

Miami Beach Visitor and Convention Authority
News Bureau
555 - 17 Street
Miami Beach, Florida 33139
(305) 673-7083

MIAMI BEACH HISTORY

MIAMI BEACH--Guts and money built Miami Beach. Girlies put it on the map.

In half a century, the one island that has it all has grown from a swampland to the world's most modern, most concentrated 12-month playground; from 644 to more than 93,000 permanent residents.

Four men had the intestinal fortitude to push ahead. Two were New Jersey agricultural visionaries, John S. Collins and his son-in-law, T. J. Pancoast. The other two were Florida-born brothers, J. N. and J. E. Lummus.

Bankrolling the future of the place where the summer spends the winter was an Indiana sportsman millionaire, Carl Graham Fisher.

Rounding out the six-man constellation of early stars who shone in and for Miami Beach was Steve Hannegan. This Hoosier publicity genius supplied bathing beauty pictures to more than 500 American newspapers every week. The editors wanted girlie art and Hannegan fed their appetites.

The Roaring Twenties saw Miami Beach begin to toddle, then walk and finally gallop through the great Florida land boom until the bubble burst in 1925 and the great hurricane of 1926 flattened the burgeoning playland and put the finishing touches on most of the paper fortunes.

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Collins was the first of the real Miami Beach pioneers to make the scene in person and leave a lasting memory. A respected horticulturist in his native New Jersey, John S. Collins involved himself originally with a \$5,000 loan to friends who envisioned Miami Beach as the perfect farming land.

He later paid his first visit to the island in the early 1890's. A friend described how Collins "walked into a virgin jungle of palmetto scrub, kneeled and dug into the earth with his hands, allowing the black, sandy loam to run through his fingers, the knowing fingers of a dirt farmer with more than half a century of experience behind him.

"That settled it. The last vestige of doubt was gone. As he rose to his feet and dusted the clinging particles of sand from his hands, Miami Beach was born."

Unfortunately, the birth was somewhat more complicated than Collins' contemporary made it sound.

By the turn of the century, Collins had overruled apprehensive partners and invested his cash in what was to become quickly the largest grove in the world. To protect the young trees from strong winds off the ocean, Collins planted the twin lanes of Australian pine trees which now tower majestically over Pine Tree Drive.

In 1909, Collins bought out his doubting associates and as an assist to his farming effort, launched plans for what is now the Collins Canal. It was dug from the present Lake Pancoast to Biscayne Bay and quickly recognized as one of the most beautiful features of Miami Beach.

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Collins believed that one day the part of the island which was unsuitable for farming could be developed as an exclusive residential resort area. He had in mind to pattern it after Atlantic City, which was then the summer playground of the wealthy. To get his produce to Henry Flagler's railroad in Miami and potential land buyers from the mainland to his "farm," Collins, at the age of 74, began construction of a wooden bridge from the mainland.

He ran out of money in 1913 and Carl Graham Fisher, 38 and a millionaire, loaned him \$50,000 to finish the work. It was the longest wooden bridge in the world at the time. Now the Venetian Causeway, dotted with residential islands built on fill, stretches across the same space.

At about the same time, Fisher had been cruising the ocean waters on his yacht and noticed some land clearing activity on the sandbar which was to become Miami Beach. He looked up the Lummus brothers and inquired what they were about. They told him they envisioned a city the sea and Fisher inquired why they didn't do all the work at once. Then Lummus wrote in his memoirs:

"I told him we had an awful good reason and that was we did not have the money, so he loaned us \$150,000 and we paid him eight percent interest and gave him 105 acres of swampland from Lincoln Road south to 15th Street as a bonus. We had paid \$150 an acre for the land we gave Fisher.

"That, and that alone, is what started Miami Beach in a big way."

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Fisher put his new holdings together with 200 acres, a strip 1,800 feet wide and a mile deep from the ocean to the bay, which Collins had given him as a gesture of appreciation for the bridge loan. Then the auto industry magnate bought 200 acres more to the south and an additional 60 acres on the bayfront.

