

Dedication of Tamiami Trail Marker

By JAMES LORENZO WALKER*

It gives me great pleasure to be able to take a small part in commemoration of such a miraculous feat, the building of the Tamiami Trail, accomplished by some of us gathered here today, along with our immediate forefathers.

I think it is proper that we go back to the first conception of the road and relive for a few moments the anxieties, hardships and accomplishments of the ones working so hard to bring about such a highway for us to use today. Who first conceived the idea of the Tamiami Trail is not likely to ever be known. Certainly, it was expressed by several people at the beginning of World War I. However, we do know that Dr. John C. Gifford of Miami expressed his idea in the *Tropic Magazine* for July 1914, in which he states “. . . according to many reports, Chokoloskee Bay on the West Coast has a great future, a city will in time develop there. There is rock all the way. There is a good hard bottom to build on, and material can be quarried here and there along the route. It seems to the writer that a road across the State would do more good than a road along the Canal to Okeechobee. The Canal affords ample transportation Northwards. . . .”

In the same year, plans were made for the Dixie Highway to be extended Southward from Jacksonville down the East Coast to Miami, which stirred interest in a “Loop Road” across the lower peninsula to connect with the West Coast branch from Tampa to Pensacola. Newspapers on both sides of the State gave wide publicity to the idea.

At a Good Roads Meeting in Orlando in 1915 (one of the first in the State), J. F. Jaudon, Tax Assessor of Dade County, was a very active promoter of the Trail and E. P. Dickey formally suggested the name of “Tamiami Trail” at this first meeting of the State Road Department. The name was such a natural that it was accepted immediately. Our nearest newspaper at that time, “The American Eagle” of the Koreashan Unity at Estero, took

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offense to the name and said it sounded like a bunch of tin cans tied to a dog's tail and clattering over the cobblestone, and why not call the Jacksonville to Miami Dixie Highway, "Jackiami Joypath" and the road through Arcadia to the East Coast "Pair-o-Dice Loop". However, with all their objections, the name stayed Tamiami Trail, which sounds like sweet music to my ears every time I hear the words.

Consideration of the location was the next step to be taken. Some interests supported a route from Ft. Myers to Immokalee to Sam Jones old town, or possible Brown's Landing on the Western rim of the Everglades, to Labelle Eastward to Miami Canal, then along the Canal to Miami. The other route — the one finally chosen — received support from all persons living South of Ft. Myers and from Dade County. There were probably 900 persons living from Ft. Myers to Miami along the route to be taken.

The problem of financing the construction of the trail was the paramount issue confronting our people. Each community voted itself a Road and Bridge District and designated it for road construction. Had this area been fully developed, this may have given enough money, but with a distance of a hundred miles between Marco and Miami with practically no inhabitants, it just got the job started. As a matter of fact, the first bond issue was in 1915, with District No. 1, for \$177,500, to acquire a 50 ft. right of way from Ft. Myers to Naples, and build a hard surfaced road from Naples to Marco. Later the same year, the Everglades District bonded for \$125,000 to build from Marco to Dade County line. Then in 1916, Dade County voted \$175,000 to build from the county line to Miami.

In 1916 the various road districts started the task of building their segment of the road. My father says the first work he ever did for any concern, other than fishing and hunting, was to help clear, throw up the grade by hand, and build bridges from the vicinity of Bonita Springs to Naples.

Capt. K. B. Harvey, in charge of operations at that time, describes the work in the *American Eagle* of Nov. 31, 1916, as follows: "We began cutting through the swamp, dumping the mass of marl and sand, etc. to one side. This dump is leveled down to grade and surfaced by hand with big heavy hoes and rakes. Through Williams Island Jungle, which is truly jungle in every sense of the word, a mass of trees of all kind and sizes, thousands of switches, poles, brush and ferns all woven together with bamboo, rattan and vine. Perhaps several hundreds would be chopped off at the ground before the mass would fall, so that it could be chipped apart with brush axes."

In another instance he related: "It was scrub and mangrove and grass muck. Think of leaves on the trees shaking and trembling, and the whole mass of muck and sand for hundreds of feet in each direction quivering and shaking like a mass of jelly with each vibration of the dredge engine. Then think of putting a 40,000 pound engine across it, with muck and marl twelve feet deep and chancing that the slightest mistake or error of judgment would make a buried and tangled wreck of 40,000 pounds of steel and machinery. We tried planks and log cribbing, but this was too uncertain and treacherous. Finally brush mats piled up four feet high, with track laid on them, proved most practical for the dredge to travel over."

The road bed being built then was hardly wide enough for two cars to pass, with too few bridges which weren't high enough to keep the water from running over and washing the grade out. The surfacing then was shell ruts wide enough for one car of today.

By 1918 the work on the Lee County end of the trail had stopped. The contractor had given up and all available funds had been expended, with the old dredge being halted several miles West of Carnestown. However, the idea was not given up. In the summer of 1921, George W. Storter, Jr., of Everglades and J. F. Jaudon walked over the unfinished portion of the Trail along a route for a temporary road they hoped could be made usable by early 1923. It took them five days to reach the grade being built at the Dade County line.

