

## HISTORY OF MIAMI BEACH

Fashioned by the hand of man with a magnificent assistant Mother Nature, Miami Beach stands today as America's No. 1 seaside resort.

Something like 30 years ago Miami Beach was partly water, partly sand and mostly mangrove swamp. Sand sucked up from the surrounding bays and fertile soil from nearby mucklands were used as bases for an unbelievably pretty city.

Today Miami Beach is the winter resort mecca for northerners by the hundreds of thousands - - many of them own their own homes here - - and, in recent years, has become a top summer play spot.

In 1911 the Florida land which is now Miami Beach, was owned by two men. The late John S. Collins, of New Jersey, had come here to inspect property on which he had loaned money, and he remained to foreclose on the property and to develop it into farmland. J. N. Lummus, Sr., first mayor of Miami Beach, meantime had acquired the few hundred acres of land not owned by Collins.

Originally all the ocean front land between Miami Beach and Palm Beach had been owned by two men who had secured it from the government with the idea of raising coconuts on a commercial scale. It was when they abandoned the idea that Collins obtained the Miami Beach end of the property.

Collins did not believe that coconuts could be raised profitably, and was planting avocados and other fruits and vegetables on his newly acquired land. More or less successful in this venture he soon discovered that lack of transportation to Miami, across the bay, was his greatest handicap.

Collins dug a canal from what is now Pancoast Lake to the eastern shores of Biscayne Bay, and was sending his produce to the market by boat. This, also, was unprofitable, and before the year of 1911 was over he started to erect a wooden bridge from Miami Beach to Miami.

About this time Collins induced his son-in-law, Thomas J. Pancoast, to join him here - - and it was shortly after this that the entire future of Miami Beach was to begin a fantastic change.

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Although the names of Collins and Pancoast must always head the list of pioneers in the development of Miami Beach, two of her men actually started the flame that was to spread the city's name far and wide as the "World's Playground."

It was early in 1912 that Carl G. Fisher "came to town." It was quite by accident that he arrived, but nevertheless he came and he started a development program and real estate boom greater than was ever witnessed in the world before.

Fisher, a former automobile race driver, manufacturer and builder of Indianapolis Motor Speedway, had retired at the age of 40 with some \$15,000,000 in the bank. He was all through with business, he thought, and was ready for play.

He bought a boat.

And, it was this boat that changed the destiny of not only Miami Beach but probably the entire State of Florida.

Fisher purchased the boat from a New York boat building company, and ordered it delivered to him at Cairo, Illinois. Fisher lived at Indianapolis at that time.

When the boat arrived at Cairo it was in charge of a young engineer, John H. Levi, who as superintendent of the boat building company, was delivering it personally. Fisher took an immediate liking to Levi, and asked him to accompany him on a jaunt down the Mississippi River.

At Mobile Fisher decided to ship the boat to Jacksonville by rail, and to proceed from there to New York up the Atlantic. When the boat was loaded on a flat car some railroad official "discovered" that its height on the car was too great to clear a low bridge between Mobile and Jacksonville.

Annoyed at this inconvenience the impatient Fisher boarded a train for his Indianapolis home, after persuading Levi to remain in charge of the boat and propel it around Cape Florida, and to Jacksonville where he would again meet it.

Levi and his small crew had a tiresome and perilous trip through the Gulf of Mexico and around the treacherous Florida Keys and upon arrival at Miami Levi wired Fisher and asked him to meet the boat in Miami instead of Jacksonville. "This is a pretty little

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town." were Levi's words in the telegram, and they were words that were to go down in history.

Fisher met Levi in Miami. He had never been there before, and probably had never heard of it before. Instead of proceeding to Jacksonville as planned he remained "a few days" and managed to buy another small boat and a home while looking the city over.

Intrigued by the beautiful inland waterways of the area Fisher and Levi spent many days in the small boat exploring. It was on one of these occasions that Fisher and Levi met Collins and Pancoast.

Collins was still trying to build his wooden bridge from Miami to Miami Beach, but had run out of working capital. Collins was then 70 years old. Fisher became so enthused at the enthusiasm of Collins that he advanced Collins sufficient funds to complete the bridge.

In return for this generosity Collins deeded Fisher several hundred acres of land as a bonus for the loan. Most of the land, however, was swampy and covered with mangrove.

Fisher engaged Levi as his chief engineer and began filling in the land and clearing the mangrove, and the first development of Miami Beach began. The Fisher-Levi team brought huge dredges to the shores of Miami Beach and pumped land from the bottom of Biscayne Bay to fill in the low places on the peninsula.

Fisher went on to lay out streets, parks, golf courses and to build a hotel. In the meantime his pumps were digging a yacht basin as they were throwing up land for the low spots.

Collins, of course, was continuing with his bridge, and it was opened in 1913 at about the time Fisher's first hotel was nearing completion. The farming idea had slipped from the minds of Collins and Pancoast by this time, and they were developing a portion of their remaining property for home sites and other buildings.

