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The International Ocean Telegraph

Canter Brown, Jr.

THE INTERNATIONAL OCEAN TELEGRAPH

by CANTER BROWN, JR.

THE SUMMER OF 1865 was one of great relief for most citizens of the so-recently reaffirmed United States of America. A few weeks earlier, on April 12, Robert E. Lee had surrendered his Confederate Army of Northern Virginia to a victorious Ulysses S. Grant and, before the end of the following month, the last Confederate force of consequence remaining in the field, then serving under General Edmund Kirby Smith of St. Augustine, had followed suit. The nation had been shocked and saddened by the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln two days after Lee's surrender, but to some extent the outrage over that crime had waned in the aftermath of the execution of the Lincoln conspirators on July 7.[1]

It was thus that during the summer months of 1865 the attention of the nation for the first time in more than four years could be focused on matters other than war, and the efforts of visionary businessman Cyrus West Field provided a central focal point for that attention. Field was promising to link the United States with Great Britain and the continent of Europe through the installation of an electric telegraph, a feat which, if accomplished– and many thought it could not be– would reduce from one month to a matter of a second or two the time it took news to cross the Atlantic. Field had attempted the feat before, and in 1858 he succeeded in laying a submarine cable that opened communications between the continents. The triumph quickly turned to disappointment, however, when the cable failed after only a few days.[2]

Undaunted by his earlier setback, Field and his associates bided their time through the Civil War years, and on June 24, 1865, steamed from England aboard the *Great Eastern*, the largest ship in the world, intent upon rectifying their mistakes

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1. E. B. Long, *The Civil War Day by Day, An Almanac, 1861-1865* (Garden City, NY, 1971), 674-76, 690, 694.
2. Arthur C. Clarke, *Voices Across The Sea*, revised ed. (New York, 1974), 56-64.

and achieving a triumph of a more permanent nature. Once again, though, Field was to be frustrated. On August 2, as Americans and Europeans anxiously awaited word of his success, the submarine cable snapped after 1,300 miles of its length had been payed out. For nine days the crew aboard the *Great Eastern* struggled to grapple the line through 2,000 fathoms of water, but their equipment was not up to the task. On August 11, Field was forced to concede another defeat while vowing a renewed attempt and ultimate success during the following year.[3]

Field was not the only man who was interested that summer in transoceanic telegraphy. Six days after the departure of the *Great Eastern* from England, a Spaniard by the name of Don Arturo Marcoartu and his associates, purportedly including a luminary of no less a magnitude than Ferdinand Lesseps, were granted an order by the government of Spain for the survey of a submarine route by which an electric telegraph line might link Spain, Cuba, and the United States.[4] It is uncertain as to when news of the Spanish grant reached the United States, particularly the city of New York, but it is clear that transoceanic telegraphy was an idea of current, broad, and immediate interest.

Several stories of an anecdotal nature have been told about the birth of the International Ocean Telegraph Company in New York City during the summer of 1865. One account suggested that affluent businessman James A. Scrymser broached the idea to his friend Alfred Pell, Jr., while "mediating beneath an apple tree in the soft shadows of the evening twilight in what way they could most bless their fellow man."[5] A later recollection has the two "rambling along the then fair rural banks of the Harlem River."[6] Whatever, the two men determined that summer to explore the possibilities of a transoceanic line to connect the United States with Cuba and, eventually, Central and South America and the West Indies.

Acting upon their determination, Scrymser and Pell contacted capitalists of their acquaintance concerning the proposed telegraph line and received an enthusiastic response. In a short

3. Ibid., 76-89.
4. James D. Reid, *The Telegraph in America: Its Founders, Promoters, and Noted Men* (Albany, NY, 1879; reprint ed., New York, 1971), 435.
5. Ibid.
6. Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Wires and New Waves: The History of the Telegraph, Telephone, and Wireless* (New York, 1936; reprinted., New York, 1974), 300.

William Farrar "Baldy" Smith. *Photograph courtesy of the Massachusetts Commandery, Military Order of the Loyal Legion and the U. S. Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.*

time they had enlisted the participation of a number of men of means and had employed the services of former Union General William Farrar "Baldy" Smith as their chief executive officer.[7]

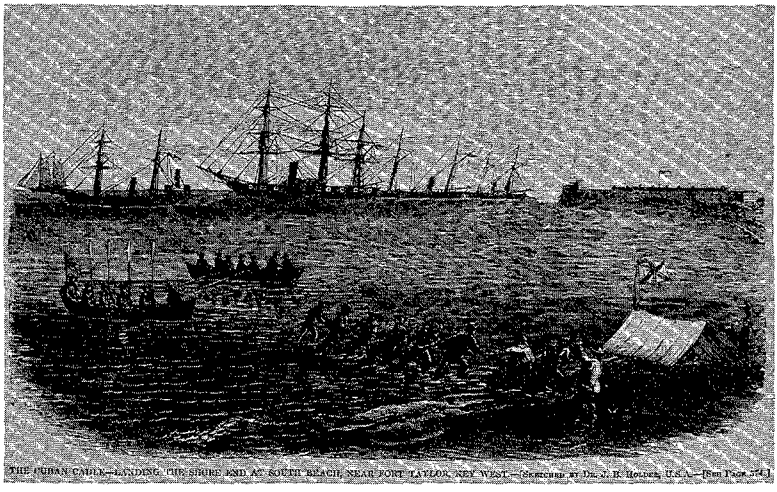
7. According to an obituary, Smith was nicknamed "Baldy" while a cadet at West Point "[b]ecause of a premature scarcity of hair." *New York Times,* March 2, 1903.

