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PALM BEACH BILTMORE A BOOMTIME LANDMARK

By HAMPTON DUNN

PALM BEACH --- One of the grand landmarks of Florida’s flamboyant real estate boom is the handsome Palm Beach Biltmore Hotel here in the social center of America.

It hasn’t always been known as the Biltmore. It acquired that name sometime after the namesake of the original hotel ducked out on his courteous duty. Built in 1925 as the Alba Hotel, the structure was named in honor of the Spanish nobleman, the Duke of Alba.

(Cleveland Amory in his biography of Palm Beach, "The Last Resorts," reported: "The mid-1920's were especially good vintage years for titles, and in 1925, when the present Palm Beach Biltmore was being constructed, so great was the titular enthusiasm that it was decided to name the hotel in honor of the Spanish nobleman, the Duke of Alba, who graciously agreed to come over for the opening celebration. Unfortunately, in spite of elaborate preparations, the Duke did not appear and Palm Beachers were forced to put on the show just as if he had, with Jimmy Cromwell playing the title role.")

The elegant hotel is fit for a King or a Duke or a socialite. The sprawling structure contains 543 rooms and when it was opened in 1927 it was reported to have cost $7 million.

Since then, the Biltmore has gone through successive receiverships. It was used by the U.S. Coast Guard in 1943 and 1944 as a SPAR training base, and it served the U.S. Navy in 1945 as a hospital.

In 1962 the Biltmore was purchased by the R. H. Weissberg Corporation at a reported price of $4.3 million. When the corporation declared bankruptcy in December, 1967, Lord Baltimore, Inc. took over operation of the hotel under a trusteeship of the federal court in Chicago. The hostelry figured in further court suits in 1970.

In its hey-day, the Biltmore rated with Henry Flagler’s The Breakers and other great hotels on the gold coast as "exciting."

There is a rumor on the island of Palm Beach that is money grew on trees, nobody would bother to pick it. Exaggerated that might be, but there is no dispute that the town is America’s most fabled home of the millionaire.