

JANE FISHER...



Shortly before her death, Jane Fisher posed with a portrait done of her 40 years ago in the salad days.

End of a Legend

By RON LAYTNER

"Honey, I've had it all," she said.

Her name was Jane Fisher — her first husband's name, a name she clung to despite three later unsuccessful marriages.

Fisher, Carl Fisher. He built the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. He built Miami Beach. He was an eccentric force in an eccentric, forceful world.

For 17 years Jane sat at his right hand, riding one of the opulent waves of the 20s, witness to extravaganzas in Indianapolis, spectacles in Florida, Paris, Italy, Spain, Peking — then unhappiness with three husbands, then a small home in Miami, finally Social Security and Medicare.

Last December, "discovered" again by some friends, Jane Fisher went to New York for a vacation. She died of a heart attack.

It's doubtful that Carl Fisher will be remembered this month above the drone of cars at the Speedway — only Jane kept his memory alive. Now she's gone. But before she died, she left this memory of the mangroves and the millions.

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JANE FISHER was holding court.

The former wife of Carl G. Fisher, legendary developer of Miami Beach, sat on a soft living room chair in a tiny Sheridan Avenue home on Miami Beach.

On her lap was a nervous Italian greyhound. On her back she wore inexpensive department store clothing. In her heart she carried a priceless library of first edition memories.

Lady Jane was the elder stateswoman of Miami Beach. She was called before the cameras whenever a well-known landmark such as the Roney Plaza Hotel was demolished. The newspaper pictures showed a little old lady in a

construction helmet smiling wistfully as the wrecking ball completed its havoc.

When yearnings for "the good old days" beckoned, community groups called upon Jane Fisher to address their meetings.

She posed or spoke with simple dignity, then drove home alone in her 1968 Cadillac. There she sat with her dog. Alone.

Jane Fisher was among the last survivors of the great names, the stupendous deeds, and the legendary frolics which attended the birth of Miami Beach. She was a living part of the life and times of some of the greatest names of Americana.

She was just a child bride some 60 years ago when Miami Beach was a forlorn sandpit. It became a city inhabited by the famous; so that, intertwined in her life were the likes of Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, Julius Fleischman, Gene Tunney, Al Capone, Eddie Rickenbacker, Gar Wood and Paul Whiteman. Even the Wright brothers gave her flying lessons!

At one time she and her famous husband were worth more than \$50 million. But that was 40 years ago . . .

She became just plain Jane Fisher, one of the many thousands of elderly retired Floridians living on the benefits of Social Security and Medicare, nourished by memories of a full life.

If you asked her age she replied, "I never tell anyone my age. I was 39 last year and this year I'm 38—and if I live long enough I'll be an infant when I die."

ACTUALLY, WHEN Jane and Carl Fisher first arrived in the tropic wilderness that was Miami Beach the year was 1912.

When the Fishers arrived with their Negro valet, friend and companion, Galloway, Miami was a tiny fishing village. Its streets were covered by crushed white rock and its handful of inhabitants forced to wear whites so that the dust wouldn't show.

The Beach itself was covered, as Jane described it, by "Mangroves. Nothing but mangroves, coons, mosquitoes, sandflies and bugs. And snakes and everything else you could think of that wasn't nice."

Fisher, a barrel-chested smiling man with intense eyes, could have retired on the wealth and fame he had earned before arriving in Florida that year.

He was a true financial genius, a self-made millionaire before the age of 21. Fisher's discovery and promotion of Prest-O-Lite at Speedway, Ind., took the kerosene lanterns off America's earliest au-

Continued on Next Page

JANE FISHER—END OF A LEGEND

Continued from Page 9



The Fisher home in Indianapolis looked like this in 1916. It now is part of the Marian College campus, and a large addition has been built on the rear.

tomobiles and allowed for night driving at speeds above walking pace. In time, bored with his company's remarkable success, he sold out for \$9 million.

This same Carl Fisher had become one of America's first car dealers.

Jane Fisher first saw her future husband at the beginning of the Century by looking up into the sky. There he was, promoting sales, sitting in an automobile swaying beneath a giant hot air balloon wafting above the streets of downtown Indianapolis.

A racing driver himself, he dreamed up, designed and built the Indianapolis Speedway. After 15 years of glorious success Fisher sold out to another young racer who went on to legendary fame as a wartime flyer and leader, and most recently as head of Eastern Airlines: Eddie Rickenbacker.

FISHER, AS ONE of America's earliest auto promoters, dreamed of a network of coast-to-coast highways and so, with a few adventurous friends, started the nation's highway system.

