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Pinellas Split 'Mother Hillsborough' After Long-Running Feud 70 Years Ago

Hampton Dunn
They razed the rickety old two-lane bottleneck Seminole Bridge in St. Petersburg back in 1965. It was replaced with a shiny new four-lane span designed to accommodate safely the heavy traffic on Alternate U.S. 19 between Tyrone Boulevard and Bay Pines.

And this $800,000 project had been given "top priority" and "rush-rush" treatment by a Tampa politician who represented the area on the old State Road Board at the time.

Therein lies a story of historical significance.

For it was the violent collapse of a jerry-built structure over the same spot in 1911 that cinched the division of Pinellas County from the apron strings of "Mother Hillsborough."

The main beef the west coast residents had had against their Tampa-dominated county government was the inattention and neglect in providing decent roads and bridges to
serve the near water-locked "Point of Pines" peninsula.

Through the years, dating as far back as 1886, there had been agitation to break away. But powerful political interests in Tampa held the upper hand and always were able to squelch any serious attempts to split the county.

But a skillful maneuver in the 1911 session of the Florida Legislature resulted in a law creating Pinellas County subject to a referendum set for Nov. 14 of the same year. A full blown controversy raged over secession and even within the territory that could become Pinellas County there was dissension over pulling out, and the election was in doubt.

That is until the Seminole Bridge broke down.

This truly was a sore spot. For many months, alas for years, the folks around St. Petersburg had lobbied their Hillsborough County commissioners to build them a span across the mouth of the elongated Lake Seminole. They even formed an Automobile Club and raised by popular subscription $2,600 cash toward the $10,000 cost of the bridge.

ALONG CAME A TEAM OF MULES

The contract was let on Feb. 2, 1910, and the long-awaited span was opened to traffic in August, 1911. Then, early on the morning of Sept. 12, 1911, a Negro driving a team of mules started across the Seminole Bridge.

Historian Karl Grismer related what happened:

"When the team was halfway across, the flimsy structure began swaying from side to side - and suddenly it collapsed. The Negro and the mules fell into the bayou . . . The bridge was a wreck and down in St. Petersburg, automobile club members cursed fluently and long . . . It was ruined beyond repair. Half of it had floated out into Boca Ciega Bay and the other half was lying crazily on its side. If the bridge had been constructed right, the motorists moaned, this never would have happened. Just another example of Hillsborough County inefficiency, they said . . ."

The Gulf Coast people said it rather loudly a few weeks later. The referendum vote was 1,379 "for" and 505 "against," which was 248 more than the necessary three-fifths vote required by the legislative bill in a severe test of the faith of the Pinellas residents in the strength of their cause.

The divorce decree became final on Jan. 1, 1912, when Pinellas County was carved from Hillsborough and became the state's 48th unit.

Seminole Bridge, incidentally, was not repaired until several years later. Then in 1921 a hurricane came and washed this span away.

A new bridge was erected in 1923. Although the creaky viaduct had all the earmarks of an antique, the Pinellas County Historical Commission met in 1965 and solemnly resolved that the narrow, dangerous Seminole Bridge "is one historical structure which we would like to be eliminated."

To do just that, Tampa attorney Vincent Nuccio, whose far-flung road district included Pinellas, stamped the "top priority" label on the job and even invoked "quick-taking" legal procedures to clear court hurdles in quickly obtaining necessary right-of-way.
And so a new chapter was written in the saga of the Seminole Bridge.

Back three score and ten years ago, the span had become a rallying point, a symbol of mistreatment when the isolated peninsula people got so dissatisfied with their Tampa cousins. When Tampa was the county seat for St. Petersburg residents it did create a real travel hardship for taxpayers with business at the courthouse.

**TRAVEL TO TAMPA LONG, TEDIOUS**

A trip by train was a long, tiresome, roundabout journey covering 160 miles and two changes, way up to Trilby, south to Lakeland and then west to Tampa. It took a full day of travel. And because of poor roads, a drive by automobile was next to impossible. The chief mode of travel was by boat, but due to schedules it was not always possible to make the round trip in one day.

Hillsborough County itself, the grand old county of Florida, was created as the result of dissension with its motherland. Once a part of Alachua County, with the county seat at Newnanville near Gainesville, Hillsborough was established in January, 1834, as its residents became miffed with the ruling Alachua clique. It was of mammoth size and from within its borders subsequently were carved not only Pinellas, but the counties of Manatee, Sarasota, DeSoto, Charlotte, Pasco, Polk, Highlands and Hardee.

The Pinellas secessionist fight was spawned in 1886 in a quiet little political deal, according to the late W. L. Straub, historian and newspaper publisher. His account said W. A. Belcher of Bayview agreed if elected state representative to pass through the house a county division bill and a certain Tampa politician, if elected to the senate, would pass it there. The would-be senator was then to move to the new county and the pair would run politics. Belcher was elected
but his conspirator was not. Nevertheless, Belcher passed the bill in the house in the 1887 session. It was promptly killed in the senate by Judge Joseph B. Wall of Tampa and that ended that.

