

# I Remember the Everglades Mail Boat

By Gordon L. Williams\*

Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning at 7:00 o'clock the Mail Boat tooted two blasts and chugged across the West Palm Beach Basin, its exhaust fumes and cooling water sputtering from its stern. Its dock was on the south side of Okeechobee Road, about where the Seaboard tracks now cross it. The boat would be back about 5 p.m. the following day (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) with passengers, farm produce and news of happenings along the southeast shores of Lake Okeechobee. For many living along that route it was the only communication with their county seat at West Palm Beach or the outside world.

One morsel of such news that impressed me was the story of a Pahokee youth who had been murdered by a gun shot one moonlight night near a settler's chicken coop.

The year was 1920; I was nine years of age. We lived in the big white house on top of the hill at 623 Jessamine Street, West Palm Beach, only a couple of blocks from the Basin. I walked by the Mail Boat dock twice a day, leading our family cow to and from bits of pasture in the vicinity of the Basin, where I habitually tethered her to graze. Our house (named "The Washington") still stands at what was then the edge of town.

I also used to fish from the docks at the City Warehouse on the south side of the Basin. The Basin itself is now almost completely filled in, the exception being a small, deep duck pond at the corner of Okeechobee Road and Lake Avenue. The water table in that pond is now much lower than it was then. That open air warehouse sheltered some farm produce, but mostly farm supplies, plows, and several kinds of tractors, including Cletrac, Happy Farmers (a 3-wheel tractor) and Fordsons, made by

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Henry Ford and Son, and sold by G.C. Barco: Ford, Lincoln, and Fordson Dealer.

We had moved to West Palm Beach in September 1918, near the close of World War I. We were the first of about a dozen disillusioned American families who had had enough of Cuba. A Mr. and Mrs. Hose of La Gloria, Cuba, had recommended West Palm Beach to us. They had once lived there and returned soon after we did. La Gloria (meaning heaven) and Omaja were the largest of several colonies of Americans established in eastern Cuba shortly after the Spanish American War. They had come from many parts of the United States in expectation that Cuba would be a part of the United States. A few hundred people had gone to Cuba with their living and farming equipment and some livestock to settle in a fertile land with a mild climate. After the United States backed away from the acquisition of the territory, if, indeed, there ever was any real purpose to do so, and after several revolutions between competing Cuban factions, plus the isolation suffered during the First World War, they were ready to give up and return to the States. During their twenty-year venture these settlers had become very closely associated. Many of them had intermarried and brought up their children in a distinctly American community. Most of the children learned to speak Spanish, but many of the older generation resisted anything that threatened their United States culture.

They had sailed to Cuba from ports as far apart as New York and New Orleans. When the time came to return to the States, they sold out their Cuban properties, and with only personal belongings, rode to Havana on the American-built Cuba Central Railway. From there, they rode the Florida East Coast Railway Company's car ferries to Key West, then over the FEC railroad to West Palm Beach or points north. Many of them knocked at our door for a visit, some advice, and lodging.

The Mail Boat first came to my attention early in 1920, when the Palm Beach Canal was new, and two of my uncles, retired Indiana farmers, rode the boat to Canal Point and back stopping over at the Custard Apple Inn. Yes, Virginia, northern farmers could save their money, retire and winter in Florida long before Santa Claus moved to Washington. Anyway, they got a picture of some of Florida farming at its best while blizzards were howling in Indiana.

In the fall of that same year, my parents and the three younger children rode the Mail Boat to visit our good friends, the Bartlett family, at Bacoms Point, three miles south of Pahokee. My oldest sister,

Elizabeth, and I stayed with the Newsomes on Evernia Street just west of Rosemary Street (now Florida Avenue). The Newsomes, their daughter Lena, and Lena's in-laws, the Griffiths, had all been friends of ours in Cuba before coming to Florida. One of the Griffiths, John, shortly after 1920, became a co-founder of the now famous Halsey and Griffith Stationery Store in West Palm Beach.

Having many American friends coming from Cuba — some of whom moved to the Everglades — and living in a large house near the Basin, we saw lots of people who travelled on that Mail Boat. I also, with a little red wagon, peddled a fair amount of farm produce — vegetables, honey, eggs, etc. The largest watermelons brought 60c to 75c, and eggs once got as high as \$1.20 per dozen. Tourists, who could afford it, paid dearly for fresh Florida produce.

