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Fort Myers: From Rafts to Bridges in Forty Year

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The Caloosahatchee, a gem among rivers, is a familiar sight to motorists approaching South Florida via the Gulf coast. Since Florida was first burped up from the briny deep in some vague prehistoric era, the wide blue waters of the “River Beautiful” have been drifted upon, poled across, swum in, fought for, used and misused. The pirate “Black Caesar” knew the river well. Ponce de Leon explored it greedily. Seminoles and soldiers played cat and mouse in its coves for many years.

For centuries, anybody who wanted to cross the river in the vicinity of today’s Fort Myers was forced to swim or float, like the ‘gators and the manatees, in its shallow waters. The early settlers on the north shore floated in sailboats to do their grocery shopping in Fort Myers on the south
shore. Many a pioneer who suddenly “lost his breeze” found himself stranded in the middle of the mile-wide river until long after the general store was battened down for the night.

Fort Myers was still in its infancy when Captain Peter Nelson began a ferryboat operation in 1887. At that time, train service from the North terminated at Punta Gorda. Ongoing passengers completed the journey to Fort Myers by steamer launch or on a primitive hack line that came to a dead-end at the Caloosahatchee’s north shore, the only alternative being a long detour via the Alva bridge some twenty-six miles upstream. Captain Nelson’s ferry was a welcome addition that brought newcomers and locals across to the tiny outpost on the south side. Eventually, R. A. Gillis and then Santa Vivas replaced the captain, as the ferry was continued (sometimes by sail, sometimes by poling) until 1924.

Then came that “DAY TO TOP ALL DAYS,” March 12, 1924. Triple-decked headlines in the Fort Myers Press joyously proclaimed:

WATER CARNIVAL—BRIDGE CELEBRATION EDITION
ENTHUSIASM KEYNOTE OF BRIDGE DEDICATION
ALL ROADS LEAD TO FT. MYERS TODAY AS CELEBRATION BEGINS

Local citizens crowd the Alva Bridge, 1914.

Photograph courtesy of the Fort Myers Historical Museum.
Three days earlier a motorcade had begun to form upstate at High Springs, north of Gainesville, gaining momentum as it jostled southward. On the second day, the procession resumed at Tampa, and on the final day it came from Punta Gorda.

In the meantime, a boxed announcement had appeared on the front page of the *Fort Myers Press*: “Every car in Ft. Myers should be in this motorcade.” They were indeed! “Motor cars! Big ones, little ones, old ones, new ones, all sizes and shapes and styles made their way to East Fort Myers to the foot of the Caloosahatchee Bridge to welcome the coming of the motorcade from the north,” reported the *Press*. “For a mile and a half beyond the bridge, both sides of the road were lined with ‘em.”

Shortly after five o’clock on the historic Saturday, three cars containing thirteen people left the south shore and started across the dangerously narrow bridge (only sixteen feet wide), which seemed to disappear into nothingness a mile or more in the distance. As they drove slowly along, they had to wait while the final planks were put in place. As the *Press* reported, “Some of the lumber over which the party drove Saturday afternoon had been in logs at 11:00 o’clock that morning.”

The crowds, flanked by a large coterie of famous guests, were wined and dined in every way known to southern hospitality and good public relations. Mayor Walter Kaune of East Fort Myers and Mayor Vernon Widerquist of Fort Myers cooperated in all aspects of the celebration, including the presentation of the keys of their cities to participants in the motorcade. “Pyramids of delicious roast beef and other eatables” were served by the citizens of East Fort Myers at a massive buffet supper sponsored by the ladies of the city. The Grand Mardi Gras was directed by Fred Phillips, providing “all that is artistic in drollery and good cheer.”

The celebration featured a variety of entertainment during the fun-filled day. Attractions included a speed boat regatta, a swim and athletic meet, auto polo, music by the Fort Myers Concert Band, floats galore, and even a covey of bucking mules. Hoagland’s Hippodrome appeared at the Fair Grounds, and a delegation of Seminole Indians from deep in the Everglades performed their famed Green Corn Dance on First Street prior to the Grand Costume Ball. Even the bridge toll to Crescent Beach (as Fort Myers Beach used to be named) was cancelled for the day.

