

**Life and Times of
William John Matheson**
These pages by Jerry Wilkinson



- DISCLAIMER -

Information in this booklet is based on research collected during submission of Lignum Vitae Key for the National Register of Historic Places and data for re-enactments of William J. Matheson. Because of the nature of the documentation, errors can exist; however diligence was given to verifying as much as possible.

Your additions, corrections and input are solicited. Jerry Wilkinson April 2001

- ACKNOWLEDGMENTS -

Dr. Raymond Mackie of the University of St. Andrews
Arva Moore Parks of Arva Moore Parks & Company
Sam Boldrick of the Miami Public Library System
Rebecca Smith of the Historical Museum of Southern Florida
Anne Thompson of The Huntington Historical Society, New York
Doris Reinke of the Elkhorn Historical Society, Elkhorn, WI
Joan Gill Blank of Key Biscayne, Florida
Finlay B. Matheson of South Miami, Florida
Bruce Matheson of South Miami, Florida

- SOURCES -

Key Biscayne by Joan Gill Blank, Pineapple Press, 1996
One Hundred Years on Biscayne Bay by Stuart McIver, 1987
Key Biscayne by Jim Woodward, Miami Post Publishing Co, 1961

William John Matheson
PROLOGUE

William John Matheson was of Scottish– American descent. His father was Finlay Matheson of Loch Carron, Ross-shire, Scotland. His mother was Anna Meighs Lightall of Albany, New York.

Finlay Matheson's brother, John (1820-1890) was the first to move to Elkhorn, Wisconsin and established a tailoring business. Finlay followed his brother to Elkhorn some time later and established a dry goods store. The Finlay Matheson dry goods store was at the southwest corner of Wisconsin and Walworth streets. Reportedly, the two brothers were associated in other businesses.

A note on brother John Matheson, he learned the tailor's trade in Inverness, Scotland, emigrated to the US in 1840, and worked in Milwaukee before moving to Elkhorn in 1844. He was the first merchant tailor to establish an actual business in Elkhorn and first to put out a sign. He married in 1849 Miss Lovette Lee, daughter of the Rev. Luther Lee of New England origin.

Anna Lightall of New York met Finlay Matheson while visiting her uncle, John Meigs, at Elkhorn and the two were married.

William John Matheson was born September 15, 1856 at Elkhorn, Wisconsin, a small community west of Milwaukee. He had an older brother, Hugh, and the aforementioned uncle, John.

Their home was a modest two-story frame Victorian style structure in downtown Elkhorn on the corner of Wisconsin Street and Court Street. It was across the street from the courthouse park, in which no doubt William and John played as children. Not much else is known of his early life.

Sometime around 1864 the family moved to the northeast coast of South America at Georgetown, British Guyana. His father was to manage a huge sugar cane plantation. Sugar was the country's principal agricultural product. In August of 1867, Finlay leased the Plantation Sans Souci from the estate of Edward Baugle for three and a half years. Apparently, he was not successful and later returned to the United States. Finlay passed away in 1882 in Toulon, Illinois.

For about two years in British Guyana the two brothers enjoyed the strange exotic world of the jungle and year round warm waters. Little is know of these two years, but Dr. Matheson returned years later on his yacht, Seaforth, to visit the plantation where he had once lived. From the words of a Miami Herald reporter the party traveled from Georgetown up the Demerara River and took a jerk-water train across country to the Essequibo River. On the Essequibo they traveled by riverboat as far as the Tumatumari Falls where a tributary allowed them to reach the site of the original sugar cane plantation. When he revisited he found the modern community of MacKenzie. This was a model community near Wismar and was maintained by the Bauxite Company that mines and refines aluminum.

Dr. M. H. Tallman of Coral Gables and a Plantation Key weekender, accompanied the commodore and visited the local company hospital. It was clean and equipped with modern medical equipment of the time. The hospital was used by the British executives, hospital staff and the Bauxite workers of native Indians and Blacks.

- Off to school -

Returning to the 1860s, after a few years in the tropics the family decided that William and elder brother, Hugh, were to be educated in Scotland. Based on the account of a Georgetown, British Guyana newspaper on December 25, 1865, the two brothers accompanied by family physician friend Dr. Walker departed Georgetown on September 3, 1865 aboard the ship Strathleven bound for England. In November they encounter a hurricane near the Banks of Newfoundland and on November 4, the Strathleven sprang a leak and was totally lost. Captain Hannington and a cabin boy were washed off the deck and never seen again. Dr. Walker died on November 14 and the remaining crew and the masters Hugh and William Matheson arrived at Falmouth, England.

From the aforementioned undated Miami Herald newspaper clipping, Commodore William Matheson provided additional details of the shipwreck tragedy. Captain Hannington was drunk and staggering on deck when a monstrous wave washed him overboard. The ship was demasted and her decks were awash and littered with debris.

The gutted and bruised ship wallowed in the trough of the sea. Food supplies and fresh water were gone and the doctor somehow caught a porpoise. They lived on porpoise and coffee made from salt water until rescued. On the third day a brigantine passed by and did not stop. On the ninth day the square rigged *Marmion* loaded with a cargo of pitch from Trinidad enroute to Plymouth, England stood by and picked up the survivors. Dr. Walker died three days after being rescued.

