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FLORIDA'S OVERSEAS RAILROAD

by DAVID L. WILLING

SOON after leaving the village of Florida City, the mid-twentieth century auto traveler driving to the Florida Keys rounds a curve and comes on to the roadbed of the Overseas Highway. If he looks quickly, the driver may see mile post 397¹ of the Florida East Coast Railway, a few rods west of the highway. This lonely sentinel of the Everglades sawgrass, standing literally "at the end of the line," marks the beginning of what was the Overseas Extension of the Florida East Coast Railway - a marvelous work of construction which ranks among the wonders of the world as an example of man's ability to transform a wilderness into civilization by assembling men and amassing materials in a gigantic overwater construction project.

Although few travelers or residents of the Florida Keys realize it, the building of the "railroad that went to sea" cost \$27,127,205, or about \$212,000 a mile² and approximately 200 lives.³ More than that, it was the fulfillment of a dream of its builder, being the last of Henry Morrison Flagler's major projects on the east coast of Florida.

The Florida Keys stretch out like a huge crescent for a hundred miles from the mainland of the peninsula to Key West. Composed of coral and oolitic limestone,⁴ the narrow islands range in size from Key Largo, thirty miles in length, to small atolls which contain scarcely more than a few cubic yards of sand covered with mangrove bushes. Until the coming of the white man, a dense tropical undergrowth covered the keys with a profusion of mahogany, ferns, and mangrove. The blue waters of the surrounding Florida Bay and Gulf of Mexico contain countless varieties of tropical fish. Pirates roamed the coves and passes

1. *The Official Guide of the Railways*, (New York, May, 1956), 634.
2. 84 ICC Reports 31 (1924), from Huber Dale Earle, *A Study of the Traffic of the Florida East Coast Railway* (Gainesville, University of Florida, 1933, unpublished M.A. thesis.)
3. Frank Parker Stockbridge and John H. Perry, *So This Is Florida*, (Jacksonville, 1938), 140.
4. Junius Elmore Dovell, *Florida: Historic, Dramatic, Contemporary*, II, (New York, 1952), 905.

in the days of exploration, taking advantage of the maze of waterways to hide their vessels between forays to plunder passing ships laden with gold for Spain.

As with most of Florida, the keys were among the first areas of the United States to be discovered and the last to be developed. White men first saw the islands in the sixteenth century, but several hundred years passed before the area became more than a tropical wilderness.

Agitation for a keys railroad began several decades before the project actually took form. In 1831, as "railroad fever" was overtaking the nation, the editor of the Key West *Gazette* suggested that a railroad line be built to the island town.⁵ (This was even before the first railroad in Florida was constructed from Tallahassee to St. Marks.⁶) Four years later, in 1835, another Key West paper, the *Enquirer*, also advocated a Key West railroad. Adding his voice to those who favored a line across the keys, Senator Stephen R. Mallory of Key West during the 1850's called in the United States Senate for a road to be built, referring to his home town as the "American Gibraltar,"⁷

The debacle of the Civil War interrupted attempts to get a railroad to Key West, but only for a short time. In 1866, attention was again drawn to the keys when J. C. Bailey, a civil engineer, surveyed the route over the keys for a telegraph line of the International Ocean Telegraph Company.⁸ Three attempts to build a line were made in 1879, 1880, and 1883. In 1879 a Florida charter was issued to the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West Railroad Company to build a line southward, ostensibly to Key West. In 1880 the state of Georgia chartered the Great Southern Railway to build a line to Key West to connect with the then projected Latin American steamship service. Neither company built any line however.⁹ Then in 1883 General John B. Gordon, late of the Confederate Army, received a franchise from the Florida legislature to build a Key West railroad. Gordon's

5. Carlton J. Corliss, "Building the Overseas Railway to Key West," *Tequesta*, no. 13, (Miami, 1953), 3-21.

6. Harry Gardner Cutler, *History of Florida*, I. (Chicago, 1923), 60. This railroad was the first project one in Florida, although not the first to be completed. It was the most important road of Florida in the Territorial period. Ed.

7. Corliss, *op. cit.*

8. Cutler, *op. cit.*

9. Corliss, *op. cit.*

attempt was the first concrete effort to traverse the keys by rail, for his company managed to construct nearly sixty miles of line on the mainland before the project was abandoned.¹⁰

All the attempts by hastily chartered and short-lived railroad companies to build a keys railroad were but a prelude to the entrance upon the scene of Henry Morrison Flagler, who finally succeeded in pushing a line to Key West.

