

The Iron Horse on the Florida Keys

By CARLTON J. CORLISS

We are here today to dedicate a marker in commemoration of an extraordinary era in the long and romantic history of these islands—the era of railway transportation.

Curious as it may seem, the island city of Key West was one of the first, if not the first, city in Florida to manifest an interest in railroads. As early as 1831, shortly after Peter Cooper's experimental locomotive, the "Tom Thumb" made its trial run at Baltimore, the enterprising editor of the *Key West Gazette* was suggesting a railroad to link Key West with the mainland of Florida.

A few years later, in 1835, another Key West newspaper, the *Inquirer*, was urging that steps be taken to build such a railroad.

In the 1850's, South Florida's leading statesman, United States Senator Stephen R. Mallory, of Key West, was stressing the advantages of a railroad to what he termed "America's Gibraltar."

In 1879, the Florida legislature chartered the Jacksonville, Tampa and Key West Railroad Company. One of the directors of that railroad in the 1880's was Henry M. Flagler, then a new name in Florida.

Mr. Flagler had started his business career as a clerk in a country store in New York State and had advanced by his own efforts to become a part owner of the Standard Oil Company, which he helped to organize.

Mr. Flagler visited Florida for the first time in 1883. He was then 53 years of age. He came, perhaps, as Edwin LeFevre once wrote, seeking the precious gold of the sunlight, or the turquoise sky, or, perhaps, merely a comfortable rocking chair on a hotel veranda."

But he found something far more fascinating, far more exciting. He found his great adventure. He "found a wilderness and out of it created an empire."

Have you ever wondered what Florida would be like today if that imaginative, adventurous, and amazingly enterprising man, Henry M. Flagler, had sought his holiday at Aiken, South Carolina, or at Thomasville or Sea Island, Georgia, instead of Florida?

FLORIDA IN 1880

The Florida that Mr. Flagler discovered in 1883 had a population, at the last census, of 269,000—less than one-twentieth of what it is today. Transportationwise and economically, Florida was the most backward of the Atlantic Seaboard states. Its few railway lines were located for the most part in the northern tier of counties, bordering on Georgia.

At that time, Key West was the largest city in Florida, with a population of about 10,000. Jacksonville, the chief city on the mainland with 7,000, was about the size of Marathon today. Tampa had less than 1,000; and many now-populous cities of Florida were not on the map. The principal towns on the East Coast of Florida, between Jacksonville and Key West, were St. Augustine, with 2,300 inhabitants, and Daytona, with 321 inhabitants. All the counties in which the Florida East Coast Railway now operates, put together, had fewer people than there are today in the city of West Palm Beach.

FLAGLER'S CHALLENGE

The vast undeveloped areas of Florida were a challenge to Mr. Flagler. He quickly saw the immense possibilities of the state, both agriculturally and as a winter resort. His first important venture in Florida was at St. Augustine, where he built a luxurious hotel, the Ponce de Leon, opened in 1888. The Ponce de Leon was the first of twelve magnificent hotels which he ultimately built, forming a chain extending from Atlantic Beach near Jacksonville to Key West and to the Bahama Islands.

To facilitate travel to and from his hotels, Mr. Flagler purchased a dilapidated narrow-gauge railroad running between St. Augustine and South Jacksonville. He rebuilt the road to standard-gauge and built a bridge across the St. Johns River. By 1890, through passenger trains from northern cities were running directly into St. Augustine, without change. This railroad line became the nucleus of the Florida East Coast Railway.

FLAGLER WAS ON HIS WAY

Once he got into the railroad business, Mr. Flagler began to push his line southward through virgin territory, acquiring land, laying out townsites,

erecting stations, hotels, building water works, gas and power plants, even schools, churches, and hospitals.

At Palm Beach, under his direction, a swampy jungle wasteland was transformed into a winter paradise. There he built two magnificent hotels—the Royal Poinciana and the Breakers—and there he also built his fabulous home, “Whitehall.”

Pressing south, Mr. Flagler’s railroad reached the Miami River in April, 1896, where his forces were already engaged in clearing land, laying out streets, erecting homes for workmen, and building still another Flagler hotel, the Royal Palm. Mr. Flagler built a beautiful memorial church, donated lots for other churches and for schools, built Miami’s first hospital, and established Miami’s first newspaper. Thus the “magic city” of Miami began to take form.