My first ride on the Mail Boat was in May of 1921. My father had promised me that if I passed the 6th grade — by no means a sure thing — he would buy me a .22 caliber rifle and let me spend the summer with Amza H. Price, a friend from Cuba who was farming at South Bay. Many boys had .22s in those days. In fact, mine, a Stevens Little Scout, was bought from another boy who wanted to “trade-up” to a new Winchester. By so doing, he received free instructions and practice permission at a rifle range on the Okeechobee Road near the Military Trail. My rifle cost \$3.00. New ones of that model were \$5.00. The Boy Scout magazines carried advertisements of several makes. So, at the age of ten, travelling alone, with my rifle strapped to my suitcase and 100 cartridges to last all summer, I boarded the Mail Boat, and we shoved off toward the Everglades. There were other guns aboard, most unattended.

The boat had a capacity of about thirty passengers, but carried about half that many in the off season. It carried many kinds of cargo, including bottled pop and ice, both for sale on the boat and for delivery at different stops en route. It was driven by a six-cylinder gasoline engine, a bit larger than those of the Hudson Super Six or the Stutz Bearcat. This was after the heyday of small steamboats, but before the development of Diesel engines of this size and weight. As the weather was hot, the passengers sat in folding chairs on the top deck, shaded by a canvas canopy.

We chugged out the West Palm Beach Stub Canal, then up the Palm Beach Canal toward Canal Point, some 40 miles away. The scenery was completely desolate — not a house, bridge, car, road, or any signs of civilization other than the canal, our Mail Boat and docks at Loxahatchee

and Conners Farm. For wildlife, we saw a turkey and two alligators a bit above the water level, sunning themselves, their mouths wide open.

At the lock at Canal Point, I was surprised to see little shops belonging to the Palm Beach Mercantile Co. and Hector Supply, both being prominent merchandisers in West Palm Beach. Back some distance to the right of the canal, as it entered the Lake, was the Custard Apple Inn, amongst big trees that were covered with Spanish moss. It was unique in the Everglades as it had both electric lights and running water from its own little utility plants. There was no bridge at Canal Point, except a foot route over the closed lock gates.

We entered the lake and turned left, stopping momentarily at the docks of Connersville, Pahokee and Bacoms Point—some two or three miles apart. At Bacoms Point I saw the Bartlett children, whom I knew well, there to see the boat dock but surprised to see me on it.

We then stopped at Kreamer Island and perhaps another island or two before I was told to transfer to a small motor boat that would take me to South Bay. I was its only passenger. That boat also served Okeelanta on the New River Canal, a couple of miles beyond the South Bay locks. Another boat went down the Hillsborough Canal to Chosen and Belle Glade. The Mail Boat continued on to Clewiston and Moore Haven.

Shortly after embarking, the operator of the little boat asked me to take the wheel for a short spell while he tinkered with the motor. My landmark was a flat-topped tree on the horizon. If the boat had a compass, I didn't see it.

We reached South Bay at dusk. I had traveled from West Palm Beach to South Bay during the daylight hours of one summer day. The 2-element Coleman gasoline lantern was burning brightly in the little general store and post office, throwing out lots of light and heat and attracting bugs. The boat operator unloaded me and some cargo as fast as he could as he had yet to pass the locks and continue on to Okeelanta before dark.

Amza was at the general store to meet me. It stood on the west canal bank, about where the present post office stands. Amza had his little cut-down Ford. There were probably a half-dozen such vehicles around South Bay then. It was a pre-self-starter Model T Ford with the touring body removed and replaced by a seat over the gas tank and a small flat bed behind. I once weighed one at 1000 pounds. They were the forerunner of pickups and jeeps and about the only car that could successfully travel those muck roads. From South Bay these Fords could travel along

the New River Canal bank to Okeelanta, and in very dry weather could reach the Miami Canal some seven miles west of South Bay. That was the limit of land travel at that time.

The automobile service station consisted of a few drums of gasoline, kerosene and oil at the general store, from which the contents were dispensed by measuring cans—20c per quart for oil and the same per gallon for kerosene and gasoline. This was non-leaded white gas but probably of a very low octane, if anybody had ever heard that word. People were complaining of the high prices and commenting about a recent forecast that in twenty years the world would be out of petroleum!

Amza's place was about one-fourth mile from the lake and two miles west of South Bay. The area close to the lake was too muddy for any purpose other than a pasture for a few hogs and two milch cows (Amza was a Pennsylvania Dutchman). He had a house and a blacksmith shop all under one corrugated iron roof, from which he caught rainwater for domestic purposes as he had previously done in Cuba. He had a one-ton Commerce truck that was almost useless in that area, a Cletrac tractor with widened tracks (to help stay above ground), two mules, a wagon, a wooden sled, and blacksmith forge and anvil. The sled, or "stoneboat," was his principal conveyor, going where even the wagon would bog down.