The next time the gauntlet was flung down was on Feb. 23, 1907, when Straub published in his *St. Petersburg Times* a "Pinellas Declaration of Independence." He noted at the outset of his historic article that the question of why a division had never been made was answered simply with "Well, you know, Hillsborough is a big county, and Tampa is a big city and controls the county, and she would never let us go. Our state senator is always a Tampa man, and he would never permit a division bill to go through the state senate."

Straub reported the 1905 population of the (Pinellas) area was 7,371, making the proposed county larger than 15 other counties then in existence, and it had shown a growth rate of nearly 45 percent in the five years preceding.

**POKE TAKEN AT TAMPA CRIME RECORD**

In his "declaration," the editor took a poke at Tampa's crime record, commenting:

"The writer intends no criticism of Tampa and its people here. All good citizens of the West Coast are proud of Tampa as one of the South's greatest cities. But it is a simple fact that the big city of Tampa - as with all big cities - in many ways causes for the
county very heavy expenses - notably through the criminal records of a big city - nine murder cases at one court session, for instance - that such a community as ours of the West Coast has little or no part in, except to help pay the bills . . . "

So the issue was revived. In the 1907 session, Rep. W. W. K. Decker of Tarpon Springs passed the division bill in the house. It was speculated that, because of his Pinellas ties, Sen. James R. Crane, who had been the first mayor of Clearwater but was then living in Tampa, would allow the bill to pass the senate. But the senator hadn't reckoned with the heat that would be built up in Tampa to beat the idea. He finally yielded to the pressure and the bill never came from the senate committee.

Pinellas strategists by now realized they must have a senator sympathetic to their cause. Such a man they felt would be a prominent Tampa lawyer, Don C. McMullen, a native of the Pinellas side, and they talked him into running for the senate in 1908.

Hot as it was, the Pinellas division issue was overshadowed at the time by the prohibition question. McMullen was a leading "Dry" and he was opposed by Robert McNamee, another Tampa lawyer and formerly of St. Petersburg, who was a leading "wet." McMullen advised his Pinellas backers that the division issue must not be in- jected into the campaign of 1908 nor should any division bill be proposed for the 1909 session. McMullen won his race.
Meanwhile, the house member from Pinellas, John S. Taylor, announced he would not introduce a bill in 1909, either. There were shouts of "treason" among the ardent secessionists. They got a bill introduced, but not by the Hillsborough delegation. A legislator from the East Coast put it in. Taylor acquiesced and let it pass the house, but McMullen knocked it in the head when it came to the senate.

COACHMAN HEADS THIRD CAMPAIGN

The people were really steamed up by now. The third and final campaign to prune Pinellas from Hillsborough began with a mass rally at Clearwater in December, 1910. S. S. Coachman of Clearwater was elected chairman and the big push was mapped.

The campaign quickly evolved into a battle of the journalistic giants of the Tampa Bay area. It pitted Editor W. F. Stovall of the Tampa Tribune and Editor D. B. McKay of the Tampa Times who also had just been elected mayor commissioner of Tampa, against Editor Straub of the St. Petersburg Times and Editor Lew Brown of the St. Petersburg Independent. They exchanged insults daily in the editorial columns and on the front pages of their respective newspapers.

Not to be overlooked among the fighters was another journalistic voice, that of Mayor E. L. Pearce of Clearwater who was writing editorials for the old Clearwater News.

The Tampa Times published a statement claiming that the county had spent some $160,200 on roads in Pinellas between Jan. 1, 1909, and May 1, 1911. To which the Clearwater paper retorted, on page one:

"This statement is terrific. It seems impossible, but we are not in a position to question its accuracy. And if true, something like $100,000 of the people's money within two years has gone somewhere where the people never saw it.

"At the very high average cost of $3,000 per mile the sum alleged by the Tampa Times to have been expended in Pinellas would have built over 50 miles of hard-surfaced roads - enough to have connected Tarpon Springs and St. Petersburg and every other settlement on the peninsula.

What has been built is about 10 miles connecting Tarpon Springs, Sutherland and Ozona with the Tampa road near the proposed county line. Several scattered bits have been 'graded' and pine-strawed. Nine miles of road has been opened and graded wholly at the private expense of the Pinellas Groves Land Company at Largo . . ."

The Clearwater News added, "Every citizen of Pinellas peninsula, intelligent or otherwise, knows that the people never got roads or bridges to anything approaching such an amount."

In the 1911 session, the bill passed the house 28-18, and, with Senator McMullen's endorsement this time, it went through the senate, 20-9. The St. Petersburg Times had bombarded the legislators for more than a year with copies of its papers blasting Hillsborough County and propagandizing for separation. Gov. Albert W. Gilchrist signed the bill into law on May 23.

A lively razzle-dazzle campaign was conducted at home to assure ratification by the voters. This noisy effort, along with the shaky Seminole Bridge collapsing at the time it did, turned the trick.
The headline in Tampa the morning after election read: "FLORIDA'S BANNER COUNTY IS TO BE VICTIM OF POLITICAL SPOILS; VOTE IS TO DIVIDE."