They arrived safely at London and traveled on to Glasgow, Scotland. Later, William's son, Hugh, named his own sailing yacht the Marmion.

From a copy of an eulogy it is revealed that William lived with a "narrow-minded" Scots Free-Church minister. He attended a parish school, then went to what we consider high school at Free-Church Manse at Arran, an island in the Firth-of-Clyde, and finally attended Clifton Bank School in St. Andrews, Fife for advanced studies.

Some time during his education William learned about a young research chemist of the Royal College of Science, William Henry Perkin, discovering the synthetic process to make aniline dyes.

Aniline is an important organic chemical extensively used at that time in the dye, pharmaceutical, explosives, rubber, and many other manufacturing processes. In 1856, William Perkin oxidized crude aniline in an attempt to make synthetic quinine and succeeded in making mauve, the first of the synthetic dyes. He was later knighted for his efforts that revolutionized dye manufacturing and affected almost every other known synthetic product.

It is not clear why William Matheson was influenced by this; however, it is said that Perkin influenced him to major in chemistry when he entered St. Andrews University in 1871. However, St. Andrews reports that they have no record of Matheson testing, matriculating or registering.

Correspondence with Dr. Raymond Mackie of the University of St. Andrews School of Chemistry unraveled the mystery. Dr. Mackie forwarded excerpts of the CENTENARY LECTURE, December 6, 1940, delivered by Sir James Irvine describing four students who attended the University in the 1860s and 1870s "who deserve special mention in the Roll of Honor of this Department."

Quoting, ". . . it happened that a young American boy was sent to school in this city, and when the time came for him to return home he pled with his parents to be allowed to prolong his stay so that he might attend the University. His wish was granted, but with the restriction that no more than two years were to be spent in this way. So he became a free-lance student and, as he was not reading for a degree, it was difficult to fit him into the rigid curriculum of the time. . . .He solved their difficulties by spending the entire day in the Chemistry Department, lending a willing hand in preparing the lecture experiments and in washing up afterwards. . . . Nearly half a century later he returned to St. Andrews to receive our tribute of the LL.D. degree; for in the interval, William J. Matheson had done St. Andrews Chemistry much credit in the New World. He made his mark in the United States as a pioneer of the Solvay ammonia-soda process, as an active promoter of the dyestuffs industry, as the first manufacturer to produce pure crystalline glucose from starch and as a generous patron of research. A close friend of Theodore Roosevelt and a constant friend of Britain, he never forgot his St. Andrews days and what he owed to them. To him, in turn, we owe the Matheson Scholarship and the Matheson Bursary. . . ."

The above is a little lengthy, but serves to introduce the man and his achievements that follow.

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- Off to work -

It appears that he returned to New York City about 1873 to begin a commercial career with the same or more determination and tenacity as he exhibited in school. Pursuing his ambition as a chemist he accepted whatever work was available; however, he soon found an opening with a chemical house representing a French manufacturer (A. Porrier, Paris, France) of organic products. In a short time William J. became the American agent for the French company, A. Porrier.

France and more so Germany were the leaders of producing pigments for all forms of artificial coloring. This of course includes textiles, paints and ceramic glazes, which are of worldwide importance. Some assume that William J. realized the importance of synthetics in the role of manufacturing. At the time the world depended on vegetable products such as the indigo plant (blues and reds), annatto (bright orange), barberry (yellow), Brazilwood (crimson), madder (red-browns), cochineal (purples), logwood (greens and olives), fustic (yellow and orange), etc. Many colors can be made by mixing the above with themselves. A vast array of colors can be made when combined with the basic chemical and mineral elements and their oxides.

Synthetic pigments began with Perkin's mauve in 1856 (the year that William was born) and evolved into thousands of hues. More important than the number of hues, the expanding industrial revolution of the 1800s could mass produce them artificially. William's knowledge of this chemistry, applied manufacturing techniques and the later acquired knowledge of patent law would make him a world industrial leader.

About 1876 he became the American registered agent for Leopold Cassella & Company, the giant German chemical company. Quoting from the William J. Matheson portion of Who's Who in New York City and State, "Began business in 1876 as a chemist in application of coal tar dyes, forming a connection with a large German firm of m^rs [sic] of coal tar, of which he is now resident partner."

Germany had become the foremost leader of dye manufacturers and Cassella was the "tiffany" of Germany. Germany dominated pigment manufacturing and controlled it through international patents until World War I. William moved swiftly and formed the William J. Matheson & Company to import and distribute Cassella products to the western world. William J. continued to form various and many other companies to support his industrial concepts.

It was downhill from then on; he maintained leadership in the aniline industry. Aniline (AN-i-lin) is entirely commercially produced from benzene by synthetic methods. It is a chemical used extensively in the dye, pharmaceutical, explosives, rubber, and many other industries. The aforementioned William Perkin was first to apply it to commercial use.

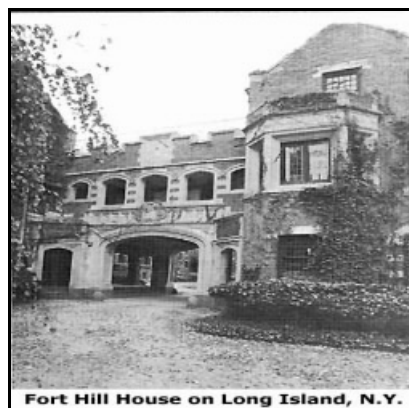
- To raise a family -

The details are not known, but in the flurry of business William J. found time to meet and marry Harriet Torrey of East Aurora, New York in 1881. Also not known is the reason for the wedding to take place in Geneva, Ohio on October 12, 1881.