As the five-year old City of Miami Beach began to move in earnest, there thus were three major property owners in 1920. The Lummus brothers had formed the Miami Ocean View Company, Carl Fisher was operating as the Alton Beach Realty Company, and the Collins' development was the Miami Beach Improvement Company.

Dammers and his associate, one Gillett whose first name has been lost in the records, said they needed a gimmick before they began to pitch the crowds. The Lummus brothers bought carloads of glassware and crockery and everybody who came on the boats won some prize. Then Doc Dammers began his huckstering.

The first sale of the first auction was a put-up job. A Miami notable bid it in for Collins at \$5,000 and the stampede was on. The next buyer was a bona fide customer and the first rumble of the Miami Beach boom began.

J. N. Lummus, later to be Miami Beach's first mayor, finally offered free Collins Avenue lots to persons who promised to build houses on them to the Lummus specifications. He gave away 35 lots and the building began. Some of the original beach bungalows stood through hurricanes and bust until the massive hotel construction swept them aside after World War II.

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Most historians have credited Fisher with the "free lot to house builders" idea but Pete Chase, who was Fisher's general sales manager during the 1920's, credits Lummus with the promotion plan which put the Miami Beach show on the road.

Collins by 1920 had abandoned his first notion of making Miami Beach a lush tropical farmland and saw the potential of it as a resort development entirely.

Nature had been unfortunately sparing in the original land area for Miami Beach. Fisher and Collins set about remedying the oversight in a hurry. The original 1,600 acres of the sandbar were enlarged in 10 years to another 2,800 acres by constant dredging, pumping, and filling from the shallow bottom of Biscayne Bay. Fisher, backed by his almost endless Prest-O-Lite fortune, spent more than \$4 million for 37 miles of bulkheads to bolster the fill land.

By 1923, two years before the Florida boom as a whole hit its peak, Miami Beach was prospering mightily and independently all on its own power. The boom was just one more exciting episode in the steady progress of Miami Beach. The newcomers it brought were mostly undesirables -- fast money promoters with no scruples and Fisher did his best to exclude the fly-by-night boys.

Fisher held to firm lines when he had a buyer for his land. He investigated financial resources. His terms were strict: Even at the height of the boom, Fisher demanded 25 percent of the purchase price in cash and the balance in full in 18 months. He took a leaf from the Lummus book and wrote into his contracts that the buyer must build on the property within 12 months.

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Fisher held firm to his original idea that Miami Beach would succeed only by catering to the newly rich of the industrial north who found Palm Beach too snobbish and too conservative.

One cynical observer remarked at the time that Miami Beach was "what was left over when God finished making Palm Beach." Fisher heard him but ignored the sarcasm. When the get-rich-quick crowd was begging for help in the late 1920's, Carl Graham Fisher's fortune was virtually intact.

If he hadn't mortgaged his Miami Beach holdings to finance an ill-conceived resort venture on damp and dismal Long Island at about the same time, Fisher would have owned most of Miami Beach. But he gambled in Yankeeland and he lost. It cost him \$12 million and Collins' successors, son Irving and son-in-law Thomas J. Pancoast, took over most of the Fisher holdings in Miami Beach.

The horde of personal servants melted away, his wife divorced him and Carl Fisher, whose money backed up the men with the guts, spent his last years in a small Miami Beach cottage, almost broke by the standards of the life he had known.

Even with the debacle of the boom-bust in the rest of Florida, the great 1926 hurricane scars still visible, Miami Beach began to crawl back toward prosperity long before the rest of America.

No small amount of credit for the comeback belongs to Steve Hannegan, the Indiana publicity expert Fisher brought to Miami Beach in 1924. Within 10 years, Hannegan had built the most effective municipal public relations machine the world had ever seen. Under his direction, publicity became an industry and a fine art.

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Hannegan sized up the possibilities of what he had to market and saw quickly it was the fact a visitor could take an ocean dip off Miami Beach in January in surf warmer than the water off Los Angeles in August.

