

EARLY STAGES OF TRAIL BUILDING REVIEWED BY

NEAL, DREDGE MASTER

Hardships Failed to Break Fighting Spirit of Supurb Workers

By Otto Neal

While there had been considerable talk of a highway across the Everglades among the dredge and construction men for many years it was not until 1923 that I became interested in what before then seemed an almost utter impossibility.

Sometime in February of that year Mr. Barron Collier spoke to me in Fort Myers about an old Marion one yard dredge that I had operated on the East Coast and I told him that I thought it could be bought. He said buy it. I was ordered by the owners to take the dredge from West Palm Beach over to Everglades and stay with it until it was in good working order and to select an able crew of men to operate it. That is all that I thought that I would ever do for Mr. Collier but here I am still with him and by the way we still have that old Marion "one yard." Well, the dredge was brought through the Palm Beach canal, across Lake Okeechobee to Moore Haven then down the canal to the Caloosahatchee past Fort Mters to the Gulf and down the Gulf through the Ten Thousand Islands up Barron's river to Everglades. It was dismantled and rebuilt at DuPont, taking nearly a month for this work. After completing the job of rebuilding and ready for work we started for the dredge one morning just in time to see it sinking in the river. This was the second time that I had a sunken dredge on my hands during the trip as it had sunk in the Palm Beach canal and taken us twenty days to raise it.

We were to start work between Du Pont and Carnestown going toward the latter village and it was at Palm Creek that we struck the first rock that afterwards caused us so much difficulty crossing the Everglades. The first time that the dipper struck it we tore off the lip and had to shut down for repairs before we got good and started. By this time Mr. Collier had told me that he wanted me to stay with the dredge until it reached Carnestown and while waiting for the dipper to be repaired we figured out a way to defeat the rock. Dynamite was the thing and hand drills made from $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. hexagon steel was used to penetrate the rock, with the aid of sledge hammers and the good right arms of the men. We used this method only for a short time however as we afterward discovered that the rock strata was not solid but filled with holes some of them a foot across and with the help of "jettors," a strong stream of water could be forced into these holes cleaning out the dirt enabling us to set the charge of dynamite. This system is still being used around the town of Everglades very successfully.

Early Stages of Trail Building (Cont.)

We arrived with the Marion at Carnestown about November 1923 and there we were asked to start the fill connecting Carnestown with the "old Lee county grade" which was to the westward about two and a half miles. This would give an outlet to Fort Myers which had been desired by Mr. Collier and the residents in the section for some time. The methods we used going into Carnestown were found to be successful westward and we arrived at the Lee county grade on the 20th of December 1923 and the dredge was floated back to Carnestown and helped rebuild the road back to Du Pont by throwing up road material from the bottom of the canal.

It was nearly a year before we again took up the job west, but by this time I was engaged by Mr. Collier indefinitely.

It might be interesting to note here the equipment used in grading the road west as compared with what was used on the eastern part of the Trail when we started across to the Dade county line. We used a 5-ton Caterpillar, one 3-gang disc plow, one 2-disc plow, one 12-inch turning plow and one very small grader. All the boulders were lifted off the road by hand, sometimes taking the whole crew to move one. At this time there were but fifteen men camped at Carnestown.

In December 1923 we made the first one mile toward Deep Lake then the Marion was sent back and used on canals around Du Pont and the town of Everglades.

At this time we all thought that the Everglades would be almost impassable and impossible to cross with a highway. Talk continued to come to us of a project that would start soon--but none of us believed it.

In November 1923 we purchased a Bay City Caterpillar type dredge which was delivered in December and the first of January, 1924 we started for the east coast across the Everglades that we had heard so much about. These were memorable days and I recall them with considerable pleasure. The prospect of the long grind ahead of us just spurred us on; we knew we would meet difficulties and we felt that we could conquer them and we did. There was just three of us started this job, an operator and oiler on the dredge and a gasoline boatman who kept us in supplies as the only transportation we had in those days was by water. The dredge at this time was operated only by single shifts and we made about a half mile per month. This was some different from later when we were working nearly 150 men and making nearly two miles a month THROUGH SOLID ROCK.

