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HENRY M. FLAGLER - RAILROAD BUILDER *

by CARLTON J. CORLISS

ONE CANNOT VISIT this storied city of Saint Augustine without recalling its long and romantic past under the flags of Spain and France and England and its exciting territorial years under the American flag.

We are told that only a short distance from where we are meeting, the Spanish adventurer, Ponce de Leon, first landed on American soil - in 1513 - in search of the "Fountain of Perpetual Youth." Ponce de Leon did not find the "Fountain of Youth" but he did find an enduring place in American history.

Three hundred and seventy years later, there came to Florida and to Saint Augustine another man-truly a man of courage, who loved adventure as much, perhaps, as the renowned Spanish conquistador.

The real-life story of this man, Henry M. Flagler, who, starting as a five-dollar-a-month store boy, became one of the nation's foremost captains of industry, surpasses in human interest any success story from the imaginative pen of Horatio Alger. Flagler came here at the age of fifty-three. He came, perhaps, as Edwin Lefevre once wrote, "seeking the precious gold of the sunlight, or the turquoise sky; or, perhaps, merely a comfortable rocking chair on a hotel veranda. But he found here what his Spanish brother missed. It did not gush from a fountain, but blossomed on de tree of his life's philosophy, which later bore marvelous fruit. He found his Second Youth." And, like Ponce de Leon, he found a permanent place in American history.

And Lefevre, writing nearly fifty years ago, while Mr. Flagler was living, said prophetically: "What he has done you may see for yourself, and the children of your children will see still more clearly. The tramp of the marching years will not grind to dust his work, but make it the more solid-like the concrete of his viaducts and his buildings, which will grow harder, more like

* An address delivered at St. Augustine, Florida, February 23, 1959 at the unveiling of a tablet erected by the National Railway Historical Society, commemorating the role of Henry M. Flagler as a railroad builder.

stone, with age. In no other place, in no other way, by no other man, could the work have been done."

Ours would be a small nation today if it had not produced a goodly quota of bold and imaginative leaders - men of vision, men of courage. They dreamed great dreams, and then-under our system of free enterprise-they proceeded to transform those dreams into realities, oftentimes in the face of the most formidable obstacles.

James J. Hill, C. P. Huntington, E. H. Harriman and other men who girded the continent with pathways of steel were aided in their projects by funds supplied by large groups of investors-stockholders and bondholders. Some had the benefit also of government aid.

But Henry M. Flagler was unique among the great railroad builders. He was a "one-man corporation." Out of his own pocket he financed the construction of the Florida East Coast Railway and many of his other enterprises.

He was the only man in American history who initiated and carried to completion such an extensive development program out of his own personal fortune.

He was probably the only man in American history who ventured upon such stupendous undertakings late in life. He was in his seventy-fourth year when he decided to extend his railroad to Key West. He was eighty-two when the railroad was completed to that city.

He was the only man in American history-and probably in the world-who included in his development program so wide a range of activities. In addition to his railroad and his chain of hotels, Mr. Flagler operated steamboats, steamship lines, port terminals, ocean-going ferries, electric-light and power plants, and water works. He organized land companies. He promoted community development. He built streets and roads, churches, schools and hospitals. And when he couldn't induce the Government to dredge Biscayne Bay to enable him to operate steamships between Miami and Nassau, he did what no other individual in American history ever did anywhere before - he had the channel dredged at his own expense.

It is an interesting fact that Henry M. Flagler was born in the same year that public railway transportation was introduced

in America. His life-span coincides almost exactly with the period of railway expansion in this country. The date of his birth was January 2, 1830. At that time there was not a mile of railroad anywhere on the North American Continent providing public transportation service. Four months after he was born, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad began carrying passengers and freight in cars drawn by horses on a track extending a few miles out of Baltimore. He was less than a year old when the first successful steam locomotive in America, the "Best Friend of Charleston," was placed in regular daily service a few miles out of Charleston, S. C., over what is now the Southern Railway.

He lived to see the nation covered with a network of more than 250,000 miles of railroad lines.

