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SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF
MR. HENTY B. PLANT
OF BRANFORD, CONN.

By J. E. INGRAHAM
Formerly President South Florida Railroad

(Editor’s Note: A business associate who was intimately acquainted with Henry Bradley Plant tells us a lot about him in this biographical sketch published in 1923 by State Commissioner of Agriculture W. A. McRae.)

Mr. Plant before the Civil War was one of the organizers, I have been told, of the Adams Express Company. During the war all relations with the Southern States ceased, and the railway service in the South was disorganized. One of General Lee’s transportation men was Col. Henry S. Haines, of Savannah. Mr. Plant and Colonel Haines were allied in the rehabilitation of southern railroads. Mr. Plant acquired controlling interests in the Charleston & Savannah; Savannah, Florida & Western, which at that time reached Jacksonville by way of Live Oak; the Florida Central and Peninsula; and two other lines reaching into Georgia and Alabama. These lines were rehabilitated and proved of enormous help in the recuperation of the South.

Mr. Plant at an early day gave his attention to the organization of the Southern Express Co., of which he was President and a large stockholder.

Early in 1882 Mr. Plant and his associates, some of the most important business men of the United States, namely: Mr. Henry Walters, Mr. B. F. Newcomer, of Baltimore; Mr. Jenkins, of Wilmington; Judge Chisholm, of Savannah; Mr. Jorris K. Jessop, of New York; Mr. Henry Sanford, President of the Adams Express Co., of New York, all interested in his enterprises, built the Waycross Short Line from Waycross, Ga., to Jacksonville, Fla., shortening the time from New York to Jacksonville very materially.

BROADCLOTH COAT, SILK HAT

At this time the writer was President of the South Florida Railroad, a "newspaper railroad," belonging to R. M. Pulsifer & Co.,
editors and owners of the Boston Herald, and extending from Sanford via Winter Park, to Orlando—under construction and nearly completed to Kissimmee—and projected to Tampa.

About this time, I was walking down Bay Street in Jacksonville with General Sanford, when he remarked to me, "You see that elderly gentleman on the other side of the street, the one wearing the long black broadcloth coat and silk hat—that is a man I think you ought to know—Mr. Henry B. Plant, President of the Savannah, Florida, and Western Railway Company, with whom I traveled on my last trip down from New York." After saying I should like to meet him, I was introduced to Mr. Plant, who greeted me with "So you are the young man who is building a railroad from Sanford to somewhere in the south of Florida."

"Yes, Mr. Plant, we have a little, narrow-gauge railroad there and we feel quite proud of it," was my reply. "We expect to open that railroad to Kissimmee shortly—sometime early next week—and I should be more than glad to have you and your friends come down and be our guests at the opening."

Mr. Plant told of buying a steamer The Henry B. Plant, and with Captain Jim Fitzgerald thought of running to Sanford. Immediately I asked for a connection for our road, as we had such with the DeBary Line three days in the week and wished Mr. Plant's boat connection for alternate days. Agreeing to this request, he said he would join our party on the proposed initial trip.

Inquiring how many we could take care of, I told him to bring as many as he wished, and that there would be a special train to meet him on Tuesday morning, when the Henry B. Plant reached Sanford.

Early on that day my associates and I, with our wives, met Mr. Plant's party at the wharf, where we boarded a brand new train, consisting of a parlor car, coach, and baggage car—the train crew having on blue uniforms and white gloves. In Mr. Plant's party were Mr. and Mrs. Plant, Col. and Mrs. Haines, and some half dozen business associates.

"WHAT CAN I DO?"

Mr. Plant was visibly impressed with the outlying country, and after returning from Belleair called a conference, at which he asked, "What can I do for you, Mr. Ingraham, on this railroad project?"

"If you will give us connection with your river steamer, and secure for us through representation as to tickets and rates, I should be greatly obliged," I replied. Continuing, I said that it was my ambition to extend the railroad to Tampa, and put on a line of steamers to Key West and Havana.

