep on, a piece of oilcloth to lay on the ground under the quilts, and a new raincoat for each of us. A box to hold all of our gear was made to snugly fit in the trunk of the car; also, there was a box to hold our supplies. Two large canteens of water, a shovel, an axe, rope, our tools and our clothing finished out the load. A kerosene lantern swung from the inside of the auto's roof. Mr. Swanson, a Danish cabinetmaker, decided to also go along with us, and his few things were loaded in the station wagon as well.

Our friends the Bowers brothers, Gerry and Worth,<sup>5</sup> packed their Model T roadster and were ready to accompany us to Florida. In all of the excitement I tried to give my dog to my best friend to care for until I returned, but the dog protested, my mother refused to take care of him, so I just left my dog at home and somehow knew that my friend would feed him after I had gone. This was the hardest task I ever faced—to give up my dog. The two Model T's engines started to purr and we started off for Washington, D.C. It was a weekday morning with a slight drizzle. The weather got wetter as we rolled to our first night camp. We drove with the station wagon's curtains rolled down, while I tried to keep our spirits up. We ate snacks as we drove through Pennsylvania and Maryland, anxious to get to Washington. No unnecessary stops were made, my Father and Mr. Swanson driving in shifts. I tried to be the navigator.

In the late afternoon of the second day, we were on the outskirts of Washington. We got directions as to where the campground was and found it to be on the edge of the Potomac River. Mud and water was everywhere. The river looked ready to overflow its banks, so we could see a problem in our first camp. However, platforms on which to pitch tents were available to rent. My Father and Mr. Swanson dragged a platform to a space that looked dry enough for the night. To pitch a tent under these conditions really tested our patience: everything wet and ankle deep in mud and water, rain running down our necks and sweating under a hot raincoat. It was getting darker by the minute, and it was no



Larry Semes (on left) and the Bowers Brothers, who went to South Florida with Larry, his father, and Mr. Swanson in 1925.  
Courtesy of Robert Louis Semes.

fun trying to find the front of the tent, a true baptism into tenting and camping. In the meantime, our friends were going through the same exercise right next to us. Finally, our tents were up and ready for sleep, but we were hungry and ready to eat, but where? By now it was getting dark so we all piled into the station wagon and went into the city and stopped at the first hotel that swerved meals. I do not remember where it was, but it was fancy. Being muddy and wet, we were led to a table in the rear of the restaurant; I guess we were a sad looking bunch. We returned to our camp after dinner and soon we fell asleep listening to the gurgle of water running under our tent.

After a day of sightseeing in Washington, D.C., we were ready for the road, but it was not long before the paved road became a dirt road. This condition would be the same through the South. This was the main road, U.S. 1.

Travelling on, just about noon, we saw a sign reading: Home Cooked Meals, Good Food. A well-kept dirt road led in towards a well-cared for two story Southern-style house with shade trees all in right places, making it very inviting. The white painted house and the wide porch invited us to have lunch there. As we drove in toward the house we could see numerous small houses in the rear, with quite a few black people getting ready to have a meal under a huge shade tree. When we had parked and were approaching the veranda we were met by a distinguished elderly man standing on the steps. He welcomed each of us and told one of the black men to "serve the gentlemen." He led us to a wash bench at the side of the house and handed us towels on which to dry our hands. We were directed to the porch to wait while the tables were being prepared. We didn't realize that we had stumbled on a genuine Southern plantation until much later on. It was just like the storybook South. The black people, no longer slaves, were all free, but since most were born and raised here, they just continued to live and work for their home and food.

The feast that was set before us was something that we were surely not expecting: a large trestle table sagging with food, vegetables, meat, hot biscuits, cornbread, fresh butter and pitchers of cold milk and buttermilk. Iced tea and coffee were also available for those who wanted them. Then we were tempted with two kinds of fruit pies and a three-layer cake. We stuffed ourselves, but our host kept telling us to eat more, else his wife would think we did not like her cooking. Two other men ate with us, they both field foremen of the farm, and they said that the food was like this every day. Finally, we just couldn't eat another bite, so we praised the service that was provided by white-jacketed black waiters and told our host how everything was excellent. My father was dumbfounded when he paid the bill: it was twenty-five cents per person, and on top of all that, we were given a sack of biscuits with bits of country ham stuck into them, just so we wouldn't get hungry on the road. From what I can remember, this place was in the area around Fredericksburg, Virginia.

We knew when we entered Georgia because the dust turned deep red, the heat got worse and there wasn't any breeze. Daily we encountered road gangs working under the eyes of heavily armed guards with a pack of dogs just daring anyone to get out of line. The prisoners were cutting brush, clearing ditches, grading roads and even building or repairing

bridges. They all wore the traditional striped suits, some even were dragging a ball and chain. We read about these road gangs, the inhuman chain gangs, and the hard convicts we actually saw. They practically built all of the state's roads, we were told.

Finally, we arrived in Waycross, Georgia, where we spent the night at a hotel. Two days later we were headed for Florida. Our young guide from our last night in Georgia told us the best way to enter Florida was to head for Live Oak and then down the West Coast of Florida. He said that the East Coast was overcrowded and overcharging for everything. We had wondered about Tampa, Sarasota, and Ft. Myers, so now we could see for ourselves and then later head over to the East Coast to see Palm Beach and Miami.

When we reached Tampa, it was not interesting to any of us, so we continued on down toward Palmetto and Bradenton. U.S. 41 was a pretty good dirt road, and we were enjoying our trip. We breezed through Palmetto being that there wasn't any interest until we came to the bridge crossing the Manatee River on the way to Bradenton. Here we were so amazed by the clear aqua blue water flowing in under the bridge and the picturesque skyline of low cool-looking buildings and stately feathery palms fluttering in the breeze. This was our first sight of truly tropical Florida. When we proceeded down the tree-lined street of this sleepy town we wanted to stay, but we were heading for Sarasota. There was a campground very near the city, and it was here that we decided to stay for the night, so we pitched our tents. We ate our evening meal after looking over this charming little town in the throes of a land boom.

After dinner, we were impressed by the few taller buildings of Spanish influence softened by the setting sun and the cool look cast by the swaying palms. The beach, by this time, lost its glare and the Gulf beckoned us with its clear green color. One thing we knew, this little town was to be put on our preferred list for further study. The next day we were moving on and came to Venice-Nokomis, but a stop in the road then. This was the place about which all the railroaders talked. It would become a retirement area for none but railroad men from all over the country. The boom would change this into a paradise, they said. We weren't too impressed and left to go on to Charlotte Harbor and Punta Gorda; both towns were on our way to Ft. Myers, besides they had a catchy name. It was late in the afternoon when we hit the outskirts of Punta Gorda.

We selected a wide sandy beach on the north shore of the beautiful bay, just at the north end of the wooden bridge. The view across the bay

was so terrific that we decided to camp right there. Driftwood was plentiful, so a fire was going in no time. Just about sundown we started to be bitten by some kind of insect that set us on fire, but we couldn't see what was biting us. We made a smudge fire and suffered in the smoke but we still were being bitten. We drenched ourselves with Citronella and found momentary relief. Now huge hordes of extra large and small striped mosquitos swarmed over us. It was dark as pitch; we even put out our lantern, the weather warm and humid, still we put on our raincoats to get relief from the "skeeters" that by now had lapped up every bit of Citronella and were now drinking our blood.

Sleep was impossible. We sat at the water's edge and that did seem better, finally dozing off only to be rudely awakened by the incoming tide. We hurriedly pulled down our tent, loaded our gear on the station wagon and pulled to the road: we had enough of this! We decided to go back and cut over to Miami. At an all-night café we held a council, checked our map and heard from the owner of this café what he would do. He told us to head north and above Sarasota take a road to Orlando, then cut to the East Coast. We here heading back to Venice when we ran into clouds of horse flies that kept up with our speed no matter how fast we drove. When they bit us they actually drew blood and left a small hole. This was the last straw as far as the West Coast of Florida was concerned—they could keep it; we wanted no part of it.

When we reached Venice we gassed up and asked the best way to drive to the East Coast. We were told we could go two ways: one, over a sandy rut road to Arcadia, taking our chances on a very lonely road through a wild part of the Florida cattle country, or we could choose to go above or even with Tampa and cut across slightly better state roads to Orlando and then to the Coast. We would save almost two days of driving by the way of Arcadia and Okeechobee City. We chose to gamble and go through Arcadia. We were warned that this was not the best way, but we threw caution to the wind and headed out.