Smith immediately sought to overcome the obstacle of the Spanish grant. He, or someone on the company's behalf, retained the services of Horatio J. Perry, an American who was known to have influence in Spanish court circles and who, years before, had received a similar concession from the Spanish government.[8] Smith later asserted to Florida Governor David S. Walker that it was "while our Company was in process of getting permission from the Spanish Government to land our cable on the Island of Cuba [that] we came across a grant just given to certain Spanish subjects." The retention of Perry so early in the company's life, however, hints at a prior knowledge of the Marcoartu concession and an awareness of the need to void or, at least, neutralize it.[9]

Subsequent events suggest that Perry told his new employers that he needed leverage to overcome the Marcoartu concession and that a similar concession to the International Ocean Telegraph Company (IOTC) from the United States would be desirable. Baldy Smith appears to have confirmed that assumption when he wrote Governor Walker in December 1865, "[W]e were informed that the only way to prevent the landing of the cable on the Shores of Florida under the grant, was by a prohibition on the part of the State of Florida through its legislature by virtue of an exclusive privilege to land a telegraphic cable given to some other Company."[10]

As Perry proceeded during the latter half of 1865 in his efforts to secure a Spanish concession for the IOTC, Smith and his backers strove to place the enterprise on a more solid footing at home. A first step in that direction was the organization of the company as a corporation under the laws of the state of New York. That action occurred December 2, 1865, with the names of James A. Scrymser, Alfred Pell, Jr., Alexander Hamilton, Jr., Oliver K. King, Maturin L. Delafield, William F. Smith, and James M. Digges listed as incorporators. The new corporation was authorized a capitalization of $1,500,000. Smith was named president; Hamilton, vice-president; Pell, secretary; Delafield, treasurer; and, as directors, all of the incorporators, save Digges,

8. Reid, *Telegraph in America,* 436.
9. William F. Smith to David S. Walker, December 24, 1865, record group 915, ser. 887, Florida State Archives, R. A. Gray Building, Tallahassee.
10. Ibid.



The landing of the IOTC cable at South Beach, Key West. *Reprinted from Harper's Magazine (September 1867).*

together with Charles Knap, E. S. Sanford, Cambridge Livingston, William T. Blodgett, Edward M. Archibald, and H. C. Bull.[11]

Ten days after the company's incorporation, United States Senator Edwin Dennison Morgan of New York obtained leave to introduce "a bill (S. No. 26) granting to the International Ocean Telegraph Company the right and privilege to establish telegraphic communications between the City of New York and the West India islands." The bill was referred to the Committee on Commerce.[12]

Just as it seems likely that the IOTC was encouraged to secure a government concession as leverage in obtaining a Spanish grant for a United States to Cuba cable, so also it appears that Smith and the company's officers were urged to obtain a concession from the state of Florida in order to provide incentive for Congressional action. Specific evidence on the point is lacking, but it is known that within eleven days of the introduction of the IOTC bill in the United States Senate, and while the bill was

11. Reid, *Telegraph in America,* 436-37.
12. *Congressional Globe,* 39th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 36, pt. 1, 23.

pending in committee, Smith came to Tallahassee where, on December 23, 1865, five days after the convening of Florida's first postwar legislature, Representative G. Troup Maxwell of Leon County, chairman of the House Committee on Federal Relations, gave notice of his intention to introduce an IOTC bill "at a future date."[13]

The Florida that welcomed Smith in December 1865 was a state desperately in search of financial help. Still to be readmitted to the Union, the state's economy was exhausted, and capital in any form had all but disappeared. As one Reconstruction historian has described the situation, "the collapse of the monetary system, price fluctuation, scarcity of goods, decay of internal transportation, and drastic alteration of the agricultural system all combined to create an economic stalemate."[14]

Accordingly, the legislature was likely to be receptive to any plan which promised to bring money to or assist in developing the state. Besides, the idea of a Florida-Cuba cable link was one that the Florida legislature had endorsed earlier. In 1854, the state had authorized "The Cuba and United States Sub-Marine and Territorial Magnetic Telegraph Company," with which Samuel F. B. Morse was prominently associated, to build a land line from Tallahassee to Cape Sable "or some other more suitable position on the peninsula of Florida."[15] Five years later another line was projected, this time with a terminus at Cedar Key. To be built as a part of the Florida Railroad system, the planned Cedar Key-Key West-Havana cable was scheduled, as of December 1859, to be laid "by the 1st of April next."[16] Delays beset the project, however, and by May 1860, a system had been established by which Cuban messages brought by boat to Cedar Key were forwarded along the company's land lines. The company's agent still expressed hope "that the telegraph will be shortly complete to Key West," but the onset of the Civil War apparently brought the project to a complete halt.[17]

Finding himself in a state eager to accommodate his business plans, Baldy Smith, on December 24, 1865, urged Governor

13. Florida *House Journal* (1865), 12, 76.
14. Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (Gainesville, 1974), 20.
15. James F. McClellan, *A Digest of the Laws of the State of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1881), 1105-08.
16. Key West *Key of the Gulf*, January 7, 1860.
17. Ibid., March 24, 1860; *St. Augustine Examiner*, June 9, 1860.

Walker to consider the IOTC's request for an exclusive state grant of authority to land submarine telegraph cables on the peninsula. "[I] have the honor," Smith wrote, "to request your Excellency to examine and forward these papers to either, or both branches of the Legislature, as may seem proper to you, with such recommendations as your judgement may dictate in view of the benefits to result in the State of Florida from such a telegraph line as it is proposed to construct, and also in view of such protection of American Interests as we think Americans can claim."[18]

It took Walker but three days to accede to Smith's wishes. By letter dated December 27, he forwarded Smith's request and proposed bill to the legislature with his own endorsement. "I am satisfied in the entire worthiness of the enterprise," Walker declared.[19] The IOTC bill was introduced in the Florida House on December 28, 1865, and was referred to the Judiciary Committee which held at least one joint hearing on the proposal with the Senate Judiciary Committee. Despite concerns expressed by some as to "the question of the constitutional power of the General Assembly to grant such a privilege," the joint committee on January 2, 1866, reported the bill back to the full House with a "Do Pass" recommendation. That body by unanimous vote approved the measure and certified it to the Senate. Apparently staying in session solely to receive the bill, the Senate that same afternoon, at the urging of John M. Gorrie of Franklin County, immediately considered and approved the proposal, again unanimously.[20]

Governor Walker signed the measure into law the night of its passage. The language he approved was clear: The IOTC "shall have the sole and exclusive right and privilege for the period of twenty years . . . of landing a sub-marine telegraphic cable or cables on the shore, sea coast, islands, keys, reefs or sand banks, lying within the limits and jurisdictions of the State of Florida, and of connecting, by means of said submarine telegraph cable or cables, the shore and sea-coast of the State

18. Smith to Walker, December 24, 1865, record group 915, ser. 887, Florida State Archives.
19. Walker to The Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Florida, December 27, 1865, record group 915, ser. 887, Florida State Archives.
20. Florida *House Journal* (1865), 99, 140; Florida *Senate Journal* (1865), 106-07.

