

Traditions

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Collier County Museum

March 1988

Volume 2, Number 1

Sixtieth Anniversary of the Tamiami Trail

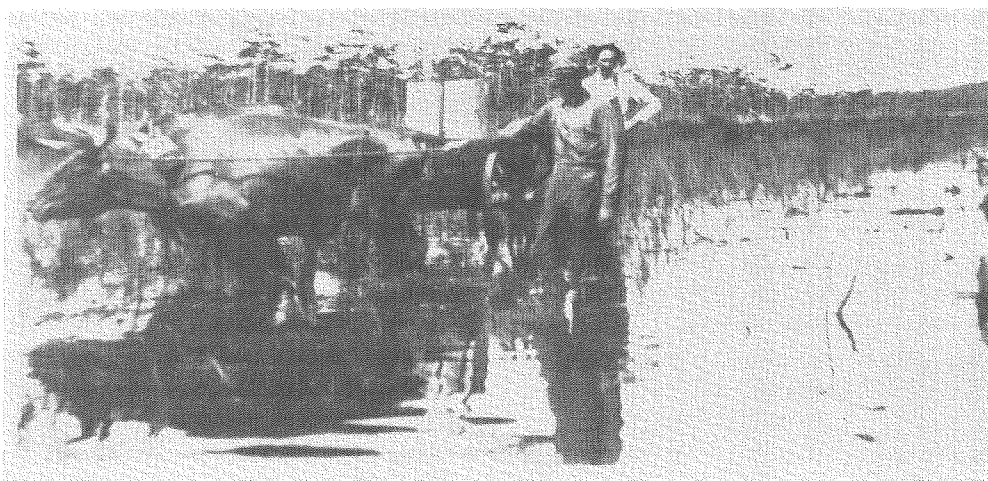
"Florida's Modern Appian Way Opens"

by Lynne Howard Frazer

After thirteen years of struggling with "muck, misery, and mosquitos," the Tamiami Trail officially opened on Wednesday, April 25, 1928, during a two-day statewide celebration. Although the idea of a road through the Everglades was scoffed at as sheer fantasy, by 1923 the nation was marveling at the development of the "eighth wonder of the engineering world." With the completion of the Tamiami Trail, Tampa and Miami were finally linked by a narrow ribbon of road through the swamps, and Southwest Florida entered the fast-paced world of tourists and developers.

"Fifteen years ago, there was not a single road of any kind running south from Ft. Myers," a reporter wrote in 1928, "There was no Collier County then, no city of Everglades. Naples could only be reached by boat." Without roads, southern Florida was destined to remain a wild back-country.

By 1915, the idea of a road connecting the east and west coasts of southern Florida was beginning to grow in popularity. Weary travelers complained that the nearest trans-Florida highway was 200 miles north of Miami, at Titusville, making a trip to Ft. Myers or Naples a long and difficult journey. Dade County Tax Assessor, Captain James F. Jaudon



Supply cart loaded with "Hercules Blasting Caps", circa 1926.

began working with *Miami Herald* reporter William Hill to generate public support for a road across the Everglades. Hill's campaign compared the building of the road to the winning of the West and his romanticized view of conquering the last frontier raised new interest in the project.

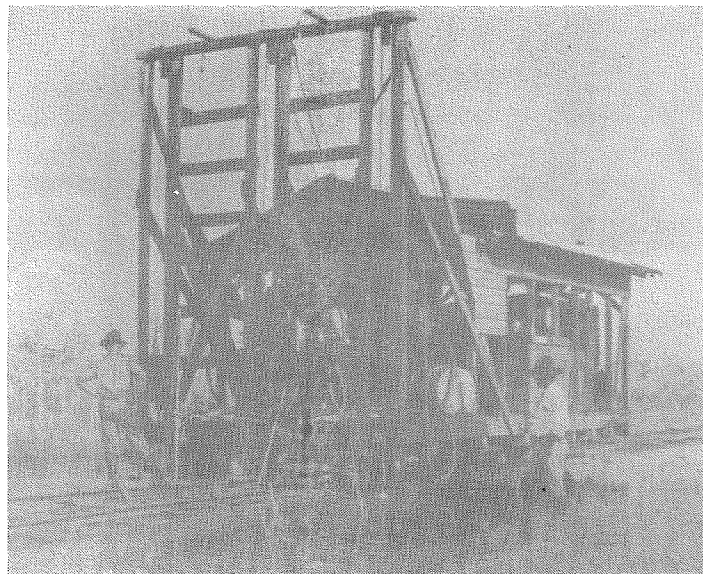
As public enthusiasm grew, names were suggested for the dream road, including "Miami to Marco Highway," and "Atlantic to Gulf Boulevard." Eventually someone combined the first syllable of Tampa with the word "Miami" and invented the name that stuck: "The Tamiami Trail."