Every word of caution was true, every description that was given about it being lonely and desolate was true, and the sand ruts were almost a problem. Herds of cattle with listless cow hands riding around, not a bit friendly, didn't help our uneasiness. The fear of breakdowns was an ever present worry until later in the day we saw a few buildings shimmering in the heat—this was the outskirts of Arcadia. I think they must have heard our sigh of relief in town.

We stopped at a gas station, just a single pump, it was Waco Pep gas; the pump had to be pumped full in a glass container marked off in gal-

lons on the top of the pump. The pump handle was a long bar that pumped the gas to the glass chamber at every stroke as it was pushed back and forth. Some modern stations had pumps that would be pumped to ten gallons and sold the different weights of oil in quart jars with spouts. This also was a new way of servicing cars.

We all went into the general store and got a cold drink, started to chat with the owner and find out what was before us and how much further. He told us it was more of the same and about the same distance, also that we should be very careful because the natives resented any newcomers and were not very friendly. Arcadia, strictly a western-style cow town, had more horses than cars. We saw an airfield that was in use during the First World War and a cemetery with the graves of some English and Canadian recruits that didn't make it during training. This was one of the largest training schools in Florida—for training to fly and to fly combat missions. We saw enough, ate at the only café in town and again headed out. The storekeeper was right: the road was the same only more desolate. This was the most primitive and the wildest part of Florida.

In a few hours of driving, we finally came to the one and only street of Okeechobee City. It still was just a sand rut, but now we had hitching rails. As we drove down this main street of the most rugged, wild, lonely and hot piece of road, in the middle of the Everglades, it was like the rim of nowhere. Arcadia was a civilized metropolis in comparison. Some rough looking natives were eyeing us as we struggled down the road, resentment showing on every face gawking from the two saloons and the one gas station. We stopped at the general store, had a lukewarm Coke, there was no ice, and tried to get some information. It was like asking for money—they wouldn't even answer. We left the store and found the so-called sheriff looking at our cars. He asked many questions, gave us some answers, and then pointed down the street. He told us to go and turn right at a place and keep going and if we made it to the end that would be U.S. 1. He also said to go as soon as possible because the natives didn't like strangers. It wasn't too encouraging, but we had enough of this gun-toting town, of sand, palmettos and heat. Never had we seen so much of Florida covered with white sand and endless acres of palmetto, merciless heat with occasional clouds of horse flies. We suffered for the mistake we made in choosing this road, but then we would have missed the raw, true interior of the state.

After many grueling miles of loose sand ruts we came to the highway and saw the sign, U.S. 1! We were just a few miles from Fort Pierce, a small crossroads, so we decided to stop and camp there. The next morn-



ing we found that again we were in a one street town, one store, one café, water that tasted and smelled like rotten eggs, and no ice to be had. The food was just as bad. This was just a primitive fishing village with some orange groves. We headed south again when we got the second flat tire of the trip. As we stopped to change the tire, we were engulfed by a cloud of small mosquitos, and did they bite! While two men worked on the tire, the rest of us fanned with palmetto fronds. By this we kept the enemy at bay and made a tire change in record time.

The highway skirted the Inland Waterway, called Indian River; the scenery was so beautiful that we couldn't make too much headway to the south. Just beyond a place in the road called Jupiter we stopped in a "tourist court," the newest and latest in travel accommodations. This was a row of small cabins of wood with one room containing a bed and chest of drawers. The station wagon was parked between cabins. Also a small café was at the entrance to the "court." The wash house was big enough for three persons at one time, but this modern court now had a toilet in each cabin. To us weary travelers this was like home, so we stayed the night. Here we were introduced to the "no see ums" which bit like fire and can't be seen. Finally, being too tired and worn out, we all fell asleep.

The next morning, after a good breakfast, we again headed toward Fort Lauderdale. As we drove, the flurry of activity started to amaze us as we neared the outskirts of the city. This was more of what we were looking for. Not being too successful in finding a place to stay, we were told of a place in Oakland Park on the north side of the city. After some searching we finally found the place, a block building that once was a garage, the large wooden doors now nailed shut. A flat roof and two small windows for air, with a side door for entry greeted us. Inside it was bare walls, eight metal cots were in a row down each side, just like an army barracks. One end of the room had a board nailed to the wall and nails on which to hang clothes. There were two old wooden chairs to complete the furnishings. Outside, the wash facilities consisted of a wash bench fastened to the wall at a spigot, a shelf above with a mirror, and an outhouse in the rear among some young pine trees. We rented this all for twenty-five dollars per week. This we thought would be just until something better could be found. We never thought that this would be home for such a long time.

At night, the place was an oven, the roof was our ceiling, and the roof tar from the heat would drip down on us or our pillows at night. Someone forgot to put screens in the windows, so the flies and mosquitos could come and go at will. The only bright side to all this was a small

café a short distance away that did have home cooking and they even put up sandwiches for our lunch. We ate most of our meals there because it was the best place in the whole area.

The next day we went to search out the property on which we were to build. It wasn't easy to find, and after many trips to the assessor's office we finally found the stakes and planned our first contract in Florida for our New Jersey client. We called him that night and were told to proceed and to use our own judgment on the type of building most suited for the area. Since it wasn't easy to find building materials, we decided on a small garage apartment on stilts, garage below, living above. This would also be cooler, catching the breezes above the underbrush. While my father and Mr. Swanson went to find material, the rest of us attacked the palmetto clumps and the pines that were to be cleared from the job site. The sweat really poured from our hide, and we found that our thirst was just endless. As soon as we took a drink we would sweat it right out. We tired very easily and ended up in the shade. Our drinking water was gone and there wasn't any close by—then we really got thirsty. My father and Mr. Swanson came back and found us all stretched out in the shade. Then we had a real discussion on how we would proceed. My dad brought a well digger along and he said he would start to drive a well that night, it would be cooler to work then anyway. We would have water in the morning; it may not be cold but it would be good drinking water. He also told us not to drink but a few swallows, but to rinse out our mouths rather than drink. That would cut down the excessive sweating.

The lumber arrived the next day, and we started to work. The lumber that arrived came fresh from the sawmill; birds must have been singing on its branches a few days before, and it was good old long leaf Florida pine. Cement and concrete was as rare as ice, so since we would build on stilts we just dug holes and bedded the posts in some hand-mixed concrete. We would cut the length when we came to that part. The floor of the garage was made of fresh lime rock. We spread it, and after tamping it down we wet the surface, and it naturally formed a fairly hard top. When we started to frame the rest of the building is when we really got in trouble. Our saw would clog in a few strokes, and when we tried to drive a nail into a board the nail would bend. The well digger was still finishing up the well and saw our predicament, laughingly he came over and told us to each get a Coke bottle and fill it with kerosene and put a rag stopper in it. Then, each time we started to saw rub the rag stopper over the saw blade and it would not clog with the pine sawdust. Then we were told to build a fire, just a small one, using the fat pine chips and

lighter knots lying in the brush under the pine trees. We put a can of water on the fire, and when it was boiling we put the nails we wanted to use into the water until they got hot, then we could nail whatever board or timber we wanted to use. Amazingly, the nails didn't bend. All in all we had a time between the hard water, the resin in the pine and the intense breezeless heat: heavy, humid and fatiguing.

The house was up in no time from our working in the cool of the morning and in the evenings. The roof was completed, the windows, doors and plumbing installed. Now all wanted to sleep here, it was so much cooler at night and quieter at night, so it was decided to rotate, still holding on to our garage until later. We didn't have any idea of what the Boom was creating. The house completed, we sent the keys to the owner, with the bill and the name of the bank to which he should wire the money. The bank would then pay off all the bills and the rest we would get for our troubles. The payment was made in very short order and the owner sent us a letter stating that he had just sold the apartment sight unseen and made two thousand dollars on the deal. He thanked us and sent a check for "the best meal in Miami" as a bonus to our gang. The time had now come for us all to go to Miami and see what we would do next.

## II. The Boom

In 1925, when the five of us approached Miami, we gazed in awe at the multitude of feathery palms on every street, gracefully swaying in the light breeze. The Royal Poincianas were aflame in all their feathery finery. The well-built houses, not too close, each tinted in soft pastel colors on the exterior, made a great show. Many of the one-story houses had rusted tin roofs, some were corrugated, others were more elegant in the Spanish style of masonry and Cuban tile roofs. Every house had a patio or a porch on which to enjoy the cool southerly trade winds.