Shortly afterwards their first child was born – Anna (Nan). Anna married Willis Wood at the Fort Hill House, the county home of her father. The two lived at 635 Park Avenue, New York City and used the Manor House on her father's Long Island Estate for their country home. After her father's death they moved to

the Fort Hill House. Quoting from the book Huntington-Babylon, Town History “The Manor House is a part of the estate of the late William J. Matheson, as is also the Fort Hill House, the residence of Mr. Matheson’s daughter, Mrs. Willis D. Wood.” Willis Wood was a partner in the stock brokerage firm of Wood, Walker & Co. and he died in 1957 at the age of 84.

More information of the Long Island estate is found in The Origins of the Fort Hill Beach Association obtained from the Huntington Historical Society and explains the significance of the above quotation. It reveals that “William John Matheson, founder of Allied Chemical [Actually J. P. Morgan was the founder and William J. sold a company to it.], bought the Fort Hill estate in 1900 from the estate of Anne Coleman Alden. . . . In the 1880s she had also purchased the 215 additional acres attached to the Joseph Lloyd Manor House. . . . In all, the southwest corner of Lloyd Neck purchased by Matheson came to almost 330 acres, with close to a mile of waterfront on Cold Spring Harbor (including the causeway and the beach to the south) and a half-mile of waterfront on Lloyd Harbor. . . . Anna Matheson Wood, after her marriage to Willis D. Wood in 1905, modernized the Joseph Lloyd Manor House. . . . Nan and Willis Wood lived with their three children in the Manor house until her father died. In 1930 they moved to Fort Hill and began to lease the Manor House to various tenants. . . .” to almost 330 acres, with close to a mile of waterfront on Cold Spring Harbor (including the causeway and the beach to the south) and a half-mile of waterfront on Lloyd Harbor. . . . Anna Matheson Wood, after her marriage to Willis D. Wood in 1905, modernized the Joseph Lloyd Manor House. . . . Nan and Willis Wood lived with their three children in the Manor house until her father died. In 1930 they moved to Fort Hill and began to lease the Manor House to various tenants. . . .”



Fort Hill House on Long Island, N.Y.

This was his summerhouse. There was a city address, which could have been a business address, listed as “184 Front Street, N.Y. City.”

Shortly after Anna was born William’s father, Finlay, passed away in 1883.

The refore, needless to say William was quite successful to afford his 1900 purchase of the Fort Hill estate. By 1901, his business had become so diverse as to include the manufacture of wood dyes, extracts and a large plant for the production of white lead, that it was decided to divide into separate companies. The outcome was the Matheson Lead Company for white lead, the Hemolin Company for wood dyes and The Cassella Company for the distribution of synthetic hydrocarbons.

In 1906, William J. was instrumental in organizing the Corn Products Manufacturing Company, which became a world factor in producing corn derivatives. One of the corn derivatives was karo or corn syrup. He was

associated with factories in Canada, Great Britain and four in Germany. When the Department of Agriculture tried forcing them to change the name to glucose it was William J. who took it to the White House for a favorable verdict. President Theodore Roosevelt had his summer house, Sagamore Hill, just down the Long Island Sound from William's Fort Hill. Principal Irvine of St. Andrews made reference to his pure crystalline glucose process when honoring William J. as an American chemist. From this incident came food product controls that were part of the Pure Food and Drug Act.

Stepping back in years to 1886, his first of two sons were born – Hugh Merritt Matheson. Like father like son, time come for Hugh to prepare for college. For Hugh this was to be Yale University. For a preparatory school, Hugh chose the Adirondack School that happened to have a winter campus (Adirondack-Florida) at Coconut Grove, Florida.

From 1895 to 1902 the campus was known as Pine Knot Camp. In 1903, Headmaster Paul Ransom officially established the southern campus of the Adirondack-Florida School to include Pine Knot. It was the first migratory school in the United States, students spent the winters in Coconut Grove and the fall and spring in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. It was renamed as Ransom School in 1949 and merged with the Everglades School for Girls in 1955, hence the present name Ransom Everglades School.

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- A visit to south Florida -

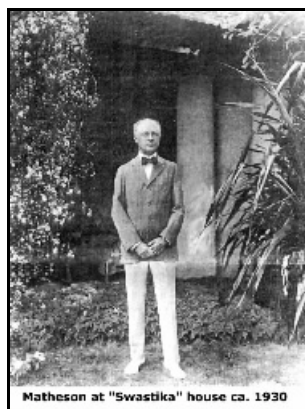
In 1902 Hugh was enrolled at Pine Knot Camp and his parents, William J. and Harriet, aboard their steamer yacht Laverock were vacationing not far away at Henry Flagler's Ormond Beach Hotel. Ormond Beach is just north of Daytona Beach. Hugh invited his father to visit him and to make certain that he would, Hugh chartered a sailboat on Biscayne Bay for the event.

