

**Carl Graham Fisher: Mr. Miami Beach and Much More**  
**By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC**

**Part II**

Creator of Miami Beach

Throughout Fisher's early years he showed a keen eye for real estate. Always interested in the best, his showrooms, offices, plants and homes were showplaces of their kind. In 1913 he took that accumulated knowledge of construction, and made a giant leap into the ranks of the country's biggest real estate czars. While vacationing in south Florida, he couldn't but help notice the barrier island that paralleled the city of Miami. Miami Beach, as it was called, was 3,500 acres of mangrove swamp and beach. Connected to the mainland by a half finished wooden bridge, it was unpopulated, and unwanted. Single handedly, Fisher transformed it into one of the most stylish resorts in the world. He cut down the mangroves, and to the astonishment of the locals, he dredged up sand from Biscayne Bay to fill in the swampland, and shipped in hundreds of tons of topsoil from the Everglades. He then built streets and sidewalks and laid out the city of Miami Beach. Fisher loaned \$50,000 at 8 percent interest plus a "bonus" of 150 acres to an 81-year old Quaker farmer, John Collins, to complete a bridge linking Miami Beach with the mainland. Fisher also bought an additional 60 acres from the brothers J. N. and J. E. Lummus, who both headed local banks.

While the Lummuses would sell land only to people who were "white and law abiding", Fisher aimed for an even more exclusive crowd. He wanted other newly rich industrial magnates, shunned by Palm Beach's upper crust, to vacation in Miami Beach. Several of them did, including Harvey Firestone and Alfred duPont.

Fisher built the spectacular Flamingo Hotel in 1912. He named the hotel after the flamboyant birds he saw on a visit to Andros Island in the Bahamas. One of the first celebrity guests was Ohio Senator Warren G. Harding, the future president whose golf caddie was one of Fisher's imported circus elephants named Carl II. To attract further attention to his development, Fisher imported a polo team from England, dressed young women in risqué bathing suits and had many publicity photographs taken. The Flamingo had private docks, bath houses and gondolas steered by Bahamians wearing brass earrings, men's club, brokers office, laundry and shops. The new hotel featured an eleven story tower with a glass dome. At night, multi-colored spotlights shone far out over the ocean, visible for seven miles. To provide guests with the freshest of dairy products, Carl brought forty Guernsey cows from Wisconsin. In the Winter of 1922, people slogging though through the snow and cold of New York City were brought up short by a large new illuminated sign on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street flashing this message: "It's June in Miami."

In 1923, he expanded the Flamingo, adding more rooms. He also built the Nautilus Hotel, which opened on January 10, 1924. At a cost of \$870,000, the Nautilus, offered the ultimate for

wealthy guests: posh rooms, and swimming pool with cabanas, beautiful stairways and chandeliers, a gourmet dining room, and, of course, the adjoining polo fields.

The increasing demand for rooms lengthened the tourist season. Instead of January 1, during the 1923-24 season the Lincoln Hotel opened on November 1, the Wofford Hotel on December 6. Land sales escalated. In 1923, the Fisher-Collins interests sold a total of \$6,000,000 in new sales, in 1924, it was \$8,000,000, but in 1925, sales almost tripled to \$23,419,782.

By 1925, there were 56 hotels with 4,000 rooms, 178 apartment houses, 858 private residences, 308 shops and offices, eight casinos and bathing pavilions, four polo fields, three golf courses, three movie theaters, an elementary school, a high school, a private school, two churches, and two radio stations.

The dredges continued to pump sand, creating more land. Islands were created in the bay and sold to the wealthy. All of south Florida was booming. "Miami was transformed from a sleepy little town on the edge of Biscayne Bay into a Magic City of modest skyscrapers and legendary real estate profits" wrote Kenneth Ballinger in *Miami Millions*.

There were enough celebrities living in Miami Beach to create a market for sightseeing buses. Guides used mega-phones to identify the homes of the rich and famous. Carl was called the "Prest-O-Lite King." Guides could point out the estates of Harvey Firestone, Julius Fleischmann (Fleischmann's yeast), Gar Wood, Albert Champion, Harry Stutz (the Stutz Bearcat), Roy Chapin, and C.F. Kettering (Delco). Jane and Carl were called the "king and queen" of Miami Beach. "Nothing annoyed Carl more," wrote Jane. "He hated personal publicity. The only publicity he wanted was for the new city. "Some day, if the migration of celebrities continues," reported the *Miami Beach Register* on January 16, 1924, "it won't be necessary to publish 'Who's Who in America.' The Miami Beach city directory will be all that's needed." J. C. Penney owned a mansion on Belle Isle; he brought Artur Rubenstein and violinist Paul Kochanski to entertain his guests there. Carl and Jane hosted the classical violinist Jascha Heifitz.