As we approached the waterfront we were amazed by the forest of masts and rigging of all sorts of sailing ships. At least fifty or more schooners, four-mast and brigs with others of every style were tied together, their bows pointing to the shore and the bustling downtown area. Facing these ships was the vast dredged-in area forming the dock space and storage for all sorts of material. (This area later became Bayfront Park.) The harsh glare from the lime rock and sand was blinding as fresh snow in the midday heat. In the background clear cool Biscayne Bay was dotted with anchored craft of all descriptions and sizes

waiting to be unloaded. All the stevedores and dock workers, of course, became land salesmen. This is what caused the embargo in Florida. The scene was typical of the pictures of the old San Francisco waterfront; even the stories were the same, as in the Gold Rush days.

Downtown Miami looked like a crazed money-mad frontier town. The streets were crowded with people aimlessly walking up and down. Business deals, mainly land sales, were being completed on the street, right out of the pockets of the dealers. Hotel lobbies were like disturbed ant hills, a madhouse of churning humans coming and going. The railroad station, practically in the center of town, was also in turmoil. However, at the freight yard, just beyond the station, a sea of boxcars filled every bit of track, waiting to be unloaded of tile from Chattanooga, cement blocks from Tennessee, roofing from Alabama and bricks from Georgia.

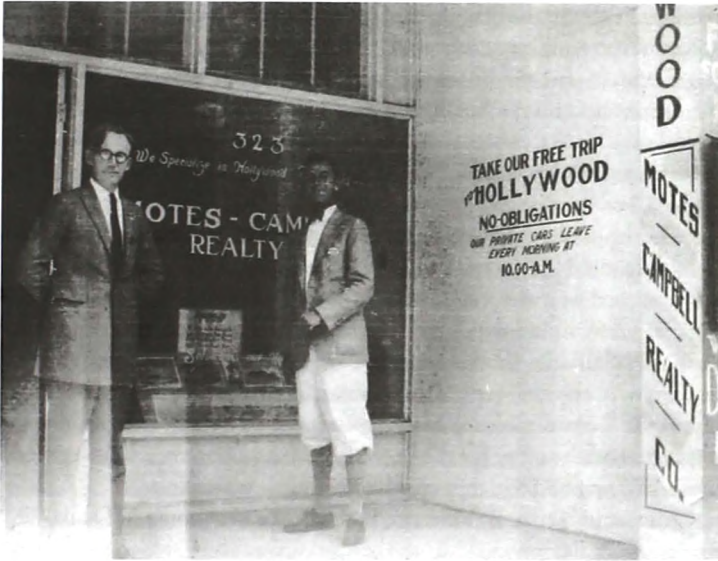
At the mouth of the Miami River stood a magnificent hotel, a five-story structure of wood, the Royal Palm Hotel. It was built by Henry M. Flagler, the builder of the huge hotels in St. Augustine and Palm Beach, and the builder of the railroad to Key West. The Royal Palm, designed for rich vacationers, was completed in 1897, just months after the incorporation of the city of Miami. Now the sweeping veranda was seething with money-seekers from all over looking to make a fortune on the land boom. The Columbus Hotel, next to the McAllister, at the foot of Flagler Street, the main thoroughfare, was being rushed to completion. Burdine's Department Store was expanding upwards. Beyond the Belcher oil storage tanks on Biscayne Boulevard an area was a virtual whirlpool of traffic, and the Venetian Hotel, built by an Atlanta group, was there as well, just about to open. Everywhere one looked buildings were going up as by magic. That is why Miami was given the name "The Magic City."

With all the building material in freight cars up to Hollywood and Ft. Lauderdale waiting on sidings to be unloaded, the railroads were greatly pressured. Dozens of people were daily pleading, cajoling and even offering bribes just to find out where their shipments were. No one could tell. Almost every storefront on Flagler Street opened to the sidewalk and was a real estate office or a developer's showroom with a name band or combo playing the current hits. Pretty young women, enticingly dressed, passed out brochures on the developers' property, cold drinks on tap, free barbeque and tickets to busses going to the sub-divisions. The streets were lined with white-painted busses decorated with signs and banners of the developers. They always seemed to be getting loaded by sales people in loud baggy knickers or in white pants and red and

white blazers. Their straw hats and canes completed the picture. Every one of them extolled the virtues of their respective subdivisions with their exotic names: Miami Springs, Miami Shores, Opa-locka, Coral Gables, Golden Beach, Sunny Isles, Irons Manor and Fulford-by-the-Sea. The free bus ride and free lunches with cold beer or soft drinks and bathing beauties all were arranged to take one's mind off their troubles. Anything was done to get people on the bus and to the properties—all the aim of the "Binder Boys," as they were called, who would give everyone the hard sell when they had the passengers relaxed and happy. Money in thousands of dollar bills changed hands every few minutes. Everything was in cash, even when many properties were rarely even seen. It was the paper deed that was sold—the last one holding the paper was really the one owning the property, lucky or not.

After almost a day of this turmoil and harassment, we decided to return to our Oakland Park quarters; we had our fill of the craziness. None of us had any inkling of being in a situation like this. Even while my dad and I were in a barbershop getting haircuts, the barbers were selling real estate. We tried to eat at one of the few restaurants where people were lined up to get in. No one seemed to be leaving, the tables were full of dirty dishes and deals were being made by the customers; even the waitresses were in on some of them. Everywhere people were trading land for paper, paper for money and money back to paper again.

Big developers from the North poured money into most of the new Boom properties. It didn't matter whether some of them were five miles or more from the ocean, they sported names that indicated they were right on the water. North of Miami Beach there was Hollywood-by-the-Sea with its lavish Hollywood Beach Hotel. The hotel, not content with its own spacious arrangement of rooms, took a strip of sandy beach, leveled it off and erected tents on wooden platforms, renting these units at room rates. This became known as "Tent City." Hollywood-by-the-Sea was the dream of J. H. Young, a developer, that progressed at a slower and smaller scale than most others. He also had a dream and also went broke in the "Bust" of 1929, never seeing his dream grow again after the Great Depression. Hollywood Boulevard ran from the ocean to the western edge of the city. He planned three circles in the boulevard: one at the main entry at U.S. 1 with a circular park in the center of downtown Hollywood. There, an outstanding hotel was built and a block away was the Hollywood Country Club with its sliding roof over the dance floor for moonlight dancing. The second circle west also had a charming hotel, another golf course and homes all around. The last circle on the west end of the boulevard also started a hotel styled like a citadel. This later



A real estate salesman and binder boy stand in front of the Motes Campbell Realty office. The sign of the wall to the right offers free trips to Hollywood, leaving daily at 10 am. Gift of J. W. Adams. HistoryMiami, 1990-443-18.

became a military school for boys of better means. This was some contrast to the beach hotel on the east end by the sea.

The main circle in downtown Hollywood had a band shell where many concerts were enjoyed by the people of the area. Caesar LaMonica, a very talented and dedicated band leader made all the arrangements for these concerts, even playing and directing for free. Later, during the Great Depression he formed an orchestra in Miami and became the first to give the Arthur Fiedler-type concerts for the public. Many well-known opera and musical stars donated their talents to the concert series.

Miami Springs popped up on the northwestern outer edge of Miami. Glenn Curtiss, a renowned aviator and inventor, developed this community known initially as Country Club Estates. In the 1930s, the prominent Kellogg family of Battle Creek, Michigan, purchased one of Miami Spring's most iconic Pueblo-styled buildings, the luxurious Hotel Country Club, and opened Miami Battle Creek Sanitarium, a health spa, in it. The spa became famous and did well for a few years. The Hialeah

race track arose in the new town of Hialeah that adjoined Miami Springs, and land surrounding it was going at a premium.

For years after the Boom's collapse in 1926, there was evidence of all the dreams and heartaches of this great land grab. Cities all over Florida were left with street signs, imposing arched entrances, sidewalks and streets covered with weeds, their exotic names still barely showing on the walls. All of this was the legacy of the Boom.