The route was surveyed and money appropriated for the job, but by 1923, the \$125,000 set aside for construction was spent. The Dade County grade had been built westward from Miami about 45 miles, and a little sandy grade had been formed between Marco Junction and Carnestown. After eight years of work, that was all there was of the

Tamiami Trail. Interest waned and the project withered to a standstill.

To rekindle public support, a group of men from Ft. Myers decided to be the first to drive automobiles along the proposed route of the Trail, from Ft. Myers to Miami. On April 4, 1923, twenty-four men left Ft. Myers with two Seminole guides to prove that a road could be completed through the Everglades. Touring in five Fords, one Overland, and an Elcar, the "Tamiami Trail Blazers," naively expected to reach Miami in three days.

From Ft. Myers to Royal Palm Hammock, the Blazers encountered only incredibly rough roads. The old roadbed soon deteriorated, however, and the men were forced to push their cars through sharp saw grass "so tall that it hid each car from the others." Several miles from the town of Everglades, the narrow road disappeared and the Blazers began the painful process of pushing the useless cars through the swamp.



Drilling rig boring holes for dynamite charges, circa 1926.

By April 11, the group was considered lost and newspapers across the nation were picking up the story of the intrepid band of explorers "struggling to blaze a trail across this hitherto untraveled portion of the state." A search party was sent out, but the Blazers could not be found and the road was declared impassable.

On Saturday, April 21, the band finally arrived in Miami and returned to civilization as conquering heroes of the frontier. Although they had lost two cars and suffered from heat and exhaustion, the Trail Blazers sparked renewed interest in the road through the Everglades.

Despite strong public support, no funds existed for the construction of the road. Barron Gift Collier offered to back the building of the Trail in the newly created Collier County until the state road department could take over the project. Called the "Empire Builder" by the people of Southwest Florida, Collier poured hundreds of thousands of dollars from his personal fortune into the great highway, until the state took over two years later.

Through the years, several construction companies had unsuccessfully attempted to build the Trail. By 1925, two companies were working furiously in Collier County to complete the road. H.E. Wolfe Construction Company, with the motto, "When you drive on Wolfe Built Roads, Smooth Riding is

assured," and Alexander, Ramsy, and Kerr, "Quick, Quiet, Quality," worked with D. Graham Copeland, Collier's engineer, to finish the Trail. Work crews in Collier County faced the most difficult portion of road construction and were responsible for building seventy-six miles of the Tamiami Trail, twenty-eight percent of the entire road.

According to the *Fort Myers Tropical News*, the Collier County road was "built of solid rock, blasted every inch of the way at a cost of \$25,000 per mile." The work sites were so inaccessible, that supplies were hauled overland by ox cart or shallow boat.

To create the roadbed, drill cars first bored dynamite holes into the limestone base of the swamp. Often workers had to stand in hip-deep water to set the sticks of dynamite. The solid terrace of rock was then blasted to become the base material of the new road. Blasting was one of the most expensive operations in the construction of the trail and was calculated to have been forty-eight percent of the total cost of the road.

