

# Labor Problems Of The Florida East Coast Railway Extension From Homestead To Key West: 1905-1907

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Henry M. Flagler began his interest in Florida railroading in 1885. By the middle of 1896 his Florida East Coast Railway extended as far as Miami, 366 miles south of its northern terminus at Jacksonville. For several years Miami remained the southern terminus of the road, but the idea of continuing the line to Key West always was present.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, the railroad was extended to Homestead, this extension being completed by 1904.

The extension to Key West was provided for in Florida law by the passage of the Key West Railroad Extension Bill, commonly known as the Crill bill. This act gave sweeping powers to Flagler, for it provided "for a fair and equitable assessment of taxes of the corporation constructing it, and to grant right of way over the submerged and other lands belonging to the State, and over the waters, of the State, and to authorize filling of the submerged lands and to construct buildings, docks and depots thereon."

Actual construction began on the extension in April, 1905. As the work progressed during the first few weeks it became evident that a large number of workers would have to be recruited outside the confines of the state. But good laborers were evidently in demand across the country. The sources of labor supply relied on for digging the Panama Canal were closed to the railway project and labor was not legally to be obtained from outside the United States.<sup>2</sup> As a result labor was not to be imported from the Caribbean, the area adjacent to the construction (such areas as the Bahamas, Cuba or Jamaica). Also Negro domestic labor was regarded by some contemporary sources as largely unavailable.<sup>3</sup> Thus the logical center for labor recruitment seemed to be New York, where poverty-

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<sup>1</sup>John W. Martin, *Henry M. Flagler (1830-1913) Florida's East Coast is his Monument!* address before the Newcomen Society at St. Augustine, Florida (New York, 1958) and *A Brief History of the Florida East Coast Railway* (St. Augustine, n.d.), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>"Over The Florida Keys by Rail," Ralph D. Paine, *Everybody's Magazine*, February, 1908, p. 153 and Sidney Walter Martin, *Florida's Flagler* (Athens, Ga., 1949), p. 210.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

stricken immigrants from Europe could be easily swayed by promising job offerings in the "sunny South."

The headquarters of the recruiters in New York City, during the first year, seemed to be the German-Italian Exchange, located at 49-51 Prince Street. Their advertising was flamboyant; attractive wages were offered. They continually advertised "Wanted—1,000 laborers of any Nationality" and offered the following wage scale:<sup>4</sup>

- \$1.25 per day for common laborers
- \$60.00 per month for interpreters
- \$90.00 per month for experienced foremen.

The ad also stated that whoever could get fifty men or more to work on the extension would be preferred as interpreter or foreman. In addition, transportation costs up to the sum of \$10.00 were to be provided by the company.

However, actual working conditions were not as rosy as pictured by the Exchange. Many of those sent to the working area south of Homestead either refused to work or came back to Miami. Typically, the story of these dissenters is as follows:<sup>5</sup>

Many of the men were assured that they were to get employment at their various trades. Reaching there (the working area) every man, regardless of whether he had experience or not, was set to work with an axe or grubbing hoe, to clear away the trees and roots preparatory to grading work. Instead of receiving board free, as they had been promised, they were each charged \$2.50 per week; the food was scarce and hardly fit to eat; their sleeping accommodations merely a board sheltered by a tent. Under these conditions the men could not work, and were brought back to Miami, where they were told they would receive their pay. Here the party said, they were informed that their pay would be retained to apply on their transportation south. They would not be sent back to New York until after they had worked six months.

In direct refutation of the dissenters' tales of woe, the railroad maintained that the workers were being given the best of living conditions. In an article in the *Miami Evening Record* for December 22, 1905, an account of the working and living conditions is given as found by an executive party headed by Mr. Flagler himself:

The laborers, consisting of Italians, Greeks, Germans, and Negroes, are in separate camps . . . The men are comfortably housed in tents all floored and sleep on comfortable double cots, or bunks, one ar-

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<sup>4</sup>*Miami Evening Record*, November 16, 1905, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

ranged above the other. They are given good, nourishing food and well cooked. All of the food, as well as all of the water used in these camps is towed from Miami in barges or steamers and for this purpose alone a fleet of vessels is always kept busy. The rough work of clearing is being done entirely by Negroes, they being accustomed to the use of the axe. The white labor then follows with the grading.

In respect to both factions, the truer picture of actual conditions in the camps probably lies somewhere between. Later camps were established on several of the keys and numerous house-boats or floating dormitories were constructed for the workers.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of the first year probably about 15,000 of these workers had been imported from New York, although another source stated that 20,000 men were carried to the area in three years.<sup>7</sup> It had been announced in two of Miami's papers that 30,000 laborers, "a large number of these . . . Italians, Slavs, and other hardy foreigners," would be brought in by Flagler's special agent from Jacksonville and that the agent "is in New York and it is said that he had been commissioned to bring 30,000 laborers to Florida." Also stated was that "A large number of these laborers have been Italians, Slavs and other hardy foreigners, but it was discovered a few days ago that among them was a number of the Typical East Side denizens."<sup>8</sup> However, two other sources indicate that the actual number of laborers constantly working on the extension never numbered more than four thousand.<sup>9</sup>

Now another problem began to manifest itself. These workers eventually created a sentiment against themselves along the entire east coast of Florida. At first this sentiment was not evident in Miami's three newspapers. In fact the *Daily Miami Metropolis*, on May 18, 1905, had stated that the *Nashville* (Tennessee) *American* was the only newspaper South of the Mason-Dixon line that opposed the immigration of "Italians and Polish and Russian Jews." But with the influx of these workers into Florida the attitude of people and the newspapers changed. Articles began appearing in the *Miami Evening Record* concerning activities of the "Mafia" and the "Black Hand" in this country. The *Daily Metropolis* stated:<sup>10</sup>

Quite a number of Italians from the camps on the extension in the neighborhood of Homestead are in the City today on a shopping tour. They came up on hand cars belonging to the railroad and will return this afternoon by hand power.