Everyone in Florida at some time or another travels across some section of an old roadway called the Dixie Highway. But few realize that Fisher, together with a group of drivers, navigators, mechanics and map-makers, armed with winches, ropes, machetes, rifles and snake-bite kits — started that roadway through young America — north to south — from the Great Lakes to Miami, more than half a century ago.

East to west he forged the Lincoln Highway, encouraging local towns across the land to build small joining sections of highway for his fleet of pioneers to drive over in pomp and ceremony.

This then was the kind of man who took Jane to Miami Beach. Fisher, then 37, told his 15-year-old bride that someday Miami Beach would be a great tropical city surrounded by glowing white beaches — a playground of the world.

In the wilderness that eventually became Lincoln Road, he optimistically built a grand mansion, the Shadows. It stood at the present location of the high rise building at 100 Lincoln Road.

"The Shadows was a beautiful house," Jane Fisher recalled, "with columns and a round front overlooking the ocean. It had three hundred feet of beach with French doors leading onto a little walkway in front of the house."

"The living room and dining room and hall all opened up together so we could have parties of 150 to 200 people. We had a ballroom on the third floor with seven bedrooms and a bathroom-dressing-room to each suite. A high iron fence surrounded the grounds and we did lots of wonderful entertaining there."

"At one time we brought the First International Polo Matches to Miami Beach and the entire Cuban Army Polo Team stayed at the Shadows. The president of Cuba sent the first Arabian horse ever born on his island as a present to me aboard the presidential yacht."



Jane Fisher carried a flag in a parade in Indianapolis in May, 1918, when World War I patriotism was at a zenith. Fishers had home here and in Miami.

"AND ONCE, BY coincidence, we were sent the largest dog in the world and an elephant on the same train. The dog was an Irish Wolfhound. He measured nine feet, nine inches from nose to tail. The elephant was named Rosie by mistake. Years later we found out the name should have been Robert. We used him to help in construction."

For the Fishers it was their golden age . . . Winters were spent

in the Shadows amidst growing Miami Beach, while summers were frolicked away in Indianapolis or Europe.

"Once we had an air show at the Speedway. The Wright brothers invited me up for an airplane ride and offered to give me lessons. Their plane was just like a little cracker box. Then Carl found out about it and made me stop."

"Henry Ford was the pace-maker at the Indianapolis Speed-

Continued on Page 12

JANE FISHER—END OF A LEGEND

Continued from Page 10

way at one time. We always gave a big Speedway party after the races. We would open the pool and if it had been a good day at the track with no accidents they would throw Carl in the water with all his clothes on, watch and everything.

"At one party Henry Ford got up and played the violin for the orchestra. He liked me because I had a rocking chair on the front porch. He was about 15 years older than Carl and he liked to sit on the porch for hours, rocking and thinking."

Jane Fisher described her most expensive party:

"It was the Polo Ball that I gave at our casino. I had 350 guests invited and 500 came. Ring Lardner wrote the invitations for me. I had the polo barns reproduced on the ballroom floor. Everyone milled around walking in and out of the polo pony stalls, drinking champagne and laughing..."

WHEN JANE THREW another party at the Flamingo Hotel, Paul Whiteman brought his entire orchestra and played at no charge.

"As a thank-you, I gave Paul a platinum watch and each of his musicians, one of gold."

Those were the days of excitement, laughter and parties. The Fishers merrily skipped through life and money while Miami Beach began to take shape beneath their feet.

Enormous expense was involved in building the fun city of Fisher's dreams. In those early 1900s Carl was spending \$52,000 a day, each and every day, for years — just on fill.

Hundreds of laborers fought the shrubbery-killing salt carried in the millions of tons of earth dredged up from Biscayne Bay. They literally had to wash out the topsoil and plant every seed of grass by hand.

One year at Christmas Fisher came home very discouraged. He told Jane that three more families had left that day and four more were pulling out at the end of the week. He didn't know if the Beach project could continue.

Jane solved the problem. The largest pine tree growing in the Miami area was cut down and placed in her enclosed tennis courts. She decorated the tree — Miami Beach's first Christmas Tree — with lanterns, placed some 500 presents at its base and had her husband's engineers rig up a device to simulate a snowfall. Every woman in Miami Beach came in to sew stockings and bags and the



Jane was in Indianapolis in a 1908 Buick in 1947 in connection with her book about Carl, "Fabulous Hoosier." Jane is in front of the Meridian Book Shop.

men were provided with cigars, cigarettes and a huge punchbowl. A Santa Claus arrived and joined everyone in singing Christmas carols. The Shadows was an oasis in the jungle wilderness.

"We had between four and five hundred guests — all the people in Miami Beach. Some also came from the newly-developing area of Coral Gables and from Miami."