Close behind the drilling and blasting crews, a battery of "Bay City Dredges" scooped up the shattered stone and formed a rough road grade. These specialized machines, patented by G. Anderson of Bay City, Michigan, "walked" through the muck and water, inching ahead at an average speed of eighty feet every ten hours. The bedrock was tough on the equipment

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From the Director's Chair

by Ron Jamro



Sincere thanks to our many friends who were able to join us for the Museum's open house on February 15th, and to the wonderful people who generously volunteered their time to ensure the day's success. A special word of thanks too, for the Naples Polo Club and the Southwest Florida Archaeological Society, whose members did an exceptional job in welcoming first-time visitors and showing them around the Museum.

With more than half of the permanent exhibits now in place, and another milestone behind us, it seems a fitting time to begin planning for the future. As always, there is the ongoing task of raising additional funds to complete the Museum's exhibit hall and to continue work on the various outdoor exhibits - the pioneer homestead, beach cottage, and a hunter's cabin which will one day house an antique swamp buggy and the Museum's extensive wildlife collection. Above all else, there's the question of where to find the \$70,000 still needed to build the Children's Discovery Cottage. A word about that.

Remember your first visit to a museum? The thrill of making your own discoveries? If you've forgotten how much fun that can truly be, stop by the museum some afternoon and watch a wiggling, laughing, excited stream of school children as they fan out to investigate what others before them have thought and created.

I suppose there are a dozen or more lofty and worthwhile reasons to justify asking your help in launching a children's wing at the Collier County Museum. But ultimately, it comes down to this: learning should and can be an enjoyable and pleasant experience. And a museum, perking with new ideas, is the ideal place for that visual adventure to begin. The plans are available to make that vision a reality. All we require now is the will to make it happen.

and a dredge bucket usually lasted only two weeks.

The "Skimmer Scoops" trailed behind the massive dredges, leveling out the roughly stacked piles of rubble, while grading crews smoothed out the road to exacting specifications. According to state law, there could be "no variation from the established road grade greater than 1/10th". No rock greater than two inches in diameter could be used within the top six inches of the road. Below this level, no rock bigger than six inches in diameter could remain. These stringent regulations often required extra blasting to reduce the large rocks.

The grading crews were also responsible for moving the "mounted camps" which included bunk houses and rolling kitchens. Three "mess" sections served food to the Trail workers. According to the *Collier County News*, these mobile kitchens often had cooking contests. In September, 1926, Mrs. W. C. Jerrard won the "August Mess Contest" and one of her supporters claimed, "Our food is the best ever. I had rather eat in our mess than at any of the Everglades hotels. We may not have lots of style, but boy, what food!"

As the work progressed, rumors began to circulate that the road crews had discovered patches of quicksand. Was the Tamiami Trail just a dream after all? E. W. Russell, Clerk for the Collier County Board of Commissioners, sent a hurried telegram to Miami stating: "Rumor of quicksand is pure fabrication. Work now progressing at the rate of mile and half each month through rock equal to best to be found in State of Florida for road building. Have just purchased two additional dredges to speed the work and will shortly use



Rolling "mess" and bunk houses, circa 1926.

double shifts. This makes seven dredges now on the job."

Despite such setbacks, by 1928 the Tamiami Trail was completed, although the final "oil and slag wearing surface" had not been applied between Naples and Miami. Along the route in Collier County, six small frame buildings were established about every ten miles to serve as stations for the newly created Southwest Florida Mounted Police. Located at Belle Meade, Royal Palm Hammock, Weaver's Camp, Turner River, Monroe Station, and Paolita, the stations were usually staffed with a husband and wife team and offered gasoline and soft drinks for sale. The mounted police patrolled sections of the road on Harley motorcycles, assisting stranded motorists along the

long lonely stretches of the Trail. Barron Collier's secretary, Florence Thomason, remembers buying costumes from a Broadway play to outfit the mounted police, and "though the uniforms didn't fit too well, the men were happy and proud to be wearing them."

On Wednesday, April 25, 1928, a large motorcade left Tampa at 8:30 a.m. to formally open the Tamiami Trail. Barron Collier and the Trail Blazers led the procession of cars and stopped overnight for a dedication ceremony in Ft. Myers. Speeches by Lee County dignitaries, a xylophone solo by Miss Katherine Silkknitter, and an outdoor dance were the highlights of the Ft. Myers celebrations.