For us, the Boom provided a new life and a new home. We decided to look in the Hollywood area for a suitable place to build a house. We knew we had to make a start soon or return to New Jersey. In our looking around we found two lots in Dania that were for sale by the president of the Dania Bank. (Dania was the next town up from Hollywood.) To us they were choice lots, no trees, sidewalks already in place, and a water line at the sidewalk. After a hasty conference, we bought the lots, one for ourselves and the other for the Bowers brothers. Soon we would have our mothers down and live in a nice home again.

Almost immediately we started to plan our new house in Dania. The mayor of Dania, who sold us the property, was also the banker; he told us not to hesitate to call on him at any time for any help that we would need. We soon became good friends and later appreciated his help. Our lot was a typical level piece of sand covered with palmettos in such clusters that it appeared as though they were all one cluster. Dad and I decided that we would build a small cottage in the rear to use while we built the main house. The Bowers brothers also planned to do the same, starting a house just like ours. While I was grubbing out the palmetto clusters and the roots, clearing a site for the cottage and the main house, my dad was out looking for building material. Every rumor and every lumber yard was investigated. Since we still lived in Oakland Park, we scoured the area as we drove to Dania every morning. We found a few blocks here and there, even a bag of cement, although the price was a shock. We heard a rumor from the banker that a shipload of cement was shortly entering Miami harbor and we could buy it right off the ship. That day we hurried down to the port, found the ship and bought what we needed; we only had to get it ourselves from the dockside and pay cash at \$1.50 a bag. We pooled all our money and paid for as much as we could haul in the two autos, then headed home. On the way home we spotted a new block plant making cement blocks, so we stopped and ordered twenty blocks for pick-up the next day. We had no money for a deposit so we sold two bags of cement and were assured of our blocks.

We proceeded to level out the sand for the cottage and leveled eight cement blocks on the sand and then we were ready to start building. We

hauled our cement blocks from the plant, and while there we heard of a good lumber source. We later found the lumber place and ordered enough lumber to build both cottages. We had to haul our own, renting a big truck. Our cottage was fourteen by twenty feet, divided in the middle with a low partition for a bedroom. We installed a chemical toilet in one corner and a sink in the other corner, a wash stand outside and a wood floor alongside with a hose above for a shower. Usually we kept our clothes on as we showered, this being an easy way to launder our work clothes. Extra windows were installed in the cottage for cooling as much as possible. We had a water keg, and I would go to the icehouse each day to see if I could get a small piece of ice. We had an old wooden ice box to put our food in, but ice was at a premium those days, being in short supply from the Boom, which caused the old ice house to lag in production. We often drank the tepid water from the spigots now just as the natives were doing. We built the cottage quickly, raw and unfinished inside, but a place to sleep, hang our clothes and call home. We bought a kerosene stove and a double bed and a cot for me.

Breakfast was taking turns, also lunch the same way. For our suppers we found that the best was to go to the only café in Dania, a two-story wooden building with the usual tin roof. The first floor was the café, and rooms were available above. The fare was strictly Southern cooking, the grits and hot biscuits, ham and beef were excellent, only the okra, squash and turnip greens were something I just couldn't take. The best was the iced tea with a small piece of ice floating in it. After eating we would go back to work off the greasy okra and yellow squash; also it was so much cooler to work after sundown.

Eventually we had enough material to start the big house. There was no such thing as blueprints, we just measured out the size of the house we wanted and placed our cement blocks on the leveled sand. By now, the lumber yards and millwork plants were sprouting up everywhere, the railroads were lifting the embargo, and materials were more available. We ordered our windows and doors ahead of time, and while placing our order we were offered fantastic pay to work in the woodworking mill, especially with my dad as superintendent. We continued with our house, hurrying to finish while the midday sun was punishing us; but we accepted the heat which drove ourselves to get the roof on and have some shade to work under it.

Since our house design was a rectangular box with a flat roof, we progressed very quickly. The exterior wall was covered with a special plaster lathe for stucco. The stucco was the scratch coat and the "Spanish finish," the trademark of every Boom time house. Each plasterer had his own way



of putting on the stucco. The flat roof always had parapets for a trademark design. Some stucco was very rough, some was brushed down with a wet stucco brush to make a pleasing finish. Of course, then the painters all smeared different colors and then blended it all in with the final coat. Some finishes turned out artistic and some very hideous. Hundreds of these houses were built, and many are still standing, a memory to the greatest land boom in Florida history.

While we were building our Dania house, my mother sold our Plainfield house and the furniture. She packed her dishes and her pots and pans, her trunks with the fancy linens and embroidery, then sent them to the freight station to be shipped to us in Dania. She bought her ticket on the train and wrote my dad that she would be there in four days. Upon arriving late due to rail delays, mother was not in a pleasant mood. She couldn't believe that the cottage was to be home for a while. She was very tired from the long train ride, hungry in a strange land and in a state of shock about what she was facing. My father finally soothed her and put her to bed. The next day my mother saw the primitive area, the primitive cottage, the unfinished main house and the lack of furniture—she was determined to go back to New Jersey. She sat and watched us work in the heat and with my father explaining, she finally agreed to reconnect with the pioneering spirit that had originally brought her from Hungary to the United States in 1906. She soon lost herself in prettying up our home, cleaning and laundering, boiling our clothes in a pot over an open fire that I made for her and fighting the kerosene stove. She was amazed at the flowers I had growing in that almost sterile looking sand. She, of course, immediately took over.

In a few weeks we finally finished our new house and planned to move in. We never realized that it was three months since we had started on this lot, time had really flown by. We bought furniture while we were finishing the interior in order that it would be delivered when we moved in. What a glorious feeling to have a real bed of my own in a room of my own. The best was to have a bathroom with tub and shower, with hot and cold water. After a hectic period I really appreciated these "luxuries."

With all the linens and dishes put away our last worry was removed, we were now a family again. Our friends the Bowers completed their home and went back to New Jersey to settle their affairs and bring their folks down to Florida. We then had contracts to build two more houses for other people who were anxiously waiting for us to start. They wanted to take part in this real estate boom also. Things were looking up.

Now that building material was more plentiful, help easier to get, we completed the two houses and bought two lots just below the new Dania



The Semes family house before the 1926 hurricane.  
Courtesy of Robert Louis Semes.

Beach Hotel. This was a very elegant hotel for the area and housed one of the largest realty offices in south Florida. They were a great collection of super salesmen, maybe the best in the area. Mom and Dad planned to build a garage apartment on the one lot and a very fine, large house on the other, nothing to be spared as far as comfort or convenience was concerned. We rushed the garage apartment to completion and sold our first home for a handsome profit at the same time. I drew the plans for the new house and after many changes we had a very fine and appealingly styled home. We ordered the best and the latest in all windows and hardware and plumbing. We really went all out. This was to be our last effort before we returned to Plainfield to build on our lots up there. We would sell this house at a tremendous profit and go. We now found out, however, that my mother was thoroughly fed up with the sand, bugs, heat and money madness.

Mother was the driving force behind us, always pushing to complete the house and move. We worked long hours and finally completed the project. With palms brought in and placed as though they had grown there for years, we had good sized shrubs planted around the house, and then we gave an open house to all of the high-powered realty firms and to our friend the banker and mayor. We listed it for fifty thousand dollars<sup>6</sup> and told them to get busy. Not working, I went to play more tennis and all the golf I could get. I only had one more goal: attending the col-

lege that took high school drop-outs and offered a two year course in contracting and architecture. However, my life was not programmed to accomplish the goal.

The new house that we were trying to sell irritated my parents. Mother wanted the realtors to bring buyers, my father was getting worried because of the signs in the business circles. They were wondering whether to move into the new house or just show it in its splendor with its beautiful red oak floors, all hand-scraped and sanded, truly hand finished. Somehow we had a siege of buyers; the realtors were really hustling. We had many offers, the best was for the price my parents agreed on, but now, with so many people interested, my mother wouldn't consider the cash offer of fifty thousand dollars. The realtor brought a signed sales agreement and a cashier's check for ten thousand as a deposit. This is what my mother wouldn't agree to; she said the price was now fifty-five thousand dollars. I thought my father would blow up, but he just told my mother that she was a very greedy, selfish woman and that this was the biggest mistake she ever made in her life. After hours of arguing, my father finally got my mother to take the offer for the house and go back to New Jersey. The realtors tried to get the deal back but the buyer had left. The deal was dead, the realtors were also mad and no one was interested in trying to sell our house. Three months later the worst hurricane in the history of the state wiped out all we had.

