

DREAM OF TAMIAMITRAIL BLAZERS REALIZED

Two highlights in the elaborage history of the Tamiami Trail are marked by epic motorcades. One motorcade will celebrate the formal opening of this highway on April 25. Five years ago another great motorcade, the expedition of the Tamiami trail blazers, brought this stupendous project to the attention of the people, demonstrated that the road could be built and aroused the public sentiment which later crystallized into action. Participants in the celebration motorcade, skimming over the paved road of rock which has been lifted from the bosom of the Everglades, will have difficulty in conceiving the almost insurmountable obstacles which were overcome by the original trail blazers before they finally penetrated the swampy wilderness between Fort Myers and Miami.

In order to prove the feasibility of constructing a highway through the Everglades between the east and west coasts, which was doubted at that time, and to ascertain the difficulties which would attend the building of such a highway, a small group of enthusiastic Tamiami trail proponents in Fort Myers decided to drive from here to Miami over the proposed route of the trail. Scouts were sent out to report on the condition of the territory, and upon their return the party set out from Fort Myers, on Wednesday morning, April 4, 1923, intending to reach their destination by Sunday. Little did they realize the physical hardships and privations they were to endure for the 23 days which it took them to make the trip.

The members of the expedition were W. Stanley Hanson, Fred C. Garmon, Cyril B. Shawcross, L. J. Van duyl, George W. Dunham, Milton Thompson, Ora E. Chapin, J. W. Hill, Grover C. Mackney, L. A. Whitney, Charles P. Corrigan, Clark Taylor, Maurice Ayer, and the late F. B. Dough, of Fort Myers, Alfred Christenson, F. S. Lewis, Charles H. Hunt and Allen H. Andrews of Estero; G. A. Prime of Sarasota, John P. Cosden of Easton, Md.; Frank Whitman and Russell Kay of Tampa, and George P. S. Smith of Everglades. The two Seminole guides were Abraham Lincoln (Assumbachee) and Little Billie (Cornapatchee). Their machines were all Fords with the exception of one Overland.

The expedition encountered heavy going from the start in the sand and marl ruts of the old road grade which had been built by Lee county. The end of the grad was about five miles west of Carnestown, and beyond the country was a vast bog. This point was reached late in the afternoon, and a scouting party was despatched to Everglades on foot to obtain advice and to requisition supplies and gasoline.

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The drivers attempted to drive on, however, each man selecting his own route, and soon they were all hopelessly mired over a vast area of marsh.

At Everglades, through the courtesy of B. J. Scott who was then general manager in charge of Barron Collier's operations there, the scouting party obtained the use of a caterpillar tractor, driven by George F. Smith, which made the remainder of the journey with the trail blazers. The tractor soon rounded up the stranded cars at the end of the road grade and hauled them to firm ground farther on. Some had bogged in sloughs, and were slithered along on their axles for half a mile or more. By Friday afternoon the party arrived at the old Everglades-Deep Lake railway, where planks were pressed into service to bridge the cars over the ditches. The blazers spent that night at Everglades as guests of Mr. Collier, and started out for the plunge across the peninsula early Saturday morning.

After a long drive across rough marl prairie and Indian camp was reached after noon, and soon the motorcade came to Turner's river cypress strand. An old ox trail was discovered through this tangle, which the cars were able to travel after several stumps had been trimmed down. Camp was made Saturday night on a pine island on the eastern side of the cypress. Two cars had been injured, which necessitated their abandonment, and thus the provisions and baggage they had carried were crowded into the others. On Sunday the blazers passed a deserted Indian camp, and soon entered Gator Hook cypress. A great deal of chopping was necessary here to hew a path for the cars, and the ground had to be corduroyed with twigs and leaves to prevent the machines becoming mired in the muck. Camp that night, the night they had expected to enter Miami, was made at Skillet camp, about 85 miles from Fort Myers. They had expected to find a cache of canned goods here, and when this failed to materialize the food supply became a problem, and the men placed themselves on rations.

After miles of difficult traveling over sawgrass prairie and difficult morasses, the motorcade came at length to the dark fastnesses of Gannett cypress, 98 miles from Fort Myers. The route through this tangle selected by the blazers was only 2,600 yards, but so dense was the growth that it was Tuesday morning before they hewed their way through. Another marl prairie and Roberts Lake cypress strand was reached, where camp was made for the night.

At sight of this formidable barrier the spirits of the party sank to low ebb. They were short of food and water, deep in the heart of the Everglades, with no idea whatever

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as to their whereabouts. This latter discouragement was shortly removed, however, when a scouting party returned to report the discovery of a survey stake, from which it was learned that they were on the tract of land in northern Monroe county owned by the Chevelier corporation, about 50 miles west of Dade county grade. A succulent deer brought down by the Indian guide also solved the food problem for a while.

The blazers thereupon decided to despatch a party to Miami on foot to give the outside world the first information as to the welfare of the expedition. After plodding many weary miles, this party finally reached Miami Thursday morning.

The main party had chopped its way into the heart of the cypress strand by noon when the hum of an airplane was heard overhead. A large smudge fire was built, but the plane could not see the party hidden in the swamp. By Thursday afternoon the blazers had cut their way through this jungle, and were on open prairie again when they were met by a rescuing party of three from Bill Roberts' Survey camp. These men determined that someone was lost in the glades when they saw the airplane and had started out in search. The blazers spent that night in the camp, about five miles from the road grade, but they had been forced to leave their cars abandoned in a swampy morass several miles back in which they had become hopelessly mired.

While the cars were being rescued from the mud Friday morning the airplane again made its appearance and this time was successful in landing nearby. It proved to be a large five passenger bomber owned by George Merrick, and it carried a generous cargo of greatly needed provisions and gasoline. Saturday morning the blazers started to tackle the last few miles to the road grade, but so deep was the intervening morass that the cars were not extricated for a whole week. Then, upon the suggestion of Erben Cook spare tires were bolted to the wheels of the cars, which acted as snowshoes and carried them over the mire without sinking.

On Saturday, April 21, the trail blazers finally arrived in Miami, and were tendered a round of ovations before they returned to their homes by way of the paved roads to the north. The blazers had taken 23 days to make their trip of about 190 miles, built 17 bridges, hewed their way through eight miles of solid cypress timber and corduroyed many miles of road. But they had driven over the route of the trail, thereby proving that the road could be built, and the vast amount of publicity they gained was one of the greatest factors in arousing the public sentiment which was the forerunner of action. The trail blazers still maintain their organization and hold meetings from time to time.