

THE TAMiami TRAIL—MUCK MOSQUITOES, AND MOTORISTS: A PHOTO ESSAY

By Doris Davis

The Tamiami Trail, a great memorial to men of courage, vision, and determination, had a momentous impact on a vital and important part of Florida growth. Since antiquity, roads have been the driving force in the creation of our civilization. For the Florida pioneer the Indian trail was the one-way route to the promised land; however, for America as a whole, the Indian trail had to be expanded into a network of highways to serve not a nation of homesteads but a nation of cities and commerce.

The American landscape was transformed with the introduction of the automobile, and a new breed of man was born—the tourist. In 1912, less than a million cars traveled on the road compared with more than thirty million on the eve of World War Two. About ten years ago nearly 100 million motor vehicles in the United States journeyed approximately 730 billion miles each year, almost enough for four round trips to the sun.

When the shiny new steamers or gas vehicles took over the road, families headed south in search of the warm Florida climate. Tampa had entered the auto era with well over 500 cars in existence in 1911. The “Good Roads” movement had been initiated with the automobile endurance race from Tampa to Jacksonville and back. A series of newspaper articles stressed the construction of good roads as essential to the material advancement of the state. Florida could attract tourists for a winter vacation if two main highways were built, one down the West Coast and one down the East Coast. The general call “See America First” was fast turning into “See Florida First.”

To eliminate the hazardous “wish to God” roads, each county created a Road and Bridge District to finance roadbuilding within their boundaries. In 1911, Hillsborough County sponsored a bond issue to build a hard-surfaced road south to the Manatee County line. At the same time, voters in Manatee County approved a \$250,000 bond issue to build a road from the Hillsborough County line to Sarasota. In 1914, through the efforts of the “Sarasota Good Road Boosters,” the Sarasota-Venice Road and Bridge District was created and financed \$250,000 to continue the highway south to Venice. In the meantime, progressive citizens in Englewood began their plans for building a road north to Venice with the hope of becoming the southern link of the Tampa road system.

In 1915, a group of businessmen from Miami, Naples, and Fort Myers met with state officials in Tallahassee to discuss the feasibility of a cross-state highway from Miami to Tampa via Naples, Fort Myers, Venice, Sarasota, and Bradenton. At first, the proposed roadway was referred to as the “Miami to Marco Highway” or the “Atlantic to Gulf Boulevard.” Sometime later at a meeting in Tampa, the name “Tamiami Trail” was fashioned from the combined names of its terminal cities, Tampa and Miami. It delighted the public, and was accepted for the name of the proposed highway.

That same year the Florida State Road Department was created by the Legislature. Following the passage by Congress of the Bankhead Act in 1916, which provided the first systematic

federal aid for improving highways, the 1917 Legislature increased the Road Department's authority. The immediate goal was to supply hard-surfaced roads joining cities, towns and villages.

The preliminary surveys for the south cross-state segment of the Tamiami Trail were made in August 1915. The exact date when construction began is unknown, but the first payment for work performed was made in September 1916. Yielding to the Tamiami Trail pressure groups, the Fort Myers District sold bonds worth \$177,000, a small fraction of the amount that would ultimately be needed. Everglades City raised \$125,000, intending to close the gap from Marco to the Dade County line. The final section of about forty miles from the Dade County line to Miami was estimated at \$175,000, and it looked like a clear path ahead for the Tamiami Trail. No one dreamed that a world war would intervene to raise the cost of labor and materials, that three new counties would be born, and that hurricanes and a colossal land bust would devastate Florida. Thirteen years passed before the road would be finished.

In 1921, when the Legislature created Sarasota County, the fate of the cross-state segment of the Tamiami Trail appeared uncertain. The Lee County portion of the trail was stopped for lack of funds. Rumors circulated that this lower section of the trail would never be completed, especially not across the "impassable" Everglades. By 1923, with vast sums expended, several workmen dead from drowning or dynamite explosions, and little progress made, south Florida residents seemed ready to give up. Then in the spring of 1923, a group of public-spirited citizens calling themselves "The Tamiami Trailblazers" set out to rekindle the Tamiami fire. In a dramatic attempt to revive interest, a trail blazing expedition of ten cars filled with twenty-three white men and two Indian guides made a perilous three-week trip across the Everglades swampland. They proved that the route of the proposed Tamiami Trail was feasible, opened the way for land development, captured the imagination of the public with their exploit, and reaffirmed the need for "Florida's Greatest Road Building Achievement."

