

## Burdines: Florida's "best" department store remembered

BY LUISA YANEZ

[lyanez@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:lyanez@MiamiHerald.com)



Tim Chapman / Miami Herald Staff

Burdines in Miami Beach at the corner of Meridian and 17th on February 15, 2005.

Long before the days of giant suburban malls, smack in the middle of downtown Miami, there was Burdines.

The former chain opened its first South Florida store on Flagler Street 113 years ago.

It has now been seven years since the name Burdines and its nickname, "The Florida Store," disappeared from the local vocabulary. But what the Burdines shopping experience meant — first in downtown Miami, then Miami Beach and later at Dadeland Mall and elsewhere — remains in the psyche of those who grew up enjoying wandering its aisles.

"Burdines was the best department store we ever had; we'll never see another one like it," said Miami

historian Seth Bramson, who has just published a book chronicling the history of Burdines and the family behind the empire. The book, *Burdine's: Sunshine Fashions & the Florida Store (The History Press, \$19.99)*, will be on sale at the Miami Book Fair International's street festival this weekend. It can also be purchased on Amazon.com.

Bramson still mourns the end of one of the area's most iconic businesses.

"Nowadays we go to Macy's but it's not the same," he said. "That's not a knock on Macy's, it's just that you go to Macy's in New York. In Miami, you went to Burdines.

"If you were a woman, a man or a child, Burdines had something for you," said Bramson. "Burdines had the greatest toy store, the greatest bookstore, the greatest casual clothes line; the greatest food and service at its restaurant."

In his book, Bramson espouses the idea that the growth of Miami and Burdines are intertwined because the store helped export the perception of Florida's sun and fun with a breezy clothing line and tropical decor.

The roots of the grand department store are modest. The first store opened by William Burdine, a retired Confederate army officer and his partner, Henry Payne, was a dry goods store in Bartow, Fla.

"Things didn't go well," Bramson said. "In 1897, Burdine lost his partner and was struggling to stay open. "Then he heard that down south in Miami people were pouring in; the train was coming to town and the area was bustling. He and his sons decided to open a satellite store — and the rest, as they say, is history."

One of Burdine's four sons, Roddey, soon took over the helm of the booming family business. By 1912, Burdines — which throughout its history hung on its buildings both the name Burdine's or

Burdines — moved to the its home on Flagler Street and became a full-fledged department store.

The 1920s real estate boom brought droves of prospective residents from the Northeast looking for the warmth of surf and sand. As the population grew, so did Burdines, which opened a store inside the old Roney Plaza Hotel in Miami Beach and eventually a permanent store at the corner of Meridian Avenue and 17th Street.

There were some setbacks. The 1926 hurricane hurt business, and another store at Biscayne Boulevard and Northeast 14th Street, later the home of Sears, closed under the financial strain of the Great Depression.

But by World War II, Burdines knew only success, and its reputation grew as soldiers training on Miami Beach fell for its unique selection of resort wear tailor-made for tropical living.

“There was a time when the duke and duchess of Windsor would pull up to Miami Beach on their yacht and they would have a Burdines seller bring them cars full of store merchandise, and they would buy to their hearts content,” Bramson said.

Burdines also was a pioneer in striking up special contracts with well-known companies to make merchandise to be sold just at its stores. For example, Atlantic Luggage made suitcases sold only at Burdines. It also had an exclusive deal to ship oranges to other parts of the country.

Publishing companies staged book signings at Burdines. Among the featured authors in 1947 was conservationist Marjory Stoneman Douglas with her definitive book on the Florida Everglades, *The River of Grass*.

The department store’s tea rooms, cafeterias and “Men’s Grill” — where only men enjoyed power lunches — became known as places where many deals that shaped the city were sealed.

South Florida children who grew up going to Burdines have special memories of their own: the department store’s famous Snow Princess ice cream dessert served in its tea room.

“I can’t tell you how many people come up to me and tell me how they recall going to Burdines with their parents to get a that dessert,” Bramson said.

The beginning of the end came in 1956, when Burdines merged with Federated Department Stores, which also owned Macy’s, Bloomingdale’s and other major department stores across the country. At first, Burdines expanded, opening stores in Orlando, Tampa, Sarasota and St. Petersburg.

As malls became the place to shop, Burdines was at the forefront. In 1971, the Burdines at Dadeland Mall became the largest-volume suburban department store south of New York.

But in 2003, with no Burdine family members involved in the company, Federated decide to bring all its stores under one brand name, Macy’s.

On March 6, 2005, the Burdines name officially died.