aforesaid, with the Island of Cuba."[21] Writing to a New York newspaper, one Floridian summed up what must have been the general feeling about the project. "It is most sincerely and earnestly to be hoped," he wrote, "that this undertaking may be carried through speedily and successfully, as it must greatly rebound to the benefit and advantage of our State."[22]

Flush with his Florida victory, Smith returned to Washington to prod the Congress into action, but there, at first, he found little but delay and disappointment. On January 18, 1866, the bill, including a twenty-five year grant of exclusive privilege to erect or lay lines and cables "from the said United States to the islands of Cuba and the Bahamas, either or both, and other West Indian islands," was favorably reported back to the Senate. There, however, it ran into determined opposition from forces led by Senator John Sherman of Ohio. Declaring "that this is too important a bill to be passed at this time," Sherman and his allies won a postponement of its consideration.[23]

On February 26, 1866, the Senate again considered the proposal, but its supporters were forced to send the measure back to committee when it appeared likely that the company's "exclusive privilege" would be stripped from the bill. Smith and his associates worked feverishly to assuage their opponents and, with the assistance of *New York Times* editorial support, were able to report a substitute bill that limited the exclusive franchise to a period of fourteen years and mandated that the cable leave and enter the United Sates "from the shores of Florida."[24]

The Senate took up the compromise substitute to S. No. 26 on March 20. Again opponents denounced the grant of an exclusive privilege, but on a vote of fourteen to sixteen barely failed at removing the provision from the bill. Had the attempt been successful, even supporters conceded it would have likely killed the measure outright. As it was, the proposal survived and, after renewed attempts to amend or kill it, passed the Senate the following day on a voice vote.[25]

The House on April 26, 1866, also passed the bill. When the House amendments were considered in the Senate, Senator

21. *Laws of Florida* (1865), 72-73.
22. *New York Times*, May 12, 1866.
23. *Congressional Globe*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 36, pt. 1, 287, 875.
24. Ibid., pt. 2, 1029-31, 1201-02; *New York Times*, March 14, 1866.
25. *Congressional Globe*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 36, pt. 2, 1518-22, 1538-40.

Sherman again attacked the proposal, forcing its consideration by a House-Senate conference committee. The work of that committee, which was approved by the House and Senate, respectively, on May 2 and 3, retained the "fourteen year" and "Florida" limitations of the Senate bill and, additionally, incorporated limits on how the company could transmit commercial information, on prices that could be charged ($3.50 for each ten words), on government use of the line, and on the time allowed for laying of cables (three years) and the opening of the line (five years). President Andrew Johnson approved the Act on May 5.[26]

With Congressional and state action finalized, the International Ocean Telegraph Company was able to wrest a similar concession from the Spanish government on August 29. The company's efforts had been enhanced when it was discovered that Don Arturo Marcoartu had fraudulently utilized the names of prominent men, including Ferdinand Lesseps, in his petition for a grant, a finding which caused Marcoartu's concession to be voided. The Spanish agreement awarded the company with a forty-year, nonrevocable concession to land cables on the Cuban coast.[27]

That same summer the IOTC also was able to overcome a knotty financial problem. Despite the public excitement over Cyrus Field's continuing and, as of July 27, 1866, successful efforts to lay and open a trans-Atlantic cable, the IOTC had experienced "great difficulty" in securing the popular subscription of its capital stock.[28] Although the company's founders themselves raised the money, it was clear that the purchase of land for rights-of-way and company stations and facilities was beyond the IOTC's immediate financial reach. The Congress helped solve the dilemma in July, though, when it approved legislation authorizing all telegraph companies to place lines on the federal public domain and on military and post roads, as well as giving the companies the right to take necessary "stone, timber, and other materials for its posts, piers, stations, and other needful uses" and to preempt unoccupied public domain

26. Ibid., pt. 3, 2146, 2195, 2201, 2215-17, 2232, 2340, 2355, 2371, 2380, 2385, 2414; *U. S. Statutes at Large,* vol. 14, 44.
27. Reid, *Telegraph in America,* 435-36.
28. Clarke, *Voices Across the Sea,* 92; "Memorial of the International Ocean Telegraph Company," Sen. Misc. Doc. 161, 41st Cong., 2d sess., 2.

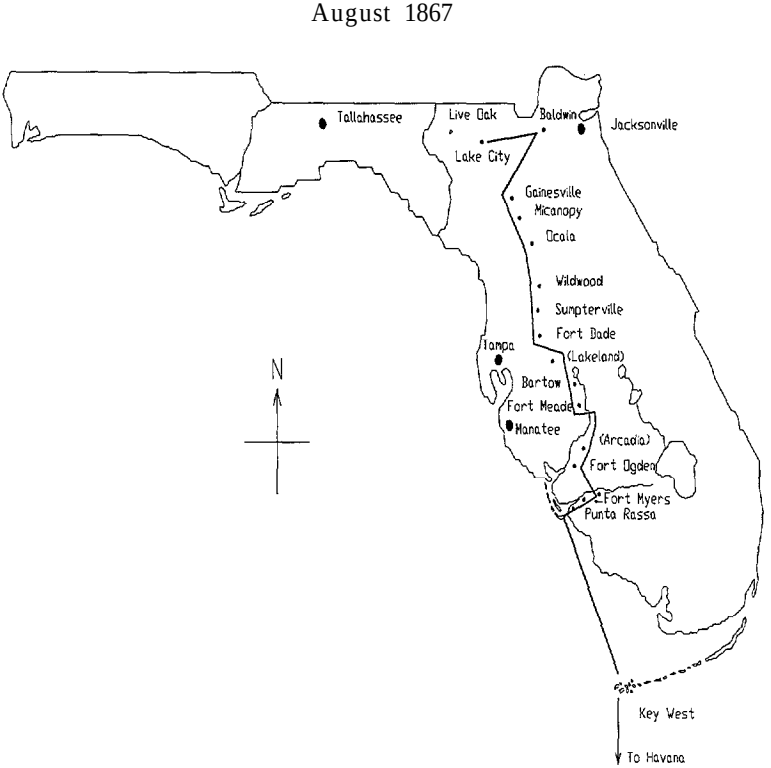
lands for its stations.[29] On August 30, the trustees of Florida's Internal Improvement Fund acted along the same lines by granting the request of IOTC agent Archibald H. Cole for permission "to construct and maintain their Telegraphic Lines over the Internal Improvement and Swamp Lands of Florida without charge during the existence of said Company."[30]