How do I call the world's attention to our warm surf, Hannegan asked himself? Legs. Newspapers across the land clamored for pictures the photographers called "girlies." They wanted curvaceous young things, singly and/or in droves, with particular attention on the legs which skirts had uncovered since the end of World War I.

Only in Miami Beach could you find girlies in bathing suits, flashing bare legs, in the wintertime. Steve Hannegan lined them up in everything from solo shots to virtual platoons and outgoing mail-bags were stuffed every day with girlies headed for picture-hungry news editors in the frozen north.

Hannegan was not just a flesh peddler, though. He established quickly a gilt-edged reputation for accuracy and honesty in reporting. He could not care less whether the news story spoke good or evil about Miami Beach. Just so long as it pinpointed the happening as Miami Beach.

He set up a separate staff to send notes to society editors in northern cities whose financially elite were basking under the warm sun in the place where summer spent the winter. Hannegan sold all the five U.S. newsreel companies on sending at least one cameraman each to Miami Beach every winter.

Pathe, Fox, Universal, Paramount and Hearst Metronone had a combined weekly audience of around 60 million and Hannegan didn't miss a one.

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Miami Beach was pleasant in the winter and when the newsreel men ran out of routine footage covering speedboat races, fashion shows, swimming meets, planes in flight against the South Florida skyline, they were easy prey for press agent stunts. Staged rescues from the ocean were a staple always good for several hundred feet of film; girlies were quickly available for posing, running, and cavorting on the sand.

To find as many bathing beauties as he needed, the Hannegan staffer only had to go as far as the nearest high school. The civic spirit was such that schoolgirls were freed from classes when girlies were in demand.

The results Hannegan got for the money he spent were fantastic. On a budget of less than \$50,000 a year, Miami Beach was getting news and picture space in northern newspapers which could not have been even approximated for \$10 million.

The girlies were not the sole source of the publicity. Honest-to-God celebrities were frequent Miami Beach visitors.

Warren G. Harding, following the lead of thousands of his fellow Ohioans, came to Miami Beach for his post-election, preinauguration vacation in January of 1921. The President-elect and most of his Cabinet-designate had made a leisurely trip to Miami Beach, floating down Florida's inland waterways on a huge houseboat with stops along the way to play golf. Harding relished the spirit of Miami Beach and told friends after a few days:

"Your own people here have not awakened to the possibilities of this playground of America. This beach is wonderful. It is developing like magic."

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The Harding party stayed at the Flamingo, Fisher's second and most luxurious hotel which had opened just a few weeks before. He golfed and as a publicity stunt, Fisher had his famed young elephant, Rosie, tote Harding's bag for the new Republican chief executive.

That same year, the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce was organized. The first of two huge swanky gambling casinos opened for business. (For two years in the mid-1930's, Miami Beach had legalized slot machines but the State Legislature repealed the permission as quickly as it could.) Al Capone came and went during those Roaring Twenties.

The very snooty Bath Club was born, as was the Committee of One Hundred, referred to then as the unofficial Senate of Miami Beach.

James M. Cox, who lost to Harding in the 1920 election, resigned from the Bath Club in 1930 and led that body's membership waiting list into a new socially elite group he called the Surf Club. Cox was enraged because Bath Club rules forbade entrance as a Cox guest to Adolph Ochs, publisher of the New York Times and a Jew.

Fifth Avenue stores began to open branches in Miami Beach with Saks and Best & Co. leading the merchandising parade. Moe Annenberg, the Philadelphia publishing tycoon who controlled the nation's racing information wires, built a lavish home in Miami Beach but failed in his attempt to buy the Miami Herald.

NEWSWEEK magazine once described Miami Beach as "4,000 acres of noise and wonder, the garishness and fun of Broadway, the nightly parade of mink coats, no matter what the weather. Most of all, perhaps, it's a sense of luxury."

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Miami Beach today, a half century out of the mangrove swamp and palmetto scrubland, still fits a comment Carl Fisher once made to Steve Hannegan.

"Steve," Fisher told him, "Miami Beach was the only natural we ever had. But boy, what a natural it was."

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