

THE MARTIN GRADE STORY

A drive across the Martin Grade is a drive through Florida's last frontier – on a road that time seems to have forgotten. To the east lie barrier islands, rich lagoons, and flowing rivers that characterize Florida's Atlantic Coast. To the west lies Lake Okeechobee, the second largest fresh water lake in the United States.

In between, are the Allapattah Flats, remnants of the impenetrable sloughs and wet prairies, cypress heads, oak hammocks, and pine flat woods, that once made up the Alpatiokee Swamp in the northern Everglades.

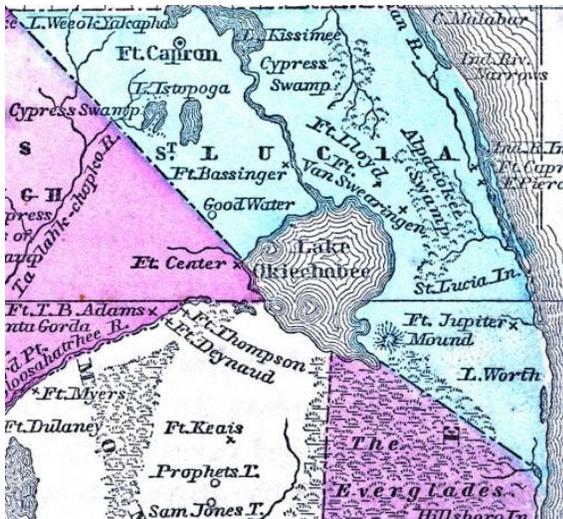


Figure 44: Map of Lake Okeechobee and Alpatiokee Swamp, circa 1830.

The history of the Martin Grade is the history of the last pioneers in Florida's last frontier. It is a tale of two cities, born at the beginning of the 20th Century less than 40 miles apart, but separated by culture,

fortune, and the impenetrable north Everglades. It is a tale full of cowboys and Indians – Florida style. Of land booms, railroad tycoons, future presidents, and hopeful visions. Ultimately, it is the story of how the forces of Mother Nature and human nature combined to preserve the look, the feel, and the spirit of Florida when pioneers first opened up its last frontier over a hundred years ago.

Although the land has been changed by human hands, along the Grade land is being used in the same manner it was used 100 years ago. Much of it has been targeted for public acquisition and protection or has already been acquired and is being reclaimed by its native habitats. Time on the land along the Martin Grade once seemed to be standing still, and now it seems to be going backward.

To the northwest, Okeechobee City is on the northern shore of the second largest freshwater lake in the United States, which the Seminole Indians simply called “Big Water.” It is a small, country town, steeped in the rural traditions of Florida's last frontier, which holds both annual fishing and livestock rodeos.

To the east, the City of Stuart lies on the banks of the St. Lucie River near the Indian River Lagoon, the St. Lucie Inlet, and the Atlantic Ocean. It is the last small town on

Florida's east coast and its atmosphere hearkens back to the cosmopolitan fishing village that first attracted wealthy northern tourists more than a hundred years ago. Although the distance between the two is small and both seem to be throwbacks to an earlier era, they are two different worlds.

Between them lies the Martin Grade.

Although the early settlers of Okeechobee and Stuart began arriving about the same time, they came from different places, traveled different paths to get there, lived different kinds of lives, and had little to do with each other. For the first 50 years, they were separated by an almost impassable portion of the Northern Everglades now known as the Allapattah Flats.

When the Martin Grade first forged through that wet wilderness to connect them in the 1920's, it was a dirt and sand track raised above the swamps by dirt dredged from the ditches at its side.



Figure 45: Martin Grade, circa 1930's.

By then, the fortunes of Stuart and the newly formed Martin County were linked by rail and sea to the Atlantic Coast, and their residents turned their back to the coastal backlands except for picnics and fishing expeditions. As a result, the Martin Grade remained a cut-and-grub road and then a sand track for 70 years – through storms and wars, booms and busts, and law suits.

There were few settlers in either area before 1880, due to a combination of hostile Indians, geography, and unfortunate timing. First, Florida belonged to Spain. Right before Spain ceded it to the United States in 1819, however, the First Seminole War broke out. At its end, the Seminoles were given most of central Florida by a treaty, and the threat of Indian attack limited settlement in the area along the banks of Lake Okeechobee and the Indian River for the next 40 years.