The problems of concessions, rights-of-way, raw materials, and finances finally out of the way, Baldy Smith was able to take the first steps toward actual construction of the IOTC line during the fall of 1866. He employed as his superintendent W. H. Heiss, formerly of the American Telegraph Company and a man described as having "considerable experience in that business."[31] To assist Heiss, Smith employed W. W. Sadler, also formerly associated with the American Telegraph Company, and to supervise construction of the submarine cable in England he named W. E. Everett, an engineer who had invented the "paying out" apparatus used in attempts to lay the Atlantic cable and who, until the commencement of his IOTC employment on January 1, 1867, was manager of the Novelty Iron Works of New York City.[32]

By mid-October 1866, Superintendent Heiss was prepared to depart for Florida to survey the proposed route. Heiss, along with A. H. Cole, was to head the team responsible for locating a land route, while civil engineer J. C. Bailey would explore the keys for a route to Key West.[33] The Heiss party was at Savannah by October 24 and in St. Augustine six days later.[34]

The geography and topography of Florida, particularly that of south Florida, was a matter of great uncertainty in 1866. No railroad or telegraph line ran south of Cedar Key, and as late as 1881, the greater part of the southern peninsula still could be referred to as "a vast unsettled wilderness, save here and

29. *U. S. Statutes at Large,* vol. 14, 221-22.
30. *Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund of the State of Florida,* vol. 1, 285.
31. Reid, *Telegraph in America,* 437; *St. Augustine Examiner,* April 20, 1867.
32. *St. Augustine Examiner,* March 23, 1867.
33. Smith to John Gray Foster, October 19, 1866, record group 393, pt. 1, Department and District of Florida, 1865-69, Letters Received, National Archives, Washington, DC; Harry Gardner Cutler, *History of Florida,* 3 *vols.* (Chicago, 1923), I, 60.
34. Savannah *Daily News and Herald,* October 24, 1866; *St. Augustine Examiner,* November 3, 1866.



International Ocean Telegraph Company Approximate Route, August 1867. *Illustration: Gregory F. Martin.*

there at intervals of from one to ten miles apart, squatters (mostly) on the public lands of the State, engaged in farming and stock raising."[35] The few settlers along the frontier of the southern peninsula, clustered for the most part along the Peace and Manatee rivers, lived an isolated existence where any reasonable access to markets or communications was next to an impossibility. A Fort Meade man in 1877 attempted to explain

35. John F. Bartholf and Francis C. M. Boggess, *South Florida: The Italy of America* (Jacksonville, 1881), 5.

the situation. "Shut out, or rather shut in from the ordinary scenes of busy life, we here hump and heave, curse and swear, and encounter more ills and inconveniences than are incidental to human life ordinarily. In this discouraging situation the overplus of produce made in this prolific year is such in many cases as 'the cow will not eat,' and is left to lie and rot by the tons, and return to its mother earth on the very spot that gave it life."[36]

The uncertainties of south Florida's geography and topography, coupled with the difficulties of travel and sparcity of population, appear to have combined to mislead Superintendent Heiss into believing that his land line most properly should run down Florida's east coast and then along the line of the keys. When in Savannah he had assured city officials that the line would run through their town, and it is likely he did the same at St. Augustine as the city council granted the IOTC permission "to pass their lines through this city, and has also furnished them with rooms for the necessary offices."[37]

Acting upon his "east coast" ideas, Heiss and his party departed from St. Augustine sometime around November 7, apparently on horseback, and proceeded along the Atlantic coast "for the Southern extremity of the Peninsula."[38] By December 12, the party had arrived at Jupiter Inlet, and Heiss reported "the entire route [has been] found practicable for the erection of Telegraphic poles." Heiss also mentioned that "prepartations were in progress to go from Jupiter Inlet to Spider Key & thence to Key West, a distance not exceeding one hundred miles."[39]

By the time later that month that the expedition reached the small settlement at Biscayne Bay, Heiss must already have begun to have doubts about an east coast route for the telegraph. A lengthy report by a member of the party sent to a Savannah newspaper from Biscayne Bay fails to mention the telegraph line at all, although the writer waxed eloquently over the future prospects of the area. "There is no portion of the State," he wrote, "which seems to offer a more inviting prospect to the emigrant than the country South of Jupiter's Inlet and in the

36. Tampa *Sunland Tribune,* September 1, 1877.
37. Savannah *Daily News and Herald,* October 24, 1866; *St. Augustine Examiner,* November 3, 1866.
38. *St. Augustine Examiner,* November 3, 1866.
39. Ibid., December 29, 1866.

neighborhood of Biscayne Bay, especially when we take into consideration its adaptibility to the growth of tropical fruits and its climate, which is not surpassed for its healthfulness by any portion of the American continent."[40]

Following his departure from Biscayne Bay, Heiss spent most of the next several months attempting to rectify his initial mistake concerning the line's route by surveying southwest Florida for an appropriate point for the beginning of a submarine cable to Key West and for a land line to that point. By March 11, 1867, he had returned to Savannah where he announced "that he has selected the point from which the cable is to leave the shore of Florida in a northerly [sic] direction, and that he has located the line through the State."[41] Five days later the Gainesville *New Era* disclosed, "[T]he superintendent has recommended that the cable be laid from a point known at Punta Rosa [Rassa], the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River, at the Southern extremity of Charlotte's Harbor on the Gulf Coast."[42]

What followed in the next two months was amazing and stands as a tribute to the administrative, organizational, and managerial skills of Baldy Smith and W. H. Heiss. For, in but one month and three days after Heiss arrived at Savannah from Florida, crews working under his supervision had commenced construction of the IOTC line at Gainesville.[43] In order to permit that event to occur, seventy-five crewmen and ten teams, together with their supplies, had been assembled in New York and transported to Florida, and 400 coils of copper wire measuring in the aggregate 350 miles in length had been ordered and also shipped to the state.[44] Concurrently, W. E. Everett was in England supervising the work of the India Rubber, Gutta Percha and Telegraph Works Company of London in the construction of approximately 250 miles of submarine cable.[45]