Mr. Flagler's first visit to Saint Augustine was in 1883. The narrow lanes, balconied houses and crumbling gates of this quaint little Spanish town, its profusion of magnolias, palms and oleanders, and its warm sunshine, appealed strongly to him. He wanted to share its exotic charm with others. But he was anything but pleased with its hotel and railway accommodations.

One day he confided to a friend that he was going to build a hotel. He invited the friend to go in with him, but the man wasn't interested. So Mr. Flagler went it alone. He purchased several acres of land, including an orange grove. He engaged two young architects and sent them to Spain to study the architecture of that country. On their return, plans for his hotel began to take shape. Ground was broken in 1885, and when the Ponce de Leon Hotel was opened in January, 1888, it surpassed in architectural beauty and luxuriousness any hotel in the South if not in the country. Its only rival in the South was the new Tampa Bay Hotel on the west coast of Florida built by his friend, Henry Bradley Plant, who was extending railroads into that part of the state.

There is a story that Mr. Flagler telegraphed his friend Plant an invitation to the opening of the Ponce de Leon. Plant, with tongue in cheek, wired back, "Thanks, Henry, for the invitation, but where is Saint Augustine?" Mr. Flagler wired back: "Just follow the crowd."

While the Ponce de Leon was under construction, Mr. Flagler began building another palatial hotel in St. Augustine, the

Alcazar; then he purchased still another hotel, the Cordova, which became an annex to the Alcazar.

At that time, the only direct rail link with Jacksonville and the North was a poorly-equipped and poorly-operated narrow-gauge line, the 36-mile Jacksonville, St. Augustine and Halifax, which ran from a joint just outside Saint Augustine to the south bank of the St. Johns River, opposite Jacksonville. In 1888, trains carrying through Pullman cars were run for the first time between New York and Jacksonville. But to get from the railroad depot in Jacksonville to Saint Augustine, the traveler had to take a cab to the point where the ferry crossed the river, transfer to the ferry, then transfer from the ferry to the train, and after a 1³/₄ hour ride on the narrow-gauge road, complete the trip into Saint Augustine by cab.

Mr. Flagler wanted it to be possible for his guests to board Pullman cars in Jersey City and step off in Saint Augustine. He tried to convince the owners of the narrow-gauge line that it would be to their advantage to make necessary improvements so this could be done. But they shook their heads. They couldn't see it. Their "No" proved to be a turning point in the life of Mr. Flagler - and in the history of Florida. If they had said "yes," Mr. Flagler might never have been heard of except as a hotel owner.

He then took a momentous step. To accomplish his objective, he purchased control of the little railroad, rebuilt it to standard gauge, extended it to a point near his hotels, spanned the Saint Johns River with a bridge, and by 1890 trains from New York and other Northern cities were running through to Saint Augustine. The railroad became an adjunct to his hotels. That's how Mr. Flagler became a railroad man.

To understand what Florida was like when Mr. Flagler came here and began his great development program, we must look at the census reports. He acquired the narrow-gauge railroad in 1885. The last census - that of 1880 - reported that Florida had a total population of 269,000 - less than one-tenth what it is today. The largest city was Key West, with about 10,000. Jacksonville, the chief city on the mainland, had 7,600. Tampa had less than 1,000. The largest community on the East Coast of Florida between Jacksonville and Key West was Saint Augus-

tine, with 2,300 inhabitants. Daytona, with 321 people, was the largest community on the entire East Coast between Saint Augustine and Key West. The total population of the sixteen counties in which the Florida East Coast Railway now operates was only 53,000 - fewer people than there are today in the city of Fort Lauderdale.