<sup>6</sup>*The Week*, May 4, 1907, pp. 11-12.

<sup>7</sup>Everybody's Magazine, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup>Evening Record, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup>"Construction," A. Hale, *Scientific American*, May 18, 1907, pp. 412-3.

<sup>10</sup>*Miami Daily Metropolis*, March 24, 1906, p. 8.

Then on April 7, 1906, the newspaper offered the following disparaging comment: "Imported railroad extension laborers come to town to drink and commit other disorders." The workers had to leave the construction areas in order to imbibe. The company did not permit the sale of alcoholic beverages on its properties. Later, when construction reached the lower keys, boats offering liquid refreshment would attempt to service the workers' needs (shades of the prohibition to come). Sometimes the company employees drove off these boats by rifle fire or "a stick of dynamite."<sup>11</sup>

Miami was the area most affected by this sudden influx of immigrants. Miami was not only the dispersion point for all laborers on the extension, but also the supply point for all the necessities of living in a wilderness (for instance, all water used for drinking purposes had to be shipped in) and a major supply point for all construction materials used on the extension. When any of the laborers refused to work they were brought to Miami. On November 30, 1905, the *Evening Record* made the following comments on this situation:

Just why the railroad, having imported incompetent men to work on the extension, should be permitted to bring them back from the keys, and unload them on to this city does not appear clear to the average mind.

These less hardy souls who had refused to work on the extension of the railroad began to arouse the people of this area. Some of this agitation was both racial and religious. The railroad found itself forced to provide work for these men in the Miami area, the work consisting of building and enlarging the railroad's dockage facilities in the downtown section. Although at no time were there more than 300 of these workers employed, this problem of what to do with the "foreigners" was not to be completely solved until the completion of the extension in 1912.

March, 1906, presented a new problem to the officials of the railroad. By this time spring had arrived in the North. Also arriving in the North (principally New York City) were most of the laborers that had been working on the Key West extension. Officials of the railroad soon began to realize that many of these laborers had come to Florida to escape the frigid winters of the northern United States. That many of these laborers left Florida with little improvement in their financial status can be seen in the following comments from the *Daily Miami Metropolis* on March 31, 1906:

Another large crowd of extension workers came in on the steamers arriving from the railroad camps last night and are wandering around

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<sup>11</sup>Everybody's Magazine, *op. cit.*

the city today, many of them in search of employment. But few of the men are better off, financially, than when they went to work four and five months ago, as the expense of living was so high and the wages so low, \$1.50 per day, that few of them are able to pay car fare back to their homes.

This exodus continued throughout March and well into April of 1906. As late as April 24, the *Daily Miami Metropolis* states that one hundred or more laborers came up to Miami and that those that were not put into jail due to disorderly conduct left for the North.

The officials of the railroad also began to realize at this time that it was much more difficult to procure a sufficient working force during the summer months than during the winter months. Accordingly wages were increased to \$1.25 and \$1.50 per day.<sup>12</sup> However, these wages were not enough. During May the officials were forced to post circulars throughout Florida and in New York City offering carpenters \$2.50 per day and board, and ordinary laborers \$1.50 per day and board—board was to include “comfortably screened quarters.”<sup>13</sup>

The officials seemed to have much better luck with the last mentioned advertisement because during July and August, 1906, the railroad replaced many of its Negro section hands with Italian labor. This was duly noted in the *Daily Miami Metropolis* for July 23, 1906, in a reprint from the *Fort Pierce News*:

The F.E.C. Railway is about to dispense with nearly, or all of its colored section hands having made arrangements to get 800 Italians along the line in the near future. Fifty are enroute now for Eden and other points. The Sycilians they formerly tried proved too dull, but they have secured a more intelligent set of men now. The colored man seems rather too independent for that class of work which requires a man to be constantly on the job, that he will not do: but the Dago can be counted on the day after pay day as certainly as at any other time; though it is admitted he will not do as much work in a given time as the black man, but will achieve more in time, owing to his presence at all times.

With this acquisition of additional Italian labor there would be no further problem of an adequate labor force for work on the first segment of the extension. In addition there apparently were no further problems developed between the Italian labor force and the resident populace of South Florida. By May of 1907, despite the destruction wrought by the severe hurricane of October, 1906, the completed roadway reached Key

<sup>12</sup>*Daily Metropolis, op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

Largo. This marks the end of the first phase of the Key West extension construction, for the mainland of Florida was now to be left. Now the construction camps and the men were increasingly farther and farther away from Miami. They are rarely mentioned in the newspapers or the magazines and journals of the time. Evidently the labor problems involved with the development of the railroad extension had largely been mastered. More likely, they had moved away from Miami as the center of construction activity moved away toward Key West.