

CHAPTER II

PIONEERS' AMUSEMENTS AND THRILLS

THE most popular form of amusement enjoyed by Miami's early settlers was the watching of arrivals and departures of passenger trains. The passenger station was originally located in the vicinity of where it stands at present, but was later removed to what is now known as Northeast Sixth Street, between Second Avenue and Bayshore Drive, occupying the sites covered by Armour Company's building and the partly completed Cox building, the future home of the *News-Metropolis*. The station was subsequently returned to its original location.

Additional amusement was afforded by the periodic visits of Indians that came down the Miami River from the Everglades in canoes laden with raccoon, otter, mink and alligator hides, and often with beautiful egrets and other rare plumes. This form of amusement proved highly profitable to some of the pioneers, especially to the saloonkeepers of North Miami, who carried on considerable traffic with the Indians. Not all Indians,

SKETCHES OF MIAMI

however, converted their wares into whiskey. Charlie Tigertail, brother of Jack Tigertail, who about a year or so ago was shot and killed in the Indian village of Musa Isle, used to ship his wares direct to the northern markets and receive his returns in gold coin. He invested the proceeds of such sales in merchandise which he retailed among his own people at enormous profits.

A little later in the history of Miami, several of the more talented pioneers had gotten up a minstrel show for the delectation of the public. That memorable performance was staged in a shack which stood on the east side of what is today known as South Miami Avenue, near the river. Harry E. Tuttle was stage manager, D. W. Moran, black-faced interlocutor, and the writer was pressed into service as curtain operator. Immediately following the first shock produced upon the critical audience by a rapid fire of hoary jokes, a vicious bombardment of decayed vegetables and other missiles was directed toward the stage with such unerring aim that not a single member of that martyred group of actors was missed. The stage manager's violent gestures in the direction of the curtain operator, urging the descension of the curtain

SKETCHES OF MIAMI

and the protection of the performers, were deliberately unheeded because of that individual's sympathy with the suffering audience rather than with the presumptuous actors.

Following that sensational but by no means unpleasing dramatic adventure, bicycle racing became the most popular amusement. A course was laid out at a point commencing at the intersection of Flagler Street and Northeast Second Avenue, running west to Miami Avenue, then south to Second Street, then east to Bayshore Drive, north to Flagler Street, then west to the starting point. The frequent races proved full of thrills and excitement. Championships were won and lost by the numerous contestants and considerable amounts of money changed hands among the spectators who made bets on the results. This form of amusement finally terminated in a near-tragedy. One of the champions, the late Wilbur Hendrix, who a number of years later was shot and killed by Bob Ashley, in the corridor of the County Jail, in his efforts to frustrate the latter's attempt to effect the escape of his brother John who was held for his alleged killing of an Indian (John Ashley and three companions, the last of the Ashley gang, were

SKETCHES OF MIAMI

recently killed by a posse composed of St. Lucie and Palm Beach County officers), in turning the corner into Miami Avenue at full speed, collided with one of the iron posts which supported the awning in front of Brady's grocery store, and sustained fractures of several ribs and was otherwise severely injured. That memorable race was the last. In addition to the excitement caused by the accident, the announcement by the judges that the race resulted in a tie between Charlie Thompson, the late Oscar Tucker and John the Dutchman, precipitated a general fight among the bettors, who claimed victory for their respective favorites and demanded their winnings which the stake-holders decided to keep for themselves.

Poker and baseball were the pioneers' favorite amusements. An honest poker player those days enjoyed as great a prestige in the community as that of a city commissioner in this period. However, no details of the games can be given without self-incrimination and the implication of many surviving pioneers of prominence. Many sensational baseball games were played by Miami's pioneers, but none excelled in thrills the super-game that was played on the Royal Palm dia-

SKETCHES OF MIAMI

mond to decide a mayoralty election between candidates Frank Wharton and W. W. Prout. The contest proved all it was expected to be, sensational from start to finish. In the last inning most of the spectators took a hand, some helping the exhausted players to their bases, and others trying to kill the umpire. The two most exciting features of that historic game were a most wonderful slide for the home plate by County Clerk Z. T. Merritt (avoirdupois, 275 pounds), who remained motionless within about ten feet from his goal, where he rested until the end of the game by permission of the sympathetic umpire, who announced his brilliant performance "safe," and Judge G. A. Worley's remarkable performance, a description of which follows.

