

Part Two of the Early Life of D. P. Davis: Davis in Miami

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The people of Miami found themselves in the midst of a real estate boom at the close of World War I. Several factors contributed to the astonishing growth in south Florida. Personal transportation had been revolutionized by the appearance of affordable automobiles and the construction of new roads, connecting not only the state with its neighbors, but also cities and towns within the state. This combined seamlessly with the emergence of a new American middle class that had both extra time and extra money. Florida's notoriously low land prices provided the necessary catalyst, offering an excellent opportunity for people willing to suffer through the heat and mosquitoes – two facets of tropical Florida that had not yet been conquered.

Davis was not in the early group of Miami land speculators, which included Carl Fisher and the Lummus Brothers, but he did watch and learn from them. Like most every aspect of his life, the story of how Davis first started selling real estate in Miami is more parable than history. The basic story is as follows: Davis came across a development that had been ■anguishing• on the market. While not in the most advantageous location, with a little perseverance and a lot of advertising, Davis sold every available lot within days, making a tidy profit for his efforts.

While there is undoubtedly some truth to the story, Davis' publicity machine, which went into overdrive after 1924, probably enhanced the original details. Davis did begin selling land that was thought too difficult to sell because it sat two and a half miles from the city center. He then opened his own company, United Realty, and started his first development, a business district dubbed Commercial Biltmore. This property lay in

the greater Buena Vista subdivision, located just north of Miami's city limits. Buena Vista, or at least a section of it, is likely the fabled "languishing" property. He knew the importance of advertising, but more importantly he understood the benefit of providing complete infrastructure with his subdivisions. For Commercial Biltmore, that infrastructure included wide streets, curbing, sidewalks, water and sewer service and lush landscaping. Davis did not use the Mediterranean Revival style of architecture that later would become synonymous with the Florida Boom. Instead, his architects used a local vernacular style, building mostly bungalows in the residential areas with Colonial and Federal influences found in the commercial sections.

While his Miami adventure provided a financial windfall for Davis, it also took away something very dear. His wife, Marjorie, died while giving birth to their second child, a boy named David Paul Davis, Jr. in 1922. It is unimaginable how Davis, at the peak of his professional life, felt as his personal life seemed to fall apart. The baby survived the ordeal, and Davis pulled himself together and finished his real estate projects. He did not do it alone. He asked his younger brother, Milton, along with Milton's wife Louise, to come to Miami and help him with his developments and, probably, with his wounded family. Milton went to Miami and, though he worked for a different company, Fidelity Realty, their offices were less than a half-mile apart.

After his wife's death, Davis began to indulge in the excesses that marked the Jazz Age. Defying prohibition, a Davis hallmark, was a core tenet of the era. He also began seeing a woman named Lucille Zehring, one of movie producer Mack Sennett's "Bathing Beauties." Another product of the free-wheeling Twenties, Zehring would play a very pivotal role in Davis' future.

Davis had to realize that, despite his accomplishments in Miami, he could not compete with developments like Fisher's Miami Beach or George Merrick's Coral Gables, or for that matter Addison Mizner's Palm Beach. Once again, Davis began to look elsewhere for new opportunities. He decided to return to Tampa, which itself was caught up in Florida's land boom. In addition, with the exception of Milton who was in Miami, Davis's immediate family lived in the bustling west coast city, and he could rely on them to help care for his two young boys.

Unfortunately, all of Tampa's prime real estate had long been sold and developed ■ at least the land above sea level. Davis heard of a plan that would change the City of Tampa forever. Burks E. Hamner, a local real estate promoter, had conceived of the idea of developing the mudflats in Hillsborough Bay in 1921. Hamner likely contacted Davis in late 1922 or early 1923 about beginning what would become Davis Islands. During a Tampa Rotary Club lunch in early 1923, Hamner described ■in minute detail• his idea for an island development. Club members, at the time, claimed he had a ■vivid imagination.•

Davis and his two boys departed Miami in January 1924, almost exactly four years after his arrival. He left behind six thriving communities and, in a more practical move, retained his Miami business office which he renamed D.P. Davis, Inc.