Even after William J.'s distressing childhood sea adventure going to Scotland in 1865, he became an avid seafarer and sailor. Hugh's sailing promise was all it took for William J. to weigh anchor and cruise the Laverock to the Coconut Grove area.

Similar to Henry Flagler's falling in love with the St. Augustine area on his first visit, William J. fell in love with the Key Biscayne area and returned the following year to commence purchasing property in or near Coconut Grove on the mainland for a winter home.

From another undated New York newspaper clipping we read: "The most southerly mansion on the mainland of the United States is being pushed to completion by W. J. Matheson of Lloyd's Neck L. I. . . . The location of Mr. Matheson's fifteen acres is a mile south of the Cocoanut [sic] Grove Post-Office, the land being on either side of the highway [This would be in the area where Ingraham Highway, Douglas Road and Main Highway meet. Matheson Avenue leads to the bay.]" The article goes on to describe the fauna of the area and the colony of Bahama Negroes with two churches and an Odd Fellows' Hall at the rear of his estate.

In her article Along The 172.3 Road, Marjory Stoneman Douglas wrote in 1957, "I don't suppose anyone ever loved Coconut Grove and Key Biscayne better than W. J. Matheson. He built his great house on the rocky ridge, with a big open patio and a wide pillared veranda from which he could look down over his long lawn under vaulting and arching of coconut palms to the glitter of the bay beyond his boat docks."



Except for the omission of his entertainment house on Key Biscayne, the 1930 Social Register and Blue Book of Greater Miami summarized his residences. His winter address was 3645 Ingraham Highway, Coconut Grove. His summer address was 540 Park Avenue, New York City. His country address was "Fort Hill," Lloyd Neck, Long Island, N. Y.

The winter house on Ingraham Highway was known as the Swastika, that is, until World War II. Swastika is a symbol from India for the sun. The Indian

symbol has its arms vertical and horizontal whereas the later Nazi adopted symbol the arms were turned at a 45 degree angle. The Indian version also has curved ends to form part of a circle to represent the sun. It is a Greek cross inside of a circle with part of four segments of the circle removed. Regardless, the name was discontinued during the war.

After his death, the Swastika house was given to his son, Malcolm, and later demolished.



Side entrance to Swastika House

- South Florida in 1900 -

It is only fair to mention that the population of Miami in 1900 was about 1,700. A summary of Miami area events around this time period is: Ralph Middleton Munroe had built the Barnacle in 1891. Henry Flagler had opened the Royal Palm Hotel in 1897. The Florida Audubon was founded in 1900. Marjorie Stoneman Douglas was born in 1890. David Fairchild first visited a garden in Miami in 1898 and returned in 1912 to work with Ed Simmons. Charles Torrey Simpson, the region's first naturalist, moved to northeast Miami in 1902. John Gifford, the first American to hold a doctorate in forestry, moved to Coconut Grove in 1902. James Deering of International Harvester Company began building the Viscaya in 1914. His brother, Charles, purchased the entire community of Cutler in 1915.

Well-heeled winter visitors to the Miami area were Carl Fisher of the Prest-o-Lite Company, Marshall Field, the Chicago merchant magnate, Andrew Carnegie of Carnegie Steel, Arthur Curtis James of copper and railroads, Charles Armour of Armour Meats and Glenn Curtiss the aircraft manufacturer. The author notes that had William J. only wanted an opulent place to winter, Flagler's Royal Palm Hotel would have served this purpose, so he obviously had other motivations. In 1902 William J. was only 46 years old.

Next in order was the birth of his last child, Malcolm. Not much is known of Malcolm except that he married Julia Culbertson in 1911. Julia had come to Miami from Kentucky with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. William W. Culbertson. They lived in Alexandria, Virginia, but had a winter home at 8565 Old Cutler Road in Coconut Grove. They had one son and three daughters.

One of the early Coconut Grove residents that William J. met was Ralph Middleton Munroe. Munroe built William J. a tunnel-stern towing launch called the Loon. Munroe in *The Commodore's Story* relates, "She was an interesting experiment in screw propulsion for very light draft and made a satisfactory work and errand-boat." It appears that Munroe thought of William as just another rich northern tourist.

- Key Biscayne -

Son, Hugh, graduated from Yale University and went to work at one of his father's chemical companies. Meanwhile, William J. began to purchase portions

of the island of Key Biscayne. It is said the beautiful island across Biscayne Bay was just too tempting for the lover of tropical islands so he had to buy it. About all that was on the island was the Cape Florida Lighthouse at the southern end. It was not an active lighthouse as the Fowey Lighthouse just off shore was in service. The island was only accessible by boat and there were no utilities although William later constructed irrigation and electric systems.

By 1908 William J. had purchased the northern two thirds of the island, or about 1,700 acres. He finally had a place for his green thumb to exercise thoughts he had had since playing in tropical British Guyana as a child. While Key Biscayne is actually the subtropics, it sure seemed like the tropics.

William J. began clearing land and experimenting with limes, mangoes and avocados; however they were planted too close to the salt spray to be commercially successful. Also, it could have been that he still had to spend too much time with his businesses in New York. He never lived full time in Florida.

