

ARCHITECTURE



PHOTOS FROM THE MATHESON FAMILY ARCHIVES

SCENES FROM THE PAST: These photos, taken around 1930, reveal Mashta House at eye level and, resembling a barge, from the air. Interior shots show mysterious wall symbols, spacious rooms and a Moorish influence.

MASHTA HOUSE

Evoking a memory of long-vanished glamour on Key Biscayne

BY BETH DUNLOP
Special to The Miami Herald

Mystery shrouds Mashta House. Once upon a time, it was an exotic party palace, built on a pier inside a protected inlet in Key Biscayne with the idea that it would simply seem to float on water, "like Cleopatra's barge," commented historian Joan Gill Blank.

Its life was short — not even 20 years — and it did not really enter the realm of legend. Little documentation of it exists, basically photos in a handcrafted book that is part of the Matheson family archives, but, through May 30, the story of Mashta House is on view at the Key Biscayne Community Center. The exhibition lines a hallway rather than a gallery, but that hallway is a path to a certain amount of historical intrigue and some sheer viewing pleasure.

The exhibition — *The Architectural Legacy of W.J. Matheson on Key Biscayne: Plantation Buildings and Mashta House* — was curated by the artist Cesar Trasobares, Key Biscayne's public-art consultant. Trasobares prowled through the Matheson archives and, with the support of Joan and Finlay B. Matheson, who donated the large blow-up prints of the photos and the research help of historian Blank, began to piece together the fascinating story. On view are prints that trace the house's construction as well as aerial photographs that paint a vivid portrait of leisure, agriculture and industry in the island's earliest years.

The house belonged to W.J. Matheson who by 1908 had purchased some 1,700 acres of Key Biscayne, basically the northern two-thirds, which he planted first with tropical fruit and

then with coconuts, ultimately developing it into the largest coconut plantation in the United States. Matheson — a scientist, industrialist and philanthropist — was also an adventurer and sailor, a world traveler who had first come to Miami in 1902 (when the city had fewer than 2,000 residents) and then decided to enroll his son Hugh in what was then called the Adirondack-Florida School, now Ransom Everglades.

On Key Biscayne, Matheson introduced numerous experimental plants and trees, bringing such specimens as the now-familiar Malay dwarf coconut to the United States. The exhibition documents those early plantation years, with images showing both terrain and horticulture, as well as the slat houses, shelters, superintendent's house, workers' quarters and commissary.

By 1917 Matheson began to build Mashta House, basing it on a dwelling he'd seen during a trip up the Nile. The name meant "resting place" in Egyptian; the architecture was essentially Moorish. Photographs show a broad loggia and capacious rooms with rustic log-beamed ceilings and lush wall coverings. The photos also reveal enigmatic murals and decorative paintings of mystical symbols, making the untold story behind the house ever more beguiling: What did the architecture at Mashta House tell us? Was it a metaphor for something larger? Did the arcane symbols on the walls have hidden meaning? Or was the house merely intended to be glamorous, evocative and a bit bizarre?

No one ever lived in Mashta House. Guests

— among them Vanderbilts, Carnegies, Mellons — arrived by yacht in time to see the glorious tropical sunsets across the bay. (Key Biscayne was only accessible by boat until the Rickenbacker Causeway was built in 1947.) The house was used throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s and then abandoned after it was irretrievably damaged by storms — though its ruins could be seen for another two decades.

For most of us who live here now — in a place with a population more than a thousand times larger than it was when W.J. Matheson arrived — Mashta House is not even a glimmer of a memory. But the legacy of the Matheson family endures, in the parks (Matheson Hammock, Crandon) the family gave us and the continuing spirit of public service and philanthropy. And now, in Key Biscayne, there's a small window into the era in which the family flourished there.

IF YOU GO

What: *The Architectural Legacy of W.J. Matheson on Key Biscayne: Plantation Buildings and Mashta House*

When: 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily through May 30

Where: Key Biscayne Community Center, 10 Village Green Way, Key Biscayne

Cost: Free

Info: 305-365-8900