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We hope you have enjoyed this issue of *Traditions*. As a valued Friend of the Museum, a complimentary subscription is automatically included in your membership privileges.

Please remember that the Museum relies heavily on your annual support to continually expand and improve our educational programs, exhibition areas and research facilities. If you believe our history should be preserved, we urge you to become a Friend of the Museum today.

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I do not wish to join at this time, but please send me a year's subscription to *Traditions*, the Museum's quarterly newsletter.
My \$8 payment is enclosed.

Please make checks payable to the Collier County Museum and return to:
The Collier County Museum
3301 Tamiami Trail East
Naples, FL 33962



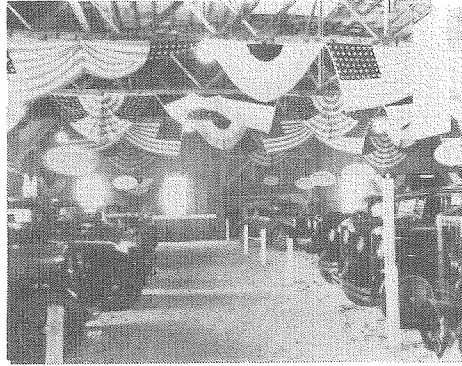
On Thursday morning, the motorcade started on the last leg of the trip to Miami, and by the time it crossed the Dade County line, over 500 cars had joined the parade. The *Miami Herald* estimated that more than 15,000 gathered at Bayfront Park to hear the dedication speeches. According to Barron Collier, it was "the final accomplishment of a great and glorious dream." The dream had taken thirteen years to build, but with the completion of the Tamiami Trail, Collier County was firmly linked to the future.

New Acquisitions

The new Spanish Contact Period exhibits feature several recently acquired objects from the seventeenth century. An innovative "ocean bottom" exhibit has been designed to recreate debris from a Spanish shipwreck and includes a small "olive jar" from Jamaica. Red earthenware jars such as these varied in size from twenty inches tall to over four feet in height, and were popular as reusable containers. Ships often carried hundreds of olive jars to store everything from water to ammunition.

Two "4 Real" silver coins from the shipwreck of the *Atocha* are also featured in the ocean bottom exhibit. The crudely stamped coins were minted in the New World and were part of the 1622 treasure fleet's annual shipment to Spain. Near the Florida Keys, the ships ran into a strong hurricane and the *Atocha* sank with over 260 people on board and a hull laden with tons of gold and silver.

001-113-7410
Collier County Museum
 Collier County Government Center
 3301 Tamiami Trail East
 Naples, FL 33962



**Car Show during Trail
opening, 1928**

In Memory Of . .

On January 6, 1988, Mr. Cecil Johnny Oglesby, Sr. passed away. His memory will be honored at the Collier County Museum as Number 2's last engineer. During the Museum's open house on February 15, his wife, Mrs. Piccola Oglesby, dedicated the newly restored steam engine in his memory, and was the first person to officially ring the gleaming locomotive bell since the engine's return to Collier County. Mr. Oglesby's engineer cap was also presented to the Museum and will be an important part of the new logging history exhibit.

A Poker Hand from the Past

by Tom Morgan

See how many aces - right answers - you can draw from these five wild card queries from Collier County's past. Answers are below.

1. The Tamiami Trail began as a Federal, State, or County project?
2. Where did the first suggested Trail route go through Naples?
3. The first cars to cross the Trail in 1923 took two hours, two days, or two weeks to reach Miami?
4. Was there ever an official Tamiami Trail Flag?
5. Barron Collier offered a large parcel of land to the Federal Government as a park along the Trail. What was the first suggested name for the recreational area that became Collier-Seminole State Park?

1. The highway began as a local county job, but was finished by the State.
2. The first route was down Third Street to 12th Avenue and then northeast and across Naples Bay.
3. The Trail Blazers took 17 days to reach Miami.
4. More than 5,000 red and white flags, bearing the Tamiami Trail insignia were made for the road opening and were flown on motorcade cars. Unfortunately, it seems none of the flags survive and the flag design remains a mystery.
5. Lee - Grant Park.