Flagler first visited Florida in 1878. At the time he was beginning a slow retirement from the Standard Oil Company, of which he was a co-founder. In 1881 Flagler's first wife died and in June, 1883, the oil magnate remarried. In the same year Flagler and his second wife visited St. Augustine, where they remained two months. Other trips to Florida followed. Soon Flagler became interested in the potential of the state and subsequently built the hotel, railroad, steamship, and land company system which by the mid-nineties had begun to transform the east coast.¹¹

In the early nineties, as Flagler's railroad was approaching the trading post on Biscayne Bay which would eventually become Miami, the trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund of Florida hired H. S. Duval, a civil engineer, to inspect the railroad south of Daytona. In this report Duval predicted mildly that Flagler might extend his line all the way to Key West. This was the first public statement made by anyone about the possibility of a keys railroad becoming one of Flagler's projects; although the tycoon did not answer the prediction, it attracted a great deal of attention and caused much interest to be focused on Flagler's works on the lower east coast.¹²

Interest was heightened in 1894, when Jefferson B. Browne, Collector of Customs for the Port of Key West, published an article in the *National Geographic Magazine* calling for an overseas railroad. Entitled "Across the Gulf by Rail to Key West," Browne's article now reads somewhat like a Chamber of Commerce pamphlet. He cited Key West's growth, trade, and strategic military location as requiring a railroad, especially if the "Nicaragua Canal" should ever be built. The piece concluded with an

10. Cutler, *op. cit.*

11. Dovell, *op. cit.*, 616.

12. Sidney Walter Martin, *Florida's Flagler*, (Athens, 1949), 202-227.

indirect invitation to Flagler to become the line's builder, referring to him as a late-nineteenth century Cyrus West Field.¹³

In September, 1895, Key West sent two of her leading citizens, George L. Babcock and George Lowe, to St. Augustine and Jacksonville to solicit interest in an overseas railroad.¹⁴

Flagler still remained silent. His railroad was pushed south, however, and reached Miami in April, 1896. A few years later the line was extended twenty eight miles to tap the fertile truck farm areas in the homestead country of south Dade County.

All the time after 1902, however, it was never intended that the line would terminate on the mainland, although no official announcement of the extension was made until three years later. Although he was past seventy and had already spent at least thirty million dollars¹⁵ on his Florida ventures, Flagler, paying little heed to the advice of his friends and subordinates to forget the project, began to move toward his final decision to build the extension. His love of doing big things and the promise of Key West and Cuban trade all led to his decision, but the single thing which caused, more than anything else, Flagler to build the road was the construction of the Panama Canal and the promise that project held for making Key West the South's most important city (which, of course, it never did). Years later, in 1912, when interviewed by a reporter, the builder said the passage of the Panama Canal bill by Congress on November 18, 1903, was parent to the idea.¹⁶

Flagler was a friend of Elihu Root, and frequently corresponded with him regarding the matter of an isthmus canal, so that there is ample evidence that Flagler followed closely developments leading to the canal's construction.¹⁷

In the summer of 1902 preliminary surveys had been made into the Everglades under the leadership of Location Engineer William J. Krome, then 26 and a graduate of both the University of Illinois and Cornell. Flagler's idea at that time was to investigate carrying the line across the Everglades to Cape Sable, thence

13. Correspondence and miscellaneous papers from the files of the Florida East Coast Railway, microfilm, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

14. Martin, *op. cit.*

15. Florida East Coast Railway files, *loc. cit.*

16. St. Augustine *Evening Record*, January 22, 1912.

17. Philip C. Jessup, *Elihu Root*, I, (New York, 1938), 470-1.

across Florida Bay and the Gulf to Key West, bypassing the keys. Krome's men encountered great difficulty in surveying through the sawgrass to Cape Sable; one of his parties had to be rescued by a relief expedition and, when found, was on the verge of starvation.¹⁸ Eventually the idea of building the road by way of Cape Sable was rejected in favor of a route across the keys.¹⁹