40. Ibid., January 26, 1867.
41. Savannah *Daily News and Herald,* March 12, 1867.
42. Gainesville *New Era,* March 16, 1867.
43. Savannah *Daily Republican,* June 12, 1867.
44. Ibid.; *St. Augustine Examiner,* April 20, 1867.
45. The *New York Times* described the submarine cable as follows: "The cable is composed of seven wires, covered with three coats of Indian-rubber, which are again covered with hemp, the whole thing being coated with galvanized iron wire coated with zinc. The shore end of the cable is two inches in thickness, weighing at the rate of two tons per mile, laid to a

Given the time and place, it was a mammoth undertaking on such short notice.[46]

Anchoring his line, Heiss established a headquarters at Gainesville where he immediately opened a telegraph office manned by one Wesley VanKirk.[47] From that point, Heiss supervised three sets of work crews. The main crew was sent to pursue "a Southern course, on the main public road, via Micanopy, Ocala and other towns." The remaining two crews were set to work along the right-of-way of the Florida Railroad, one erecting poles and stringing wire toward Cedar Key, while the second was racing toward Baldwin.[48] Upon its arrival at Baldwin, the latter crew redirected its efforts to the west and Lake City along the right-of-way of the Florida, Atlantic and Gulf Central Railroad.[49]

One of the men who led work crews on the southern route was a Newark, New Jersey, man by the name of George Renton Shultz. Forty years after the event, Shultz remembered leading his "gang" of "huskies" into the "almost unknown wilds" of peninsular Florida. According to Shultz, the men "traversed

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depth of 150 fathoms; connected with this piece which is one and a half miles long, is a medium sized cable an inch and two lines thickness, fourteen miles in length, weighing one and three-quarter of a ton per mile, and sunk to a depth of 200 fathoms. The same proportions are observed on both ends of the cable, the center cable being thinner, having a diameter of ten lines, weighing one and a quarter tons per mile, and submerged to a depth of 400 fathoms. The communication from Key West to Punta Rosa [Rassa], through the Florida Bay, is by another cable 133 miles long, nine lines in thickness, weighing three-quarters of a ton per mile. The entire submerged length of cable is 191 miles." *New York Times,* August 12, 1867; *St. Augustine Examiner,* March 23, 1867.

46. During this period of time, the IOTC reached an agreement with Western Union by which the two companies' lines would meet at Lake City, and the IOTC signals would be carried on to the north on Western Union lines via Live Oak, Florida, and Lawton and Savannah, Georgia. Construction of the Western Union link was coincident with that of the IOTC line and ran for the most part along the right-of-way of the Atlantic and Gulf Railroad. Gainesville *New Era,* April 20, 1867; Savannah *Daily News and Herald,* May 3, 1867.

47. It appears likely that the IOTC Gainesville office was located in the commercial house of George Savage and Edward Haile, located on the east side of the town square. Gainesville *New Era,* June 22, 1867; Charles H. Hildreth, "A History of Gainesville, Florida" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1954), 86.

48. Gainesville *New Era,* April 20, 1867; Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet,* 121.

49. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet,* 121.

sawgrass glades, hammock land, pine barrens and cypress swamps, rafting, wading waist deep and cutting a swath through over 250 miles of almost unexplored country when alligators and rattlesnakes or moccasins menaced almost every step."[50]

The memory of George Shultz may have exaggerated somewhat the dangers and travails of the work of the IOTC crews, but not by much. Most of south Florida was rugged and wild, and the crews were working at a fast pace. Before work gangs reached Ocala from Gainesville, for instance, other crews had been leapfrogged ahead and had begun constructing the line further south.[51] The cable was in operation at Ocala by May 13 but, by that time, work already was proceeding 100 miles or more to the south.[52]

From Ocala the line descended the peninsula on a route approximated by modern U.S. Highway 301. Near present-day Dade City (then Fort Dade) the wires veered to the southeast into Polk County where they skirted the site of today's Lakeland and pointed toward Bartow. From that point, the line paralleled Peace River to the west as far as Fort Meade where it turned sharply to the east, crossing Peace River at the Fort Meade bridge. Once across that stream, the wires again turned to the south and passed through or near the Popash, Joshua Creek, and Fort Ogden settlements. At Fort Ogden, the line turned away from Peace River south to a point on the Caloosahatchee River some ten or twelve miles above the remains of the Seminole and Civil War post at Fort Myers.[53] It then ran down the Caloosahatchee on its southern side through Fort Myers to the abandoned military buildings and pier at Punta Rassa.[54] The

50. *Fort Myers Press,* March 25, 1909.
51. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian,* May 7, 1867.
52. Telegraphic contact between Ocala and Gainesville was opened May 13, 1867, by the exchange of cables between Ocala's mayor, S. M. G. Gary, and Gainesville's mayor-elect, S. Spencer. The Ocala IOTC office was located in rooms "furnished by the citizens." *St. Augustine Examiner,* June 1, 1867; Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian,* May 7, 1867.
53. Not more than four, and possibly only two, families lived at the site of Fort Myers when the IOTC line was erected. Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Fort Myers: The History of the Land of the Caloosahatchee and Southwest Florida* (Fort Myers Beach, 1982), 86-88.
54. "Wire Road" in "History of the Old King's Road" (WPA Federal Writers Project, typescript), P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville; Bartow *Informant,* May 7, 1884; [Florida] *Real Estate Journal's Map of South Florida* (Arcadia, ca. 1885; reprinted by Tom Gaskins Cypress Knee Museum, Palm Dale, FL, 1971).

entire Gainesville to Punta Rassa line extended some 275 miles and was completed on May 29, 1867, taking start to finish only thirty-eight and one-half working days for its construction.[55]

With the land line completed, Heiss immediately made his way to Savannah to make arrangements for the return of fifty of his crewmen to the north and, no doubt, to find out what had happened to his submarine cable.[56] The IOTC's contract with the India Rubber, Gutta Percha and Telegraph Works Company had called for delivery of the cable in May, as well as for installation of the cable by the English firm and the guarantee of its successful operation for fifteen days.[57] Yet when Heiss and his crews arrived at Punta Rassa, no cable ship was in evidence, nor, presumably, was there any word of the cable's whereabouts. Still, Heiss was optimistic, and at Savannah on June 12 he confidently predicted, "the cable will be brought to Key West between the 25th inst., and the first of next July."[58]