In the spring of 1923, the Trail Blazers, a self-styled group of promoters of the Trail, made a dramatic effort to revive interest in finishing the Trail. They attempted to navigate by automobile the 35 or 40 mile gap between the Lee County and the Dade County end of the Trail, following the route Storter and Jaudon had laid out 2 years before. After much cribbing, prying and pushing, the group reached the grade the 11th day out, leaving the cars 5 miles back, which actually took 13 days to make the trip with cars.

In the same year of 1923, our beloved Barron G. Collier, Sr., (middle name being "Gift", which in my opinion was God's Gift of man for the development of Southwest Florida), tied his fortune to this area, and during the Legislative Session of that year, our own fabulous County of Collier was authorized and became a reality on July 7, 1923. The formation of the new county was agreed to partly on the promise of Mr. Collier to see that the Trail was completed. The work was immediately started again and through Mr. Collier's backing, the county was able to bond itself for \$350,000 in 1924.

The base of operations was set up at Everglades, the new County Seat, and the center of the Collier activities. A new construction firm of Alexander, Ramssay and Kerr began operations in October 1923 with a 1-yard Marion floating steam dredge operated by Meese Ellis, starting from the point of crossing at the Deep Lake Railway, a street car track used for transportation from Deep Lake to Everglades, working Westward to where the old Moneghan dredge had come to rest some 4 years earlier. The road construction was throwing up a sand base about 30 feet wide and about 4 feet high, which later had a wearing surface of 19 feet wide of lime rock about 8 inches thick.

In January 1924, a 1-yard Bay City Crawler type dredge, operated by Sam Benard, started East from Carnestown headed for the Dade County line along the route followed by the Trail Blazers a few months before. From Carnestown East about 2 miles, the soil formation was largely sand and could easily be scooped up by the dredge with their main problem being mud and water in the swampy areas. At this point, rock was encountered, as predicted by Dr. John C. Gifford in 1914, that required extensive blasting operations, and they were soon buying dynamite by the carload.

I read an article in a magazine while waiting in a doctor's office some years past, that stated if the fuses were laid end to end that were used in building the Trail through Collier County, that they would reach from Everglades to Anchorage, Alaska; and if the dynamite were laid end to end, it would reach from Jacksonville to San Francisco, Calif. The amount being approximately 3 million sticks used in Collier County alone. In 1927, Florida rose from 15th consumer of dynamite in the nation to 3rd.

The bond proceeds of \$350,000 was soon gone, and Mr. Collier was taking time warrants for money to carry on with until John Martin was elected Governor on the platform to see that the Trail was completed, and in August 1926, the State Road Department took over to finish the last 12 most difficult miles, as well as the road from Naples to the Lee County line.

A weekly boat service from Everglades to Ft. Myers and Tampa brought in machinery and supplies. A tugboat and sea-going barge handled dynamite and other large shipments. A tanker with a capacity of 10,000 gallons made weekly trips to supply the 1,200 gallons of gasoline burned in daily operations. All supplies were loaded on barges and floated to the dredges. At that point, they were hauled to the drilling and blasting crews by oxcart. The last 2 miles, the water and muck was so deep that boats were pushed by men to carry the supplies.

A vast quantity of lumber was needed for bridges and building, so a saw mill was set up at Port DuPont, but the need for lumber on the Trail induced the move to a new location a mile East of Turner's River. High water and an inadequate timber supply rendered this site unsatisfactory, and the mill was moved 2 miles North of Carnestown. This mill produced the 800,000 board feet of lumber used for bridges in Collier County alone.

To maintain the equipment, a large warehouse was constructed at Carnestown which housed approximately \$20,000 worth of spare parts. Emergency repairs beyond the stock of parts was done by machinists and blacksmiths in the Everglades Shop. All phases of the work kept in close contact with each other by telephone, with wires being temporarily strung as the work progressed.

The crews were cared for by portable bunk houses and mess kitchens. A hospital with doctor and trained nurse was maintained at Everglades.

During the boom days laborers were hard to keep. C. G. Washbon, when once asked how many crews he worked, replied, "Three . . . One on its way from Tampa, one working, and one on its way back to Tampa". However, the job went on and was completed a little ahead of schedule. W. R. Wilson, our guest today and Project Engineer, who with D. Graham Copeland, Chief Engineer for the Collier Enterprises, and C. G. Washbon, had an Engineer's slogan, "Quick, Quiet, Quality", said he never heard a man say anything about his salary unless he was asked a direct question, but their entire conversation was about how many stations they made that day.

Fons A. Hathaway, Chairman of the State Road Dept. under Governor Martin, said inquiries were received from almost every State in the Union, and that it has challenged the interest of the American nation.

The paper, *South Florida Developer*, said "The Tamiami Trail would probably be known as the 9th Wonder of the World. Vernon Lamme, in an article, said "It is the greatest road built during the 20th century" . . . and the Asheville, N. C. paper of April 8, 1928, said "The Quebec-Miami highway is completed with the construction of Florida's Trail across the famous Everglades, which is the connecting link of the 2500 mile North and South International Ash Trail".