But Mr. Flagler wasn’t through. His greatest challenge was still ahead. At Miami he had found it necessary to dredge a channel across Biscayne Bay, at heavy personal expense, so as to operate steamships of narrow draft to and from Nassau. He knew that if his railroad was to prosper, it must reach out and promote trade with Cuba and other Latin neighbors to the south. To do this, he must have a deep-water port. The deepest harbor in Florida—in fact, the deepest harbor south of Norfolk—was at Key West.

MIAMI LEFT OUT IN S-A WAR

The importance of having access to a deep-water harbor was forcibly and painfully impressed upon Mr. Flagler during the Spanish-American War, in 1898, when the War and Navy Departments routed all troop movements and military equipment and supplies through Tampa, instead of Miami, because Tampa could accommodate ships of deeper draft. Then and there Mr. Flagler determined to carry his railroad to a deep-water port.

Then, shortly after the turn of the century, the Federal Government, under President Theodore Roosevelt, started preparations for the construction of the Panama Canal. Commercial and transportation interests throughout the country began planning to put themselves in readiness to reap to the fullest whatever advantages the Canal might bring.

An extension to Key West would put the Florida East Coast Railway 300 miles nearer the Panama Canal than any other railroad in the United States. It would put the railroad within 90 miles of Cuba, trade with which was growing under American occupation.

Mr. Flagler moved promptly. In 1902, he sent his engineers into the region south of Miami—then but partly explored—with instructions to find the most feasible route for a railroad to Key West. His engineers spent many months in the field. They surveyed routes through the Everglades with a view to spanning the Bay of Florida with a long bridge from Cape Sable to Big Pine Key. And they surveyed routes over the full length of the Florida Keys. In 1904, they submitted their reports, maps, and cost estimates. After careful study and extensive consultations with the engineers, Mr. Flagler, then in his 75th year, called in his vice-president, Joseph R. Parrott, and issued his famous order—"Go ahead; go to Key West." The route recommended by the engineers was the exact route followed by the Key West Extension, or as we call it today, the Overseas Railway, and is now followed by the Overseas Highway.

A BOLD UNDERTAKING

Certainly the Key West Extension was a bold undertaking. Only the most courageous of men would ever have tackled it. Mr. Flagler not only had courage; he had the determination to see it through. And he had unbounded faith in Florida.

"Flagler has faith in Florida," wrote J. E. Ingraham, vice-president of the Florida East Coast Railway, in 1909, "such faith as removes jungles and builds railways in the midst of the sea. Looking south he sees a new Cuba, too busy and prosperous for revolutions. He sees the shuttling of ships through the Panama Canal. He sees the union of North and South America in a confederacy of commerce. He sees Florida as a great central state, sending the products of her farms northward, and the output of her factories southward. Such is Flagler's confident vision of the future, and he has backed his judgment with most of his immense fortune and with his high reputation as a man of business."

During the construction of the Key West Extension, three hurricanes of great severity swept over the islands, each causing loss of life and extensive damage to work and equipment. Each time there were many who feared Mr. Flagler would become discouraged and order the project abandoned. But each time he promptly gave orders to repair the damage and get on with the work.

RAILS TO KEY WEST

Finally, after eight years of ceaseless struggle, and the expenditure of more than 27 million dollars, the rails from the north and the rails from the

south were joined; and the last spike was driven at Span 36 on the Seven-Mile Bridge. On the morning of January 22, 1912, Henry M. Flagler and his friends, aboard a special train, followed by a second train carrying Senators, Representatives and Diplomats from Washington, as well as newspapermen, passed over the entire line to Key West—setting off the greatest celebration in the city's history.

Seldom had a railroad project attracted such widespread interest and attention. It was acclaimed by newspaper and magazine editors as "a marvel of engineering skill". . . . "one of the engineering triumphs of the age." *Dun's International Review* called it "one of the most difficult construction feats ever carried to completion in the United States." And *Railway Age* called it "one of the most remarkable railroads on earth."

THE EAST COAST OF FLORIDA HIS MONUMENT

Mr. Flagler lived only a few months after the railroad was opened to Key West. Like many another pioneer, he did not live to witness the full result of his effort. He and his railroad had transformed the East Coast of Florida from a semi-tropical wasteland into a productive agricultural region and a winter playground unequalled on this continent. He and his railroad had brought many towns and cities into existence and given them their start—Marathon among them. Since his death in 1913, the East Coast of Florida has undergone a development in some respects without a parallel anywhere in the world.