In the winter following the signing of the Panama Convention Flagler and his chief aide, Joseph R. Parrott, studied the engineer's reports and preliminary surveys in a new light. The investigation was carried further, and at the end of the winter of 1904 Flagler closed a conference with Parrott with the question, "Are you sure this railway can be built?" Parrott replied, "I am sure," to which Flagler said, "Very well, go ahead."²⁰

Although the momentous decision to build the extension had been made, it was still not revealed to the public. Flagler went ahead, however, and appointed a Chief Construction Engineer, Joseph C. Meredith, who was hired in July, 1904. At the time Meredith was employed in the construction of a dock at Tampico, Mexico.²¹ A graduate of Iowa State College,²² the engineer was a noted bridge builder. He has been described by one of his associates as "small of stature, but of great energy, resourcefulness, determination, and courage."²³ The choice of Meredith is generally recognized to have been a fortunate one, for he was responsible for much of the success in building the extension.

Continuous progress toward beginning construction was made in the months following Meredith's appointment. In January, 1905, Flagler and his aides toured the keys from Miami to Key West by steamer, viewing the route of the projected extension. At Key West they stayed several hours in conference with local officials.

Then on January 30, the *Miami Metropolis*, in a special Key West edition, announced officially that the extension would be built. The newspaper was Flagler's mouthpiece in South Florida; it noted that the line was expected to be finished in January,

18. *The Florida Flower*, (Miami and Tampa, October 15, 1911.)

19. Corliss, *op. cit.*

20. Florida East Coast Railway files, *loc. cit.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. I. N. Tompkins, *Through Sunny Florida*, (Mankato, Minnesota, 1921), 18.

23. Corliss, *op. cit.*

1908 - an optimistic prediction, indeed, since it would be until 1912 before the road would be completed.²⁴

When the decision was made to build the Overseas Extension, bids from private construction firms were invited, but only one contractor wanted the job, and he on a cost-plus basis. Flagler refused to have the work done in that manner, so the job was carried out from beginning to end by the organization of the Flagler System itself.²⁵ Meredith was in charge of the vast project. He was assisted by W. J. Krome and Division Engineers P. L. Wilson, C. S. Coe, G. R. Smiley, and Ernest Cotton. Bridge Engineer was R. W. Carter, General Foreman was E. H. Sheran, and Auditor of Construction was B. A. Deal.²⁶

Work began south of Homestead in April, 1905.²⁷ Immediately the skill of Flagler's engineers was put to test. The thirty-odd miles between Homestead and Barnes Sound consisted of Everglades sawgrass and marsh. To build an embankment for the right-of-way, dredges, built in immense holes in the ground, dug about thirty miles of navigable canals along the route. In the course of the work, water was let in to float each dredge. As the dredge ate its way toward the sea, mud was thrown up to make an embankment, leaving a canal behind. In some places the bedrock was so near the surface that the dredges were stranded; a system of locks was then used by which the stalled machines were floated over the barriers.²⁸

At Barnes Sound the line reached Key Largo. Work was pushed down this long island to Upper and Lower Matecumbe Keys and to Long Key. Much of the roadbed in this portion was built of native limestone blasted from along the right-of-way. To protect embankments exposed to wave action, a heavy layer of marine marl was dredged up and loaded on to trains of steel dump cars operating on long trestles built out into the marl beds. The marl was dumped where needed, where it formed a solid protective coating, with a glass-like surface which proved strong enough to withstand some of the heaviest hurricane seas.²⁹

24. Martin, *op. cit.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. Florida East Coast Railway Files, *loc. cit.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. *The Florida Flower.*

29. Florida East Coast Railway files, *loc. cit.*

At Long Key a viaduct 2.68 miles long³⁰ was built to connect Long and Grassy Keys. This bridge is probably the most beautiful of all the bridges built on the entire extension, reminding one, as it does, of an ancient Roman aqueduct. The structure consists of 180 reinforced concrete arches of Hudson River rock. Each of the arches was built on piers set into solid rock on the ocean floor; twenty five feet separate the water's surface from the crown of each arch.³¹

By December, 1907, the railroad had reached Knight's Key, eighty three miles below Homestead. There a large dock reached by a long trestle was constructed. This structure was opened February 6, 1908, and passenger steamship service was established to Havana. For the next four years, until the extension was completed, Knight's Key was the southern terminal for FEC trains. A port of entry with a post office and customs house was set up to handle the traffic which soon began to pass through the terminal.³²

