THE GOLD COAST LAND BOOM
IN THE 1920s

By John William Parton

At the height of the Florida land boom of the 1920s, it seemed to T. H. Weigall, an English
newspaperman, that every storefront in Miami housed
a real estate office. Its streets were bustling with men
in shirt-sleeves trying to sell land to every passerby.
The Florida land boom was another in a series of
frenzied real estate speculation that had occurred
throughout American history, but no previous specula-
tive orgy had matched its size. Florida's boom and
bust were unique by-products of the 1920s and were a
rehearsal of the Great Bull Market and subsequent
crash later in the decade. The land boom exemplified
how American society had emerged into a consumption-
oriented, affluent society by the time of the "dollar
decade."

Since the 1880s Florida had been developed by
promoters hoping to lure wealthy patrons to the
"American Riviera." Henry M. Flagler, who had
made a fortune from Standard Oil stock, typified such
boosters of Florida sunshine. As his Florida East Coast
Railway stretched down the east coast of the state, he
developed a string of resort hotels in Saint Augustine,
Palm Beach, and Miami. The state offered many other
opportunities for boosterism: Carl G. Fisher turned a
mangrove swamp into Miami Beach; George Merrick
converted his dream of a beautiful planned community
into the reality of Coral Gables; and Addison Mizner
began his amazing career as designer and architect for
the wealthy of Palm Beach and Boca Raton.

By the early twenties the rich — the Vanderbilts,
Ludens, DuPonts, Firestones, and others — vaca-
tioned on the "Gold Coast." President Warren G.
Harding attracted even more attention to the area
when he relaxed in the area's sunshine. Carl Fisher
had one of his elephants, which he used in promo-
tional stunts, serve as the president's caddy during a
round of golf. The "ballyhoo" had started and would
grow in intensity as the Coolidge Prosperity swept the
nation.

The Boom Begins

Following World War I the real estate values
along the Gold Coast rose precipitously as the
intrinsic values of Florida became more well known.
Indeed, few states could rival its climate and the
The automobile was one of the backbones of south Florida's land boom during the 1920s. Here, on Fort Lauderdale beach in 1925, the Model-Ts and other models line what one day would become "the strip."

untapped wealth of its agricultural lands. But the state could not have become the center of national attention until certain prerequisites came into existence. The boom depended upon the modernization of American society. Consumption, spending, boosterism, optimism, mobility, and desire for wealth epitomized the affluence of the newly industrialized and urbanized America. The nineteenth century values of thrift and prudence gave way to a popular culture dominated by conspicuous consumption and by the search for luxury and leisure. Coolidge Prosperity had arrived; Americans had more money to spend and a wider variety of goods to choose from.

Furthermore, technology and mass production had eased the rigors of travel to Florida. The advent of the inexpensive Model-T and the availability of railway, steamship and even air transportation meant that middle-class urbanites and farmers could join the wealthy in the Florida sunshine. Other innovations permitted the promoters to exploit the environment. They dredged harbors, created artificial islands, and filled swamps. Such construction projects also lessened the danger of swamp-related diseases. Thus, technology, mobility, prosperity, and the new popular culture converged to make possible the selling of Florida to a receptive nation.  

While the state experienced impressive economic growth in the period from 1920 to 1926, the land boom reached its apogee during the months of July through October 1925. In the latter period the boom reached fantastic proportions, acting as a vacuum sucking in swarms of people who hoped to make "killing" in Florida real estate. During these four months Miami's population swelled from 75,000 to 150,000. Similarly, Fort Lauderdale increased its population by 150 percent in the last nine months of 1925. A total of 2,500,000 tourists poured into Florida in 1925.  

PERSUASIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS

The migration to the state resulted partly from innovative and pervasive publicity campaigns like that of Arthur W. Pye, passenger traffic manager for the Clyde Steamship line. In 1915 Pye initiated a national campaign, aimed at middle-class families, that depicted Florida as a summer resort. At the same time, the Clyde line reduced its summer rates. Soon the name Florida symbolized "orange groves under a blue sky, blond beaches warmed by tropics, palm trees and pink hibiscus, tarpon in a tepid sea." By 1925 massive advertising in northern and midwestern states has contributed to a national mania to reap outrageous profits from Florida real estate deals. The tourist inundation of the state reminded Gertrude Mathews Shelby of how the smell of blood attracted wild animals; the smell of money drew people to the Gold Coast. The advertising campaigns succeeded because the national mood accepted with alacrity the exaggerated stories.  