In the meantime, the State legislature carved out Collier and Hendry counties from the southern portion of Lee County. In 1923, Collier County floated \$350,000 in bonds to continue building the cross-state highway. The Collier Company provided men, equipment and supplies. It vowed not to build a swamp road on brush mats, but to construct instead a hard-surfaced automobile highway ballasted on rock. Under the mire and muck of this section was Florida limestone, which, when dynamited could be dug out and piled up to form a base for the Tamiami Trail.

The following year, 1924, the Florida State Road Department officially recognized the project. The Legislature incorporated the Tamiami Trail as part of the State Highway System and assumed the responsibility for completing it. The job began with surveyors and rod men clearing the right-of-way, working breast-deep in the swamp. After them came the drillers, blasting their way through more than ninety miles of hard rock under the muck. Ox carts were used to haul dynamite. When bogged down, men would shoulder the explosives and flounder through the water. Giant dredges followed, throwing up the loose rock to provide a base for the segment of road that took thirteen years and approximately \$13 million to pave across "America's Last Frontier."

To celebrate the remarkable completion of the highway down the southwest coast of Florida and across the treacherous Everglades, the Tamiami Trail Association arranged a festive county fair in Everglades City. Barron G. Collier led the many dignitaries in the huge motorcade which began in Tampa and three days later ended in Miami. The original "Trail Blazers" were present to relate their hazardous experience by automobile across the River of Grass. Captain J. F. Jaudon proudly gave an address on the early history of the Trail, and Governor John W. Martin spoke on the value of the Tamiami Trail to the state. Amidst this fanfare, on April 25, 1928, the highway opened to traffic. Since then millions of motorists have traveled the Tamiami Trail and viewed the Everglades from the safety of their cars with little knowledge of the blood, sweat and tears that turned a vision of the future into today's reality.



1900—“Wish to God Road.” Wish I had taken the other set of ruts. Road leading south from Bradenton to Sarasota

(courtesy of Sarasota Historical Archives).



Tamiami Trail—Section 28 from Northwest Corner, looking Southeast

(courtesy of State Photographic Archives, Strozier Library, Florida State University).



Tamiami Trail 1923. Surveyors—The first operation was to lay out the centerline of the road and then stakes were driven in the ground every 100 feet

(courtesy of Collier Development Corporation).



Oxen Teams—The only animals that could be used in the Glades were oxen due to their wide-webbed feet. The average time an ox was used under these extremely adverse conditions was two weeks

(courtesy of Collier Development Corporation).



Dynamite Setters—Some of the men who set dynamite by tamping the sticks into pipes in the rock base two to five feet below the surface of the water line

(courtesy of Collier Development Corporation).



Rolling Bunkhouses— Work crew bunkhouses were pulled forward by oxen on the rough right-of-way an average of 150 feet a day. These were the first mobile homes in a state now numbering them in millions

(courtesy of Collier Development Corporation).



Walking Dredge—Unique dredge used exploded aggregate to create both a canal and a road bed. The dredge moved forward by jacking itself up and extending its bucket to skid forward by eight to ten feet. This “hop-a-long” dredge made the Tamiami Trail possible

(courtesy of Collier Development Corporation).



Two Ruts on a slight elevation

(courtesy of State Photographic Archives, Strozier Library, Florida State University)



**April 4-22, 1923—Tamiami Trail Blazers, first men to cross the unfinished portion of the trail
(from Ft. Myers to Everglades City) in Autos**

(courtesy of P. K. Yonge Library).



Mired motorists

(courtesy of P. K. Yonge Library).



Tamiami Trail—1927

(courtesy of State Photographic Archives, Strozier Library, Florida State University).



Dr. Frons A. Hathaway, Chairman of the Florida Road Department and Assumhachee (Abraham Lincoln), Indian guide for the "Tamiami Trailblazers", congratulate each other on the completion of the Tamiami Trail

(courtesy of State Photographic Archives, Strozier Library, Florida State University).



April 25, 1928—Official opening

(courtesy of State Photographic Archives, Strozier Library, Florida State University)



Everglades celebrates the opening of the Tamiami Trail—April 27, 1928

(courtesy of Matlack Historical Association of Southern Florida).



Tamiami Trail—One of the few remaining nine foot asphalt sections of the original Tamiami Trail between Sarasota and Venice at Eagle Point on Roberts Bay

(courtesy of Sarasota County Historical Archives).

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