### III. The Blow—The Hurricane of September 17-18, 1926

Dania was a small town in those days, two blocks long on U. S. 1, the road in and the road out of town. There were sidewalks on both sides with some paved and some unpaved streets going off the main street. The rest of the roads were coral rock, graded and rolled. In this town everyone knew everybody. It was a quiet little community. The beach was about a mile east down the road. It was as wild as nature wanted it to be; the fishing, however, was excellent at any time.

My memory of that clear, warm moonlit night, the halo around the perfect moon, caused me to wonder as my dog and I were walking. I was dreaming of what the future had in store for me, not realizing that this night would always be a memory etched into my mind never to be forgotten. The breeze was just enough to keep the mosquitos from biting too much as I walked along the street near my house. Even the land crabs, those miniature monsters from another world, their eyes on the end of two long stems, large claws out in front, walking in groups while they rattled their claws against each other making a weird noise. They

were either in groups in the road or they filled the wet ditches, only their eyes on the stems above water. They were out in full force that night, I remember.

Our house was only three blocks from the beach road and the center of Dania. The Dania Beach Hotel on the beach road was also the country club of the town; everything took place there. My dog was staying close to me, fretting and uneasy, looking up to me with those soft brown eyes. I also felt restless and uneasy. We went by the hotel and listened to a big-named band playing to a party in full swing, probably someone's birthday. I hated to go home, it was so peaceful outdoors. Finally I got home and prepared for bed. My dog pleaded to come inside from the porch, so I let him in and he went under my bed whimpering. This was very strange for my dog to be doing. I got to bed, however, and dozed off.

Later that night, I was awakened from a restless sleep with the sensation of the house vibrating. There seemed to be a faraway roar. The wind was gusting and the rain was coming heavier and heavier. My parents were sitting in the front room feeling perplexed and scared as well. It was about midnight. There was no more shiny moon. It was amazing, but true—the old saying about the most beautiful day or night you ever saw is before a hurricane. Suddenly my dog nudged me, trembling and whining softly. I hurriedly slipped into my pants and shirt joining my parents as we looked out the front window. The wind gusts were getting stronger, building into a steady blast. The rain drops now sounded like pebbles hitting the window and pounding on the roof. The porch screens were blown out and the wind was reaching a screaming crescendo, rain soon came horizontally, driven and running into every crack and crevice steadily forcing its way through to the inside of our house.

None of us could figure out what this weather was; we had storms before in New Jersey, but nothing like this. We never thought of listening to the radio for the warnings. About this time we felt and heard a big bang on the side of the house. The garage doors had blown open and were slamming against the house. The next thing we saw was one of the doors go cartwheeling across the field nearby. Now we started to get really scared; my mother was hysterical, the dog whined and my father was trying to go out the front door to the garage. I pleaded for him to stay in the house.

Our garage apartment was built about two feet off the ground with a large porch across the front to the garage. Looking through the window to the porch we could see the floor was covered with water. My father slipped out to the garage and returned with a coil of rope. He said we better go to higher ground, up into the center of Dania, probably to the

Methodist Church. We tied ourselves together and started out into the ghostly light; it was about four in the morning. As we started to walk through the water, now almost knee deep, a sudden gust of wind slammed us to the road. A gusty noise we heard was the front door blowing open, our windows blowing out and our garage door sailing away.

The rain stung the skin as we stepped into the deafening rage of the storm fighting to stay upright. We were amazed that the water was so high, not realizing that the wind was emptying the canal that was almost three blocks away. The wind was practically making us run towards the highway, the water tangling our feet, and breathing became a problem, sometimes getting more water than air from the increasingly heavy rain. Another problem was the tree limbs and other flying objects that could be lethal projectiles. We soon were able to reach the highway and the Methodist church that was our goal. The sky was getting lighter, a grayish green light. We soon passed the edge of a grove of citrus trees. Along the road the fruit was still flying from the branches, green fruit acting like cannon balls. One green grapefruit hit a telephone pole near us and took a chunk out of the pole. The wind was howling like a banshee, our clothes were plastered to us and we were feeling giddy from the low atmospheric pressure. We wondered if we could make it to the church. We read later that the barometric pressure went lower than 26.00 inches.

My poor mother was so exhausted by this time that my father and I carried her between us the rest of the way to the church. People already saw us coming and one of the men tried to help us, but he was slammed to the ground as we also were, all of us crawling the rest of the way to the church.

The Dania Methodist Church was a well-built block and concrete structure two stories high. The sanctuary was above the meeting rooms and the kitchen below. By now the church had changed its appearance. The plain square steeple was now resting on a house across the street. The roof was scattered to parts unknown. The upper floor walls were still standing with gaping holes showing where the windows had been. Now we wondered how we made it there. Those of us gathered in the building's first floor felt fairly safe under the sanctuary, the windows were smaller and the doors were sturdy. We all wondered what this storm was and where it came from. As most of us were watching the devastation through the windows we saw unbelievable pieces of trees and parts of buildings flying through the air, some even hitting our building and adding to our fears. The force of the wind was now very fierce, the noise unlike anything any of us had ever heard. The group on the north side of



The Dania-Hollywood Methodist Church after the 1926 hurricane. Elser, photographer. Gift of Jacksonville Historical Society. HistoryMiami, 1979-085-5 (above) and 1979-085-21 (below).



the building saw the round top of the city water tower fly off just as if it was a giant Frisbee. The nerve-racking high pitched sound of the screaming wind mixed with the roaring rumble of a giant freight train. Many of us wondered if this was the end.

Most of the women were huddled in the center of the room, the safest part. Their heads were bowed seemingly in prayer since this was indeed a time for prayer. However, when the walls in the sanctuary above us fell down, panic was almost out of control. Suddenly, there was a sudden lull in the storm. The lack of the high-pitched wind playing tricks was very eerie. The wind had dropped rapidly to just a fresh breeze, the sun shined through the fast moving clouds. A few people dared to step out of the safe area, some more to view the total destruction with roofless houses, tree limbs dangling by fiber threads, every street covered by tons of limbs and trash, sopping wet from the hours of rain. People got closer to people, clinging and hugging each other, happy to have survived. It grew very light as we all wondered if the storm was over. Some of the men started to go out to see if there was anyone they could help as the sun came out in a patch of blue. Now we all realized that it was past morning, the rain had stopped and the sudden stillness was almost putting us into shock. It was maddening.

Even though the women pleaded with the men not to go too far from the church, some went anyway. My father and I only ventured out to see if the building we were in was still safe. There was only one piece of wall left on the upper level, most of it was on the pews and the floor, from end to end. The lower level seemed safe enough for us to stay until we could find out what our next move would be. Everyone seemed to be too elated that the storm was now over. The scene outside the building was pure disaster: people coming out of all sorts of wrecked houses and everyone trying to aid the injured. Many just stood quietly in deep shock with a dazed look and vacant stare. Men were going to the cries for help, some were even carrying the injured to the church. Tangled messes were left strewn into heaps along with concrete blocks scattered about as though a giant was tired of playing with them. The beautiful trees that had lined our highway were now just twisted stumps. Light poles were splintered and broken wires tangled in a unholy mess hung dangerously here and there.

The cries of anguish from the injured were being heard now around us. Men carried more wounded, bypassing those who were beyond help. It seemed as though every house had some injured needing help, someone trapped in the rubble. In about thirty minutes from the beginning of this state of calm the sky turned gray and suddenly the rain started com-

ing down in sheets. The wind abruptly slammed into us like a freight train, but from the opposite direction than it had come before. Dad and I just made it back to the safety of the church as we carried an injured woman. Men who were knocked to the ground by the wind we had to drag inside. Quickly the door slammed shut. The fury of the winds soon blew out the windows on one side of the first floor. We quickly took the doors we had used for litters and blocked the windows. It took four men to hold the doors until we could nail or block them to the wall. We piled everything available against the wall. Now we watched from the other side as the same drama unfolded again. The wind was at its shrieking best, no one could figure out why the wind was blowing from the opposite side, or blowing at all. The general opinion was that the storm had turned to go back from where it had come.

We could see some unfortunate people who did not make it to the church crawling towards us, some in great pain and almost drowning in the torrential rain. Some were able to make it to the back door where helpful hands aided them and brought them inside. Some we could see being hit by the flying debris, suddenly not moving; some just covered their heads and lay on the ground riding out the fury. We all felt the urge to go out and brave the storm to help those caught in the ferocious winds, but all we could do was just look. Our concern was how long the storm would last. We didn't know what time it was, my father's watch was left home on the dresser. We supposed it was late afternoon, about twelve hours since the early morning. About two hours later the gusts started to weaken, the shrieking and the roar seemed to be at a lower pitch. It appeared that the worst of the storm had passed over us.