Just beyond the Knight's Key Terminal lay a seven-mile expanse of water which was crossed by the longest bridge built on the entire project. Two types of bridging were used on the Knight's Key viaduct: concrete piers and concrete arches. A foundation was provided by using cofferdams; piles were anchored in the solid rock at the sea bottom, and these were filled in and built up with cement. The piers which were placed above contained about 175 cubic yards of concrete apiece - enough to fill a five masted schooner - and on these a steel floor plate girder style of bridging was used to make a decked bridge. At the south end of the bridge, one and a quarter miles of water was spanned with 210 arches. The space between the spandrel walls above the arches was filled with sand and gravel. On this filling cross-ties were placed and subsequently ballasted, lined, and surfaced just as if the road were on shore.³³

When the extension was about half completed, Chief Engineer Meredith died suddenly on April 20, 1909. An indication of the esteem in which Meredith was held by his employer and associates can be had from the inscription which appears on the

30. Martin, *op. cit.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Corliss, *op. cit.*

33. St. Augustine *Evening Record*, *loc. cit.*

unhewn granite monolith which marks his grave in the old Miami City Cemetery,³⁴ the resting place of so many people connected with South Florida's early history:

"In memory of Joseph Carroll Meredith, Chief Engineer in the Key West Extension of the Florida East Coast Railway, who died at his post of duty, April 20, 1909. This memorial is erected by the railway company in appreciation of his skill, fidelity, and devotion in this last and greatest work of his life."

Fortunately, however, Meredith had laid plans months in advance of the work; almost all the construction had been planned and was on paper at the time of his death. William J. Krome was promoted to take Meredith's place and the construction was pushed forward.³⁵

The third of the three greatest bridges on the extension was built at Bahia Honda. The deepest water anywhere in the keys was encountered at that point, some of the foundations of the steel truss bridge being thirty feet below tide level.³⁶

The story of the Overseas Extension of the Florida East Coast Railway is much more than a recital of events in the construction of bridges and right-of-way. The project was a gigantic human undertaking which involved a continuous battle against the elements. Hurricanes, blistering heat, insects, and scarcities of food, water and building materials all combined to hinder the progress of construction. Speaking of the determination which ultimately overcame these difficulties, Krome said, "We have put things through because we had to."³⁷

Mosquitoes were an ever present problem. The line was built many years before modern-day insecticides and DDT were discovered, so great quantities of pyrethrum powder and numerous smudge pots were used to combat the pests. Nature proved to be the best mosquito repellent when one year a hurricane swept across the keys, filling all freshwater pools with saltwater, so that the insects could not breed for a few months.

Lack of adequate food and water at the site of construction was an even greater problem. Except for fish (and there was

34. Florida East Coast Railway files, *loc. cit.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. Neal Wyatt Chapline, *Florida The Fascinating*. (New York, 1914), 91.

plenty of that!) the keys produced virtually no food, so that provisions for the thousands of construction workers had to be hauled from the mainland.

At first it was thought that water could be found in the keys, and so geologists were hired in the early stages of construction to explore for and dig wells on the islands. Their efforts were in vain, for no potable water was discovered. The project required up to 4,500,000 gallons, or 700 carloads, of fresh water a month. At first it was hauled from Miami to the keys by boat. Later, when enough track had been laid, the precious liquid was brought from Manatee Creek in the Everglades. Finally, wells were dug and a 100,000 gallon tank erected at Everglades, near Homestead, and water was carried from there to the project in 7,000 gallon cypress tanks mounted on flatcars. At Marathon and other points the water was transferred to six-tank barges for further distribution.

Although some things needed in the construction of the extension were found along the keys, most of the material had to be imported, some of it from thousands of miles away. Thirty five miles of temporary trestling and 70,000 units of piling were laid down along the route, and all this timber was brought in from the mainland.³⁸ Sand and gravel were hauled from Chesapeake Bay, crushed rock, enough to fill eighty tramp steamers, was brought from the Hudson River. Two hundred thousand tons of coal were also freighted in.³⁹ For underwater construction, cement was imported from Germany; American made cement was used for work above the water line.⁴⁰

During the course of construction a variety of equipment was used: twenty seven launches, eight stern-wheel steamboats from the Mississippi River, three tugs, twelve dredges, eight concrete mixers, twelve steam pile drivers, ten power excavators, eight derrick barges, one catamaran (for hauling coffer dams), 150 lighters, two steel barges, six locomotive cranes, and two sea-going steamers were all used in building the extension. All the floating equipment was furnished with dynamos for generating electric light, because much concrete work was done at night.⁴¹

38. Corliss, *op. cit.*

39. *The Florida Flower.*

40. Corliss, *op. cit.*

41. Cutler, *op. cit.*

By far the greatest obstacle nature threw up in the way of the railroad builders were the three hurricanes which struck in 1906, 1909, and 1910.