Early Stages of Trail Building (Cont.)

We kept up this tedious work until June, 1924 with just the one dredge and then the first Bay City "walking dredge" was purchased. This was added to speed up the work as we were encountering at that time considerable difficulty with out dynamite--with the two dredges working single shifts we went thirteen miles in twenty months. The rock all the way over this thirteen miles was terrible and the dredges would sometimes be able to dig a fifteen foot canal depth and then again but four and the rock was all the time growing harder as we struggled eastward. It was difficult to determine the amount of dynamite necessary for each "shot" and oftentimes we were compelled to reblow the holes and this was done by dropping "bundles" of tied sticks of dynamite in front of the machines and try it over. It was miraculous that no one was seriously hurt during these operations. It must be remembered that all this time the county had charge of the work--and were having a tough time of it. The conditions were becoming almost unbearable out in the swamps and the rock was getting harder and harder until Mr. Copeland took charge in September, 1926. This engineer saw immediately what our difficulties were and we started experimenting with multiple drilling machines which when in operation solved our most serious problem. We began to proceed with what seemed incredible speed. We had experimented for two months and then the battle against the rock was started in earnest and after the second "walking" dredge was purchased we made as much as two miles in a single month several times.

One of the most difficult problems of trail building is clearing the land ahead of the dredges. In January 1925 we were at Turner's river with the dredges and clearing started here in earnest. We kept from fifteen to twenty-five men clearing all the time. These fellows had plenty of grief; in water to their waists lots of times and supplies had to be brought to them by oxen and when too boggy for that during the rainy season the men "toted" their supplies and rations on their shoulders. Transportation was the one great obstacle after we solved the drilling problem. Oxen were invaluable until we reached the Dade county line. We used them clear across from Turner's river. Without doubt the clearing and blasting crews received the brunt of the manual labor and they came through the ordeal nobly. The clearing men were sometimes away from town for two months at a time because of the difficulty in getting back. They worked ahead of the dredges at all times, naturally.

If it hadn't been for D. Graham Copeland I don't see how we would have been half way across by this time instead of finishing the hardest road job that has ever been attempted in a long time.

Early Stages of Trail Building (Cont.)

The latter part of September, 1926, a schedule was adopted that would bring us to the Dade county line by April 1st, 1927 and Mr. Copeland called me into his office and asked if I thought we could make it--he said that it Had to be done. We had eight miles of solid rock to carve our way through within seven months--and our equipment was getting tired and might lay down on us at any moment if forced to capacity. It was here that Mr. Copeland worked best; his decisions were instantaneous, not "goin' off half cocked" as the saying is, but the man just knew what had to be done and he went about doing it the quickest and best way possible. I told him that we could make it but should have another "walker" dredge to back us up if the others showed signs of weakening. Within a month we had another "walker" in operation. I don't know just how long it took to get the giant dredge down here but we erected it and had it at work within ten days after arrival.

We completed the job to the Dade county line by April 10th; just ten days behind the schedule that we set for ourselves and I tell you that isn't so bad. After this we dug our way four miles on through the other side of the Dade county line to meet the dredges coming from the East coast and the most difficult rock of all was found in this four mile stretch in Dad county.

The drilling equipment that Mr. Copeland and I rigged up to conquer the rock held up remarkably well and at no time during the work did it stop for repairs long enough to throw out a whole shift but once. The men on the job were wonderful. Many would work all night Saturday and Sunday to get their machines in perfect order for the new attack Monday. The men seemed to realize the proportions of the work and the benefits that would be derived by the traveling public and wanted to see the thing through. They did their part--and they did it exceptionally well.

This is just a short history of the early days of trail building and in no measure tells what we went through during the long months when it would seem that we were making no headway at all, but never failing or giving up hope for a moment we battled on and the people of Florida today can tell you whether we accomplished what we started out to do or not.