With the purchase of the narrow-gauge railroad, Mr. Flagler began to think in terms of railway development as well as hotels. Combining the two, he acquired and rebuilt a couple of small roads which carried him as far south as Ormond and Daytona. At Ormond he built the Hotel Ormond, bridged the Halifax River, and carried out other improvements. By 1892, he was acquiring large areas of undeveloped land down the East Coast of Florida. He was taking steps to promote agricultural development even in advance of the opening of his railroad. To provide transportation to communities beyond the railhead, he established a steamboat line which ran from Daytona as far south as Lake Worth, the future Palm Beach. His rails reached New Smyrna in 1892; Cocoa, Rockledge and Eau Gallie in 1893, and by January, 1894, trains were running as far south as Fort Pierce.

Sometime previously Mr. Flagler had visited Lake Worth, 300 miles south of Jacksonville, and he was so impressed with the natural beauty of the place that he decided to transform it into a winter paradise. His rails reached West Palm Beach in the spring of 1894. And across Lake Worth, on the ocean front, an army of workmen, recruited from a dozen states, were already engaged in building the fabulous Hotel Royal Poinciana - the largest hotel in the Flagler chain and one of the largest in the world. Soon after, he added Palm Beach Inn; later, The Breakers. He surrounded the hotels with acres of enchanting gardens, studded with royal poincianas, royal palms, japonicas, cocconut trees, and exotic shrubs drawn from all quarters of the globe.

Amid these surroundings, Flagler built his stately mansion, "Whitehall." This was his winter home for the rest of his days.

When the road reached Palm Beach it was known as the Jacksonville, St. Augustine & Indian River Railway. Soon after, it took its present name-the Florida East Coast Railway.

Down the palm-fringed coast, sixty-six miles south of Palm

Beach - reached only by steamboat, sailing vessel or winding sandy trail - was old Fort Dallas, relic of the Seminole War of the 1840s. There a plucky widow, Mrs. Julia D. Tuttle, had acquired several hundred acres of piney woods, palmetto and jungle land bordering on Biscayne Bay and Miami River. In her home state, Ohio, Mrs. Tuttle had watched the transforming influence of railway transportation and she hoped for the day when the railroad would come to the Miami River.

As early as 1893, before Mr. Flagler's railroad was half-way down the Coast, she had sent word that she would share her land holdings 50-50 with him if he would bring his rails to the Miami. But it took a devastating freeze in the winter of 1894 to cause Mr. Flagler to give serious thought to Mrs. Tuttle's proposal. It was the worst freeze on record, ruining orange groves, touching pineapple crops on the Indian River, and even nipping coconut palms as far south as Palm Beach. At the time it seemed like a fatal blow. Mr. Flagler, then in Saint Augustine, sent J. E. Ingraham, his land and colonization agent, south. Ingraham reported that there had been no sign of frost south of New River -where Fort Lauderdale is now located.

"I said to Mr. Flagler," Mr. Ingraham related, "I have a written proposal from Mrs. Tuttle. She invites you to extend your railroad to Miami River, and offers to share with you her holdings for a townsite.

"Mr. Flagler looked at me for some minutes in silence, then he said: 'How soon can you arrange for me to go to Miami River?'"

Mr. Ingraham's reply illustrates the primitive transportation and communication at that time. He said: "If you can give me three days to get a messenger through to Mrs. Tuttle, advising her of your coming, I will arrange to have a launch meet you at Lake Worth, take you down the canal to Fort Lauderdale, and from there a carriage will take you to the Miami."

The trip was made, and Mr. Flagler was so favorably impressed with the place that he closed the deal with Mrs. Tuttle, and soon started building his railroad southward from Palm Beach.

Two years later, on April 15, 1896, the first train arrived at Miami River, where Mr. Flagler's men were already engaged in

elling trees, clearing land, erecting camps and temporary buildings. Within a few days, Miami's first hotel, the Royal Palm—also a Flagler project—was under construction. Thus, under Mr. Flagler's magic touch the fabulous city of Miami began to take form. He laid out streets. He erected a large terminal dock, dredged a channel to admit passage of shallow-draft steamships, and established a line of steamers between Miami and the Bahamas, where he built two hotels - the Colonial and the Royal Victoria. He founded Miami's light and power company, which became the present Florida Power and Light Company. He founded the Miami Water Company. He built homes for workmen. He donated lots for schools and churches, also for the city hall and the county courthouse. He erected a beautiful memorial church, and he built Miami's first hospital.