"WE DECIDED NO matter how difficult Miami Beach was, we'd stick it out. We forgot about our northern home towns that first Christmas... Miami Beach had become our home."

The city began to take shape. At first Carl Fisher had a hard time selling the land. So, true to his promotional ways, he simply doubled its price. Now that it seemed expensive, they lined up to buy.

The posh mansions and private islands began to spring up. The great and the not-so-great arrived.

"We had the gangster of all gangsters living on Palm Island in those days — Al Capone," Mrs. Fisher recalled. "But he was very quiet when he lived here and I guess he was watched very closely. They had a lot of parties at his place and Capone had his own little private army protecting him."

"I don't recall meeting him personally. I believe I was in a touring car when my husband was talking to him at one time. I never conversed with him — ladies just

didn't. But I saw him on several occasions."

Miami Beach went on to become a success and once more the great financial genius was bored. Carl G. Fisher decided to build a new development — Montauk Point on Long Island.

Confident of his golden touch he personally guaranteed the money of everyone investing in his new creation. It was the beginning of the end.

"In 1926 one of our salesmen hysterically wired Carl that the great hurricane had totally wiped out Miami Beach. Carl immediately closed down the Montauk Point project."

"Once you close down a construction project like the Point it's hard to start it up again. Everybody began wanting their money back. So Carl had to mortgage this piece of property, this polo field, that golf course, this building..."

EVERYTHING WAS going wrong for Carl Fisher. The long-awaited heir the Fishers had counted on, Carl G. Fisher Jr., finally arrived, but died after living only 28 days.

Fisher began to drink. He was despondent at the death of the son he had longed for. When a woman in need prevailed upon Jane to bring up her 3-year-old son in place of the child the Fishers had lost, Jane felt it was the answer to their unhappiness. But Carl, involved in the first losing streak of his meteoric career, was not too interested.

Reluctantly he allowed Jane to adopt the child — but on her own.

The fabled marriage grew steadily worse. And one day, suddenly, Jane Fisher left for Paris with her lawyer and got a divorce. Shortly afterwards, Carl G. Fisher married his stenographer.

But it didn't end there. Though Jane remarried three more times, she and Carl remained good friends.

"I remarried but we always had the most marvelous friendship. Whenever he was where he could come to see me, he did. And when he was not well many times in his later years I would go and see him. He disregarded my marriages and I disregarded his marital status. He bossed me 'til the day he died."

Grieved at the loss of his golden touch in his last years the great developer traded off most of his last holdings for a small weekly income for life. When the end came in 1939 Jane was not at his side.

At the time of Carl's death she was living in upper New York State on a 200-acre mountain-top estate. She vainly tried to rent a plane or get an airline connection to Miami in those early days of flying. But she arrived too late. The funeral was over.

IN LATER YEARS, after three marriages, residence in Europe and dealings in business, Jane Fisher's investments began to go bad.

In one of her last dealings she traded a block of Miami property in the Lincoln Road area for the Queen Elizabeth, a 52-unit apartment-hotel.

"I had a secure income but the government took about a third of it. I had a very good manager at the hotel, but when I sold it he left. Then I was forced to take it back because the new owners couldn't make the payments."

"I put my adopted son in as manager and he didn't do so well; the taxes weren't being paid and the bills kept mounting. I had three heart attacks within a week at that time and I couldn't help."

"And so I lost it. The bank came in on a Wednesday morning and took the hotel away. I lost everything. I had just three dollars in my purse because I never carried money. I paid everything by check. The government stepped in and took over my bank accounts and padlocked my office. I was penniless."

"But it's funny how things come back to help you. When I was wealthy and money was unim-

Continued on Page 14

JANE FISHER—END OF A LEGEND

Continued from Page 12

portant, I loaned a woman about \$35,000 to help her through a very bad time and avoid serious trouble.

"That woman is so important to me now. She sends me \$50 each week and has done so for several years. She helped me live. I was not well enough to get a job. Then my real friends came to the fore.

"My distress was common talk at the time. One of them could have come to me and said 'Jane, could I let you have a thousand dollars?', something I had done so very many times for people who were in trouble or in need.

"Not one of them came to me. But I don't hold it against them. It's so easy when you have no problems not to recognize those of others. They just didn't think.

"IT WAS HEART-WARMING to me where the assistance did come from. It wasn't from my society friends.

"I knew one wealthy man. My husband had made him a millionaire. He could have helped me. It wouldn't have been a button off his vest. But I didn't ask him — I'm very proud.

"One kind friend gave me a little boathouse on her property in which to live. I stayed six months until I found a house.