The sea appeared to be a part of William J. Matheson's life. It was obvious throughout his long and eventful career that he had an attraction to the ocean and tropical living. This was manifested again when he took the helm as commodore of the Biscayne Bay Yacht Club (BBYC) in 1912. Hugh joined the club the same year. Commodore Matheson kept the helm until 1923, more consecutive years than any other skipper except founder Ralph Middleton Munroe (1887).

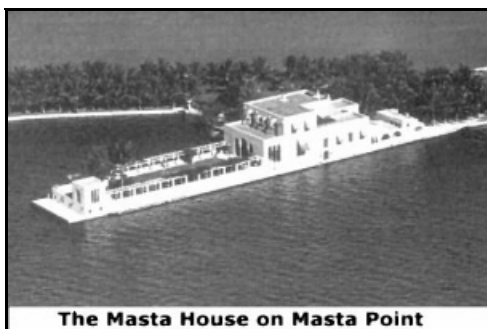


The commodore's close friend, Arthur Curtis James (the world's second richest man), with whom William J. sailed aboard James' famous yacht Aloha (See James' book Aloha) was a frequent visitor to the BBYC, but never became a member during William J.'s tenure. He stepped down in 1923 leaving a healthy club, an illustrious membership, but an indicator to time. In 1887 all the member's boats were wind powered – now only five were.

A tragedy brought son Hugh back to Florida. While working for his father's chemical houses Hugh contracted an illness that was diagnosed as Mad Hatters Disease – lead poisoning. Lead poisoning was not uncommon among workers with chemicals, dyes and among tanners.

The doctor's prognosis was good however, if he would remain outdoors in the fresh air and sunlight as much as possible. Somehow, the fresh air and sunshine would systemically remove the lead from his body.

This was great news for his parents as they felt somewhat responsible for Hugh's poisoning. Two significant outcomes of the incident were, one being that Hugh had found a lifelong mate. He fell in love and married his nurse, Ligouri Hardy, in 1911. The second was Hugh could be outdoors and be of immense assistance to his father by overseeing his south Florida holdings. Therefore, managing the Coconut Grove, Key Biscayne and future properties filled the outdoor living prescription for Hugh Matheson. It was one that he would enjoy and he had a mate to share it with. From here on William J. will create, set policy, form plans and write the checks, but Hugh will execute them. William J. still had a lot of work ahead of him in New York.



By 1911, William J. had acquired much of Key Biscayne. It was up to Hugh to drain and fill swamps, clear roads, create yacht basins, expand planting facilities, construct worker quarters and plant coconuts by the thousands. By 1915 eighteen miles of roadways were created. None were paved.

Of the Long Island 330 acre Fort Hill estate, one writer wrote that Mr. Matheson set about to turn it “into a gentleman farmer’s self-sufficient estate.” This was not a bad description of his 1,700-acre Key Biscayne estate, except it was only a weekend estate for him - a place to entertain his friends.

In 1915 there were forty-two workers, which increased to 60. They all lived on the Key, as there was not a bridge until 1947. William J. built in 1909 on the bayside of Key Biscayne at Mashta Point a palatial concrete weekend and getaway entertainment home named “Mashta House.” It was of Moorish style with a huge ballroom and high domed ceilings. Mashta is an Egyptian name “meaning home or resting spot by the sea.”

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- World War One -

The onset of World War I in 1914 affected and effected the chemical industry, especially the pigments portion. Until then Germany dominated the high-end of the industry, and with Germany engaged in a war, it used all its machinery and output to support its war effort. The U. S. was cutoff from all Germany's exports. As the conflict worsened the more effect it had on the United States. William J. also had plants in Germany that were cut off from imports of the free world.

From page 330 of The Notes of Clarence Barron, William J. said: "I retired from business before the war. For forty years I worked and studied nights to keep abreast of the times in chemistry. I could manufacture in Germany cheaper than here, but when the war broke out my imports were were cut off. . . . The government appealed to me to come back into the chemical line, as I was the only man in the country that knew all that could be known at that time about aniline dyes and the chemistry connected therewith."

Matheson's Cassella Color Company, which was primarily in dyes, took a lead in stabilizing the industry. Heretofore hindered by the German patents, the American government seized the patents and put them under the control of a licensing corporation – all is fair in love and war.

In an effort to beat the competition before the war William J. had made himself an expert in patent law. Seeing the end of the German dominance, his talents were drawn upon one way or another by most of the larger chemical groups. Successes and opportunities abounded at every corner, and William J. was there. He had the intuitive perception to grasp the situation and move expertly. Reportedly, at the outbreak of the war he severed his German connections and founded the National Aniline and Chemical Company. This company was later consolidated with other companies to become Allied Chemical and Dye Company.



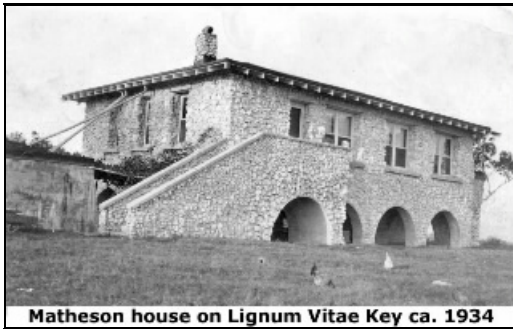
One of many of his accomplishments was his seat on the Directorate of the General Chemical Company which was the key for America to quickly enter into the manufacture of the pigments to support its involvement in the war. The General Chemical Company was a complicated enterprise of other chemical companies that made most of the base products – the same companies that Germany had successfully prevented from competing with its products. His

chemical background, patent law knowledge, industrial leadership and outstanding business acumen made him a winner everywhere he turned.