For two weeks Heiss awaited the arrival of his submarine cable, and when word finally came it was not what he wanted to hear. To the good, the cable's manufacture had been completed, and it had been shipped from England. On the bad side, it would take the better part of a month for the cable to arrive. Perhaps alleviating somewhat his frustrations over the cable's tardiness, Heiss also learned that the United States steamer *Thomas Corwin* had completed a new series of soundings on his proposed submarine route "and found everything favorable."[59]

During June and early July, Heiss busied himself with arrangements for opening "test offices" and maintenance stations along the route of his land line.[60] The maintenance stations were established at intervals of approximately thirty miles along the line and were staffed by company employees equipped with company horses.[61] All supplies for the maintenance stations and

55. Savannah *Daily Republican*, June 12, 1867.
56. Ibid.
57. *St. Augustine Examiner*, March 23, 1867; Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, July 2, 1867.
58. Savannah *Daily Republican*, June 12, 1867.
59. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, July 2, 1867.
60. Ibid., June 18, 1867.
61. When a break or other problem occurred on a line, two "trouble shooters," one each from the nearest maintenance stations, were responsible for locating and alleviating the problem. A former IOTC lineman described the process as follows: "If he [the lineman] had covered his half of the distance

test offices, or so the company later would claim, were "purchased at the North" and transported to Florida at the IOTC's expense.[62] At Punta Rassa, Heiss installed George Shultz as his operator and station manager. Shultz opened the telegraph office in one corner of "a yellow pine barrack" built on fourteen-foot pilings and fixed up for himself a bedroom in another corner of the former army facility.[63] At Bartow, enterprising townsmen attempted to go the company one better and arranged for the speedy horseback transmission of commercial and other news to Tampa, some forty miles away. The project was short-lived, however, and not until 1878 did Tampa secure a telegraphic connection with the outside world.[64]

After his long, hot summertime wait, the patience of Superintendent Heiss finally was rewarded on July 26, 1867, when the 1,200-ton schooner-rigged screw steamer *Narva* made her appearance off Havana, the IOTC submarine cable in her holds. On hand to greet the ship was Baldy Smith, other IOTC officials, and the inspector of Cuban telegraphs, one Señor Arantave. Due to an outbreak of "a great deal of sickness" on the island, Smith met the *Narva* outside Havana's harbor, and the steamer immediately departed for Key West.[65]

[between stations] and found no trouble, then he turned around and went back home. Sometimes a man might only go a mile or two and fix the line while the man from the next station could be compelled to go the entire distance out and back from his post." "Wire Road" in "History of Old King's Road."

62. "Memorial of the International Ocean Telegraph Company," 5.

63. Over the years, friends of Shultz from the North began to visit him at Punta Rassa in the wintertime. Most were put up in one of the eleven rooms on the second floor of the barracks– an area that came to be known as "murderers' row"– and, as word of the accommodations spread, Shultz found himself the keeper of a hotel. The telegraph operator's "Tarpon House" became famous, after a fashion, when it began catering to wealthy sports fishermen in the 1880s. The hotel burned to the ground December 20, 1906. *Fort Myers Press,* March 25, 1909; Grismer, *Story of Fort Myers,* 171.

64. Tampa's telegraphic connection with the outside world was opened May 15, 1878, courtesy of the Tampa and Fort Meade Telegraph Company. The company was formed by an association of Tampa and Polk County investors and, as the name suggests, linked Tampa to the IOTC cable at Fort Meade. The line was built under the superintendence of Fort Meade cattleman and merchant Sherod E. Roberts. Tampa *Florida Peninsular,* June 8, 1867; Tampa *Sunland Tribune,* December 22, 1877, May 25, September 1, and October 19, 1878.

65. *New York Times,* August 17, 1867; Reid, *Telegraph in America,* 438.

Upon the *Narva*'s arrival at Key West, a week-long series of preparations were begun under the supervision of F. C. Webb, the contracting engineer employed for the purpose by the India Rubber, Gutta Percha and Telegraph Works Company. Assisting in those efforts were the United States steamer *Tahoma,* the lighthouse steamer *Fountain,* and the Spanish war steamer *Francisco de Asis.* [66]

Preparations complete, on the afternoon of Saturday, August 3, the end of a heavy shore-end cable was loaded onto a scow from the *Narva,* hauled the three-quarters of a mile to shore, and spliced into the Key West telegraph office cable. The following morning the *Narva* steamed some thirteen miles to the south of Sand Key, paying out cable as she went, and then cut and buoyed the shore cable at that point. Through the night she steamed on to Cuba, arriving off that island's coast about 8 o'clock on the morning of August 5.[67]

The harbor of Chorera, located about four miles to the west of Havana and the site of "an ancient Spanish fortress or tower," had been selected as the Cuban landing for the IOTC cable. As "many steamers and sailboats gaily decorated and filled with passengers" watched, the Cuban shore cable was brought to that point on the afternoon of August 5 and successfully spliced. A correspondent of the *New York Times* related to that newspaper's readers what then ensued. "Owing partly to the fatigue of the working parties, and partly to some of the implements being out of order, no attempt was made to leave the coast that night, nor until 5 P.M. of the 6th, which is to be regretted, as the weather was most suitable– clear and a smooth sea. At that time the *Narva* commenced paying out, steering well to the north at the rate of about 3 1/2 miles per hour, the Spanish frigate being distant about one mile on the port-bow, and the *Tahoma* the same distance to starboard. The latter during the night made her way across at full speed, purposely to find the buoy placed over the end of the cable on the 4th inst. and to remain near it as a beacon, should the others be swept by the current out of their course. At daylight on the 7th in the midst of heavy rains and tempestuous looking weather, the buoy was found, and the *Tahoma* lay by it with a large flag at her masthead, that could be

66. Ibid.
67. *New York Times,* August 17, 1867.

seen at a distance of twelve or fifteen miles. Fortunately this was so, as the *Narva* had steered so much to the eastward, and progressed so slowly, that only at 3 P.M., when heading for the reef– over twelve miles eastward– the *Tahoma's* flag was seen, and she bore up to the westward, reaching the buoy at 5 P.M. or a few minutes after, they having been over twenty-four hours coming a distance of seventy-four miles; but their wrong steering, or the bad management of those in charge of the cable, had made the route so circuitous that no less than 106 miles had been expended, consuming all the reserve (thirteen miles) which the contractors had of their own, and obliging them to make use of nineteen miles of the cable intended to be laid between Key West and Point Ross, (the terminus on the mainland of Florida.) Had this not have been on board the *Narva*, they would doubtless have been obliged to under-run and lift one end or the other of the cable, and run it out again in order to form the connection. At 7 P.M., when the buoy of the Florida end had been reached, the cable broke, and the weather looking badly at the time, the place was marked, the Spanish frigate left for Cuba, and the *Narva* and *Tahoma* for Key West, arriving at the latter place about midnight of the 7th."[68]