"I had to borrow \$2,000 for the down payment. I went to three or four people and to a man I knew then only very casually, a very nice man, a doctor.

"I'll never forget it. He took out his checkbook and asked if \$5,000 would be enough. I said it would be ample and I paid him back within three years — with interest.

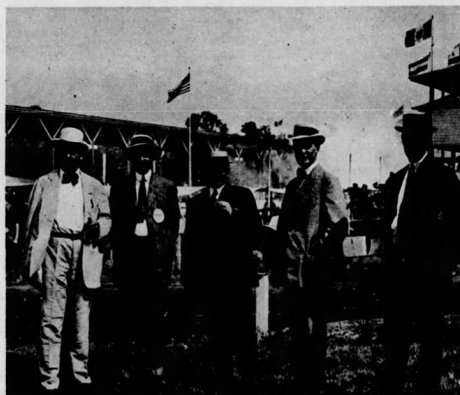
"It's funny now, but the average person thinks I'm quite a wealthy woman. Let them think that. This is the only piece of property I own. It takes five minutes to cut my grass. A friend comes and cuts it for me every week.

"I'm still asked all the time to contribute to charities. I'm always sent invitations to parties. I had one in the mail today — \$12.50 a plate and I'd have to buy a ticket for an escort. I can't afford it!"

In describing her life and loves, Jane said:

"I'm like the old woman who said: 'I ain't goin to Heaven wonderin.' I've had my share of attention. I've had lots of beaux, lots of men friends.

"They've been marvelous — wonderful! I love to dance. I've always been a good dancer. That's my only regret now. I went to a



Dignitaries at the first 500-mile race included Carl Fisher (right) and Henry Ford (second from left) near the historic pagoda on track's main straightaway.



This was the Fisher home in Miami. It was the gathering place of the famous and scene of spectacles well remembered by a near-destitute Jane Fisher.

party last night and the music was simply marvelous and I had to sit there. I didn't like that."

ACCORDING TO Jane Fisher Miami Beach hasn't turned out as Carl would have wanted.

"I really sort of resent the Lincoln Road Mall. It's beautiful but I doubt if it's served the purpose it was meant for. It was wonderful in the old days. Everyone had their Cadillacs and Lincolns and Rolls-Royces. We'd drive up to the shops and see everyone we knew. It's a different Lincoln Road now with different people.

"Of course I think it's a wonderful place for the senior citizens to sit and watch the crowds go by. But it's lost its elegance. I wouldn't say it's a tourist trap. It's just that people come down in bathing suits and odd attire."

In criticizing Miami Beach's progress, Jane said: "I think the high rises are the biggest change we've had in the last ten years. I call them monsters. I dislike them intensely.

"The people of Miami Beach are being cheated. There was a day when we could go for a drive down Collins Avenue for miles and see

the ocean at all times. Now we just glimpse it occasionally. And they're even building high rises on both sides of Collins Avenue. Soon, it'll be like a cavern — an alleyway that we go through.

"There is such an influx of new people. Three quarters of the people here today don't know the name of Carl G. Fisher. They've done almost nothing to perpetuate the name. Only by public subscription did they build a monument on Alton Road and 50th Street.

"I'm the only one who has kept Carl's name alive. That's the reason I speak before clubs. I'm determined that as long as I live, his name shall live on.

"Without Carl there never would have been a Miami Beach. The other people didn't have the money to build the projects and attract the people of great wealth to build the big hotels.

"They've done a lot for others. In later years Arthur Godfrey did a good job of promoting Miami Beach and they named a fine street for him. He deserved it. But without my husband there never would have been a Miami Beach to publicize.

"CARL NEVER named a street after himself. He usually named them after his friends. Chase Avenue was named for Pete Chase, our head salesman. John Oliver LaGorce was a dear friend, so Carl named LaGorce Island and Drive for him.

"There is only one thing in Miami Beach named for Carl and that's a little branch post office down on West Avenue. Dr. LaGorce and I cut the ribbons for the opening of it.

"My husband greatly admired Henry Flagler. So he pumped out an island and erected that monument to Henry Flagler in Biscayne Bay. Carl spent \$150,000 on the monument and the city doesn't even keep it up. It makes me so mad every time I go by it and see the weeds and garbage.

"Miami Beach is growing into a big, ugly city," she complained. "I don't think it's what Carl would have wanted. The people nowadays desecrate its beauty.

"I love flowers and trees so much that it just tears my heart out when I see bulldozers going into vacant lots and just ripping out great trees with no regard for them. I was here when those trees were planted. I can almost hear them cry.

"I know it hurts them — I wish I could do something."

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