In March 1925 the Literary Digest asserted that Florida, which had more advertising than any other state, benefited most from “word of mouth” publicity that was “spread by the banker and the tin-can tourist, who had been impressed by the climate and the land-gambling fever.” Everyone, apparently, was striking it rich. A returning soldier, so the story went, swapped an overcoat for a deed to ten "worthless"
acres near the beach that were valued at $25,000 in 1925. At the height of the boom a woman sold her Miami lot, which she had bought for $25 in 1896, for $150,000. Clara G. Stillman wrote that Florida had "suddenly discovered an unlimited pride and faith in herself, an enormous appetite for wealth and power."5 That Floridians became unconscionable boosters is undeniable. An examination of boom literature reveals much about their state of mind.

In 1925 the Florida Realty Associates attempted to assuage northern critics of the boom by publishing a small pamphlet, Florida: Some Reasons Why; Recent Profits in Florida Real Estate. Citing the 1924 amendments to the state constitution which prohibited state inheritance and income taxes, the Associates pointed to the activities of "far-seeing" businessmen as the main reasons, besides the state's climate, for the rapid economic development. According to this pamphlet, land values would not reach their peaks for ten years. Hoping to induce more people with a ready supply of money to the state, the Florida Realty Associates repeated stories of the tremendous profits derived from real estate investments.6

The Hard Sell

But this represented some of the milder types of advertising. In 1925 developers resorted to all kinds of publicity. Newspaper advertisements, billboards, signs pulled by airplanes and boats, free bus rides to the developments from all over Florida and large cities outside the state, and free performances by a variety of celebrities abounded. Typical of newspaper advertisements were the ones for Coral Way Park and Lauderdale-by-the-Sea developments. On January 4, 1925, both advertised in the Miami Herald: Coral Way Park gave away grapefruit, and Lauderdale-by-the-Sea held a free fish fry and staged a free sight-seeing ride. Although both claimed to be developing home sites, they emphasized the "quick and profitable" returns from speculative investment in their developments.

Similarly, on April 26, 1925, the developers of Miami Shores enticed the readers of the Miami Daily News by appealing to the excitement of living in "this great sub-tropical region" which had been remade "into one of the most marvelous beauty spots of all the world through man's genius and efforts." This developer assured the prospective buyers that the future of Miami Shores, "America's Mediterranean," was bright. In Fort Lauderdale, G. Frank Croissant attracted investors by having Sidney Smith, creator of the cartoon character Andy Gump, meet people at Croissant Park.7

The developers of the more exclusive areas used more subtle publicity. George Merrick, who had already sold forty million dollars worth of real estate in Coral Gables, contended in an advertisement in the Miami Daily News that Florida, and especially his development, merited the increased attention and economic activity. Because of the climate and the steady growth of Miami since 1900, Merrick claimed that he found a large market for his "extremely well-built" houses which were primarily owned by

Addison Mizner's Boca Raton was a long way from being "the world resort of unrivalled opportunity" when this photograph was taken on Dixie Highway in 1925.
Miami's wealthiest and oldest residents. Thus, he envisioned Coral Gables as a model city built for the upper class, and not a speculative venture. Addison Mizner, the creator of Boca Raton, proclaimed in an advertisement in the Miami Herald that Americans deserved and needed a great resort, such as Boca Raton, because of the wealth and immense power of modern America. According to Mizner, Boca Raton, "The World Resort of Unrivalled Opportunity," would become America's showplace for the world.8

Advertising was hardly confined to newspapers and pamphlets. Real estate agents and "bird dogs," people who steered prospects to certain agents for a percentage of the commission, flooded train depots and ship docks to secure buyers before they arrived in the business sections of Florida cities. When tourists first arrived by train or boat, they saw airplanes pulling signs and motorboats dragging advertisements through the ocean. The plethora of billboards disgusted Francis McCullagh, an English visitor to Florida during the boom. McCullagh declared the billboards' appeals "slangy, ungrammatical, full of mixed metaphors, but eloquent in [their] own way, inexhaustible, and fitted with a semi-religious, semi-patriotic fervor." This type of appeal, McCullagh asserted, was very effective in America.9

Money, Money, Money

Most developers exploited Florida's climate and emphasized the profits that could be made from real estate. In an article published in the New Republic, Elsie Weil vividly described the "get rich quick" mania which permeated the state. After venturing into a real estate office, Weil pointed out to the agent that the property he was trying to sell her was more than two miles from the ocean. He replied:

"You don't understand values. This is a choice lot, an exceptionally rare bargain. Only twenty-five hundred down and the next payment of five thousand in three weeks. Why, you can sell it before the first of December for a hundred thousand dollars."