When night came, the throngs of celebrants could not all be accommodated in the hotels and homes of the two towns. In anticipation of just such a situation, a thousand cots had been set up to take care of the overflow.

Fort Myers finally had a bridge and lost no time in reaping benefits from its newest link to the outside world. “The trickle of people who had rolled south in postwar days had become a flood of tens of thousands in 1924,” one writer later noted.\(^2\) As expected, a number of visitors who witnessed the bridge had come to stay. “From the standpoint of publicity alone, the bridge celebration is worth thousands of dollars to Fort Myers,” the local newspaper candidly commented.

Newspapers elsewhere in Florida helped publicize the occasion. The city editor of the *Tampa Tribune* "wrote some mighty good stories... which meant much to Fort Myers,” according to the
Fort Myers Press. The Miami Herald touted “the great West Coast Highway and Tamiami Trail Jubilee Motorcade.” (The new bridge was viewed by Miamians as an important link in the dream to connect the East Coast and the West Coast by a road through the unexplored Everglades.)

The year 1924 proved a turning point in the advancement of Fort Myers. The Pythian Building (now known as the Richards Building) was soon to soar to a heady four-stories in height. It was overshadowed by the Franklin Arms Hotel, the town’s first real “skyscraper”; this was an eight-story addition to the hotel which had been developed from the historic old Hill House. The Atlantic Coast Line passenger train station opened. Within a year, building permits jumped from $502,750 to $2,794,075. Real estate sales boomed so high that in a single day transactions totalling $2,528,000 were recorded.

A scant seven years later, on February 11, 1931, the original bridge was ingloriously demoted and became known thereafter as the “old wooden bridge.” At the same time, a gala headline in The Fort Myers Press proudly. proclaimed: “THOMAS EDISON BRIDGE OFFICIALLY DEDICATED AT CEREMONIES TODAY.”
The opening of the second bridge was heralded by a birthday celebration for the “patron saint” of the city. Since Thomas Edison was observing his eighty-fourth birthday, the formal ceremonies were kept as brief and simple as possible “in order that the aged inventor may not become fatigued.” Mrs. Edison approved the dedication plans submitted by the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce. “Oratory will be barred,” was the promise, with a few remarks by Governor Doyle Carlton to be the only speech on the program.

The Edison party was escorted to the parade area by a bevy of local high school girls. Other parade highlights included Seminole Indians from their Everglades reservation and the Tamiami Trail Blazers—a rugged group of twenty-six local men who had pioneered a route through the trackless Everglades in 1923, arriving in Miami after three harrowing weeks in their model-T Fords. Other celebrities, who underlined the importance of the occasion by their presence, included Cyrus H. K. Curtis, editor of *The Saturday Evening Post*, tire magnate Harvey S. Firestone, Imperial Potentate of the Shriners Esten B. Fletcher, famed architect Nat Gaillard Walker, and Dan Beard, foster father of the Boy Scouts of America. Pioneer Ruth Parker trotted on horseback, just as she had some fifty years before when she had served as Edison’s telegraph messenger. In fact, the city was thronged with visitors from far and wide.

Fort Myers Beach also benefitted from bridge construction. The toll bridge over Matanzas Pass, linking Estero Island with the mainland, cost $.54 per car in 1921.

From *Yesterday’s Fort Myers* by Marion Godown and Alberta Rawchuck.
The star of the show was the beloved Mr. Edison, who personally cut the official ribbon to open the bridge. He probably never knew that, in the excitement, somebody had neglected to supply a proper ribbon. Paul Ley, local manager of the telephone company later recalled the near-crisis:

The American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps, of which I was a member, participated in the ceremonies. Col. Dixon of the Corps was in charge of flags, decorations, etc., and had made arrangements with the M. Flossie Hill Co. to pick up the ribbon.