The blow which hit on October 18, 1906, took the greatest toll of lives and property: 130 men were killed and untold thousands of dollars in damage was done the right-of-way and equipment.⁴²

W. J. Krome estimated that the winds reached 120 miles per hour at Long Key in the 1906 hurricane. When the storm struck Long Key, houseboat number 4, with 150 men on board, broke from its moorings, and was quickly swept into Hawk's channel and out into the gulf. Heavy seas from the gulf began to break up the vessel. Soon the top was swept off and as the barge broke up, men grabbed for timbers and the side of the barge. From 30 to 40 were crushed to death as the boat collapsed. One side of the boat was especially crowded with men; but, as the waves mounted, the vessel turned over three times, reducing the number of men each time. Those who were lucky to survive were picked up by the Russian steamer *Jennie* and other passing vessels. Some of the workers were landed finally in ports as far away as Liverpool and New York. In this same storm the steamer *St. Lucie* was lost, carrying thirty five of the hundred workers on board to watery graves.⁴³ Meredith's statement that "no man has any business being connected with this work who can't stand grief"⁴⁴ was only too true!

The disaster of the 1906 hurricane taught a thorough lesson to the builders of the extension, so that thereafter, greater precaution was taken to minimize storm damage. More attention was paid to storm warnings. Flagler encouraged his engineers to bring their wives and families to the construction site, and provided housing for them, but by August of each year after the 1906 disaster families were urged to move to the mainland for the duration of the hurricane season.⁴⁵

To prevent floating equipment from being carried away by hurricane waves, storm channels were dredged out in shallow

42. Ralph Henry Barbour, *Let's Go To Florida*, (New York, 1926), 277.

43. *Florida Times-Union*, October 21, 1906.

44. Chapline, *op. cit.*

45. Martin, *op. cit.*

water where machinery exposed to storms was deliberately sunk, then raised when the winds subsided.⁴⁶

Although the storms of 1909 and 1910 were strong enough to carry rocks weighing from six to eight tons out to sea, there was much less property damage and loss of life.⁴⁷

To succeed in overcoming hazards of nature and to build the gigantic extension, Flagler and his aides found it necessary to employ an average of 4,000 workers at a given time. (Payroll records show that about 40,000 men were engaged in construction work at one time or other during the job's seven year life.)⁴⁸

A small part of the labor force came from among the "conchs," natives of the keys, but the bulk of the force was drawn from elsewhere. Recruiting agencies were set up by the Flagler System in Philadelphia, New York, Pittsburgh, and other northern cities. Negroes were recruited from the South and from the Bahamas. As the work progressed, the overseas extension became a veritable melting pot of races and nationalities. Greeks, Italians, Cubans, Negroes, southern white "crackers," and northern whites were all used in varying numbers.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most saddening aspect of the labor force was represented by the men who were recruited in northern cities. Most of them came from skid rows, like New York's Bowery, and were in poor health, broken by disease and alcoholism. A list of occupations and professions represented by the down-and-outers was kept in case an emergency on the job should require any special services, and this roster revealed that among the group were former lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, sculptors, clergymen, artists, actors, salesmen, and teachers, to name but a few. Some of these men would work for several years; others would quit during a payday spree, and would often return to the North, only to return again later, under a new contract.⁵⁰

One of the largest groups of laborers came from the three British islands of Grand Cayman, Little Cayman, and Cayman Brac in the Caribbean. Each year, usually in January, the islanders came to the project and stayed until about two weeks before

46. St. Augustine *Evening Record*, *loc. cit.*

47. Cutler, *op. cit.*

48. Corliss, *op. cit.*

49. Florida East Coast Railway files, *loc. cit.*

50. Corliss, *op. cit.*

Christmas, when they would quit - almost to a man - and go home to be with their families until January.⁵¹