For seven days and nights after the heavy weather lifted, the crew of the *Narva* struggled to grapple the broken cable, a feat finally accomplished on August 18. The two ends quickly were spliced, and service between Key West and Havana became a reality. To mark that event on August 21, the mayor of Key West and the captain-general of Cuba exchanged telegrams. The first, from Key West's E. O. Gwynn, hopefully stated, "As our facilities of intercourse improve so may our mutual interests and prosperity increase." Captain-General Joaquin del Manzano's reply optimistically declared, "I celebrate this happy event, which, giving us more rapid communication, will powerfully contribute toward the development of our mutual interests and prosperity."[69]

Though by August 21, 1867, the IOTC had established telegraphic communication between Key West and Havana, it still had not connected Key West with the mainland of Florida. Such

68. Ibid.
69. Ibid., August 25, 1867.

a connection should have been accomplished easily and quickly, but, once again, events occurred which brought the work to a temporary halt. Yellow fever broke out in Key West, and the disease quickly spread to the *Narva.* Details are slight, but it appears that at least three members of the crew died and an unknown number suffered from milder cases.[70] It was not until September 10 that the cable was laid, spliced, and in working order.[71]

The United States to Cuba telegraph line was opened to the use of the public on September 11, 1867, just over two years after James Scrymser and Alfred Pell took their walk along the Harlem River in New York City. The previous day, however, official greetings were exchanged between Secretary of State William H. Seward and Captain-General Joaquin del Manzano. As befitted the future of the cable, both men stressed the importance of the link, in Manzano's words, "[to] the development of commercial interests and friendship between this country and the United States."[72]

From the beginning of service between Florida and Cuba, the IOTC was a business success. In its first year of operations the company netted just under 10 percent on its revenues, a figure which increased the following year to just over 12 percent.[73] In December 1868, a second cable was laid over the same route, and in May of 1871, W. H. Heiss added yet another between Key West and Punta Rassa. In a cable to New York, Heiss was pleased about the accomplishment. "I have just laid a heavy cable between Punta Rassa and Key West . . . by American talent exclusively, both electrical and mechanical. This is the

70. The yellow fever spread from Key West to Tampa and Manatee (Bradenton) perhaps by way of James McKay's steamer, *Southern Star,* commanded by Captain Archibald McNeill. At least three persons died at Manatee. Out of a reported sixty-five cases at Tampa, fifteen individuals succumbed. *St. Augustine Examiner,* September 21, 1867; Robert E. King, *A History of the Practice of Medicine in Manaee County, Florida* (Bradenton, 1985), 51-53; Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg, 1950), 152-53.
71. The cable did not come directly ashore at Punta Rassa. Rather, it crossed the lower tip of Sanibel Island and then passed under Carlos Bay to the mainland. *New York Times,* September 12, 1867; *Fort Myers Press,* March 25, 1909.
72. *New York Times,* September 12, 1867.
73. "Memorial of the International Ocean Telegraph Company," 5.

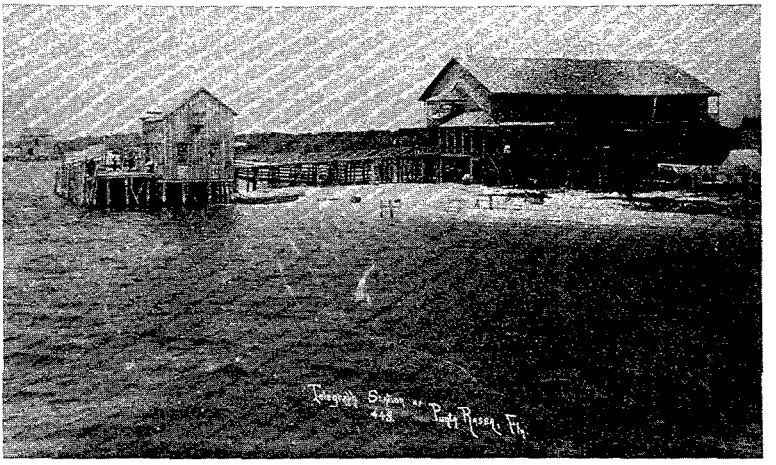
first long cable ever laid without foreign assistance, and notwithstanding bad weather. This cable was laid by a tow from the ship in which it had been coiled to be landed, a circumstance which makes the success of the work unprecedented."[74]

In 1870, the IOTC expanded its telegraphic network by connecting Cuba with Jamaica and Panama, later adding lines to Puerto Rico and Trinidad.[75] For that purpose, the company organized the "West India and Panama Cable Company" and, later, the "Cuban Submarine Telegraph Company." By the close of the decade of the 1870s the IOTC controlled a network extending from Cuba of more than 2,500 miles of wire and cable.[76]

The IOTC's prosperity and expansive tendencies were not overlooked by the giant of American telegraphy, Western Union. "[W]ith a jealous eye on the rapid growth of this prosperous concern," Western Union, in the spring of 1873, purchased a controlling interest in the IOTC. In the reorganization which followed, Baldy Smith was ousted as president and was replaced by Western Union's William Orton.[77] At the same time, N. de Bree was named superintendent following Heiss's removal. The new management then directed the laying of an additional Punta Rassa-Havana cable, authorized the construction or reconstruction of side lines to Jacksonville and St. Augustine, and "thoroughly overhauled" the company's other properties. In that year, the Punta Rassa-Havana line handled 51,899 messages, a figure which by 1876 had increased to 81,688.[78]

The Florida-Cuba line from Punta Rassa continued in service through the nineteenth century and into the first four decades of the twentieth. The installation in 1899 of a Miami Beach-Key West cable cut into its business, however, and in 1942, the Punta Rassa lines ceased being used. Fifteen years later, in 1957, the International Ocean Telegraph Company itself passed from existence, having been absorbed by Western Union.[79]

74. *New York Times,* May 19, 187 1.
75. Harlow, *Old Wires and New Waves,* 300.
76. Reid, *Telegraph in America,* 439.
77. Harlow, *Old Wires and New Waves,* 300.
78. Reid, *Telegraph in America,* 439, 441.
79. Kenneth R. Haigh, *Cableships and Submarine Cables* (Washington, DC, 1968), 258-59.