Again from The Notes of the Late Clarence W. Barron on page 330 William J. states “. . . When the war ended I was producing forty to fifty tons of mustard gas a day beside tear gas and other gases.”

St. Andrews University programmed an honorary LL.D. degree for William J. scheduled for July 2, 1920. He found it impossible to travel to Scotland so the Senatus Academicus conferred it “in absentia.”

Going back one year to May 16, 1919, William J. purchased Lignum Vitae Key in the Florida Keys from the former coconut planters, the Hine Brothers. Hine Brothers was a New Jersey Corporation of Thomas A. Hine and Charles C. Hine (deceased). There is considerable support that he purchased Lignum Vitae Key for some sort of an experimental project with David Fairchild. A stone caretaker's house, lime grove and coconut palm grove were soon in place. Dr. William J. transferred Lignum Vitae Key to Hugh on January 30, 1929. The Executors of the Estate of Hugh M. Matheson sold the island to George Deen on March 11, 1953 for \$125,000.00.



Matheson house on Lignum Vitae Key ca. 1934

- The coconut palm plantation -

Back to Key Biscayne, the reason for changing from avocado, mango and lime trees to coconut palms is not clear. He appeared to abandon limes almost completely, but Hugh would carry the flag for the lime industry for another two

decades or so. Hugh later formed the “Florida Key Lime Growers Association”, however the Persian lime won the race. It was larger, packed better, greener in color, and shipped better, but to the purist it could not match the taste.

Key Biscayne was originally owned (for 75 cents an acre) and planted in coconuts (1880s) by Ezra Osborne and Elnathan Field. James A. Waddell planted huge areas of coconuts at Cape Sable (30 rows, four miles long) as well as Thomas and Charles Hine in the Florida Keys.

Keeping his tradition of doing things **on the large scale by 1920 there were about thirty six thousand coconut palms Cocos nucifer, growing on Key Biscayne the coconuts one of the world's 12 greatest food producers rice being number one The coconut palm is not native to the Americas and not to Europe either Like the key lime it is native to Asia They were brought to Africa and Europe by the early seafaring spice trader, then by the Spaniards to the New World The key lime was to prevent scurvy and some say that the coconut was the world's greatest antiseptic first it required no refrigeration did not bruise or break easily was good ballast the monedrink the liquid eat the meat make utensils of the shell and use the fibers for whatever there was no waste**

The general belief is that Ferdinand Magellan in his voyage around the world transported the coconut to the Philippines in 1521. This could be disputed as his crew was near starvation before arrival, therefore few coconuts would have arrived. However, it would only take one!

David Fairchild, William J. and Hugh found one of the problems to raising coconuts commercially. In his paper The Makapuno Coconut of the Philippines, 1949, Fairchild expounds on the fertilization of the coconut palm and summarizes that “. . . cross pollination is the rule rather than the exception. . .” In 1920 he found 86 known varieties in Florida. At that time they did not know of the lethal yellowing that would appear in the 1970s.

Fairchild wrote in 1921, “The first important introduction of a coconut variety was when W. J. Matheson financed the bringing in of the Malay Dwarf coconut palm from the Federated Malay States and established them on his Key Biscayne plantation.” As aforementioned, it came true in the 1970s when scientists announced that the Malay Dwarf palm was one of the few coconut palms (others

are the Panama Tall and Maypan palms) that can fight the disease. The name of William J.'s luxurious houseboat to transport guests from the Swastika House to the Mashta House was the Coconut.

Up to the 1920s it appeared that William J. was a total preservationist. The only construction that he did was for his own benefit or to further the growth of flora. Hugh shared this with his father except he added his love for endangered animals. And to an extent, so was Anna who held onto the Fort Hill estate to death while donating pristine meadows and beaches for public use. Anna's approach was neighbors are friends and friends are neighborly.

- The Florida Land Boom -

William J. owned the northern two thirds of Key Biscayne. He wanted to purchase the southern one third also but while he was away in 1915, James Deering beat him to it. At first Deering had no plans to develop the ~~property but that changed as time passed with a plan to build an exclusive housing development there over various delays a decision to restore the Cape Florida Lighthouse and a deed lawsuit that went all the way to the Supreme Court. James Deering died in 1925 before much was done with the property~~

The 1920s were a bizarre period for Florida. This period is known as the Florida Land Boom. People **bought** and sold everything, often two or three times a day; so why could not James Deering? And, why could not Dr. Matheson? Land development was to Florida as gold was to the west.

To the uninformed, Deering's death would seem to be his opportunity to own the entire island; however, William J. had been contacted by Tampa's land baron, Mr. D. P. Davis – builder of exclusive pumped and filled Davis Island. So instead of buying south Key Biscayne, William J. contracted to sell much of his submerged northern portion to Mr. Davis. Mr. Davis was an expert at dredge and fill operations and loved inexpensive riparian property rights. The contract was delayed and during the delay, mother nature visited Miami in the form of the Great 1926 Hurricane.

