

1970

Tamiami Trail Blazers: A Personal Memoir

Russell Kay



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Kay, Russell (1970) "Tamiami Trail Blazers: A Personal Memoir," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 49 : No. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol49/iss3/8>

TAMIAMI TRAIL BLAZERS: A PERSONAL MEMOIR

by RUSSELL KAY*

PRIOR TO THE CONSTRUCTION of the Tamiami Trail connecting the east and west coasts of Florida, the only cross-peninsular highway ran from Tampa to Daytona Beach. With the advent of automobiles in Florida shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, the possibility of constructing a highway across the Everglades was considered. It was a very controversial issue, however, and opponents argued that the giant cost and the great engineering problems would make the project impossible. Businessmen and chamber of commerce representatives on both coasts, however, insisted that it could be done. Shortly after the end of World War I and even before the onset of the Florida boom of the 1920's, a publicity campaign was launched to sell the highway construction idea. Citizens were urged to use their influence with the Florida legislature and the federal government to consider and study the problem.

A cross-state highway in south Florida would be worthwhile, almost everyone agreed, but the obvious cost of such a project discouraged many private citizens and public officials from endorsing it. However, men like Captain James Franklin Jaudon of Miami and Barron G. Collier of *Collier* County, who had vast holdings that would be benefitted greatly by such a highway, helped to keep the argument alive. As a result, a group of west coast businessmen decided to promote the idea by staging a "blazing" of the proposed Tamiami Trail in April 1923.

There were a number of well-traveled Indian trails running from Miami to Fort Myers, and many of these were at least 100 years old. In three to seven days it was possible for someone who was willing to forgo the luxuries of civilized life, and who was strong enough to battle mosquitoes, snakes, and sand flies to move across the Everglades from one coast to the other. The

* Mr. Kay is a resident of Tampa. His syndicated column, "Too Late to Classify," appears in a number of Florida and southern periodicals. For this memoir, Mr. Kay has used his scrapbook of contemporary newspaper clippings and photographs.

Seminoles, Miccosukees, and Cow Creeks had constructed palm thatched chickees along the established trails and travelers could store food, salt, and other necessities. According to Indian code, anyone travelling through was always welcome to help himself to jerky, venison, salt, or whatever else he needed from these stations. He was, of course, obligated to replace what he had taken at his first opportunity. These chickees served to aid and protect Indian travelers and any other adventurous souls who might move along the trail.

Stanley Hanson of Fort Myers was the Indian agent for the area in 1923. He knew, understood, and respected his charges, and they in turn liked and respected him. Often, he later recalled, he would awaken in the morning to find one or more Indians sitting on his front steps in Fort Myers waiting for him with some particular personal problem that needed solving. Hanson strongly supported the Tamiami Trail project, and he engaged two Indian guides to help lead the trail blazers in 1923. One Indian, a tall, raw-boned fellow, about thirty years old, was named Assumhachee but everyone called him Abraham Lincoln because of his size and appearance. The other was a Seminole leader, short and stubby, about sixty years old. His face was quite wrinkled, but he was very agile. His Indian name was Conopatchee, but the whites called him Little Billie. These were Miccosukee Indians, and they came from a small village located on a pine knoll in the heart of the glades country, about forty miles north of Everglades City.

The trail project was conceived as a means of publicizing the need for a cross-state highway. At that time (1923), canals had been dug through the area and rough grades had been thrown up from Naples on the west coast and from Miami on the east. Construction, however, had been halted when money ran out, and public interest quickly began to lag. The west coast grade terminated a few miles north of Everglades City, then a sportsman's retreat that had been established by Barron Collier.¹

The trail expedition was headed by Ora E. Chapin, manager of the trust department of the Title and Trust Company of Fort

1. Collier was a northern advertising tycoon who became the major land developer of southwest Florida and for whom Collier County was named. Everglades City was reached by the Deep Lake Railroad from Immokolee, constructed by Collier.