Workmen and others attracted here by Fisher's activities had gained in sufficient numbers by 1915 and it was decided to organize a city. Prior to this date Fisher's development had

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been known as Alton Beach, and it was on March 26, 1915 that the name was changed to Miami Beach and a charter was granted.

J. N. Lummus, sr., owner of nearly all of the ocean front property from the Government Cut north, was the city's first mayor and a prime mover in getting the city started.

By 1915 Fisher had built a second hotel, the Flamingo, and was starting another. His first hotel was the Lincoln at Washington Avenue and Lincoln Road, torn down in 1940 to make way for the new Mercantile Building.

Between 1915 and 1920 Fisher was spending money so fast for hotels, golf courses, polo fields and other development work that his Indianapolis bank sent one of its Vice Presidents, James A. Allison, to Miami Beach to see what this "crazy man" was doing.

Allison, a former partner of Fisher in the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, watched the "crazy man" for a few days and then invested half a million dollars of his own money and became one of Miami Beach's greatest investors and substantial citizens. He later erected an elaborate home on Star Island, built an aquarium on the site where the Floridian Hotel now stands and built an entire Island for the construction of St. Francis Hospital, which he later donated to the Sisters of St. Francis.

About 1920 Fisher, Collins and Lummus started offering their first properties for sale to the public. At first the idea appeared a bit ridiculous to the more skeptical, but after a few weeks of uneasiness lots began selling and a small land boom was on.

Between 1920 and 1923 great strides were made in the development of Miami Beach and similar booms were under way in other sections of the State. Real estate prices rocketed sky high by 1924 and America's greatest spectacle was in progress.

Fisher's five elaborate hotels had been completed by this time and he was continuing with paved streets, white way lighting, business buildings and other structures. It was said at one time in 1925 that Fisher's original investment of eight

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or ten million dollars had earned \$100,000,000. for him.

At the height of the boom in 1925 ocean front lots that had been difficult to sell for \$800 to \$1,000. in 1920 were bringing from \$400,000 to \$500,000 each, and none were available. Today, incidentally, those same lots are listed at \$75,000 each.

This boom which brought people from all parts of America to this area, naturally, had to end sometime. And it was well into 1926 that the thousands of over-night real estate salesmen and "binder boys" realized that there wouldn't be any more easy pickings here.

All of the real estate trading, however, wasn't on paper. Besides the Fisher and Collins developments under way in the early 20's others were erecting homes, apartments, hotels and other structures. In 1922, for instance, about \$1,500,000 worth of buildings were constructed here. The following year more than \$4,000,000 was spent for construction, and in 1924 permits were issued for over \$7,000,000 worth of new structures. The peak, however, was reached in 1925 when well over \$17,500,000 was invested for buildings alone.

In 1926 the city of Miami Beach was visited by a devastating hurricane which did millions of dollars worth of damage, and which, at the time, seemed as though it might break the spirit of the pioneers and of those who had planned to remain here through the reconstruction days that were to follow. This, however, was not the case. Storm debris was cleaned up. Damaged structures were repaired and Miami Beach again started forward.

At the end of 1927 Miami Beach was again showing considerable progress in the building of new homes and by 1929 another but smaller boom was about to start. Building that year aggregated almost \$8,000,000, but rapidly dropped to slightly over \$4,000,000 the following year when the stock market crash was felt in Miami Beach.

The depression years between 1930 and 1935, naturally, curtailed activity in Miami Beach, yet there was a certain amount

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of progress, and through a rigid economic program the city itself maintained adequate health and safety measures and kept public improvements moving and at the same time met all of its financial obligations without default.

Again in 1935 Miami Beach showed signs of further progress and the years to follow, probably, were the most prosperous with the exception of the abnormal and hectic two years of 1924 and 1925.

Miami Beach in 1942 has almost 300 hotels and nearly 1,000 apartment buildings, and can accommodate approximately 90,000 visitors at any given time. It is estimated that over 250,000 people visited Miami Beach during the 1940-41 winter season and accommodations have been added during the summer which should swell that number to 300,000 this year.

In addition to being "America's Greatest Winter Resort" Miami Beach is also becoming quite a well known summer vacation City. During the past three or four years summer business has increased to the extent that whereas a handful of hotels remained open then nearly 200 are now operated on a year-round schedule.

During all of Miami Beach's rapid growth, uncertain periods, depression years and fantastic booms the city has been lucky in the selection of its officials who have operated the affairs in a manner to attract favorable attention throughout the financial world.

For instance, John Levi has served on the City Council continuously since 1918, acting as President of the body a large portion of that time and as Mayor for one term. The present Mayor, Val C. Cleary, is a pioneer resident, having served as Tax Assessor in 1922, Mayor in 1930, and Councilman from 1934.

Collins died in 1929 at the age of 90; Fisher died in 1939. Levi, in 1942, is serving as Councilman, and Lummus is retired.