It was my main job while there to churn, cut wood for the stove, and help his wife mind their one child, a crawling baby. It wasn't the life that I had expected to enjoy that summer.

Community life at South Bay consisted of a Sunday school at the school house, perhaps 100 yards back of the store, preaching on some Sundays, and an occasional gathering, such as the Fourth of July fish fry. For that, the men and boys fished all day, then brought their catches to a big iron kettle, filled with lard, located at the school house yard. The entire fish catch consisted of one or two small fish. Fortunately, somebody suspected as much so had plenty of chicken on hand. It was a complete success!

About my second week there I accepted an invitation to go swimming in the canal just above the lock with some boys I had met in Sunday school. I assured them I could swim. I had learned the previous summer in a course given at Gus's Bath in Palm Beach by the American Red Cross and the *Palm Beach Post*, Joe Earman, Editor. However, this was my first plunge into fresh water. The lack of buoyancy frightened me and there was no way to get out, the canal bank at the lock being very steep.

There was nothing to do but swim across the canal and the length of the needle dam. When I recently looked at that spot, I still wonder how I made it.

A week or two later, playing where water was being released through the needle dam, I got caught in the current and, was thankful for the help of a young man who pulled me to safety.

Early one morning, there at the lock, I had the good fortune to see three or four canoe loads of Seminole Indians going fishing. The lead canoe was powered by a one-cylinder Evinrude outboard motor, about the only type built at that time. It traveled forward but pulled the others in reverse. Apparently, the flat sterns of those hollowed-out canoes pulled better over the water than did the sharpened bows.

That summer the villagers including Amza built a muck road the four miles from South Bay to Belle Glade. They used several tractors, all with widened wheels or tracks, scrapers, teams, etc. When it was finished we celebrated by having a Sunday school picnic at Belle Glade. The women rode in wagons, but the men and we children walked that eight-mile round trip. That was a big occasion. It included ferrying the New River Canal at South Bay, using a barge that had recently been furnished by Palm Beach County. The users of the ferry had to operate it themselves.

A couple of weeks later Amza drove his cutdown Ford clear to West Palm Beach. He went by way of Belle Glade, then along canal banks where U.S. Highway 441 now runs. He had to cross the New River, Hillsborough and Palm Beach Canals by ferries that he had to operate. It was quite a trip, but several hours faster than the Mail Boat.

Shortly thereafter, I received a letter from my mother saying I could spend the rest of the summer with the Bartletts at Bacoms Point if I wished. Well, I did so wish and, with my suitcase, rifle and still most of my 100 bullets, I proceeded to Bacoms Point via the Mail Boat. That was before there was a road from Belle Glade to Pahokee. Incidentally, as a young man several years later, I worked on the survey of the Belle Glade-Pahokee road.

On that summer day of 1920, upon boarding the Mail Boat at the island rendezvous I learned that it had not reached Clewiston and Moore Haven on its previous day's run. It had passengers for there also. Where they spent the night I don't know, but if it was beyond Canal Point I'm sure it was in quite primitive accommodations. A half-century later, Mrs. Williams and I had the pleasure of a week's cruise on the Amazon River.

The scenery on the Amazon and the great expanse of fresh water reminded me very much of my boyhood rides on the Mail Boat across Lake Okeechobee.

The sand ridge that runs along the east shore of Lake Okeechobee ran out into the water and ended right in front of Bartletts' house. That gave them a good sandy beach and lake bottom. Besides adding to the swimming pleasure this made it possible to drive the mules and wagon out into the water for the house's water supply. We'd put two or three barrels on the wagon and fill them with a bucket on a short rope. If the mules felt a call of nature, we'd have to quit bailing and drive ahead several yards before resuming it. Most people drank water from shallow wells, but that had a sulphur taste and the Bartletts preferred lake water a-la-mule-wagon.

In swimming we frequently saw alligators also swimming in the lake. If we thought they were a bit close, we'd go toward them and they'd swim on away — no problem.

The Bartletts were in the cane syrup business. One brother made the syrup at Bacoms Point and the other sold it in and around West Palm Beach, staying at our house quite a bit. The syrup mill was a bit of Yankee ingenuity. The cane mill was on piles some ten or fifteen feet above ground, so the juice flowed by gravity from there to successive evaporating pans and on to the barrel that held the finished product. The mill was turned by a Fairbanks-Morse gasoline engine and long belt. The two evaporating pans each had a labyrinth of partitions about four inches high, so the juice would gradually thicken as it ran the course of those labyrinths. They were placed over a furnace some twenty-five feet long and four feet wide that was fired with sizable logs — preferably custard apple wood. The furnace had a big iron door of about four feet by four feet at one end and a steel-pipe smokestack, some 30 feet high, at the other. It was a hot place to work on a hot summer day in the Everglades. On the days we made syrup everybody worked at feeding the mill, keeping the engine running, firing the furnace and skimming the impurities off of the liquid as we worked it toward the syrup barrel. Between syrup-making days there was about a week of gathering cane, gathering fire wood, and a general cleanup for the next run.

