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Transportation in Florida from Oxen to Airplanes: A Photo Essay

by Hampton Dunn

Tourism "made" Florida, but without transportation, there would be no tourists, or developers of any kind. Indeed, improvements in transportation have often preceded significant economic spurts. In the beginning, the Florida peninsula was an uninhabited wilderness, infested by mosquitoes, infected by malaria and infiltrated with wild animals. The first Indians arrived by walking, and they eventually pounded out paths through the woods. Then they traveled by horseback, enlarging the trails that finally would become roadways.

Early European mariners discovered Florida's marvelous harbors, which explains why this area became "the cradle of America." The Conquistadores – Ponce de Leon, Panfilo de Narvaez, Hernando DeSoto and Pedro Menendez – came and started the first settlements in what became the United States. DeSoto's party boasted that Tampa Bay was the "best port in the world."

It was not until after Florida became a territory in 1821 that much of the interior opened to white settlement. The Spanish colonialists had been content to stay put in the coastal communities of St. Augustine, Key West and Pensacola. With the development of the steamboat, Florida's numerous rivers, lakes, creeks and later canals attracted these vessels. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, river boats took visitors exploring to the bowels of Florida's woodlands and to such exotic sights as Silver Springs and Green Cove Springs.

After the Civil War the railroad barons, Henry M. Flagler and Henry B. Plant, revolutionized travel with their iron horses. They also built elegant hotels to accommodate their passengers, and Florida became a mecca. Little towns sprang up along the routes, and permanent settlers moved in. The arrival of the railroad opened up Tampa to explosive development in the 1880s.

After stage coaches, steamers and railroads came the automobile, turning America into a "nation on wheels." Henry Ford produced a vehicle that the average American could afford, and after World War I, "Florida – or Bust!" became the slogan for nomads heading south. The Florida real estate boom of the 1920s resulted, and even though it was followed by a bust, the setback was temporary. The decades after World War II saw spectacular growth, fueled in part by the construction of an interstate system of limited access highways that dramatically reduced travel time from the north.

Meanwhile, the airplane vastly accelerated the pace of travel. It was in the Tampa Bay area that commercial aviation was introduced to the world. On January 1, 1914, an intrepid pilot named Tony Jannus began flying passengers on a regular schedule between St. Petersburg and Tampa.

Finally, it should be noted that Florida is the birthplace of space travel – just as Jules Verne predicted many moons ago. He envisioned flights to the moon by rockets launched in "Tampa
Town.” It came to pass that he was not far off target: Man was sent to the moon from Cape Canaveral, only about 100 miles from “Tampa Town.”

A French visitor, Edmond Johanet, came through pioneer Florida in 1890, stopping at a number of interior towns. His impressions of his travels appeared in the book *Un Francais Dans La Floride*. The Frenchman spent time in the town of Brooksville, the county seat of Hernando County. A boy, an ox and a cart must have been a rare sight for Johanet during his visit to Brooksville.
In 1938, the Peninsular Telephone Company (now General Telephone of Florida) was busy stringing a toll-route line from Tampa to Brooksville through some rather rugged countryside for the Bell Telephone Company. Oxen were still used because they could stop dead in their tracks when directed to do so by the linemen.

A horse-and-buggy traffic jam complicates travel on the Lafayette Street Bridge in Tampa (on today’s Kennedy Boulevard) during this scene from the turn of the century. The minarets of Henry B. Plant’s Tampa Bay Hotel loom in the background. A cyclist makes his way through the congestion by using the streetcar track as a bike path.
Open-air street cars clanged along the double track on Tampa’s Franklin Street when this busy scene was snapped at the turn of the century. The view extends northward on Franklin Street from Lafayette Street (now Kennedy Boulevard) at the edge of the Court House Square.

This boat carried hunters on a day trip out of Fort Myers and along the Caloosahatchee River. The day’s game hangs proudly from the boat’s roof. The correspondent who mailed the postcard from Fort Myers to his mother in New Castle, Delaware, wrote: “This is a usual thing here.” It was postmarked May 7, 1909.
A Ford jalopy makes its way down Main Street in Hardee County’s Bowling Green during 1910. Except for the automobile, the two pedestrians (to the left) appear to be the only movement along the unpaved streets.

One of the first automobiles in the Fort Myers area was this vehicle transporting women at the Koreshan Unity development in Estero during the early twentieth century.
A group of motorists donned their Sunday best for an afternoon of “joy riding” in an early model car in Tampa in 1914.

These Florida drivers depended on a different kind of horsepower to pull the out of the mud. This drama took place on the Russell farm at Fort Ogden in DeSoto County about 1920, and it was repeated elsewhere all over Florida before the roads and the autos became more sophisticated.
In October 1919 every seat of this jitney bus was filled as the driver carried passengers between Tampa and Clearwater. The side curtains could be lowered for customers’ convenience in instances of bad weather.

During the 1920s, the automobile reached small-town America, but as this scene in downtown Auburndale shows, traffic was not a problem.
Completion of the Gandy Bridge between Tampa and St. Petersburg was imminent in 1924 when this group went out to inspect the job. Space was left in the concrete paving for tracks for an intercity rail line, but it was never put into service. The bridge was the dream project of George S. Gandy.

As late as the 1930s, some areas of Florida were scarcely accessible to twentieth-century automobiles, except by nineteenth-century means. For years the Punta Rassa Ferry chugged back and forth to Sanibel Island. It is shown disgorging a load one day in the 1930s. This postcard was sent on December 12, 1937.
The Orange Blossom Special first came into Naples, Florida, on January 7, 1927. It was the first passenger train of Seaboard Air Line Railway, and service continued until 1971.

Pioneer aviator Lincoln Beachey was the first to fly a self-propelled airship in Florida, at Jacksonville, in 1908. He was the first to fly an airplane in the Sunshine State, at Orlando, in 1910. He is shown here in his Curtiss Pusher in Tampa in 1911. He first flew on Sunday, February 19, and was promptly arrested on charges of disturbing the peace.
On February 21, 1911, Tampa’s first air meet took place at the old race track near the McMullen Aviation Field, site of present-day Tampa International Airport. Crowds of curious and excited onlookers gathered to watch the historic occasion.

The Miss St. Petersburg, a Liberty-motored, all-metal plane, was one of a fleet used by Florida Airways in 1926-27 on the first airmail route in Florida. The ten-passenger craft was used on the run from Jacksonville to Tampa to Fort Myers and to Miami.
This man started the world’s first scheduled commercial airline on New Year’s Day, 1914, between St. Petersburg and Tampa. He is Antony “Tony” Jannus who flew the Benoist Airboat Old 43.
St. Petersburg acquired an airline in 1934 with the award to National Airlines of a 143-mile mail route between the Pinellas County city and Daytona Beach via Tampa, Lakeland and Orlando. The airline had five employees, including George T. ("Ted") Baker, the dauntless architect of National Airlines, who is shown here (center in shirtsleeves) proudly displaying National’s ten-passenger Stinson in 1936.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


*Editors’ Note:* All of the photographs in this essay are from Hampton Dunn, *Florida: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk, Virginia: Donning Company, 1988). For a review of the book, see pages 66-67 of this issue.