Soon we saw a group walking from town towards us. It was the police chief and some deputies. They came into the church building and told us that we had just survived a very dangerous tropical hurricane and they were so happy to see us unharmed. They noted that they had been in touch with Ft. Lauderdale and Palm Beach by short wave radio and that help was on its way. Miami and Hollywood were in worse shape than we were. Casualties were high everywhere, but the Red Cross was coming and the National Guard was also beginning to get rolling. The roads had to be cleared first before any movement could take place. The power company had heavy equipment starting to clear a way through and were making sure all power had been cut off. The chief said to move to the high school for the central First Aid station until more medical units could be brought in. The school gym became the morgue. Our one and only doctor pleaded for anyone to help in First Aid to go with him. The chief told us to form two groups, each to cover one side of town and look



the wounded and assist all to the First Aid station. He told us not to bother with the dead, just mark the location; they didn't need our help.

After all the injured were attended to we stopped to rest. It was at that time that we found out how tired we were, and hungry too. The church had a kitchen and in no time we had a fire of charcoal going outside. While the water was put to a boil we went into the center of town and scavenged all the canned goods we could, especially the coffee. The women, glad to be of some use, started to cook. We didn't realize how badly the town was damaged. The stores all had their fronts missing as though a bomb had gone off. Some stores only had the walls standing, roofless. The contents of stores were strewn in the street, broken and part of the debris. The chief had told us to salvage as much food as we could and he would join us later for a meal.

It all seemed so primitive, but to us it was going to be a feast. The news soon got out about the hot food, and many people had their first meal since the day before. More supplies came in and as it became dark we had candles for light. The candles were used sparingly since we knew it would be a long time before we would have electricity again. Most of us found a place to lie down and rest or nap because the next day would be a very difficult day. Our family huddled together and I tried to unwind and nap.

When morning came we started to hear the sirens of the ambulances as they came into the school area, loading and taking off as fast as they could. We never realized how long we would be hearing the sirens; it would be many days and nights. After the morning coffee, the three of us went to our street and stood on the little rise looking down toward our house. We were looking due east, the early morning sun softening the destruction of what once was our home. The water in the road still had not receded, ditches on each side were still full of floating remains of the storm. We could see the walls of the new house, but our little garage apartment was no longer there. The big house was very barren and desolate looking with windowless openings in the outside walls, no roof and only a tree limb waving from the would-be kitchen window. This was heartbreaking; the only cheer was the beautiful sunny morning. I couldn't hold back the tears, but then my mother and father wept too. They realized that we now had lost everything we had; a lifetime of hard work was gone. What we wore was what we owned.

The Red Cross caravan was to set up in one of the stores in town. The police chief told all of us that were homeless to immediately go and sign in with the Red Cross. The main part of our town looked like a bombed out village: stores with no fronts, the roof or one wall or two



Above and below; The Semes' garage apartment next to the main house after the 1926 hurricane. It was in this house that they tried to survive the storm, but eventually had to evacuate. Below: Louis Semes, Sr., stand in front. Courtesy of Robert Louis Semse.



Louis Semes' house after the 1926 hurricane. Mr. and Mrs. Semes had turned down \$55,000 for this house and the garage apartment just one month before the hurricane. Courtesy of Robert Louis Semes.

gone, a shambles everywhere you looked. The friendly little Dania bank that stood on the corner had just the floor and the vault in the rear holding up a part of a wall. The lobby was just a pile of rubble. The café where we learned to eat cornbread and okra was still standing but the windows were now gaping holes, most of the tin roof had been blown away. As we wandered down the road we just couldn't believe that such a short while ago this very road was busy. Then the thought suddenly struck me: what happened to my dog? I went weak at the thought of ignoring him all this time. This was our casualty, never realizing that this would be the last dog I would ever have. Later, I spent many hours and days searching for him or his remains, but I never found a trace. The human death toll was quite high. My close friends lost either their mother or father; some both parents. I lost three of my closest buddies. My Model T car I found in a drainage ditch with a part of a tree holding it down. I had just paid for it a week ago, so I just walked away from it, since it was beyond any help. Our family car was still in the garage with a piece of wall holding it to the concrete floor and a tree stump lying on the hood, the windows still up, and only one had cracked. But when I opened the door water and mud gushed out. This was what a hurricane could do.

We didn't realize how bad off we actually were until we got thirsty. The water plant needed electricity, and there was none. We found out that a pitcher pump behind the café was still working, so without being cautious or taking precautions, overpowered by thirst we drank the water. This became the town's only water supply until other arrangements were made. Here we were, homeless, destitute, with only the clothes we wore, very dejected, sad and getting hungry again. We weren't alone, many still had a house, however, and some had roofs over their heads, but they were the very few.

We walked to the Red Cross station set up in what was once the furniture store. On the way we passed the bank, now a pile of rubble. It was where our money was, the vault door still closed, but it would be days before it could be opened. Our books and papers were buried in the mud where our house stood. We wondered how anyone could prove how much money they had at the bank? Later, the bank did set up in a hastily cleaned and boarded store that was made usable. The Red Cross field director had us fill out forms and directed us to proceed to the Dania Beach Hotel and get clothing and sheets and blankets. We found a usable room in the hotel that wasn't too wet, having only had the windows broken. The lobby was a disaster. Every pane of glass and every door was splintered covering the tile floor with an added layer of stinking mud

almost a foot thick. Land crabs that were scurrying among the bloated pieces of furniture didn't help.

After sorting through piles of donations we did find some things that fit and weren't too heavy for our weather. Much of the clothing was from northerners, all heavy wooly coats, pants and shirts. After outfitting ourselves we reported back to the director for our meal ticket and work assignment. Mom was sent back to the hotel to help issue and fit clothes for the others and to help get the bedding and blankets out of their boxes. Dad and I were told to go to the cleanup crew. First, we all had to get typhoid shots, only then we would get our meal tickets. So after our shots, with our meal tickets in our pockets, we found the crew chief. Our first job was to search in the debris piles for victims. The heat helped since the odors that were pretty strong, usually meaning either an animal or a human casualty. We had to tie a rag over our nose as we continued the search; it was gruesome. At meal time we were told to get a bucket at the water truck that had arrived and draw our ration of water. It was less than a quart per person, to be used for drinking and washing. By now our arms were really sore, the hurt and pain was with every movement. My arm was swollen and feverish which meant the typhoid vaccine was working.

At the mess tent we were given a chunk of bread and a bowl of some sort of stew, which we washed down with black lukewarm coffee. Being hungry we ate every bit we could. Mom started to complain of a swollen arm also. I vividly remember on our way back to the hotel, we passed the furniture store that was being used as the Red Cross director's office. He was seated at a dining room table, even with a table cloth and napkins, eating a meal of what looked like fried chicken, iced tea by the pitcher and hot vegetables, served by one of his aides. By the looks of it he was enjoying his meal, almost flaunting the food as our messy work crew trudged toward their jobs. I could feel the resentment by all of the unfortunates.

When we met Mom after work she had good news for us: she had gathered bed linens and blankets for us and found a room on the second floor of the hotel that was fit to use. She said we were to use this until further arrangements could be made. When we again saw the first floor of the hotel it was a shambles beyond belief. The lobby and most of the first floor rooms had varying thicknesses of mud, furnishings were scattered and broken, very few windows were with glass and the doors were swollen shut or splintered open. The fine dining room looked as though a giant had kicked everything around. The musty, foul smell was getting pretty bad, so we opened everything we could to let the rooms dry and air out. The kitchen, luckily in the rear of the hotel, was slightly higher

than the dining room, which was a blessing because there was very little water damage in this tiled area.