Myers. It included Frank Whitman, managing editor, and the author, then business manager of *The Florida Grower* of Tampa; E. P. Green of Bradenton, a member of the state road department; L. A. Whitney of St. Petersburg; John E. Morris, chairman of the Lee County board of county commissioners; George E. Hosmer, publisher of the *Fort Myers Press*; George W. Dunham, director of the Tamiami Trail association of Fort Myers; Henry Colquit, F. C. Garmon, Fred B. Hough, Amos Bolich, L. J. Van Duyle, Joe W. Hill, Maurice Ayler, Clark Taylor, C. Shawcross, Hilton D. Thompson, H. Andrews² of the *American Eagle*, a weekly newspaper published at Estero; and Stanley Hanson, *the Indian agent*.³ Very few of these men had much experience as woodsmen and almost none of them had ever been in the Everglades. They were city-born and city-bred, and they joined the party more as a lark than anything else. They had very little knowledge or understanding of what lay ahead of them.

It was understood by all concerned that if the venture was successful it would prove that it was possible to cross the Everglades by automobile. Each man paid his own expense and provided most of his own camping equipment. The convoy included one commissary truck, seven Model T Fords, and a new Elcar that had been taken from its showroom in Fort Myers. All except the *Florida Grower* automobile carried standard equipment. This latter car, carrying Frank Whitman and the author, was equipped with extra-sized Miller horseshow tires which had been provided by the manufacturer as an advertising effort. The tires were supposed to provide perfect traction under any conditions — beach, sand, or mud — but they would more than meet their match on the slimy-saw tooth sawgrass of the Everglades.

The shiny new Elcar was driven by the owner of the Fort Myers automobile agency, and he hoped a successful trip would demonstrate the prowess of his vehicle. He was doomed to disappointment; it became quickly stuck in the mire when the

-
2. Another memoir of the trail blazers' expedition was written by Allen H. Andrews, *A Yank Pioneer in Florida* (Jacksonville, 1950), 140-59. It has been reprinted in Baynard Kendrick, *Florida Trails to Turnpikes, 1914-1964* (Gainesville, 1964), 72-80.
 3. There is disagreement among contemporary newspaper accounts as to the name and number of men on the expedition.

going became rough, and it had to be rescued and returned to Fort Myers. The second car to drop out, about halfway across, was the Overland because of stripped gears, and it may still be mired in the recesses of the glades. It looked for a time like one of the Fords would not make it either because of a broken front spring, but a new spring was fashioned out of pole cypress, and after it was installed, the car continued with the rest of the convoy.

The group left Fort Myers on the morning of April 4, 1923 with a great deal of hub-bub and excitement. There was picture taking and last minute interviews by newsmen representing the state and some national papers. Among those who had gathered was the famed inventor, Thomas Alyva Edison, who, along with Henry Ford, entrusted a bottle of grape juice to the author to be presented to William Jennings Bryan in Miami. Neatly tied with a large white ribbon bow, it was stowed in the grub wagon. The road from Fort Myers south to the end of the grade at Naples was a nine-foot wide shell road. That was not too bad, but it was very rough grade from that point on. Everything went fairly well the first day, at least until the convoy reached a point just west of Everglades City where the gully had washed through the grade. Shovels were hauled out, and the holes had to be filled before the cars could proceed. The end of the grade was reached about sundown, and the first night camp was made there.

Beyond the end of the grade lay nothing but waving saw-grass and that was the sight that greeted the adventurers. The first car drove off the end of the grade into the muck, traveled about 100 yards or so, and then mired down to its running boards. The second car followed with exactly the same result, and it appeared that the project was doomed to failure before it had really gotten started. A delegation was sent into Everglades City to see if Barron Collier would send wide-track Cletrac tractors to pull the mired automobiles out. Collier agreed, and all of the cars, with the exception of the Elcar which was too firmly stuck, were dragged by the tractor to more solid ground where they could proceed under their own power.