As the work progressed, it was found that the best results were achieved from contract work. The railroad let contracts to individuals who then hired ten or twenty men to help them.⁵²

To accommodate the workers, fourteen camps were established along the keys; a number of two-story floating dormitories were also used.⁵³ Each camp was under the supervision of an engineer and consisted of dormitories and a mess hall, which were serviced by a staff of stewards, janitors, and laundrymen.⁵⁴

Until 1909 the construction office was located at the Miami Terminal Docks, after which time it was moved to Marathon.⁵⁵

At Marathon were the offices of the constructing engineer, chief auditor, and paymaster, as well as the reserve storeroom and material yards, loading docks, weather bureau, and emergency hospital. A short distance down the line, at Boot Key, were machine shops and marine railways for repairing floating and rolling stock.⁵⁶

Flagler took good care of his workmen. Each camp was adequately supplied with food and water brought weekly on boats from the central storeroom at Marathon. Hospital facilities were provided at Marathon and Miami.⁵⁷

Perhaps as a reflection of Flagler's stem Calvinism more than anything else, liquor was prohibited in the construction camps. As one might expect, this regulation was virtually impossible to enforce. Although they ran the risk of being treated with no more ceremony if caught than as if they were pirates, numerous operators of "booze boats" plied the waterways around the camps, supplying the workers with whiskey. The work camps were not frontier settlements in the strictest sense, but they took on the air of a wild-west town every payday, as laborers drank up much, if not all of their wages.⁵⁸

51. *Ibid.*

52. Florida East Coast Railway files, *loc. cit.*

53. *Florida Times-Union*, October 7, 1906.

54. *St. Augustine Evening Record*, *loc. cit.*

55. Corliss, *op. cit.*

56. *The Florida Flower*.

57. Martin, *op. cit.*

58. *Ibid.*

Paydays and alcoholic sprees came only once a month, however. Most of the time, life on the extension project was one day of hard work after the other. Winthrop Packard, a Florida traveler during the time of the overseas project, gives us this word picture written after he had made a journey down to Marathon on the train around 1909:

“Men cling like birds to slender staging or insecure footholds, swaying to one side to let the train pass, then swaying back again to go to work. A lean, knob-muscled navvy, who has been half comatose, slumped in an awkward heap in a seat, rouses to the hail of these men as we pass, and becomes excited over the work. He explains that he has been in the hospital for five months, and is just on his way back to the job. The hurricane took his tent from over his head while he was eating his dinner, picked him up bodily, and hurled him against a pile of railroad iron, breaking a leg and other bones.”⁵⁹

After the channel at Bahia Honda had been spanned, only forty miles lay between that point and Key West. Every effort was made to speed the progress of construction, for Flagler was growing older and his lieutenants wanted the job completed for him as soon as possible.

Much of the land between Bahia Honda and Key West consisted of rather large pine-covered islands. Construction on this portion of the extension was distinguished by the use of unique gasoline-powered dredges. When used in water, this equipment was mounted on barges; when needed for land work it was taken ashore, mounted on wheels, slid onto a steel truck, and used that way.⁶⁰

In the meantime, at Key West, 134 acres of land was dredged up to make a terminal for steamships that would connect with Flagler's trains. A concrete pier 1700 feet long and 134 feet wide was built out to deep water and wide slips were dredged through solid rock for the pier's full length.⁶¹

Early in 1911 efforts to complete the extension were doubled. W. J. Krome described the situation in this way:

59. Winthrop Packard, *Florida Trails*, (Boston, 1910), 248-9.

60. *The Florida Flower*.

61. Florida East Coast Railway files, *loc. cit.*

"It was near the end of February, 1911, that the question of finishing the road for traffic in the shortest possible time came up. We were asked, 'Can you complete the extension so that we can put Mr. Flagler into Key West in his private car and over his own rails from Jacksonville on his next birthday, January 2, 1912?' I did some close figuring and replied that we could complete the road for that purpose by January 22nd, provided that no storm or other unforeseen delay should overtake us. And we will lay the last rail on the morning of January 21st." ⁶²

Krome's promise was kept, for work progressed according to schedule, and on the afternoon of January 21, 1912, the completion of the Overseas extension was marked when the cross-over span at Knight's Key was closed. ⁶³ The first (pilot) train had entered Key West at 2:45 A. M. that same morning, drawn by engine number 201, which had been used to start construction in 1905. ⁶⁴ "Flagler's Folly," as it had been derisively called, was completed, and its builder would be able personally to enjoy his hour of triumph.