In the evenings we would frequently sit around the dining table and play some card game. Rook was a favorite, but some of our elders frowned on that because it involved bidding and that smacked of gambling. Sometimes, especially on Saturday nights, we would play until we heard an occasional rooster crow.

Mrs. Bartlett had what may have been the only privately owned piano in the Everglades, and she was very adept at playing it. Some evenings she would place a kerosene lamp on the flat spot at the end of the keyboard and we would gather around for a songfest. My favorite was *Let the Rest of the World Go By*.

On Sundays everything was quiet. We were not supposed to play—not even checkers or chess—and our only reading should be our Sunday school papers or the Bible. The owner of the general store at Pahokee was kind enough to send his worm-drive Ford light truck to take us to Sunday school at Pahokee. We awaited this vehicle at Todds' front porch, a few hundred yards from the Bartletts. The car was due about the time the house's shadow reached the base of a tree in their yard. No clock or watch was necessary. One of the Todd teenage girls thought she was supposed to sit in the middle of the front seat and steer the car. The young man driver didn't seem to mind, so he held on to her—perhaps to keep from falling out—while we all held on in the back. Dear girl, if she is still living, doubtless is sitting in a rocking chair, drawing Social Security, and criticizing the younger generation.

Bacoms Point (located at what is now Pahokee State Park) got its name from old Dad Bacom, a man apparently in his sixties when I knew him. He had lived there for many years and had children and grandchildren in that area. His abandoned vegetable packing plant located on the end of the point was tumbling down, and a newer one being operated by others. He was retired except for possible cane juice moonshining that was prevalent around there during those prohibition years. He was a frequent passenger to West Palm Beach on the Mail Boat. On one trip when my father happened to be on board, the boat left West Palm Beach on schedule but had progressed only a couple of hours when Dad Bacom suddenly died on the boat. There was nothing to do but turn the boat around and take his body back to West Palm Beach—without consulting his family or anybody else. The mail was a bit late that day.

The settlers along the shore of the lake, between Canal Point and Bacoms Point, lived in small unpainted frame houses on the sand ridge but farmed claims that they had staked out in the muck lands behind the ridge. During the summer of 1922, I helped my father locate and plat those claims for homesteading purposes. I, standing on a Coca Cola case, learned to run a surveyor's transit that summer, starting me off on an engineering career that took me to all parts of the world. To do his survey work that summer, my father bought a cut-down Ford from a settler there. A few weeks later when he was having trouble navigating some



deep sand ruts along that ridge, he discovered that he had bought a wide-gauge Ford. In those days, Ford made cars of two different gauges to fit the wagon roads of different areas — narrow gauge for the South and wide gauge for the mid-West. Let the buyer beware!

Farming, even on that rich soil, was a heart-breaking gamble. With the lake level uncontrolled, in some years the crops would be flooded and in others it would be scorched. Then, after a crop was harvested, it was generally shipped to the rail-head at Okeechobee, thence on to some northern city that was selected at random with no knowledge of the prevailing prices in that city at that time. It was not uncommon, after all the work of growing and shipping a crop, to get a bill for part of the freight, the selling price being less than the freight charges.

Much of the farm land was too soft for the employment of horses or mules. I once saw a set of four steel mud-shoes to buckle onto a mule's hoofs. They were about eight inches square and one-fourth inch thick but were too clumsy for the mules to learn to walk with.

One day in late 1921 my mother suddenly decided that she must drive from West Palm Beach to Bacoms Point. It was too urgent a matter to wait for the next Mail Boat. That's where she was wrong! She had a 1920 Ford touring car, the first model with a self-starter. She loaded the five of us children, plus two extra teenagers, into that car and we took off. She was the only driver, and it was her first venture off of the pavements in the proximity of West Palm Beach. Unlike the developing road to Belle Glade and South Bay, the route to Canal Point, Pahokee and Bacoms Point was via Jupiter and Indiantown, following the sand country that skirted the deep muck land. This was some years before the Seaboard Railroad was built through Indiantown.

