

## Attracting real estate buyers in the '20s

With a plethora of property and housing developments to choose from, enticing customers for a sales-pitch during Florida's free-wheeling real estate boom of the 1920s was a far cry from today's Open House sign, front yard balloons, and wine, cheese, and cookies.

Marvels of promissory happiness offered all that was available in the paradise that was Sunshine State.

There were so many choices. So many possibilities. Hundreds of thousands were pouring into Florida looking for their golden opportunity in the real estate market.

Mirroring the runaway Wall Street bull market of the time, riches were here for the taking. The only criteria was quick, decisive action.

Short on a down payment? No problem. Wall Street had its "margin," Florida offered "binders" a 10% down fee with the promise of the balance at a future date.

Funneling customers to a particular area to see for themselves and hear the sales pitch required imaginative thinking.

Some fledgling communities sent fleets of buses to the north to bring down prospective buyers. Hollywood By The Sea enlisted an army-sized sales force and a convoy of buses with "the carrying capacity of a railroad 1,000

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### A Real History

Jeff Lahurd, columnist Sarasota Herald-Tribune USA TODAY NETWORK



**The Voice of the Semi-tropocs, WJBB, extolled Sarasota's many virtues over the airways. Among the programming, Foo Foo the clown read children's bedtime stories. AP**

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## BUYERS

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miles long." The salesforce welcoming the wide-eyed newcomers was said to exceed 3,000.

Carl G. Fisher who built the Indianapolis motor speedway, and facilitated the New York to Los Angeles Lincoln Highway, and the Dixie Highway to the south, set his development sights on Florida.

He cut mangrove trees a couple of feet above the ground, pumped up sand from Biscayne Bay, and created Miami Beach, one of the most alluring and heavily promoted resorts in the world. Among his come-on's, bathing beauties at play on the beach, and publicity shots of President Warren G. Harding using a baby elephant to carry his clubs on a Miami Beach golf course.

Voice of the Semi-tropics" run by the chamber of commerce to spread the word of this Gulf Coast paradise around the country. The station offered boxes of citrus to faraway cities who wrote to the chamber of commerce that they picked up the programming. A listener in Salem, Oregon, wrote, "Sarasota seems to be a live city and will surely derive great benefit from such programs." Of course, John Ringling brought the circus here in 1927 to help prop up the faltering economy, advertising Sarasota throughout the country. And before that, he imported the Czecho-Slovakian National Band to perform free concerts. After a stint on St. Armands Circle, the 26-man troupe walked in unison along Main Street to the War Memorial at the center of Five Points in their crimson uniforms playing stirring marches. At the bandshell built for them on Palm Avenue, they performed everything from Jazz, and folk songs, to hi-brow symphonies.

When Sarasota's Poms Park offered for sale 130 lots, each with a shade tree, fertile soil for citrus growing, and conveniently close to schools, churches, and shopping. A

The renowned orator, William Jennings Bryan, the three-time Democratic Presidential candidate said of Miami, "Miami is the only city in the world where you can tell a lie at breakfast that will come true by evening." Bryan went on to persuade customers to buy in Coral Gables for George T. Merrick who used 80 buses to transport prospective buyers to "America's Finest Suburb." Bryan used his oratorical magic at the magnificent Venetian Pool. Merrick reportedly paid The Great Commoner \$100,000 for his well-known eloquence.

St. Petersburg, "Florida's delightful play place," claimed to be the healthiest city in the United States with "only one undertaker in the city with a winter population of 13,000 people." They proudly proclaimed, "Whole months go by without a single death." Pensacola reached out to those fearful of being attacked by an offshore enemy. The San Carlos Hotel comforted their guests by assuring them, "You may sleep without fear of any enemy approaching western Florida's coast as it is guarded by concealed twelveinch guns and mortar batteries." These hidden weapons could strike a 10-foot target three miles from shore even if it was traveling at the rate of 15 miles per hour. The name of the enemy was not divulged. Happy dreams.

In a marketing gimmick that may have turned away many would-be prospects, George Sebring sought for his city those citizens who eschewed demon rum and the vicissitudes associated with it. He pursued Godfearing individuals who were four square in favor of Prohibition. Every deed included a no-liquor clause. Sebring would "be absolutely free from the vices that usually afflict rapidly growing communities." Lake Wales, formerly a turpentine camp, came into its own as a real city in the mid-'20s. Their sales campaign focused on those who wanted to join like-minded residents who were "cultivated, happy, wholesome, energetic, progressive people working together, playing together, enjoying hugely the fun of creating a little city with the advantages of a big city." Addison Mizner designed Boca Raton to be the most exclusive resort in Florida. He let it be known that "Exaggeration is unessential. The future of Boca Raton is far too opulent to require coloring." Mizner and his brother, Wilson were as colorful as they came.

Three-hundred pound Addison was once described as taking a stroll "outfitted in pajamas preceded by two Chows, a small monkey named Ethel on one shoulder, a Macaw named Agatha on the other and leading two large monkeys. His architectural style that took hold in Florida was dubbed by detractors as, "Bastard-Spanish-Moorish-Romanesque-Gothic-Renaissance-Bull Market-Damn the Expense style." After the real estate crash, Wilson was sued by a gentleman who told the court that he was promised that he could grow nuts on his property. "Not so," shot back Wilson, "I said you could GO nuts on that property." The Sarasota/Venice area was not at a loss for imaginative ways to draw in potential customers. We had station WJBB, "The

Model T Ford was offered as a prize, and Hawaiian music was played throughout the day.

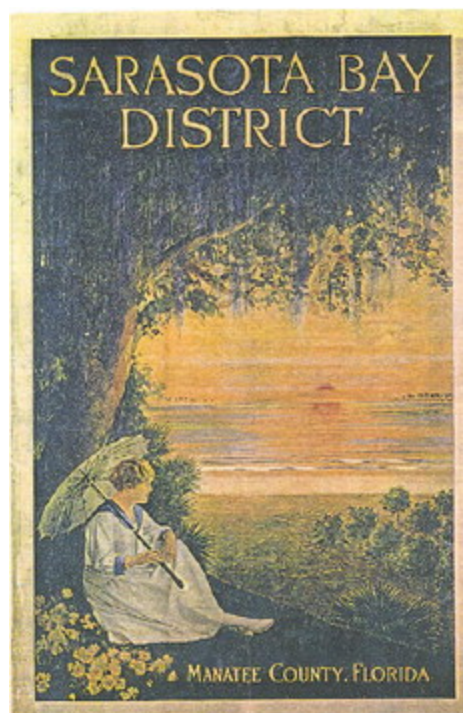
Probably though, the real draw was the world-famous Horney Brothers twins, hired to auction the property. The look-alike boys had reportedly sold \$2 million worth of property the previous year in 10 states.

Dressed in hi-hats and tuxedos, they had quite a routine: "They look alike-they act alike - they dress alike - they talk alike - and they both cry out the same bid at the same time speaking exactly the same words." I would have driven over to Poms Park to see them in action.



**Advertising Sarasota in the Windy City which developed a strong connection to Sarasota. JEFF LAHURD/**

HERALD-TRIBUNE



An idyllic, inviting scene advertising Sarasota when it was still a part of Manatee County. AP



**Welcome to the Sunshine State JEFF LAHURD/  
HERALD-TRIBUNE**