Beyond the Miami River, 156 miles southward, lay Key West, then many times greater in size than Miami and possessing a harbor capable of accommodating some of the largest ships afloat. At that time and for years thereafter the maximum channel depth of Biscayne Bay was twelve to fourteen feet. Key West, on the other hand, with the deepest harbor south of Norfolk, could accommodate vessels having a draft of thirty feet.

Came the Spanish-American War and the American occupation of Cuba, followed by greatly increased trade with the island republic. But because of superior port facilities, Tampa, on the West Coast of Florida, became the principal port of embarkation in connection with military and naval operations in the West Indies. Lack of a deep-water harbor on his railroad was keenly felt by Mr. Flagler. Then, soon after the turn of the century, the building of the Panama Canal caused business and transportation interests throughout the country to put themselves in readiness to share to the fullest whatever advantages the canal would bring.

Key West was three hundred miles nearer the Panama Canal than any other seaport in the country. Mr. Flagler sent his engineers to explore possible routes for a railroad to Key West, and to study probable costs. Finally, with their reports before him, he issued the order that started one of the most remarkable construction projects in history. The Key West Extension was a struggle of man against natural obstacles—against the sea, against

the storms that sometimes reach hurricane fury. This titanic struggle began in 1904, when engineers staked a right of way through everglades and swamps and jungles and shark-infested waters. It ended twelve years later when the last of thirty majestic concrete and steel viaducts was completed to form the permanent structure.

In the twelve-year period of construction, many thousands of men were employed; a huge fleet of steamboats, tugboats, floating machine shops, dredges, derrick and cargo barges was engaged. Hundreds of cargoes and trainloads of fuel and construction materials and supplies were brought from distant places—cement from Germany, coal from West Virginia, steel from Pennsylvania, lumber from Georgia, poles and crossties from Mississippi and Alabama, food and provisions from the Chicago packing houses. Labor was drawn from the North, as well as from the Bahamas, Cuba, the islands of the West Indies, and even from Spain.

It is my good fortune to have been engaged from 1909 to 1914 on this most interesting construction project. I can say truthfully that no experience in my life stands out more vividly—no experience packed more action, thrills, and drama—than were packed into the six years I spent on this project.

During the construction, three hurricanes of great severity swept over the Keys - in 1906, 1909 and 1910 - each causing loss of life and extensive damage. Each time there were many who feared that Mr. Flagler would become discouraged and order the project abandoned. But each time he gave orders to repair the damage and get on with the work.

At Key West, many acres of land were reclaimed from the sea to form the seaport terminal. The Flagler-controlled Peninsular & Occidental Steamship Company linked the railway with Cuba; a car-ferry service between Key West and Cuba was established, and a beautiful, modern hotel, the Casa Marina, still the finest in Key West, was built.

Mr. Flagler lived to see his railroad opened to Key West. On January 22, 1912, he rode triumphantly into the Island City on his special train, and the entire populace turned out to greet and cheer and honor him. In a brief speech, the grand old man, then in his eighty-third year and almost blind, said with a full heart, "Now I can die happy; my dream is fulfilled!"

A few months later - on May 20, 1913 - Florida's benefactor passed to his reward, and it is recorded that "in cities and towns up and down the East Coast flags drooped in mourning, and at many points schools and churches paid a tribute they had never before paid anyone, tolling their bells for the man who had done more than any other for this part of the state."

Like many other pioneers, Mr. Flagler built better than he realized. And like many another pioneer builder, he did not live to witness the full results of his effort. Since his death in 1913, the East Coast of Florida from Jacksonville to Key West has undergone a development in some respects without parallel in the history of this nation. Where there was one winter visitor in Mr. Flagler's time, there are scores today. Land values and agricultural production have multiplied many times over. Cities and towns have experienced remarkable growth. Miami in 1913 had a permanent population of about 6,000. Today Miami is the metropolis of Florida, with a permanent population in the metropolitan area of approximately half a million. Miami Beach, called the "Eighth Wonder of the World," was yet to see its first hotel in 1913.

