

HistoryMiami Looks at Real Estate Past of Whitman Family

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Whitman Family Gallery, displayed at the HistoryMiami. *J. Albert Diaz*

In South Florida's hot real estate market, hardly a day passes without a transaction, groundbreaking or concept rollout being heralded as "historic."

While records in terms of price and building size are being set all the time, few in the business have Matthew Whitman Lazenby's bragging rights.

No other developer can stroll into Miami's premier history museum and see an exhibit about his family's bygone days.

"Real estate invariably is a 10-year cycle with a five-year memory," Whitman told the Daily Business Review in a recent interview, citing an industry adage about the market's forgetfulness.

That disdain for the recent past makes HistoryMiami's exhibit about the Whitman real estate family even more remarkable. Matthew Lazenby is the fourth generation to lead a real estate business. Jorge Zamanillo, director of HistoryMiami, agrees the exhibit and much of the museum's curatorial work is a stand against a city with a famously short memory.

"In a community like Miami where the city is relatively young, people think we have no history," he said. "We want to communicate that it's not only the 10,000-year-old prehistoric remains that matter, but the everyday person is also making history. Your story might be important, in varying levels of importance, because you came here an immigrant or are the first generation to open a business or made a mark in Miami in some other way."

The museum has taken artifacts the family had been exhibiting at its Bal Harbour Shops mall and added rare archival footage and photographs that chronicle its past.

Real estate ventures are only part of the story line. While the first of the South Florida Whitmans, William Whitman Sr., developed Miami Beach hotels and houses along Espanola Way, his sons had wider-ranging interests.

Dudley Whitman loved surfing, boating and the sea, and went on to develop cutting-edge technology for water sports and underwater filmmaking in the 1940s and 1950s.

Bill Whitman helped his brothers with inventions and later became a world-renowned horticulturist famous for importing exotic fruit trees.

Stanley Whitman took the helm of the family business from his father and helped develop both Bal Harbour Shops in 1965 and much of the surrounding village.

Stanley's grandson Matthew describes it pithily: "His brothers had a love affair with rare fruits and the ocean all the while he was working. In a way, he worked really hard so his brothers wouldn't have to."

Pioneering Way

Zamanillo explains that even though the varying accomplishments might make for a disjointed exhibit, there's a thematic common thread: men triumphing in a strange land open to possibility. "Here are three teenagers adapting to their environment," Zamanillo said. "This is what they're presented with. They live on the beach, they have water and fish, and they embrace that. You make the best out of your circumstances, adapt to it and then create something to make it better." Zamanillo added the family history stands out against other early Miami real estate tycoons with names like Fisher and Collins since "it's not just about buying land where they got famous because they bought a lot and put their name in a development. These guys were creative, in a very pioneering way where you're making something with your hands, developing a prototype and creating something that's still in use today."

The family's real estate exploits continue. Besides being partners in the \$1.05 billion development of Miami's mixed-use Brickell City Centre, the family company is investing \$400 million in Bal Harbour Shops to greatly expand. The mall is consistently ranked as one of the most profitable in the world on a per-square-foot basis. Whitman Family Development LLC said in a statement that the work "will ensure that the Shops continues its 50-year status as the top luxury shopping destination in the world, while also maintaining Bal Harbour Village's reputation as a center for luxury living."

Read more: <http://www.dailybusinessreview.com/id=1202729100161/HistoryMiami-Looks-at-Real-Estate-Past-of-Whitman-Family#ixzz3cr1H3urL>