Where there was one winter visitor in Mr. Flagler's time, there are scores today. Agricultural production has multiplied many times over. Palm Beach, West Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale, Hollywood, Homestead, and numerous other communities which began as railway stations have become flourishing cities. Miami, which started from scratch with the coming of the railroad, had attained a population of 7 or 8 thousand when Mr. Flagler passed from the scene. Miami Beach was just beginning. Today Miami and Miami Beach have a population four times as great as that of the entire state of Florida in the eighties, when Mr. Flagler began his great development program.

NEW EPOCH ON FLORIDA KEYS

The introduction of railway transportation marked the beginning of a new era on these islands, as it did elsewhere in Florida. Indeed, the coming of the railroad was probably the most significant event in the history of the

Florida Keys. It was the railroad that blazed the way and laid the foundations for settlement and development. It was the railroad that erected, at enormous expense, the viaducts and bridges of steel and concrete which support the Overseas Highway. It was the railroad that cleared the jungle and erected the many miles of fills and embankments upon which much of the highway rests.

The railroad came; and, for the first time, island after island became conveniently accessible to the settler and the visitor. For the first time, the Florida Keys had dependable transportation and communication with the mainland of Florida and with all parts of the country.

For the first time, fresh water—so vital to life—was available in adequate supply at all points on the Keys.

For the first time, the Florida Keys, from one end to the other, became a closely-knit community, linked by a continuous avenue of transportation and communication.

For the first time, fishing camps were established in the Keys area, attracting some of the most notable sportsmen and fishing enthusiasts in the country. Among them, Charles Frederick Holder, a California deep-sea fisherman of renown, who, in his writings, declared the Florida Keys to be “the greatest salt-water fishing grounds in the world.”

From the time railway service was introduced, settlers and vacationists started to come, communities and resorts began to take form, permanent homes were built, schools and churches were established, and businesses grew and prospered.

From the day the railroad was opened, the people of the Florida Keys enjoyed the same transportation advantages that had contributed so greatly to the growth, prosperity, and well-being of other parts of the country. The Florida Keys entered upon an era of progress which continued when railway transportation was replaced by highway transportation.

DAILY RAILWAY SERVICE

For 27 years, Marathon and the Upper Keys enjoyed the benefits of uninterrupted passenger, freight, express, and United States mail service. Communities below Marathon, including Key West, enjoyed railway service for 23 years.

Deluxe passenger trains, carrying Pullman drawing-room, compartment, and open-section sleeping cars, dining cars, club cars, and observation cars ran on daily schedules, in each direction, between New York, Philadelphia, and Washington and the Marathon-Knights Key terminal beginning January 22, 1908, and the Key West terminal beginning January 22, 1912.

At Knights Key Dock, trains met the Peninsular & Occidental steamships which ran daily to and from Havana, Cuba. Later car-ferries were also operated between Key West and Havana. In addition to local and long-distance passenger trains, the railroad provided daily freight service to accommodate all communities along the route.

MARATHON A BUSY CENTER

All trains to Knights Key Dock were backed up and turned around at the Marathon Wye Track, which also served the Marathon Materials Dock. The Wye Track was not long enough to accommodate the longest passenger trains, so they were broken in two for turning, each turnaround required several switching movements.

Immediately below Marathon, at the west end of Key Vaca, were the Boot Key Machine Shops and Marine Ways for repairing and servicing steamboats, tugboats, dredges, derrick barges, houseboats, and other floating equipment engaged on the construction.

In the lagoon directly south of Marathon Station was a spur track several hundred feet in length leading to extensive marl deposits in that area. Hundreds of trainloads of marl were dredged from this deposit for surfacing the railroad embankment.

Marathon was the headquarters for the entire Key West Extension project. Here were located the offices of the chief constructing engineer, the engineer of bridges, the mechanical engineer, the procurement officer, the auditor of construction, the chief steward, and the storekeepers in charge of three large warehouses. It was the principal labor recruiting and distributing center, as well as the major supply and transfer point for the construction, where lumber, piling, crossties, oil, structural steel, and a great variety of materials and supplies were received, unloaded, stored, and trans-shipped by water or by rail to the various construction sites and camps up and down the Keys.

TRAFFIC THROUGH MARATHON

Some of us who remember those days recall trainload after trainload of pineapples from Cuba rolling north; trains laden with packing-house products, dairy products, petroleum products, coal, machinery, lumber, and what-not rolling south—for the Army, the Navy, or for export. And there were trainloads of fresh water in tank cars from the mainland to supply the needs of all points along the Keys and Key West.