Henry M. Flagler was a practical businessman with a practical business viewpoint. He believed in the profit incentive. As one of the founders of the Standard Oil Company and its vice-president for many years, he had been trained in the Rockefeller school. But in his Florida operations he developed what one writer referred to as "a new attitude toward humanity." He demonstrated time and again that he was as much interested-probably more interested-in creating job opportunities, and better living conditions, not only for those who worked for him, but also for the thousands who came to live in communities along his railroad. He "seemed to feel a sense of personal responsibility for every settler on his railroad and for every one of his many employees."

On one occasion Mr. J. E. Ingraham, who knew Mr. Flagler intimately, said: "I once asked Mr. Flagler how it happened that he came to engage in the development of Florida. He said there were two things that actuated him. One was that he believed his fortune had been given him for a definite purpose, which was 'to help his fellow men to help themselves,' and this he could do better in Florida than anywhere else; the second (and he said

this with a twinkle in his eye) 'I wanted to see if a plain American could not succeed where the Spaniard, the Frenchman and the Englishman had failed.' "

Mr. Ingraham also observed: "In the work which he accomplished in this state, Mr. Flagler was most unselfish. Through all this great work of construction-there is interwoven a golden cord of unselfish deeds, of generous gifts, of great liberality to municipalities, churches, schools and individuals, which runs into hundreds of thousands of dollars, but of which there is no written record except the simple entry, 'By order of Mr. Flagler.' "

Eugene Sewell, Miami's pioneer merchant and one of its outstanding citizens called Mr. Flagler "a man with a big heart and a wonderful vision."

During the yellow fever epidemic in 1899, he said, "people got out of work and a lot of colored laborers were about to starve . . . and we were in a very bad condition. Mr. Flagler ordered street work started and gave everybody a job who wanted one. . . .

"The city development work was carried on for about two years by Mr. Flagler, and we had to depend on this for most of our business." Mr. Sewell related that "Mr. Flagler took a keen interest in the fortunes of the farmers along the railroad. He was always a friend in adversity . . . Once when the pioneer growers . . . were hit by a cold wave which ruined the tomato, bean and eggplant crops, Mr. Flagler within twenty-four hours sent his agents to those who had lost their crops and loaned them enough money to replant-without asking for security."

It was inevitable that some of the pioneering work which Mr. Flagler initiated and carried out should, in the march of progress, disappear or undergo change. Some of his great hotels-the magnificent Royal Poinciana at Palm Beach, for instance, and the equally magnificent Royal Palm in Miami, in time made way for other and more modern hotels.

The railroad to Key West continued in operation for a period of twenty-three years. Finally, on Labor Day, 1935, one of the most destructive hurricanes that ever visited the Florida Keys inflicted severe damage to miles of embankment and track, but all the great concrete and steel bridge structures which formed the backbone of the project remained intact.

The nation was then in the midst of a severe depression. Railway traffic and earnings were extremely low. The Florida East Coast, along with many other roads, was operating in the red. These, and other factors, led to the decision to abandon the road south of Florida City rather than spend the money necessary to restore it to workable condition. Consequently, that part of the railroad was sold to the State and was converted to the now-famous "Oversea Highway."

It is regrettable that such a step was necessary, but we find comfort in the fact that the highway is carried down across the islands by the mighty chain of concrete and steel viaducts which Mr. Flagler built. Actually, the highway is a feeder for the railway. Railway or highway, it is a part of Mr. Flagler's contribution to the development of Florida.

Today-nearly half a century after Mr. Flagler laid down his work, we are gathered from many parts of the United States to honor his memory and to unveil a tablet that will express in some measure our appreciation and our gratitude for his outstanding and unique contribution to railway development.

This great contribution and his inspiring life-story are a part of our American heritage. Florida and all America are and will forever be indebted to this great and good man who, in the words of the poet, "saw a wilderness and out of it created an empire."