When we woke up the next morning our arms were very sore, red and swollen so much that we could hardly dress. The shot had really reacted. After the breakfast served army-style at the field kitchen, we decided to see the Red Cross field director again. We told him of our plight and showed our swollen arms. He in turn very sympathetically told us to work it off or we don't eat. My dad was pretty mad and I was too, so we took our shovels and went back to the hotel, looked up our friend the resident hotel manager and told him we would work for him for our room. The story about the Red Cross man also made the hotel manager pretty upset. While we were talking, the German chef at the hotel was also listening. He and his wife, who were also residents, said that if we would help clean up the kitchen he would feed us as long as the food would hold out, and as long as we wanted to stay. We accepted gladly. We then marched down to the field office and told the director to get some other "slaves" for his job and also mentioned what he could do with his shovel and Red Cross relief. I'm sure our remarks didn't earn us any stars with the field office that day.

My dad and I were joined by another unfortunate on our return to the hotel. Until our arms would get better we made a survey of what we would do first in setting up a program of work. We also soaked our arms with cold compresses. We were ready for the next day. The chef asked us to start on the freezer, the walk in cooler in the kitchen, since it was still a bit cool although the power had been off for four days. We helped to get all the perishables out and called the Red Cross cook to come down. He gladly took all we had, promising to share with us as long as we wanted. We tackled the oil-fired stove and cleaned all the lines and the stove to make sure there was no water in the pump or the lines and soon had it working again, better than new. In trying to clean the kitchen we found that we had no water of course.

Since all Dania city water was shut off because there was no power for the pumps to fill the water tower, the only source was our town fire truck hooked to the well and pumping into a water truck. Water was being dispensed into containers. All the water you could carry was the rule. I found two five gallon water jugs from the water cooler at the hotel and carried these one at a time full from the water truck to the hotel. The walk was about a half mile, so to solve this I found a wheel barrow and with two jugs I rolled back and forth. Now we had water to cook with and to scrub down the kitchen. My mother took charge of the laundry,



The hurricane destroyed the Hollywood Beach boardwalk.  
Courtesy of Robert Louis Semes.

which was a big old-fashioned galvanized tub sitting on concrete blocks in back of the kitchen. I gathered enough wood to last for a day and made her a paddle to stir the boiling clothes. I also found some wire and put up clothes lines. Mom had a yard full of sheets every day.

Meanwhile, work was progressing in cleaning one room at a time on the main floor, as clean as soap and water could make them. The windows were patched until glass would be available. The dining room was cleaned of mud and trash; we repaired some tables and chairs from spare parts taken from broken-beyond-repair pieces. The rug was taken out and dried. The lobby, being all tile floor, was the easiest to clean. Temporary repairs were made on the doors and windows in order to keep out the weather and the inevitable rats and snakes. They were seeking food and dry land. By now we had recruited others to help with the cleanup; they also were given a room and meals for their assistance. The

program was going along well; most of the helpers were going back by now to rebuild their own homes, so it was more or less up to us to continue. The hotel manager contacted his northern boss, and money was wired and word was received on a truck with supplies starting on its way. By now, the lights were on again and the water supply was in use, so the hotel was shaping up ready for business. The best part of all this was that the Red Cross field director requested a room with meals at the hotel. Our manager politely told him there was no room at the inn, to just stay where you are. The whole group felt happy upon hearing this; we all felt justice had been done.

Daily we were watching the area dry out around our wrecked house. We would go to the house whenever we could and root around in the mud finding whatever we could. At the foundation of the garage apartment we found most of mom's silver; further along we uncovered dad's gold watch and heavy chain, some dishes that somehow weren't broken and numerous pots and pans. This was all that was left of our possessions; a pitifully small amount to show for a lifetime. Mom took what we found back to the hotel and boiled everything and stored it in cartons. I still grieved for my dog, unconsciously looking around and knowing that if he were alive he'd be home.

The main house was roofless, the windows all gone as well as the doors. The floor was caved in, piled with mud and trash. What a heartache to see what was once a fine home not too long before, in such shambles. Insurance in those days on any buildings was not thought of, only fire insurance. Our neighbor's houses were standing also roofless, no doors or windows, looking desolate with only a fragment of a curtain waving in the breeze as though swaying, "I surrender." The once-beautiful palms around our place were just stubs leaning every which way in keeping with the denuded salt water-soaked shrubbery. What a shock our neighbors would have.

As we contemplated our house, we wondered should we rebuild or just walk off and leave it? My mother was ready to return to Plainfield and start all over again. As we stood there trying to decide, tears running down our cheeks, looking at the high water mark, my dad decided to take the challenge and rebuild again. I agreed, as did my mother. By now, all the services were restored, the water and lights were again normal in the town. We had service to a pole, ready to hook up when we had a house again. The bank was again doing business in a store while rebuilding was in progress. Dad found out he could get a loan to rebuild our house. To have friends and a good reputation in our little town helped to finance our project, for the two empty lots weren't very good collateral. I don't

remember if we even thought of how we would repay the loan, we only had one goal now, however, rebuild and move in.

We worked on our house from sunup to sunset, on moonlit nights we even worked outside. To become tired was irritating because then we had to stop. The smelly mud was cleaned out, the floor was jacked up after we got rid of the land crabs and a few snakes. We put the roof on the house and many long days later we were able to move back into our own home again. We were still living at the filled to capacity hotel as honorary guests. The dining room was in full service, all due to the influx of repair crews from all over. Construction workers were everywhere, rebuilding much better just in case there would be another test.

When we moved back to our new home we had water but no electricity, still waiting on service which would come any day when a crew might come down and give it to us. We were the only ones so far from town. Again we had to cope with kerosene lamps and cook on an oil stove. It didn't take long to move our meager possessions. We did have some mismatched furniture that the hotel gave away and some that we could repair. The beds were good and even carpet that we had from the hotel had been scrubbed clean and was useable.

After we had moved back into our rebuilt house we started to look for work. There was plenty of work, but no one had any money to give for it. Business was bad; the only ones in business were the ones without the money to get out of town. We both got work: my father with a builder, and I on the new Hollywood Beach Hotel. This huge job was union and mostly concrete formwork, four and five stories high. I was fortunate enough until the roof was finished, then I was laid off. I did get a job with my dad; we made a good team, we and two others were picked as the finish carpenters. This all lasted until fall. Again we were both jobless. I managed to get a few weeks on the new Dania High School gym and wing, then my job was given to a family man who desperately needed work.

By now, everyone knew that the Boom was over; people were leaving the state in droves. Soon the tragic 1927-1928 hurricanes hit the Palm Beach and Lake Okeechobee areas, with the frightful toll of over 2,000 lives lost. The only shining event was that Lindberg flew across the Atlantic Ocean in May 1927. Construction jobs were scarce, the feeling of a financial crisis was in the air. The Boom was history. Weeds were growing on million dollar land and the feeling of despair was everywhere.

We heard that the two-mast ship *Rose Mahoney* across from the entrance of the Miami News tower had to be dynamited to ease the removal. Miami, Hollywood and Fort Lauderdale had over 12,000 build-



ings destroyed. Our whole area had been out of contact with the rest of the country for over thirty-six hours. Miami Beach was covered with three feet of sand. The fifteen-story Meyer-Kaiser building in downtown Miami was twisted so badly that eight stories were removed. The new building code was started for storm-resistant housing. This stopped many buildings either being started or under construction. Some projects went broke, some just became skeletons. The University of Miami's new administration building stood incomplete and was transformed into a jungle—overgrown and abandoned. The banks started to fail, on top of all the other troubles. The Dupont interests started to buy banks, buildings, and acreage all over the state, pennies on the dollar. Local people couldn't leave since they were holding the bag; all we could do was start from scratch. This was one side of Florida that not many knew about. Furthermore, there was not any agency to go to for assistance.

#### IV. The Bust

In Hollywood or Miami there just was no work of any kind to be had in 1929. The Great Depression was being felt everywhere. I heard that our neighbor Mrs. Becker was going back to Chicago, and she would like to have someone help drive her car. She had two teenaged boys of her own, and they were a handful. I volunteered and she accepted, so again I gathered my tools and packed my suitcase, loaded her car and successfully drove her to Niles Center, Illinois, just north of Chicago.

I caddied on the golf course in the mornings and looked for work in the afternoons and evenings, but that was futile. Around Thanksgiving, Mrs. Becker came by one day and said she was going back to her Florida home. The fall air in southern Illinois was getting crisp, and I was getting homesick, too, so I asked if I could share the ride with her. She didn't realize that I wanted to go home; she was happy that I was wanting to go. On the way back to Florida I often wondered if I had made the right decision, or was I ignoring a good future? I promised that if I changed my mind I would come back to Niles Center.