"Do you think that your stockholders would sell an interest in this property?" to which I replied, "If you can see your way to purchasing, say, a three-fifths interest in this property, extending it to Tampa, eventually putting on such a line of steamers, I am satisfied they would."

TAMPA GETS RAILROAD

As a result of this meeting, and the subsequent one in Boston, The Plant Investment Company became owner of a three-fifths interest in the stock of the South Florida Railway, under contract to build the road from Kissimmee to Tampa. The work was pushed to completion very rapidly and on the 4th of January, 1884, the South Florida Railroad was opened to Tampa, Governor Bloxham and his entire cabinet and their families being the guests of the
Railway Company and present at the driving of the last spike.

The policy pursued by the South Florida Railway Co., under Mr. Plant’s approval, enabled us to put 45,000 people into that territory the first eighteen months after the opening of the road. Mr. Plant afterwards established a line called the Plant Line, from Tampa to Key West and Havana, later extending the Railway Company from Tampa to Port Tampa, a deepwater port on old Tampa Bay.

In August, 1886, the lines all over the Southern territory, or the territory lying south of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi were changed from the old 5 feet 2 inches standard gauge of the South to the 4 feet 81/2 inches gauge. The South Florida Railway changed at this time from 3 feet to the standard gauge, and through Pullman cars were then run from New York to Tampa and Port Tampa. This was the first railway through service in the State.

PLANT AT PARIS EXPOSITION

Mr. Plant afterward built the Tampa Bay Hotel, in the midst of beautiful gardens on the west side of the Hillsborough River, furnished it very magnificently, and ran it as a strictly first-class tourist hotel.

Mr. Plant personally represented the South Florida Railroad, and exhibited Florida products at the Paris Exposition.

During the interval the Jacksonville, Tampa and Key West Railroad had been extended gradually from Jacksonville to Palatka, and then to Sanford, entering into close connection with the South Florida Railroad. This railroad was afterwards bought by Mr. Plant, as well as the Florida Southern from Palatka to Brooksville, and later the Sanford & St. Petersburg, from Sanford via a northern route to St. Petersburg, Fla. Further, during 1884, Mr. Plant extended the South Florida Railroad from Bartow, Fla., to Pemberton Ferry, through Dade City and Lakeland, connecting with the Florida Southern at Pemberton Ferry, now called Trilby. In 1887 Mr. Plant extended his railroad to Port Tampa on the old Tampa Bay and there established great wharves, capable of berthing twenty-six steamers at the same time, providing ample track room and facilities for unloading phosphates from cars to ships, and Port Tampa became one of the greatest phosphate ports in the world. At the time of the Spanish-American War General Shafter’s division was encamped near Tampa and his troops and supplies of all kinds were loaded on transports at the Company’s wharf at Port Tampa, from which point General Shafter set sail on his campaign to Cuba.

FLAGLER JOINS PLANT

In 1886 Mr. Henry M. Flagler joined the directorate of the South Florida Railroad, becoming a large owner in the stock of the Plant Investment Company.

Mr. Plant lived to see his great enterprises meeting with success, which his foresight, energy and expenditure of capital justly warranted.

In 1887, during the period of yellow fever epidemic, shotgun quarantine prevailed all over the State, causing great demoralization. Mr. Plant, Mr. Haines and I, who had given a good deal of attention to this matter, proposed the organization of a State Board of Health, which would have charge of such affairs, and I was authorized by Mr. Plant to proceed to Tallahassee, interview the Governor, and make a proposition that if he would call a special session of the Legislature at once the South Florida
Railroad and the Plant Investment Co. would bear the expense of such a session, provided a health bill was not passed. The Governor declined this proposition, but a regular meeting of the Legislature held soon afterwards passed a bill organizing the State Board of Health, and Dr. J. Y. Porter, of Key West, was duly appointed State Health Officer. This appointment was most wise and timely and immediately all of the terrible shotgun quarantine ceased, protection to the health of the State was afforded, and since that time no serious epidemic of any kind has occurred in Florida.