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Life and Times of William John Matheson

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These pages by Jerry Wilkinson

- The 1926 Hurricane –

Key Biscayne, parts of Coconut Grove and Miami were awash. The hurricane struck at night and about 117 perished in Dade County. Those on Key Biscayne survived, battered but alive. Thousands of coconut palms were down, the Mashta House flooded through its lower level and debris everywhere. The restoration was Hugh's job.

What the 1926 Hurricane did not stop of the Florida Land Boom, the 1929 stock market crash did. As it so happened, Mr. Davis encountered unexpected financial hardships and sailed for Europe. He never arrived and has never been heard from since. The contract was void and the land quit claimed back to William J.



On January 30, 1929, dad transferred the island of Lignum Vitae Key to son, Hugh. In September of 1929 the American Institute of Park Executives met in Miami and toured Matheson Hammock. It was remarked that this place ought to be a park. When approached William J. retorted, "I have been waiting for someone to ask for it – it ought to be public property." He donated the 80 acres for Dade County's first park.

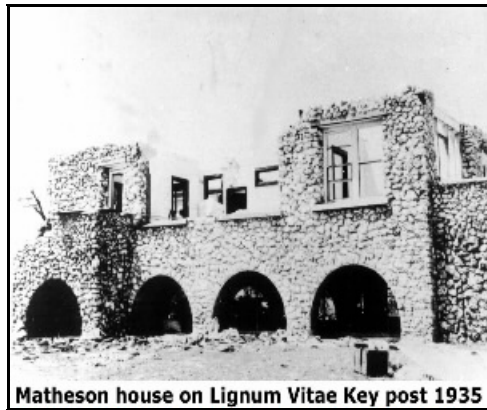
Back at his birthplace, Elkhorn, Wisconsin, the city library had burned. It just so happened that the library had been built on the old Matheson home site. In addition the family's home had burned and was rebuilt evidently before their leaving for British Guyana. William J. donated \$80,000 to build a new masonry library building. It was dedicated on July 18, 1931.

But William J. could not attend. Returning from the Bahamas, he had passed away from a heart attack on May 15, 1930 aboard his yacht Seaforth.



William J. Matheson's yacht "Seaforth" entering Biscayne Bay, 1930

He was survived by his wife, Harriet; daughter Anna Woods; sons, Hugh and Malcolm. The Elkhorn Independent newspaper adds their perspective by adding to the list of survivors, "James Matheson, president of the First National bank, Donald Matheson, who spends a great deal of his time in Elkhorn, and the Misses Mary and Barbara Matheson, all first cousins of Dr. Matheson, are relatives living in Elkhorn. Judge Alexander E. Matheson of Janesville is a second cousin." There was no mention of his wife, Harriet, or second cousin, Lulu May Matheson She is the daughter of W.J.'s uncle, John Matheson.



Matheson house on Lignum Vitae Key post 1935

- Epilogue -

An idea of William J.'s will can be obtained from an unidentified clipping titled "Miss Matheson is Named in Will". This time Miss Lulu May is identified as a second cousin to receive \$200,000. Reading on "The will specifies the manner of disposal of more than a quarter of a billion dollars. . . . No bequest was made to the widow, provision for Mrs. Matheson having been made before Dr. Matheson died. . . . Dr. Matheson remembered his employees, leaving \$100 for each person in his employ at the time of his death, \$300 additional for each employe [sic] who had worked for him for two years, and \$100 for each year over two years.

"Three children will receive \$500,000 each, besides a third of the residuary estate for each. In addition, Mrs. A. M. Wood, Huntington, Long Island, is given \$25,000 to distribute among charities.

"A niece, Marie George Cassidy, Flushing, Long Island, is to receive \$200,000 and each of her two children is to receive \$10,000.

"The largest single bequest to charity is a sum of \$400,000 to \$500,000 which is set aside for the William J. Matheson Foundation, a charitable and educational corporation. One of the important works which this foundation is to do is to continue the study of sleeping sickness.

"A \$15,000 fund is given to Dr. Matheson's school, the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Numerous other charitable bequests were made."

Daughter, Anna (Nan) Matheson Wood eventually gave most of the Fort Hill, Lloyd Neck, L. I. property to charity. In 1968 she conveyed title of an open track of meadowland to the Nature Conservancy and is now known as Matheson

Meadows. In 1982, the 22-room Joseph Lloyd mansion was donated to the Aspen Music Festival. (Mrs. Sam Guyton, daughter of Mrs. Wood, was married to a trustee of the Aspen Music Festival.)

Anna, Hugh and Malcolm jointly donated the north end of Key Biscayne for today's Crandon Park (680 acres). It is also known that part of the transaction was that Dade County Commissioner Charles H. Crandon promised to construct a causeway from the mainland to Virginia Key. World War II delayed action until November of 1947 and it was named after the famous U. S. aviator Edward Rickenbacker who shot down 26 aircraft in World War I. Key Biscayne was now open for vehicle traffic.

Much of the property south of Crandon Park was sold by Anna and Hugh to the Mackle Company for commercial use about 1950. Inexpensive houses were soon for sale. Engineers deemed the concrete in the Mashta House was too weak for remodeling so it was torn down. Later in 1986 a developer considered building a replica of Mashta, but the attraction of selling the land was too great.