Contrary to general belief, the Everglades is not a giant swamp. In fact, in dry seasons it is sometimes very difficult to find drinking water. The 1923 trail blazers often had to shovel

down through the layer of coquina rock that underlies most of the glades country. Usually water was found two or three feet from the surface. When the shovel struck the rock, the muck top soil was scooped out and water then seeped up through the rock. In a couple of hours there would be a small pool at the bottom of the well or hole. So as not to disturb the muck still in the well, it was necessary to reach down and scoop up a cupful at a time, being careful not to disturb the water more than necessary. The author was elected water boy, and it was his job when camp was made to start digging for water. It took some time to fill the water canteens, but it was better than to use liquid from the stagnant pools. In an emergency, long reeds could be forced down through the muck and soil and when sucked gently, some water, lukewarm and dirty, could be pulled up.

Underground streams running near the surface, from north to south, caused the cypress to grow in strands from a quarter of a mile to two miles in width. These strands began with small pole cypress on the edges and large full-grown trees in the center, and, of course, a maze of cypress-knees. There was no way of knowing how wide a strand might be when the convoy reached it, so scouts were sent ahead to find a location where the strand was narrow and fairly easy to cut through. When the group reached the first strand, everyone grabbed an axe and began chopping the small cypress poles on the edge. It was exciting and fun the first time such a project began, but the bouyant, gleeful spirit did not last very long. At the time, the author was five-feet two, weighed 110 pounds, and had absolutely no experience in chopping down trees. He slammed his axe into a tree, only to have it stick there. Try as he could, he could not move it. One of the Indians, watching, said: "Think so, White man damn fool." One of the men, anxious to reach the trees first, tried to jump over the roots and knees, but he only stumbled and cut himself in the knee with his axe. Unable to work, the injured man was installed in one of the cars, and he had the task of sharpening the axes. Being the lightest man in the group, it was soon evident that the author's services as a chopper did not amount to much, and he was delegated to drive the cars through the narrow path that the choppers cut.

When a car bogged down and wheels started to spin and sink deeper in the mud, limbs and brush were cut to build a corduroy road. Sometimes the convoy was able to travel only a mile or so a day. Shortly after the cars moved into the glades the fenders were removed since they became so thin and dented they were more of a hazard than a help. Like a command pilot, the author sat behind the wheel of the first car and gunned the motor while a half dozen fellows pushed from the rear. The men were all skinned and bruised from the vicious sawgrass. They were learning pioneering the hard way.

The men had expected to see a great many snakes and alligators, but they only encountered one rattler on high ground where scrub palmetto was abundant. The single alligator they saw was in one of the canals beside the grade on their first day out. When the headwater of the Turner River was reached, they found a large pool with literally dozens of large and small moccasins frolicking in the water or sunning themselves on the bank. One of the men killed two of the larger snakes with a shovel, but this so angered the Indians they threatened to desert then and there. It took much arguing on the part of Indian Agent Hanson to calm the natives down. He explained the Indians never kill wantonly, and that they respected the snakes because they contended that the reptiles had more right to be there than humans. This was the home of the animals, reptiles, and birds; they were there even before the Indians, and to kill them without cause was a crime. Little Billy, the Indian guide, who advanced this philosophy, explained that snakes intended no harm, and that if the men minded their own business and left them alone, the snakes would mind theirs. To demonstrate his confidence in the snakes, he walked barefoot among them, head erect, and maintaining a steady pace. The snakes made no effort to bite him, but simply wiggled out of his path. Little Billy said the snake usually sees you before you see him, and as long as you act as if you had not seen him and was not interested in him, he would not attack. He called the rattlesnake the "kind" snake because he said it always gave warning before it struck. A few days after this incident with the moccasins, the author had another snake encounter. In camp one evening, he dug several water holes, and filled the water bags. The next morning he went to one of the holes to get more

water before breaking camp. Just as he was about to put his arm down into the hole, he looked and saw a large moccasin curled up in the little pool of water. Fortunately, he looked before he extended his hand.