That was what Gertrude Shelby defined as resale psychology:

"Did you ever keep chickens?" I remember someone asking me....
"The land rush is similar. Put down in the henyard a pan full of big scraps. The hens come running. The first of them grab big pieces and depart hastily for the back country. The others see the piece in the beaks and instead of realizing there's plenty more in the pan, they chase the hens who got the first pieces and snatch part of their dinners. That's resale psychology." 10

The massive advertising onslaught had its desired results as tourists, who flocked to the state, became speculators.

Billboards were a very popular means of advertising during the boom years. This photograph, taken in downtown Fort Lauderdale in the Twenties, indicates the size and number one might have found in populated areas. Note the large painting over the Maxwell billboard.
Hollywood's J. W. Young bought a fleet of buses to ferry his prospective customers to his boomerang community. Here the buses are lined up in front of the Hollywood Hotel where a Publix market stands today. Photograph courtesy of Charles LaFavre.
The heady atmosphere of the boom also swept away the common sense of the Florida newspaper publishers. On the last day of 1924 the *Miami Daily News* predicted that 1925 would be an even better year; the next day the *News* prophesized that Miami's growth would exceed all reasonable estimates. On January 3, 1925, the *News* proclaimed that Miami would have a population of 250,000 by 1930, since one million people who lived within a two-day train ride of Miami were middle-aged and financially independent and should, therefore, become seasonal residents of southeast Florida. With Miami real estate prices still low, the *News* believed that "smart men" would seize the opportunity to enjoy the state's climate and turn a nice profit while, at the same time, owning an area home. Writing in the *News*, Gerald Brandon found Miami's climate, architectural artistry, and scenic beauty to captivate completely even the most skeptical tourists.\(^\text{11}\)

**Positive Press**

The south Florida newspapers never questioned the validity of the boom, even at its most frenzied excesses. At the height of the speculative orgy, the *News* incessantly applauded the rising real estate values as indicators of a tremendous growth for Miami. On July 15, 1925, after reminding its readers that many nationally successful business and professional men and the important national chain stores were investing in Florida, the *News* remarked that such facts were more convincing than "the most fanciful prognostication of the professional optimists." Miami's land values, the *News* claimed, were still moderate. Moreover, on August 29, 1925, the *News* cautioned Miamians to be prepared for a terrific surge of visitors in the winter of 1925-1926 because of the impending national coal strike and California's vulnerability to earthquakes. It compared Miami to a snowball rolling down a slope, inexorably gathering impetus and momentum.\(^\text{12}\)

The *Miami Herald* also helped to inculcate the boom psychology. During the winter of 1925 the *Herald* chided the northern publicists who tried to exalt the "winter joys." "We never have to slush around in the slush," editorialized the paper, "nor do we have to risk our neck upon streets and sidewalks that glare with ice." The *Herald* found "no good reason" for Miami's prosperity not to continue indefinitely. With its advertising volume sixty-two percent ahead of the 1924 pace, the *Herald*, on April 29, reasoned that the general business level of Miami also must have increased sixty-two percent over the 1924 level. On April 25, 1925, the *Herald* quoted from an article published by the Alexander Hamilton Institute which declared that the conditions in Florida resulted from urgent and persistent demand for property; the *Herald* hoped that this reasoned explanation would calm the fears of the timid.

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\(^{11}\) *Pictorial History of Florida*

\(^{12}\) *Pictorial History of Florida*
On October 5, 1925, the Herald happily reported that the volume of its advertising had increased ninety-one percent over the 1924 figure. Four days later it paid tribute to the early developers of Florida who "applied to the rope of sand Florida's east coast the fusing heat of their indomitable faith" and created a haven for millions of people. The "golden strand," the Herald wrote, "is only beginning to take on ultimate beauty...which will be achieved because there is still faith in the souls of the men and the women who are here and who are coming."  