The Dixie Highway provided us with a paved route as far as Jupiter. It had been paved from Miami to Jacksonville for a few years, but there were no paved roads inland. The sand road west from Jupiter was quite passable until we reached the deep sand workings of the newly dug St. Lucie Canal. There we got stuck, managed to get across the canal on a county-operated ferry, and got stuck again. That time we burned out a clutch band. We got towed the short distance to Indiantown, but its only auto repair shop was a shade-tree operation of a couple of young men named Gillespie. Their mother was kind enough to put us up for the night while her sons undertook to remove the radiator and pull the motor to get to the three planetary-transmission bands. (In later models, Old Henry provided a simpler method of band replacements.) Even then, the whole

of Indiantown had only enough band lining to replace two of the three bands needed for one Ford car—by far the most popular car in the world. So the car had to be reassembled with only two new bands.

About mid-morning we were on our way again. However, in the above reassembly, a timer wire was left against the fan belt so that by noon it was cut in two, reducing our already under-powered, over-loaded vehicle to three cylinders, way out in the middle of the flat pine woods. Fortunately, the driver of the only car we'd seen in several hours observed our trouble, spliced the wire for us and sent us on our way. We reached Bacoms Point late in the afternoon — some thirty hours after leaving West Palm Beach — a tired, dirty, hungry, disheveled car load, but ready for a swim. My mother didn't drive the car back!

In the late summer of 1922 my father took my younger brother and me over that same road in his cut-down Ford without mishap — except the loss of my highly-prized rifle. Traffic was so scarce and the water in the road ruts was so clear that it was drinkable. We proved that point by doing just that!

In 1922 water hyacinths became so thick in the West Palm Beach Stub Canal that boats could no longer reach the Basin. By frequent flushing of the main canal, it was still navigable. In addition, the Okeechobee Road had been pushed westward as far as Loxahatchee by then, so that the operators of the Mail Boat could dock it there and use a bus to transport passengers between that dock and West Palm Beach. With the completion of the Conners Toll Road across the deep sawgrass glades, along the canal bank between Twenty-Mile-Bend and Canal Point, about 1923, the Mail Boat's saga came to an end.

Upon graduation from high school in 1927, I started work with a survey party under Jake M. Boyd, County Engineer, locating roads throughout Palm Beach County. That included the survey of a proposed road from Belle Glade to Ritta Island and some improvements on the Belle Glade-Pahokee road. For that work we stayed at the Belle Glade Hotel, run by a Mrs. Lang. By that time there were roads to all of the towns from South Bay to Okeechobee City and a railroad to Pahokee. In the Mail Boat days, I knew many children at Pahokee that had never seen a train! Now it had come to see them — that's progress.

There was just one radio in Belle Glade at the time of the second Dempsey-Tunney fight. Its owner set it up in the hotel lobby so we could all listen to that broadcast. It was not clear, but we got the gist of the fight. So did Jack Dempsey!

In recent years, I have encountered considerable confusion between the hurricanes of 1926 and 1928. Those of us who lived through them remember them very well. Actually, there were two each year, smaller ones preceding the devastating ones by a few weeks. The first one of 1926 was bad enough weather to shut down construction work for a day on a bridge where I was working near old Juno. The big one of that year leveled much of Miami. It floated a ship into Biscayne Park that stayed there for many years. In 1928, the first one blew the roof off the porch at my father's dairy, where the present Florida Turnpike crosses the Jupiter-Indiantown Road. The second one did much damage in West Palm Beach and flattened all the buildings at our dairy. I had been to college at Gainesville just one week.

This second hurricane of 1928 continued west across the Everglades, blowing the water of Lake Okeechobee out across the glades to the south, where the lake had essentially no rim. It swept everything before it. One friend of ours, John McAllister, of Okeelanta, drove his Oakland sedan to the highest point he could find — the canal bank at South Bay—where he and his wife planned to ride out the storm. (I don't know where their three sons were.) The water, waves and driftwood pounded against the car so hard that John was afraid it would roll off the canal bank, so he got out to push the driftwood aside. One timber must have hit him. He was never seen again. Mrs. McAllister didn't know how she survived. When she was picked up the next day by a rescue boat, she was far out in the glades clinging to some driftwood.

The tragedy of that 1928 hurricane brought about the construction of the Hoover Dike to contain Lake Okeechobee in case of another such hurricane. There have so far been no more like it. In bringing about this protection, this dike sort of cut off the settlers from the lake — like cutting a vine loose from its roots. Those inhabitants now think in terms of roads and cars instead of boats and docks. In a way it's sad.

Sometimes I now drive through the Everglades on paved roads, in cars with glass windows and self-starters, and reminisce about the places I used to know so well. It's been a very long time since the Mail Boat docked at Pahokee!