The promotion of Fisher's tropical paradise sparked a Florida land boom. Six million people poured into Florida in three years. By the end of 1925, Fisher was worth more than \$50 million, but his personal life was in shambles. Devastated by the death of his only child in 1921, Carl became a heavy drinker and womanizer.

### Miami of the North

Always restless, with boundless energy, Fisher was so sooner finished with Miami Beach, than he started looking for his next great challenge. He found it in Montauk, Long Island, three times the size of Miami Beach, almost entirely undeveloped. It was to be the culmination of his life's work. He bought all 10,000 acres in 1925, for the relatively modest sum of \$2,500,000. He estimated it would take another \$7,000,000 to build it. "Miami in the Winter, Montauk in Summer", was Fisher's slogan. He would provide the elite who had flocked to his Miami Beach, with a comparably exclusive summer resort just hours from the social centers of New York, and Newport.

As a primary lure for the globe trotting set, Montauk would become the Sportsman's Paradise that was then in vogue for the very rich centered around the main pursuits of yachting, fishing, golfing, shooting, tennis, polo and swimming. In short, for Fisher's dream of a "Miami of the North" to succeed, he would need to construct a first class destination, that offered the litany of activities the Astors, Vanderbilts, Goulds and others wished to pursue. His 1932 promotional brochure emphasized "Now Montauk Beach, through the vision and resources of a group of distinguished builders, is being transformed into America's finest out-of-door center, where the real aristocrats of modern America may find new health, new relaxation, new ways to play amid luxurious surroundings."

By the time Fisher arrived, Montauk was already well known among connoisseurs, as a first class fishing and hunting retreat. Ever since the late 1800's well heeled sportsmen had gone "on Montauk" for extended expeditions. What they found was a beautiful, rustic outpost nearly untouched by the modern era. Teaming with geese, ducks, turkeys, fox, rabbits, and deer, Montauk was a hunter's heaven. Inshore and offshore, no finer fishing could possibly have been found on the East Coast. However, as a first class resort – or a resort of any kind – it left nearly everything to be desired. Outside of a small Inn that stood on the site of today's Montauk Manor, and a few private homes, there were no accommodations for guests. In general there was no electricity, no running water, no indoor plumbing, and little in the way of creature comforts any where in town.

Fisher was faced with formidable task of transforming these 10,000 sleepy acres, into a world class resort. Like everything he did, he threw his considerable energies into the task. Within weeks of his purchase, a work crew of some 800 men were busy around the clock, clearing roads, installing power, and laying the infrastructure for a large scale, modern village. On June 1, 1927 the palatial Montauk Manor was opened, and its 178 modern guest rooms filled with summer vacationers.

Guests could choose from a number of daily activities. An oceanfront bathing pavilion, complete with outdoor pool and 1600 feet of boardwalk along the beach, was constructed on the site of the current Surf Club. 18 quality holes of golf could be played at today's Montauk Downs. Tennis any one? Choose from 12 outdoor courts near the Manor, or 6 indoor courts at the now, sadly abandoned playhouse next to the Manor. If polo was your game, playing fields complete with paddocks, stables and herds of ponies were established at the current Deep Hollow Ranch. The horsy set could also trail and beach ride, and even ride to the hounds in a traditional English fox hunt! Add to all this the nearly unlimited fishing and hunting Montauk always provided, and it's easy to see how a visitor's day was filled. Established in his headquarter suite atop his six story Montauk Improvement Building – at the time the tallest building on Long Island – Fisher watched his plans become a reality.

Perhaps Fisher's most ambitious piece of engineering was the re-configuring of present day Lake Montauk. It was, until 1927, a true lake – fresh water, land locked, and as such of no use to Fisher. He needed a yacht club, with deep water berths capable of docking the grand vessels of the Vanderbilts, Astors, and Whitneys. Unfortunately, Montauk's only available anchorage, at Fort Pond Bay, was unsuitable – it was unprotected and subject to devastating storms and high tides. Fisher did the only logical thing, in light of Montauk's geography. He blasted open a new

channel from Block Island Sound connecting Lake Montauk to the open sea. Once done, he dredged roughly half the Lake to a depth of 12 feet and established the Montauk Lake Club on Star Island. It remains in operation today, capable of docking ocean-going vessels to 150 feet.