All the men were interested in the beliefs of the Indians and in their philosophy of life. They found that in many ways the Indians were more honorable and more trustworthy than the average white man. They respected all life and attempted to protect it. The Indians took only such game as they needed for food; overkills, such as that practiced by white hunters, was considered a sin by the Indians and they believed that the Great Spirit would surely punish them. One member of the trail blazers carefully wrapped his watch and pocketbook in a handkerchief and placed them carefully beneath his pillow each night, fearing the Indian guides might steal his possessions. Hanson rebuked him, however, saying that he could leave these items out in the open on a stump and that the Indians would never touch them unless they had been associating with white men. They had learned to lie, cheat, and steal from the whites; the Indian code of personal behavior was much stricter than the whites and any breach was promptly punished. The Indians' Supreme Being or God is a spirit that permeates *all* life on earth, from the tiniest blade of grass to man himself. The Indians believe that death releases mortal man to a life of spirit in a better land.

When the convoy drove out of Fort Myers, the trail blazers had thought that they were beginning a journey that would last about three days, but it began to extend much beyond that. In fact, two weeks later they were still out in the bush. One afternoon, while a group was attempting to cut a path through the cypress strand, a severe storm hit. The author had been left in camp to keep the fires going and to prepare lunch for the hungry woodsmen when they returned. The wind howled and the rain came down in buckets. Of course, the fire was quickly extinguished in spite of anything that the author could do to keep it alive. When the gang returned, soaked to the skin, and eager for a cup of hot coffee, they found nothing. One of the Indian guides again had reason to comment: "White man, damn fool." He then showed the author how to keep a fire going in a storm. Stepping over a dead pine, he hacked away with a

hand axe until he reached the heart of the tree, from which he removed a handful of pay-rich chips. In a short time, he had a roaring fire ablaze, all ready for coffee.

Since progress had been so slow, the group ran out of most of its food. There was some coffee, salt, sugar, and cereal, but little else. For days the men had been urging the Indians to kill a deer or a wild turkey. However, the two Seminoles would look in the grub wagon, check the stores before they went hunting, and they always returned saying "no catch." Then, when there was practically no food left, they left at daylight one morning, and in less than an hour they had returned with a plump deer, a bag of cattail roots, and some swamp cabbage. From then on the men ate venison and the native "vegetables" for breakfast, lunch, and supper. They also had a few wild turkeys that were delicious, and they enjoyed one meal of frog legs and fish. Food was plentiful and varied in the glades, but you had to know where and how to acquire it.

The men had expected to be molested and tormented by insects, especially mosquitoes, and they slept under mosquito nets which they found were really not necessary; there were few insects of any kind to contend with. Dragon flies were everywhere, and perhaps they kept the other flying insects under control. The only major problem was in the cypress. When you slammed an axe into a tree, you let loose a shower of fuzzy green worms that cascaded down on your head, neck, and arms, and could leave a painful sting. No large animals were encountered. At night bobcat and cougar cries were heard nearby, but none were ever seen. Birds were plentiful—mostly water birds, cranes and herons—but they stayed far away from the group and were only seen feeding in swamp areas or in flight. One small flight of roseta spoon bills was noticed. The most common bird seen was the little white heron.

The trail meandered here and there, and the convoy travelled the route that seemed the easiest. They crossed and re-crossed the present Tamiami Trail, and at one point a marker was placed to indicate the halfway point between Everglades City and the Miami grade.