In the early years of the Depression, back in Dania, my father and I finally built the big house back to its original design, thanks to the trusting bank that gave us a mortgage. All we had to do was to make our monthly payments, and this caused us some worry.

Soon, we heard a rumor that a showcase and fixture company in Miami was looking for some expert cabinetmakers and millworkers. I now had a Model A Ford coupe, so my father and I went to see about these rumors. Our interview was a success; we were both hired, my father

as a full cabinetmaker and I as a helper. Top pay was seventy-five cents per hour for my father; I would receive fifty-five cents. We didn't argue, this was heaven-sent after picking tomatoes at five cents per bucket in wet fields. The green tomato stain that wouldn't wash off, or the ten-hour stint of shoveling rock into a concrete mixer for a fortunate two dollars per day, and only able to work two days so someone else was able to make some money, wore thin.

Thankful for the opportunity to smell sawdust and shavings again; our only worry was to satisfy our boss. The trip to Miami each day, beginning in the early morning, soon became a routine. We started out early so as to be at work since twenty miles in those days was still a long drive. U.S. 1 was still a narrow two lane road. Our boss liked our method of working and the skill we had. He assured us of steady work as long as we wanted. We were told that good woodworkers were not plentiful and hard to find. It wasn't very long before we both were given raises. We were very, very fortunate to have jobs. We were happily working every day, putting in as much as sixteen to eighteen hours each day because of some deadline. We didn't mind, the pay was good. We still drove back and forth each day, six days a week.

My father had an opportunity to trade our house and lots in Dania for a four-unit apartment building in downtown Miami. It faced the Railway Express office and (Florida East Coast Railway) railroad tracks and stood only a few blocks from the railroad station itself (on N.W. 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue between Fourth and Fifth Streets. The mortgage on the property was good-sized, but there were three lots in the trade also. These lots were free and clear, just off the corner of Le Jeune Road and the Tamiami Trail (S.W. 8<sup>th</sup> Street). At this time, these lots were practically out of town, very wild, and Le Jeune Road was only a narrow two lane road. The apartment was a two-story block structure with a flat roof and a center open stair to the second floor. This open stair also acted as a cooling vent to the upper units. All the units were rented; however, one lower rear unit would be empty within a short while. My father took my mother and me down to look over the building, and it was decided we would make the trade. We found it a bit sad the day we did move from Dania. Leaving a place where so much of our life was lived and the hardships and good times we had was difficult, but we also saw the challenge of moving to the big city and the new opportunities. We had all dreamed of living in Miami.

I borrowed a truck and piled our meager belongings in it and headed for Miami. Our apartment, now empty, was surprisingly cool, the breezeway really worked, sending a cool stream of circulating air in the

area. One of the other tenants was a young married architect whose wife was a secretary for a law firm. The other tenant was a bachelor who had a concession in the Capitol Theatre on North Miami Avenue (in the 300 block). This was just a block away. He sold toasted peanuts along with some real fancy nuts all bagged and sealed at his home. I found that the wooden boxes he received these imported nuts in contained some rare and pretty wood. So I got to take all I wanted. He next started to package salted nuts in some cellophane bags that had Tom's Nuts printed on the bag. I often wonder if he was the one that started the famous "Tom's Toasted Nuts," which was still going as I write today.

Work was very scarce, after the cabinet project in downtown Miami. However, my father did get a job in a millwork shop, but I was too young for them, not a bread-winner. I finally got a job in an auto salvage yard. I took good parts off junk cars and after cleaning them up and testing them they were binned. For this I earned one dollar a day. I did get plenty of experience on all makes of cars and plenty of parts to keep our Model A Ford running.

After a year at the apartment my folks decided that it would be wise to move from this area before the creeping deterioration took over. The winos and bums were getting too close. They soon found a nice bungalow on N.W. 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue just off Flagler Street. It was very convenient to everything, in a middle class neighborhood. The apartment building was sold for cash to Tom the peanut man. This was a big break for us in the midst of the Depression, because now my father could be very persuasive in any business deal. So we moved again, not into the bungalow but to a rental on N.W. 26<sup>th</sup> Avenue just off N.W. 7<sup>th</sup> Street. It was under some oaks and this made it fairly cool at night, but red hot in the daytime. Our rental was near the Silver Slipper Night Club.

With Prohibition now in effect, the Club did a very flourishing business. Don Lanning, the owner and bandleader had a featured singer, his wife Roberta Sherwood. Her "Sophie Tucker" style packed the place nightly. Many a night I would walk down the street to the rear of the Club and listen to the band and to Roberta belt out "When They Cut Down the Old Pine Tree." She was really marvelous. I heard later that Don had died and Roberta and her two sons went to Las Vegas to a club. Later we moved again to the bungalow on N.W. 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue and I got real lucky; I found a job with the government.

The times were still hard, no one would hire a teenager since there were so many family men looking for work. I sold my car and I went to my first job in months. With the Depression and no work available to young guys like me, I often went down to the docks hoping to find even

a day's work. I noticed a smart looking white yacht tied up at the pier. I was curious and approached the ship. Some of the crew was starting to chip and paint on the side so I started a conversation. In talking I found out that the ship was a survey vessel in the Coast and Geodetic Survey used for plotting the shoreline and finding and mapping the depth of the waters. This ship was working in the south end of Biscayne Bay in Miami. The sailor was about my age and soon found out in our conversation that I was looking for work. He said that if I really was interested he would take me to the boatswain. I met him, a typical character right out of the movies with a striped t-shirt, a well-worn salty-looking yachting cap and as a rugged a Norwegian face as I ever saw. He was a true sea dog.

I was questioned at length about my knowledge of the local waters, my background, home and age, all of which I answered with elaborate nautical terms, my expert knowledge of the lower Bay and the coastline. I know that he just let me rant on stupidly not believing half of what I said, but we did go to the captain, a fairly young lieutenant junior grade nautical engineer and from the Academy. We talked and I was hired as a seaman to report Sunday night and leave Monday morning. We were to go to the lower Bay. I found that the ship was *The Corsair*, a coal burner that J. P. Morgan had donated to the government and now put to good use. There was teakwood rails and deck, canvass awning over the fantail, gleaming white paint on the hull, a beautiful sight.

We finished our survey work the first week of December 1930 and when we returned to Miami we were told that we would be going to Charleston, South Carolina, the next week. The captain told us we would decommission our ship in Charleston and be ordered to a new vessel later that was being finished in Boston Navy Yard. I told my folks what we were going to do and that I would let them know where I was and what I planned to do later. The work in Charleston was good. We also ate well, worked hard and could go into Charleston every night. Of course we had very little money, so this was mostly sightseeing.

The fact that I found out that I loved the sea gave me the urge to join the U. S. Navy. I wanted to have this for my career—to travel, to advance in some profession. Naval aviation was in its infancy, and this really became my dream. After the job in Charleston with the Coast and Geodetic Survey ended, three of us decided to take jobs on a freighter as deck hands. It was sailing north, and that was what we wanted. I had tried to enlist in the Navy in Charleston, but their quota was full. Norfolk, Virginia, was the next place, and our ship was stopping there. At the first of the month I went to the Navy recruiting office in Norfolk.

I signed up and was told to be there the next day ready to go. I went to the shipyard where I was temporarily working and quit my job, got my pay and told my fellow workers. They wished me well, and we rehashed a few incidents after supper. I packed my bag the next morning and left for the recruiting office. My life in the U.S. Navy had begun.

#### Editor's Note

My father rode out The Great Depression in the U. S. Navy until 1937, when he returned to Miami. A year later he married my mother, Aretta Langley Horn of an early Miami family at Plymouth Congregational Church in Coconut Grove, then a suburb of Miami. He worked for a while at the Packard car dealership in Miami and then in 1940 began working for Eastern Air Lines until he retired in 1972 as the supervisor for the maintenance of Eastern Air's facilities in Miami. Larry Semes died at the age of 91 in 2001.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Louis Semes, Sr. was 42 years of age.
- 2 Carolina was 39 years of age.
- 3 Larry was 16 years of age.
- 4 1925 Ford Model T station wagon is pictured at <http://www.ohtm.org/25fordb.html>.
- 5 Gerald Bowers (1902-1985) died in Plainfield, New Jersey; Ellsworth Bowers (1905-1983) died in Warren, New Jersey, electing not to stay in Florida.
- 6 Approximately \$640,000 in present-day dollars.