All the bases were filled by players and spectators when the Judge went to bat. After bowing to the grand stand and shouting to those who admiringly surrounded him to disperse, he rubbed his hands with sand, took hold of a giant bat and looked dreamily toward the Atlantic across the bay. The spectators were awe-stricken by his dramatic pose, but soon recovered and as with one voice shouted "Judge, give 'em hell." The Judge was visibly moved by this demonstration

SKETCHES OF MIAMI

of confidence. Standing erect in his size sixty-six blue-jeans, he looked for all the world like the famous actor DeWolf Hopper, in his role "Casey at the Bat." Like his prototype, he treated the first two balls with scorn and swung with all his might against the third, which unlike Casey, he struck full in the face and sent it flying across Biscayne Bay. This phenomenal performance was followed by a spontaneous explosion from the band that played several popular airs while the players and spectators walked, some arm in arm, around the bases to the home plate where all joined in an ovation to the modern Casey.

At the conclusion of the game the victors (Wharton's team) were carried on the shoulders of their admirers, who marched to town preceded by the band which played "Hail, Conquering Hero," as they never played before, or since. Indeed, it was well for most of those heroes to have been carried thus, as they were all in and could not walk a step.

Another exciting baseball game took place on the day following the writer's convulsive initiation into the mysteries of Elkdom. This dramatic incident occurred on a Thursday afternoon when Miami's entire population turned out to

SKETCHES OF MIAMI

watch the game. Arriving somewhat late, and while trying to secure a seat in the grand stand the writer was embarrassed by exclamations from the crowd to sit down. This solicitous interest in his personal comfort evoked the defiant retort that he would bet any one in the crowd a dollar on the visiting team. This challenge proved a wonderful test of the pioneers' civic pride. Everybody within reach offered to cover the bet, as a result of which the uproar became so great that chief of police, Frank Hardee, who occupied a seat next to municipal judge, George Bolles, was compelled to extricate the disturber from the excited crowd and put him between them for protection. Upon restoration of order he ventured to glance over his shoulder at the crowd of gamblers behind him; whereupon a brother Elk, named "Beauty Jones," offered to bet him a dollar on the home team. To show the crowd that he remained unintimidated by their riotous conduct he instantly covered the bet.

The following morning Chief Hardee entered the writer's store and put him under arrest. Upon being brought into the city court room he found the place filled with prominent citizens, most of whom he recognized as his tormentors

SKETCHES OF MIAMI

in the Elk's lodge of the preceding Wednesday night. For information regarding the assemblage he turned to Oscar Conkling, court reporter for the *Metropolis*, who stated that the majority of those present were Elks, and that they were there for the purpose of aiding in his (the writer's) prosecution for gambling because he had disgraced the order. This explanation seemed incredible, as he was told that no Elk would prosecute a fellow Elk. He rather suspected that it was a conspiracy hatched by the partisans of the Florida East Coast Railway Corporation — the presence of John B. Reilly was a basis for such suspicion. In those days the supporters of that corporation missed no opportunity to punish its political antagonists. However, this suspicion proved groundless.

After a whispered consultation between the judge and chief of police, the prisoner was called to the bar and charged with gambling. In response to the judge's question "guilty or not guilty?" the defendant asked his honor how much he had bet on the game. This strategic question was declared by the learned judge to be irrelevant, and if repeated he would put the defendant in jail for contempt of court. This

SKETCHES OF MIAMI

judicial threat precipitated a heated argument between the judge and the prisoner at the bar which came near ending in a physical encounter between them. Finally, upon advice of Judge Atkinson, the defendant pleaded guilty. Whereupon the presiding judge admonished the defendant not to be late at future baseball games and ordered him to spend the dollar he had won on something to drink for the thirsty Elks, including himself, who was also a member of the herd. The verdict was received with applause. Upon restoration of order the exalted ruler of the local Elks Lodge approached its neophyte in due form, solemnly declaring that this ended the third and final section of his initiation as an Elk.