The next day, January 22nd, was chosen for the beginning of the three-day celebration in Key West which marked the opening of the extension. The train carrying Flagler's private car, *Moultre*, was the first to arrive, pulling in at 10:43 A. M. An estimated 10,000 people - many of them seeing a railroad train for the first time - were on hand to greet the aged empire builder of the east coast. As Flagler's train came into Key West station, a thunderous shout of welcome went up from the assembled crowd, and the old man was showered with American Beauty roses; a children's chorus of 1,000 voices sang in his honor. After a welcome from the mayor, the official party was feted at a banquet and reception.

Seven additional trains arrived in the island city later that day. In order, they bore President Taft's official representative, Assistant Secretary of War Oliver and his party, a delegation of foreign diplomats, a group of high army officers, the Chattanooga, Tennessee, Board of Trade, delegations from Jacksonville and Miami, Florida Governor Gilchrist and his staff, and a group of

62. Cutler, *op. cit.*

63. *Florida Times-Union*, January 23, 1912.

64. *Florida Times-Union*, January 22, 1912.

passengers from New York City who departed for Havana at 4:00 P. M. on the steamer *Governor Cobb*.

In the two days that followed, the assemblage of United States citizens and foreign representatives participated in a celebration which included a political rally, a Cuban circus, a Spanish opera, moving pictures, and a carnival. Seven warships of the United States, Portugal, and Cuba were in the harbor.⁶⁵

Although Henry M. Flagler died in 1913, work on the extension continued after his death. Temporary trestles were replaced with concrete bridges and additional piers were constructed at Key West to handle the traffic which eventually made the road profitable on an overall basis. The line was considered so monumental a work that until it was abandoned it was incorporated into the FEC's emblem with a picture of a train crossing the beautiful Long Key viaduct.⁶⁶

And yet, although no one would have predicted it, the Overseas Extension was doomed from its very inception. For on Labor Day, 1935, a tropical hurricane struck the keys, damaging the right-of-way so seriously that the line was abandoned. By that time traffic had declined on the extension, and the railroad was bankrupt as a result of over building in the twenties land boom and of the effects of the depression. The receivers lacked funds to repair the damage, so, in 1936, all right-of-way, embankments, and bridges from mile post 397, just south of Florida City, to mile post 519, just north of Key West, was sold to the Overseas Road and Toll Bridge District. The railroad received \$640,000 cash and cancellation of about \$160,000 in taxes as payment.⁶⁷

The building of the Overseas Extension of the Florida East Coast Railway was a dramatic chapter in the epic of railroad construction in Florida. It reflected the vast financial resources of America on the eve of World War I and man's ability to conquer the elements, if but temporarily, with engineering skill. And, although the day of the great railroad builders has vanished into the ages, our memory of Henry Morrison Flagler is constantly refreshed, for his ocean road has become the Overseas Highway, which is making possible the current rapid growth and development of the Florida Keys.

65. *Florida Times-Union*, January 23, 1912.

66. Florida East Coast Railway, *Annual Reports*, (St. Augustine?, 1912-1920.)

67. Florida East Coast Railway, *Annual Report*, (St. Augustine?, 1936.)

In fact, if he looks closely, the present day traveler can still see concrete traces of the era of the construction of the extension. In Broad Street Station at Richmond, Virginia, the train bulletin board still advertises train number 76 as carrying passengers from "Jacksonville, Miami, Key West, and Havana," although it has been many years since the whistles of the Flagler System engines were heard across the coral waters of the Florida Straits. A Jacksonville wholesale food company still uses an adaption of the FEC'S original Long Key viaduct emblem (which the railroad discarded after the 1935 hurricane) to publicize its wares. On the Knight's Key bridge of the Overseas Highway the rails on which Flagler's trains rolled are now used as guard rails; and on a lonely, vacant stretch of upper Key Largo almost hidden in the undergrowth of mahogany and key lime trees, stands a small concrete marker which proclaims that it is "FEC right-of-way" - mute testimony to the eventful days of the railroad that went to sea!