The "Tarpon House," site of Punta Rassa's telegraph station, ca. 1890. *Photograph courtesy of the Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives.*

The construction and maintenance of the International Ocean Telegraph Company lines to Punta Rassa, and from thence to Key West and Havana, had an impact on Florida, and particularly south Florida, although not necessarily or always in the manner one might expect. The funds spent on construction of the line brought some capital to the state, although most appears to have gone to northern or English manufacturers and suppliers and to workmen imported by the company from the North.

Some Floridians were employed by the IOTC as telegraph operators and trouble-shooters, and the employment and salaries those jobs provided were much coveted. During certain times the desire for the jobs was so intense that it led to violence. A case in point is that of Goodman Bond who, in the spring of 1877, was serving as a "patrolman" or trouble-shooter on the line in present-day Hardee County. Court records and contemporary accounts reveal that one of Bond's predecessors in office was William Dyess, Sr., who had been discharged several years previously. Dyess's son, William, Jr., seems to have wanted the job himself, and to force Bond's departure, he and a friend, Joseph Stephens, threatened Bond and may have attempted to burn down his house. Charges were brought in the local justice court but were dismissed from lack of evidence, whereupon

Bond took up a shotgun and dispensed his own brand of justice, an act which resulted in the death of Stephens and near misses in the direction of the elder and younger Dyesses. Sensing his predicament, Bond took "a trail in the woods and disappeared," thus creating the vacancy Dyess had sought in the first place.[80]

Resentments over desirable jobs may have tainted somewhat the IOTC's reputation among its Florida neighbors, but the company's own actions also created problems. For one thing, use of the line was expensive. Congress in 1866 had limited to $3.50 for each ten words the cost of a telegram on the line, but the company interpreted that limitation to apply only to sending messages on the submarine portion of its cables.[81] By 1870 the charge was $4.00 in gold for transmission of a ten-word message from Lake City to Cuba.[82] At the end of the decade, a New York to Havana cable of the same length ran $5.00, and addresses, salutations, closing, and signatures were included.[83] These were prices the average Floridian could scarcely afford.

The costs of cables might not have been so bad if the company had been willing to carry news on the wires as a public service. In 1868 arrangements were made by citizens of Key West to receive daily news, but the IOTC charged $25.00 per month for the same information to be sent from Bartow to Tampa.[84] Cattleman Francis A. Hendry was reflecting the sentiments of many when he wrote in 1877, "For several years the I.O.T.Co. line has been established, passing by our doors, without even dropping a word of news from the outside world."[85]

Hendry and his associates had another bone to pick with the IOTC. For several years after the opening of the company's

80. Goodman Bond eventually was caught and in 1885 was tried in Manatee County circuit court for the murder of Joseph Stephens. He was convicted of murder in the first degree with a recommendation for clemency and sentenced to life imprisonment. On April 19, 1886, he was pardoned. *Savannah Morning News,* July 18, 1877; Manatee County, Circuit Court Records, *State of Florida v. Goodman Bond,* Manatee County Historical Records Library; *Ocala Banner,* March 28, 1885; Florida *House Journal* (1887), 34, 37.

81. "Memorial of the International Ocean Telegraph Company," 4-5.

82. "Memorial of the Florida Telegraph Company," House Misc. Doc. 149, 41st Cong., 2d sess., 2.

83. Reid, *Telegraph In America,* 441.

84. Tampa *Florida Peninsular,* February 29, 1868.

85. Tampa *Sunland Tribune,* July 21, 1877.

facilities at Punta Rassa, the IOTC controlled the shipping pier there and charged cattlemen fifteen cents a head for the privilege of loading their Cuba-bound beeves. When Hendry later built a competing facility, he charged only ten cents a head, an action which drove the telegraph company out of the cattle-loading business.[86] On the same subject, Hendry, a former Confederate officer, and some of his associates may have taken umbrage at the insistence of Punta Rassa's station manager, George Shultz, in defiantly flying the Stars and Stripes above his barracks headquarters.[87] The Confederate cattlemen could hardly have missed the point.

Despite its public relations problems, the IOTC did offer jobs, and it did offer a method, however expensive, by which otherwise isolated frontier areas could communicate with the outside world. The publicity involved in the construction of the line and the prominence of the Punta Rassa facility also served to bring peninsular Florida to the attention of the rest of the nation. It was in a different manner, though, that the company may have had its greatest impact on Florida, and that stemmed from the fact that the company had to build a road.

It already has been seen that for the first 100 miles or so of its length south of Gainesville, the IOTC line followed the "main public road." Thereafter, the line entered what George Shultz referred to as "almost unknown wilds." While it is true that the area was unknown to Shultz, it also is true that there were settlers and roads, some of which were expertly engineered military routes remaining as legacies of the Seminole wars. The problem was that most of the roads twisted and turned around swamps, sandy places, and what have you, whereas the telegraph needed to run on a more or less straight line. Of course the telegraph could cut across country, but its maintenance required easy access that only a road could afford.

Faced with this dilemma, Heiss decided to string his line just where he wanted it to go and to build his own road to run along side of it. That road came to be known as "the Wire Road" and, later, "the Old Wire Road."[88] Maintained at least in part by the IOTC, the road became the main north-south route of access

86. Ibid., September 29, 1877.
87. Florence Fritz, *Unknown Florida* (Coral Gables, 1963), 75.
88. "Wire Road" in "History of Old King's Road."

into frontier south Florida, and on it in the late 1860s, 1870s and early 1880s came many of the settlers who pioneered southwest Florida, and the thousands of cattle destined for the loading docks at Punta Rassa.[89]

The International Ocean Telegraph Company was born in an era when the air was electric with excitement over the possibilities of submarine communications. Its backers, administrators, and engineers conceived and executed the idea of a United States to Cuba telegraph line despite innumerable legal, financial, engineering, logistical, and natural problems and did so within the space of only a little more than two years. It was a remarkable achievement, and its continued profitable operation for almost eighty years proved the genius and inspiration of the men who had created it.

89. Bartow *Informant,* May 17, 1884; Kissimmee *Osceola Sun,* September 25, 1975.