About two-thirds way across the glades, the convoy sighted a plane obviously trying to locate the party, but the men were unable to get a fire going in time so as to identify their loca-

tion. The group was never lost, however, and they always knew approximately where they were, even if they had no means of informing the outside world. Finally they reached a knoll about ten miles west of the Miami grade, and sent scouts ahead to let everyone know that they were all right. Maurice Hyer and the author were chosen to make the trip on foot. Although they were now hardened by experience, this long trek on foot proved one of their toughest assignments. The author remembered that he walked and walked through the swamp and sawgrass until he thought he would "surely drop of exhaustion." Without either food or water, the men finally climbed up the Miami grade to find a convict camp. The guards recognized the men which the papers and people had been writing and talking about and they provided a meal of chili and beans, which the author remembers as one of the "best meals I ever had in my life." Cars were summoned from Miami to meet and bring the two men into the city. Since they were unexpected there was no immediate celebration and there was no one to greet them. They did not mind, however; they were just happy to be back in civilization. Meanwhile, the rest of the men were still out in the Everglades trying to move towards the coast as rapidly as possible, and for them a welcome party was planned.

The bottle of grape juice intended for William Jennings Bryan was never delivered; about halfway across the glades, when all of the food supplies were nearly exhausted, someone remembered the grape juice, and it quickly disappeared. Nobody knew what happened to the white ribbon, but the author recalls that it "was the best grape juice I ever tasted."

Communications in 1923 in South Florida were somewhat limited. The outside world had no knowledge of how the trail blazers were fairing in their undertaking. Exaggerated stories were released from Miami by a few news service writers, who, drawing on their imagination, pictured the men as lost in the wilderness and fighting for their lives against wild animals, alligators, and snakes. One account told of their capture by Seminoles who resented their intrusion into their area and were holding them captive. Most reports concluded that the convoy was hopelessly lost, without food or help. This was all 'hog-wash" and untrue; the men knew generally where they were all the time, and they were only delayed because of the difficult



The expedition is launched.

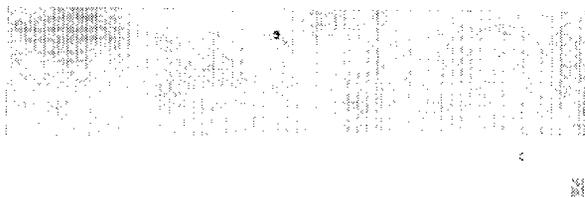
A break for lunch.



Kay: Tamiami Trail Blazers: A Personal Memoir



Trail blazers
and guides



Mired
Motorists

terrain. One dispatch out of Miami stated that seven women, wives of party members, were in the group. This was also untrue, but it caused some eyebrows to be raised, and there were questions and humorous remarks when the travellers finally emerged.

When reports of the "lost" convoy were released, planes were sent out from Miami trying to locate the men. Hidden in the cypress, the men had seen one of the planes, but they were unable to signal it. A plane had spotted the group about twenty miles from the Miami grade, and another dropped food and supplies. The men appreciated everything, especially the coffee. They had never been without food of some kind, thanks to the Indian guides. The gasoline supply had run low, but the fuel drained from the tanks of the abandoned cars enabled the trail blazers finally to make it to the Miami grade.

It is likely that very few of the group ever expected to see the Tamiami Trail become a reality in spite of their efforts; certainly not within the few short years after the 1923 expedition. The men had encountered the hardships and problems first-hand, and they found it hard to believe that the engineers could complete the road building project with as little cost and effort as they did. In 1928 the author, along with other members of the group, journeyed to Everglades City to celebrate the actual opening of the Tamiami Trail. It was a momentous occasion with a parade and celebration. Barron Collier paid for most of the celebration cost, and he played host to the original Tamiami trail blazers.⁴

Just how much the Tamiami trail blazing expedition had to do with the final completion of the highway is a matter of opinion. However, it did develop nation-wide publicity, and it centered attention on the need for such a highway. From this point of view, it was highly successful. It was estimated that the motorcade brought 35,000 columns of front-page publicity in American and European newspapers, and film-clips of the departure from Fort Myers and the arrival in Miami were shown in movie houses throughout the world. The Florida legislature endorsed the proposed highway as a state project, and much less concern over its financing was voiced. From these points of view, the trailblazing was highly successful.

4. This group held an annual get-together.