We were assembled at about mid-point of the bridge when some one realized we had no ribbon. Time was getting close! As I had parked my car on the bridge approach, I was elected to make a dash to the store three blocks away. I made it back with just minutes to spare.4
The embarrassment of the forgotten ribbon soon paled, however, in the enormity of another oversight which was called to the attention of the whole world by Robert Ripley of “Believe It or Not” fame. The $700,000 bridge, bearing the name of the great inventor of the electric light, had no lights! In due time, the lights were installed and motorists have been crossing the bridge safely everafter.\(^5\)

The filled-in riverfront and new Yacht Basin in the early 1940s with the Edison Bridge (right background) next to Royal Palm Hotel Pier.

Photograph from Yesterday’s Fort Myers by Marion Godown and Alberta Rawchuck.
Governor Carlton’s brief remarks on that historic day underlined the long-range importance of
the bridge. “Facilities for transportation are dominant factors in the economic, social, and
political life of a people and in the development of a community,” he observed.

In 1964, only forty years after the Caloosahatchee was first opened to vehicular traffic, still
another downtown span opened. A few blocks west of the “old” Edison Bridge, the new
$2,607,366 structure soared to dizzy heights before coming to earth at a brand new overpass
intersection near the heart of Fort Myers, where the Tootie McGregor landmark fountain used to
be. For awhile, it appeared that the bridge might have to make a U-turn and go back where it
came from; the final right-of-way for the south approach was not secured until six weeks after
the span had been completed, inspected and officially accepted.6

Unlike the cooperative efforts of the earlier bridges, unprecedented controversy accompanied
this newest bridge from the date of its inception in 1957. The State Road Department, on the
advice of consulting engineers, recommended the location which ultimately was accepted.
Mayor George M. French of Fort Myers initially said that he would veto any deed to a
right-of-way across the river bottom because he was adamantly opposed to any mid-town site.
Councilman Newt Goodwin of East Fort Myers “threatened to raise an army to march on City
Hall protesting the downtown location.” (He understandably preferred Palmetto Street in East
Fort Myers.) Three days after Road Board member Al Rogero announced that the bridge contract
would definitely be let, Mayor French revealed that he was studying the possibility of tunnelling
under the river instead of bridging it, but he failed to block the project.

Even the naming of the bridge was in dispute. Officially, in an unofficial sort of way, the name
was alleged to be “The Bridge of Light.” Others bitterly called it “Rogero’s Folly.” The local
newspaper referred to it alternately as the new Caloosahatchee bridge, “the new four-lane span,”
or simply “the bridge.”7

The opening of the bridge also engendered confusion. On Wednesday, April 29,1964, local
headlines proclaimed: “NEW CALOOSAHATCHEE BRIDGE SCHEDULED TO OPEN
FRIDAY.” On Friday morning, however, a small boxed announcement bore the headline: “NOT
TODAY—MAYBE TOMORROW.” The scheduled opening had been abruptly cancelled late
the previous day. With the postponement, disgusted city officials “threw up their hands and said
there would be no further announcements of any kind by the city concerning the opening of the
bridge.” The following day, a small insert in the New Press laconically announced: “AT LAST—
IT’S OPEN!”

Unlike its two predecessors, the newest bridge went into operation with little fanfare. One
disbelieving resident commented, “I never heard of opening anything worth a couple of million
dollars without some sort of ceremony.” Another citizen, who had seen the arrival of all the
bridges during the forty-year period, remarked scathingly, “They had a to-do at both the Sanibel
Causeway and the Cape Coral bridge downriver. But this one opens by having some unknown
state official take down a barricade!”

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Although unheralded, the opening of a new bridge promised another era of growth like those that had accompanied “the Old Wooden Bridge” and “the Old Edison Bridge.” Again in 1964, South Florida citizens braced themselves for a boom. It was not long in coming.

1 This account of events in 1924 is based on the *Fort Myers Press*, February 4, 11, 25; March 5, 10, 12, 13, 19, 1924. The current *Fort Myers News Press* was not formed until June 1931, as a result of the merger of the *Fort Myers Press* and the *Fort Myers Tropical News*.

2 Florence Fritz, *Unknown Florida* (Miami, University of Miami Press, 1963), 139.

3 This account of events in 1931 is based on the *Fort Myers Press*, February 5, 6, 10-12, 1931.


6 Ibid., 188.

7 This account of events in 1964 is based on the *Fort Myers News Press*, April 29-May 1, 1964.