At the completion of the Trail, Collier County had an indebtedness of \$1,429,552.70, being 6% bonds payable over 30 years, which with interest made a 5 million dollar indebtedness. In 1931, the State passed a gas tax

to help all the counties pay off their bonds. Collier was one of the first to pay off, making its last payment in January 1955.

We are here today to unveil this plaque in commemoration of the ribbon cutting by Gov. John W. Martin on April 25, 1928, being the completion of the Tamiami Trail after 13 years of work. I think the congratulatory message used by Knight & Wall Co. of Tampa in the *Collier County News* of that date sums up our appreciation in this manner — “Valiant effort, far-sightedness, and concerted endeavor of a determined people have gone into the making of South Florida’s greatest achievement, The Tamiami Trail. To the people of Collier and Dade Counties we offer our most hearty congratulations. The completion of the Tamiami Trail marks a new era in the progress of South Florida; opening a vast, fertile section which is destined to become one of the most productive agriculturally in the whole United States.

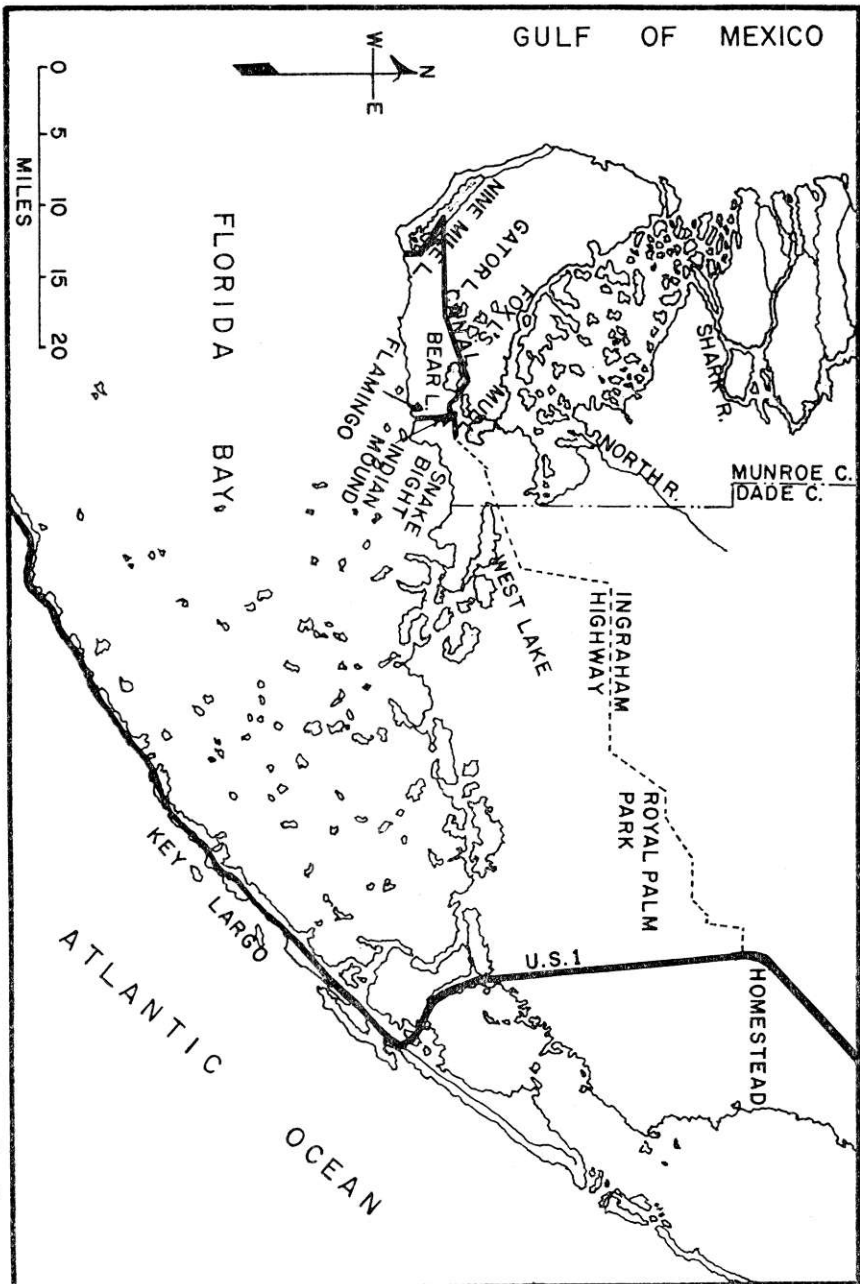
To the pioneers of this seemingly impossible work go the laurels of true nation-builders. To those determined people who have carried it successfully through to completion, the thanks of the entire State are due. This gigantic project, completing South Florida’s highway system, will stand monumental to its builders forever.

The last barrier to commerce is broken down. Collier and Dade Counties take on greater importance as close-packed traffic flows from East to West and back again over the new route.

We congratulate you, we respect your ability, and the stick-to-it-iveness which has brought this truly great achievement to completion.”

Thank you!

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