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COMMUNITY NEWS

Saga of the Coppertone Girl, Part 2

The search for a new home continues, aided by families who knew her way back when



The initial plan to move the Coppertone sign fell through when owners of the General Tire building decided to restore it to its original design.

Image courtesy of Louis Martin

By Margaret Griffis
Special to BT



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Determination. It's one of the main ingredients liberally sprinkled into a dish called Miami. Maybe it was Juan Ponce de León who tossed a whole bag of determination into Biscayne Bay while on his quest to find the mythical Fountain of Youth. Or perhaps Julia Tuttle used it as fertilizer in her orange groves and lured old Henry Flagler down here with the subsequent blossoms. Wherever it came from, determination fueled the countless pursuits that thrived in the golden sunshine.

One modern quest has been the effort to preserve downtown's old and lovely Coppertone sign, and the fight to save it from the elements still rages. The MiMo Biscayne Association, a volunteer group devoted to protecting Miami Modern architecture, has been working not only to restore the Coppertone girl and her dog but also to move them to the greener historical pastures of the MiMo Historic District along Biscayne Boulevard. (It is simply a shame that Mrs. Tuttle didn't leave a plot of land and Mr. Ponce de León a bucket of rejuvenating water for such an occasion.)

Recent plans to relocate the sign to the classic General Tire building (designed by Robert Law Weed and now occupied by Andiamo Pizza at 5600 Biscayne Blvd.) fell through when, according to the MiMo Biscayne Association, the owners of the property decided instead to restore the building to its original design. Now the search is on for a new site.

Fran Rollason, the association's president, says the group hopes to find a location on either end of the historic district, which extends from 50th to 77th Street so the sign can be used as a welcome marker. Once a new site is found and the MiMo group has a better grasp of the costs needed to restore and move the sign, they will appear before the city's Historic, Environmental & Preservation Board and ask for support of the project.

Serendipitously, Jerry Bengis of the local advertising family who originally built the sign,

has joined the effort. He feels a certain bond with the sign and is thrilled to be working to preserve it. He asserts that the actual restoration wouldn't be very expensive, but much depends on the complications of mounting the sign at its new location, which is where costs could rise significantly.

Another new voice has now joined the preservation chorus and adds his own personal quest to the sign's long story. Louis Martin is the son-in-law of the late Charles E. Clowe, who purchased Coppertone from family friend Benjamin Green in the early 1950s. Clowe was a savvy businessman and advertising star who took the product nationally before selling it to the Plough Company (now Schering-Plough) in 1957. Martin simply wants to set the record straight on the origins of the icon.

Although he acknowledges that Cheri Brand was the child model for the final painting used in the Plough Company's advertising campaign, he says the original advertisements, featuring the little tanned tush, appeared on Miami bus placards a few years before Cheri was born. The original paintings were lost in a fire, so Joyce Ballantyne Brand, Cheri's mother, was commissioned to re-create the image.

Reading the story as written by his late wife Sophia (literally on the back of one of those bus ads), Martin reveals that the little Coppertone girl was actually his own daughter Deborah, Charles Clowe's granddaughter. She had been running around poolside at the Clowe home in Coral Gables when her training pants slipped, exposing a pale bottom on an otherwise tan body.

Deborah's grandmother remarked to her husband: "Charles, look at that. It's adorable. I'd rather see that on a billboard than any sexy girls." Clowe then added the dog for advertising appeal, and so the icon was born. Although she never posed for an artist, and the Coppertone girl's looks were slightly altered, it was Deborah Clowe who unwittingly served as the original inspiration. So the story has deeper Miami roots than previously known.

The fabric of a community, especially one so large but also so young as Miami, is stitched together with personal narratives from people like Jerry Bengis and Louis Martin, and held fast by the determination of visionary people. Whether her name is Deborah or Cheri, the Coppertone girl represents the spirit of Miami in its vibrant adolescence – young, playful, a bit naughty, and insistently optimistic.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com

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