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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



A 'DOWAGER QUEEN' OR AN 'ASTOUNDING HEAP?'

By HAMPTON DUNN

CORAL GABLES --- A bit run-down and time worn, the elegant hotel building nevertheless stands there today with the same proudness she had when Coral Gables was just a gleam in George E. Merrick's eye back in Florida's crazy "boom."

Some now call the old Biltmore Hotel structure "The Dowager Queen of Coral Gables" or the "Grand Dame" of this beautiful suburb. The U.S. Government, which housed its lame and ailing soldier veterans in the hotel for a quarter of a century beginning during World War II, calls the rambling building "surplus." And in his day, when he was trimming down everybody and everything to size, Westbrook Pegler described the Biltmore an "astounding heap. . .a 500-room boarding house in the Moorish mood."

Merrick carved a lovely city in the palmetto bushes near Miami and laid out a fairyland that survived the boom, the depression and wars. A keystone in the area was the Biltmore. Merrick made an operating agreement with John McEntee Bowman to assume the \$10,000,000 hotel and country club properties. The hotel opened its doors on Jan. 15, 1926. Bobby Jones, Gene Sarazen, Bobby Cruikshank and other golfing greats cracked Biltmore's par. Rodney Miller took charge of the hotel job and said the hostelry with its 26-story Giralda tower ("tallest structure south of Atlanta") was completed in less than 10 months.

Oh yes, the plush Biltmore in its infancy survived Florida's most devastating hurricane---on Sept. 18, 1926--although it "was completely watersoaked in its interior."