Lignum Vitae Key and Matheson Meadows on Long Island remain as pristine as conceivable for the 21st century. Matheson Hammock Park runs it a close second. Crandon Park on Key Biscayne probably ranks third. The southern portions of W.J.'s Key Biscayne property incorporated as the Village of Key Biscayne, Inc. in 1991. The 6,000 square foot library in Elkhorn stands as a memorial to William J.'s parents, Finlay and Anna Matheson. A picture of William John Matheson hangs on the library wall.

Genealogy of the William John Matheson family

Brothers and sisters are listed vertically as a column. Children are indented to the right below the parent; therefore, older generations are to the left and younger to the right. Each indent to the right is another generation. The vertical order is not necessarily by age. The principal surname is Matheson and any marriage that changes the surname is underlined.

NOTE: These will probably not align vertically because of the nature of various html browsers. Please do the best that you can. The (1) is the first child of the above family; therefore, if there are two (1) aligned it is incorrect. The second (1) should be one increment to the right being the next generation younger. Brothers and sisters should align vertically.

(1) John Matheson (1820-1890) m. Lovette Lee

- (1) Jesse m. Charles Wescott
- (2) Benson
- (3) John
- (4) Louis S.

(2) Finlay Matheson m. Anna Meighs Lighthall

- (1) Hugh m. ?
- (2) **William John** m. (1881) Harriet Torrey
 - . (1) Anna (Nan) (1881-1980) m. Willis Wood
 - . . (1) Robert Matheson m. Georgia ?
 - . . . (1) John
 - . . . (2) Robert
 - . . . (3) Caroline
 - . . . (4) Willis
- . (2) Hugh Merritt (1886-1952) m. Liguori ?
 - . (1) William J. Jr. m. ?
 - . (2) Hugh M. Jr. m. ?
 - . (3) Finlay L. m. ?
 - . . . (1) John Henry m. Marie Quinn Flanigan
 - . . . (2) Finlay Brooks
 - . . . (4) R. Hardy m. Marlee McNaughton
 - . . . (1) Anna Liguori

- (3) Malcolm m. Julia Culbertson
- . . (1) Malcolm Jr. m. Emmy Henry Tompkins
- . . (2) Julia Torrey m. Benjamin Guy II
- . . (3) Margaret Robertson m. Edward Randolph
- . . (4) Lucy Culbertson m. Frank S. Height

William J. Matheson Chronology

1856 - Born Sept 15, Elkhorn, Wis.
 1863/4 – Moved near Georgetown, Br. Guyana
 1865 – Sept 3 departed for Scotland for school.
 1871 - At age 15 informally attends St Andrews Univ.
 1873/4 – Worked in a chemical house representing a French company
 1875 – Became the American agent for the French company
 1881 – Became the American Registered Agent for Leupold Cassela & Co.
 1881 – Married Harriet Torres of E. Aurora , N.Y.
 ? - daughter, Anna born -
 1883 – Father (Finlay) died
 1886 – Son, Hugh Merritt born
 ? - Son, Malcolm born
 [1890 - Marjorie Stoneman Douglas born]
 [1898 – David Fairchild established a garden in Miami]
 [1900 – Fla .Audubon founded. Miami pop.= 1,700]
 1902/3 – Son, Hugh, at winter campus of Florida Adirondack school
 1904 – Began purchasing land on the SE Fla. mainland
 1904 – Commodore Ralph Munroe built motor launch Loon
 1906 – New York Glucose Co. for corn refining
 1908 – Began buying KB property
 1909 – More KB land. Planted Key limes unsuccessfully
 1910 – Expanded planting facilities on Key Biscayne (KB)
 1912 – Commodore of the Biscayne Bay Yacht Club, and Hugh joins
 1913 – James Deering founder of IHC purchased Cape Florida land
 1914 – 1918 WW-I, U.S. enters in 1917 and seized German patents
 1916 – James Deering planned to develop Cape Florida
 1919 – James Deering restores Cape Florida lighthouse
 1919 – Abandoned Key limes on Key Biscayne (KB)
 1920 – Had 36,000 coconuts trees on KB
 1920 – Bestowed LLD from Univ. of Scotland
 1921 – Imported Malay Drawfs coconuts
 1925 – James Deering died as well as the Cape Florida development plans.
 1926 – Contract with W.P. Davis, huge Fla. land developer
 1926 – Bought 6.84 acres of No. KB at govt. auction for \$58K.
 1927 – W. P. Davis died, land back
 [1928 – Pan Am Airways in Miami]
 1928 – Had total of 1,800 acres on KB, ?? on mainland, 270 acres on LV Key, 80 acres Upper Matecumbe Key
 1929 – Took Ernest Coe for his first view of the Everglades in his seaplane
 1930 – Died May 15 aboard his yacht Seaforth of heart attack
 [1933 – Son Hugh donated 1,500 coconuts to Miami poor]
 [1938 – Fairchild Tropical Gardens]
 [1938 – Hugh the imported the makupuno coconut]
 [1940 – Hugh trades KB 800 ac. Crandon Park for a KB causeway]
 [1941-45 – WW-II]
 1947 – Nov., Rickenbacker Causeway to KB opened
 [1947 – Everglades National Park]
 1950 – Mackle Co. built low cost housing south of Crandon Park & tore down Mashta house

The End

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