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## Miami Stadium: Field of broken dreams

BY LUISA YANEZ

Cuban millionaire José Manuel Alemán believed that building a new stadium in 1950s Miami would lure major-league baseball to the city. And he was willing to stake his personal fortune on it.

Alemán was dead wrong.

Billed as the most "significant ballpark built since Yankee Stadium," Miami Stadium never lived up to its hype following Opening Day in 1949.

To be sure, the ballpark in Allapattah saw the likes of Ted Williams, Jackie Robinson, Mickey Mantle, Satchel Paige, Jim Palmer and Cal Ripken Jr. during its 52-year history. But it failed miserably at drawing fans, playing host to only minor-league teams and spring training games.

By 2001, it was demolished, dying with little public outcry under the name Bobby Maduro Stadium. It had been renamed in honor of the famous Havana Sugar Kings team owner.

Today, 60 years since the original plan for the state-of-the-art stadium was unveiled, the tragic history of the stadium and its father-and-son owners is being revived in a documentary, *White Elephant: What's There to Save?*. It premieres Saturday night at Little Havana's Tower Theater.

"Miami Stadium was a total folly," said Rolando Llanes, a local architect who spent a decade obsessed with the stadium's history and who teamed up with local filmmakers and producers Joe Cardona, Mario De Varona, John Graham and Gabriel Mena to chronicle its demise.

"The story of the stadium," said Llanes, "transcends baseball."

Indeed, the Cuban Revolution, millions of dollars stolen from the Cuban government and a cache of hidden weapons for Fidel Castro's rebels are all part of the tumultuous tale of one man's ambition to bring baseball to Miami.

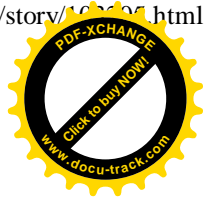
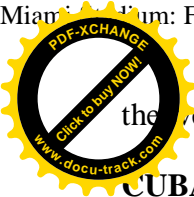
### ST. LOUIS BROWNS

The story begins in 1947, when the St. Louis Browns, who played spring training ball at the long-gone Miami Field next to the Orange Bowl, made a familiar threat: Build us a better ballpark or we're leaving.

The city said no, but the Browns' demand sparked an idea with José Manuel Alemán and his Miami business partners. Why not build a stadium to turn the then-sleepy winter resort city into a spring training mecca and eventually a major league hub? With Cuba so close, they felt they had built-in competition and fans.

"There was a sort of 'if they build it, they will come' mentality at work, which can still be found today. These guys were dreamers, and Miami has always attracted dreamers," Llanes said.

The stadium was to be the jewel in the Alemán family's Miami real estate holdings, which included Cape Florida, now Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park; a home in the 4000 block of exclusive Pine Tree Drive; and



the well-known McAllister Hotel in downtown Miami.

## CUBAN LAND BARON

Alemán was a brazen and wealthy Cuban politician and a land baron who split his time between Miami and Havana. In Cuba, he rose to become minister of education, just like his father. He had pedigree, too. His father had been a hero of Cuba's war of independence.

In 1948, the investors formed the Magic City Baseball Club. Alemán was the silent partner with the deep pockets.

That same year, Alemán became a controversial figure in Cuba. He allegedly took part in the noontime theft of a \$174 million fortune from the Cuban treasury's vault. It's unclear if Miami Stadium was built with stolen money, but cash flowed freely for the project from the start.

The same week as the heist, the group purchased a local minor league team, the Miami Tourist, for \$64,000, top money at the time. The Tourist were renamed the Miami Sun Sox.

The deal also included architectural drawings for a new stadium, a structure with a Broadway theater-like marquee and a cantilever roof which helped provide a rare, unobstructed view and shade for spectators.

Within nine months, the \$2.2 million behemoth concrete and steel stadium rose on the corner of Northwest 10th Avenue and 23rd Street, near the railroad tracks.

Inside, the grandstand was meant to be a crowd pleaser, with luxurious lounges for club and reserved seat customers. It featured an 80-foot high elevator tower to the press box. Its signature feature: a 10-foot neon sign that flashed "Miami Stadium."

On opening night Aug. 31, 1949, the Sun Sox played against the Havana Cubans. "The greatest single event in local baseball history is scheduled for tonight," that day's Miami Herald declared.

Typical of Miami fans, they bought up 13,007 tickets, deceiving owners into thinking they would always be there.

In attendance: Baseball Commissioner A.B. "Happy" Chandler. The owner's only son, José Braulio Alemán, then 17, gave the welcome speech. Someone yelled: "Play ball!" and everyone thought it would be forever.

Hardly.

The stadium never again attracted such a large crowd. Alemán's ambitious project would soon lose steam.

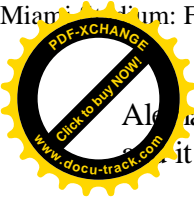
The following year, the elder Alemán died at age 46 of Hodgkin's disease. His teenage son became the stadium's sole owner.

Meanwhile in Cuba, political upheaval raged as Fulgencio Batista returned to power.

Rookie baseball executive Alemán became consumed with the island's future. He joined other prominent Miami Cubans in throwing financial support and guns to Fidel Castro's rag-tag army. He even stored rifles for the rebels under the stadium's grandstand and allowed them to train there at night.

The stadium dream was dying, and so was the younger Alemán's interest.

Fans, too, were losing interest in the Sox. One game attracted only 300 spectators. The team folded in 1954.



Alemán, then 25, wanting to be rid of his white elephant, sold it to the city of Miami in 1958 for \$850,000. It became the city's headache for the next 43 years.

Over several decades, the stadium was the spring training home of the Brooklyn Dodgers and Baltimore Orioles, a shelter for Nicaraguan refugees, a flea market and even a concert venue. Today, an apartment complex sits on the site.

It never made it to the majors.

## TRAGIC END

For Alemán, life was never the same. He moved to Cuba in 1959 after Batista was overthrown. But it didn't take long for his vast family fortune to be confiscated by the Castro government. Betrayed, he returned to Miami and disappeared from the public eye.

In Miami, Alemán became a recluse. He kept his curtains drawn. He couldn't hold a job. He moved in with relatives.

His glory and wealth gone, he spent the rest of his years fighting personal demons. Friends and family said he believed "the communists and the Mafia" were trying to kill him. They said he would pass his days walking back and forth across his room, chain smoking. At night, he fought insomnia.

He made news one last time. It was a Sunday morning in July 1983. He opened fire with a 9mm pistol inside the family's modest Miami home near Little Havana. He shot four relatives, killing his elderly aunt. He then turned the gun on himself.

He was 51.