Montauk in the 1920's was a cosmopolitan resort, a Monte Carlo on the Atlantic that attracted the world's elite. The Montauk Manor was the most luxurious hotel on Long Island, a favorite of the New York/Newport crowd which at the time even boasted of direct steamer service to Manhattan. Each night of the Summer season lines of limos would disgorge scores of blue bloods and society swells, bound for champagne dinners and secret midnight rendezvous within the Manor's cavernous rooms. The Star Island Casino, next to the Yacht Club, was jumping every night, with fine food, aged wine, and the ever-present sound of money hitting the tables. It was there that the Mayor of New York, Jimmy Walker, was nearly arrested one night, during an infrequent raid by the local authorities. For the first few years, Carl Fisher's dream city was a genuine, and very profitable, reality.

### Fisher's Fall

Fisher had planned for everything, everything that is, except weather and the Great Depression. On September 17, 1927, a tremendous hurricane hit Miami Beach. Although the damage was not as severe as reported, that year's tourist season was a bust. Next October, the bottom fell out of the stock market, and real estate values began a dizzying fall. Since much of Fisher's wealth was based on real estate, his fortune began to crumble. Within the year his empire had lost a third of its value, and the banks that held his notes began to become nervous.

As his credit began to thin, Fisher sold his holdings – the Speedway, Miami Beach hotels, homes, yachts, land and nearly everything that could be liquidated. Stretched beyond even his formidable means, his empire collapsed into bankruptcy in 1932. Three years later, Fisher declared personal bankruptcy. When he died in 1939, his personal finances had dwindled to a paltry \$52,198. Although Montauk itself had a few good years in the 1930's and 40's, Fisher's dream of another Miami Beach was buried along with him. Without his considerable talent and salesmanship, Montauk was left with the imposing infrastructure of a grand resort, but with few of the details completed. Within years of its zenith, much of Fisher's Montauk fell into decay and ultimately abandonment. By the 1950's his office building stood empty, the beautiful Montauk Manor was a brooding wreck, and his grand boulevards ran off to nowhere. Montauk was left with no other choice, but to fill in the gaps as best it could, resulting in a somewhat uneven, but resort community.

Montauk today is an amalgam of Fisher's original vision of a get-a-way for the rich, and the reality of an affordable vacation village. Admittedly, Montauk now has over 3,000 quality hotel rooms, some 50 restaurants, a thousand deep water boat slips, a world class golf course, and some of the most beautiful ocean and bay beaches in the world. Even some of Fisher's original projects have been resurrected in the past few years, and brought back to life. The Montauk Manor, and Fisher's old improvement headquarters on the green, are now deluxe condominiums. The Yacht Club is in new hands, with restoration of its remaining Fisher sections, in full swing. The original golf course is even better than ever, as the Montauk Downs.

The Indianapolis attorney who represented Fisher in his many breach of promise suits, Walter Myers, remembered the last time he saw his former client. Visiting Miami Beach on business during the Great Depression, Myers spotted Fisher standing with one foot on a park bench. Stopping his car, Myers walked up to Fisher, shook his hand, and asked him how he was doing. The answer Myers received was not encouraging:

*I can tell you in a few words. The bottom dropped out of the sea. New York and Long Island took everything I had. I'm a beggar—dead broke, no family to fall back on. Yes, the bottom dropped out of the sea and I went with it.*

*You know, I promoted Miami Beach here. The grateful people got up a purse, five hundred dollars a month for me. That's what I live on. I used to make dreams come true. Can't do it anymore. I'm only a beggar now. The end can't be far away.*

Fisher died from a gastric hemorrhage on July 15, 1939 in Miami Beach. Jane Fisher, divorced from Fisher in 1926 and remarried, never forgot her life with a man some Hoosiers had labeled “crazy.” Living with her first husband, said Jane Fisher, was like “living in a circus: there was something going on—something exciting going on—every minute of the day. Sometimes it was very good; sometimes it was very bad. Still, it was living. It was excitement, aliveness, that I never found again.”

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