I remember how people would gather at the railway station, some for no other reason than to watch the train come in, but often to meet incoming passengers or to bid goodbye to friends, or, perhaps, to catch a glimpse of a celebrity passing through. I remember Sir William Van Horne of Canadian Pacific Railway fame, who traveled in his palatial private car, the "Saskatchewan." The visit of President William Howard Taft in a special Presidential train was a notable event. He was enroute to the Panama Canal, which was then under construction. His train stopped at Marathon for some time, affording many of the townspeople an opportunity to shake his hand.

Marathon had some important visitors in those days. I remember the famous botanist-explorer, Dr. David Fairchild, and Mrs. Fairchild, the daughter of Alexander Graham Bell. And there was Alexander Agassiz, a distinguished zoologist. And Zane Gray, renowned deep-sea fisherman and novelist. And of course the visits of Mr. Flagler and other high officials of the railway company were always events of special interest.

LOCOMOTIVE WHISTLES

Those were the days of the steam locomotive, and many an engineer had his own way of sounding his whistle. Folks living along the railroad could tell the name of the engineer the moment he came within hearing distance. I remember Lon Bunnell, who used to run the old switcher at Marathon Yard. Lon rigged up an ingenious whistle in the Boot Key Shops; and when he got the thing working right, he could make it sound off like a steam caliope in a circus parade. Regulations banned unnecessary locomotive whistling on the mainland. But all restrictions seemed to end once a train, especially a freight, passed south of Jewfish Draw. If there were rules, no one on the Keys was mean enough to enforce them; so the boys often broke loose. If an engineer felt like playing "Home Sweet Home" or "Polly Put the Kettle On," he played it.

I can't vouch for the authenticity of the story that one Sunday morning the pastor of a little church up around Tavernier had to halt his sermon when

the strains of "The Old Rugged Cross" came wafting through the open windows from a big freight locomotive pulling in from the north. "Brethren," said the pastor, "do listen! Only a truly religious man could make an engine whistle like that!" Then, as the train pulled away, the whistle started again; but this time the tune was "How Dry I am! How Dry I Am!"

Finally, on that fateful Labor Day in 1935, came the hurricane which silenced the "lonesome wail," the shrill voice of the locomotive forever on the Florida Keys! It was a time when the faith and resolute courage of Henry M. Flagler was sorely needed. But he was gone. The nation was in the throes of the worst economic depression in its history. Railway earnings were the lowest in many years. Nearly a hundred railroads in the United States were in bankruptcy — the Florida East Coast among them. Ninety per cent of the people of Key West were on relief. The outlook was so gloomy that the receivers of the railroad decided to abandon operations on that portion of the line south of Florida City. Public authorities approved. As a result, the entire railway property from Florida City to Key West was sold to the State of Florida for about one and a half million dollars and converted to the now-famous Overseas Highway.

IF FLAGLER WERE LIVING

Some people believe that if Mr. Flagler had been living and in control in 1935, he would have ordered the railroad repaired and restored to service. Of course, no one knows what he would have done under the circumstances.

He would, in all probability, have done what he felt was best for the public good. His program had embraced about all forms of transportation—railroads, steamboats, steamships, ferry boats, car ferries, motorboats — whatever served best. If conversion from railroad to highway best served the public need, it would probably have received his hearty approval.

If Mr. Flagler were living today, he would without doubt find much satisfaction first in the fact that the mighty chain of concrete and steel viaducts and bridges which he built and which for a quarter of a century carried the railroad structure now carries the highway structure; and second in the fact that the Overseas Highway has long been one of Florida's outstanding tourist attractions, as well as a highly important part of Florida's vital transportation system.

THE MARATHON MARKER

Today the Historical Association of Southern Florida is completing a project which had its beginning several years ago, when the late William A.

Parrish, Sr., the "Father of Marathon," was alive and active. Years ago, Mr. Parrish indicated his keen interest in an historical marker at Marathon.

The marker which we are unveiling today is the third and last of a series sponsored by the Historical Association, in cooperation with local groups (in this case, the Rotary Club of Marathon) to commemorate the Overseas Railway. The first of these markers is at Homestead, the starting point of the Key West Extension. The second is at Key West, the southern terminus. Both markers were dedicated in January, 1962, the 50th anniversary of the completion of the railroad to Key West.

The Marathon marker will be the only one along the 128-mile stretch of highway between Homestead and Key West that will acquaint the hundreds of thousands of visitors who travel over the Highway each year with the pioneering roles of Henry M. Flagler and his Overseas Railway in the development of the Florida Keys.

The marker will also acquaint visitors with the fact that Marathon—as headquarters of construction—had an unique and important part in the building of this famous sea-going railroad, which has been called "The Eighth Wonder of the World."