The press also boosted Fort Lauderdale. In January 1925 the Fort Lauderdale Sentinel proudly proclaimed that the city was the "one spot of all the world" and urged the city fathers to build a race course in order to entice even more "sporting people" who spent "money liberally." Its rapid development, the Evening Sentinel reasoned, augured well for future growth and profits. And the Fort Lauderdale Daily News congratulated the city commission for approving city improvements which would draw more people and more business.  

The boom probably could have occurred only in the 1920s. The people who swarmed to Florida reflected the changed values Americans held after World War I. Undoubtedly, the effect of technological advances gave many Americans the chance to break away from traditional patterns of life. While waiting at a train station in North Dakota, Anne O'Hare McCormick witnessed the impressive appeal that Florida had on the ordinary farmers. She asked the station master where a farm family in a loaded-down Ford was going. Replying that they were going to Florida, the station master appeared mesmerized by the intriguing word, Florida. McCormick even felt the "magic of the word as he lingered over it." The publicity campaign had worked extraordinarily well, enticing usually conservative people to invest in Florida real estate.  

Many contemporary analysts believed the migration to Florida exemplified the pioneering spirit innate to Americans. The New York Times labeled them "pioneers de luxe" because, by 1925, the lure to Florida was money. Elmer Youngman, the editor of Bankers Magazine, found the so-called pioneering spirit in the state to be manifested by the "longing for change and for greater opportunities of wealth and happiness" and by the hope which "beckons man onward." While such qualities as hope, enthusiasm, and a spirit of adventure could be found in the mobs of property buyers, Elsie Weil correctly identified the prime attraction as money.  

Hot Dog Lunchees  

While material accumulation had long been a sign of success in America, the 1920s, and especially the Coolidge Prosperity, elevated wealth to a more respectable position. There was a "get rich consciousness" in Florida; nothing else can explain the irreverent attitude of the mobs which filled Florida cities. Reginald Townsend found that land agents harped on the quick turnover, the overnight profits. He estimated that every third person on the Miami streets was a real estate agent. "One is literally dazzled by the riches promised by these high-pressure salesmen," J. Frederick Essary wrote, but he wondered why so many of the agents had to eat at hot dog stands. Walter P. Fuller, a real estate agent in Tampa during the boom, described it as a "greedy delirium to acquire riches...without benefit of effort, brains or services rendered."  

The conditions in Florida can best be depicted as unchecked mob psychology. To the visitors the boom, Bruce Bliven asserted, was just another American miracle. Bliven wrote that it was typical for the "sheepish" prospects to be set upon by the "wolf-eyed salesmen." Americans, Elmer Youngman proclaimed, liked the "goings-on" in Florida; the activity, energy, hurry, and noise. "Those who have
visited...Florida and have failed to become its devoted admirers and friends.” Youngman wrote, “would do well to make a careful examination of the quality of their Americanism.” No one, John Jordan claimed, could understand the “psychological crowd frenzy” without experiencing the boom’s milling mobs whose hysterical actions were directed by neither logic nor reason.18

Swayed by the allure of advertising and wealth, Americans had become consumers in a prepackaged world. All one had to do was go to Florida and become wealthy. The boom exemplified the ballyhoo of the 1920s and its rampant hedonism; Henry Bloch thought that Florida promoters had discovered the “Fountain of Jazz,” not the fountain of youth. The discordant elements of American society had found outlet in the boom. It demonstrated the uncertain values of the middle class, the former solid foundation of society, because many of them aspired for “quick, overnight profits” in order to match the power and prestige of the patrons of Palm Beach.19

The Florida boom cannot be blamed on the pioneer spirit. It happened because of many diverse reasons: the disillusionment after the war; the dreams of promoters; the receptive state of mind of the middle class; the Coolidge Prosperity; the secularization of American values; the hedonism of the 1920s; and the imposed conformity of society. The boom showed that there was a widespread gambling instinct in America which was readily coupled with the desire for the easy life. Perhaps the New Republic was correct in its 1926 assessment that the boom was a reaction against American civilization, a reaction against the triumph of twentieth-century urbanisms, industrialism, centralization, and secularization over the values of the nineteenth century.20

Or was it simply the magic of money?

FOOTNOTES


7. Miami Herald, January 4, 1925; Miami Daily News, April 26, 1925; Ft. Lauderdale Evening Sentinel, February 12, 1925.

8. Miami Daily News, November 2, 1925; Miami Herald, June 30, 1925.


13. Miami Herald, January 4, 9, April 25, 29, October 5, 9, 1925.