The army linked the forts it constructed on the Kissimmee River and near the Indian River and Jupiter Inlets by building military trails, but then the Second Seminole War broke out. It ended after the decisive battle of Okeechobee in 1837, and, in 1842, Congress offered 160 acres of land to any homesteaders who were armed and prepared to defend themselves. But the threat or renewed Indian attack had driven most of the new homesteaders away before the end of the third Seminole War in 1858.

With the main body of the unconquered Seminoles moving into the southwestern Florida Everglades in 1858, the Martin

Grade area was opened for new settlement, but, once again the possibilities were dashed by bad timing. The rest of the nation was gearing up for the Civil War which started in 1860, and Florida joined the Confederacy a year later.

As the war wore on, displaced southerners looked south for their fortune. Cut off from northern investors, Florida's major industry became feeding the Confederate Army by capturing wild hogs and cattle that had been set free by the Spanish three hundred years before. Thus, the Cracker Cowboy/Cow Hunter heritage was born, and it has dominated the culture of the great prairies north of Lake Okeechobee ever since.

These pioneers were often poor and carried all they possessed with them as they traveled. Those who settled in the Martin Grade area led a traditional frontier life, hunting and farming for food, relying on horses and oxen for transportation, and building their homes of rough sawn timbers, even as tall buildings and trolleys were transforming cities such as New York and Philadelphia into major metropolitan areas in the Gilded Age.

Modern settlement did not begin in the Martin Grade area until the coming of the railroads, and they were a long time coming. In 1855, the United States had turned over all of its "swamp and overflowed lands" in Florida to the State for the purpose of reclaiming them, and the new State of Florida had offered free land as an incentive to railroad and canal builders

to develop Florida. But railroad building was not a top priority during the Civil War.

In 1869, not long after the War ended, the Golden Spike had connected the Atlantic Seaboard with the Pacific Coast by rail. Nonetheless, railroad building in Florida lagged behind during the Reconstruction Era of the 1870's.

It did not begin in earnest until 1881, when Hamilton Disston, a rich Philadelphia industrialist, refinanced Florida's Internal Improvement Fund by buying 4 million acres in central Florida – including most of the first Seminole Reservation between Orlando and Lake Okeechobee – for 25 cents an acre.

Disston also reached agreement with the state to drain all of the lands overflowed by Lake Okeechobee and the Kissimmee River in exchange for half of the reclaimed land. He began dredging a series of canals to drain the Everglades and, in the 1880's, he opened steamboat routes from Lake Okeechobee west through the Caloosahatchee River to the Gulf of Mexico and north up the Kissimmee River to the Atlantic Ocean.

Disston started the first true Florida land rush, and from that day forward the history of the Martin Grade region was linked to the fortunes of wealthy industrial capitalists living in northern states along the Atlantic Seaboard. But, due to logistics and geography, it took another quarter century for the canals and trains to reach the Martin Grade area, itself.

By then, three independent groups of newcomers had set the region on its path to the future. They shared the area peacefully with the remaining Seminoles, who had never left the area and who lived in Seminole Town about ten miles south of the Martin Grade, where the community of Indiantown would ultimately be created.

One group of settlers, many of whom became Florida Cowboys, were from north Florida or southern states. They worked their way south, down the center of the state to the northeastern shores of Lake Okeechobee. These hardy men and women settled near the old forts and military trails and soon adopted Florida Cracker ways. In the settled areas, they operated ferries and general stores and began to civilize the region.

In more remote areas, they became Cow Hunters who rounded up herds of wild Cracker Cattle in the Kissimmee River valley, using bullwhips from which they got their “Cracker” nickname, to keep the cattle under control.



Figure 46: Florida Cowboys 1895 by Frederick Remington.

When not hunting cattle, they planted vegetables and citrus on the high ground, hunted deer and turkeys, fished in the rivers and the lake, and built homes out of rough-cut, virgin cypress that kept out the alligators, panthers, bears, and poisonous snakes.



Figure 47: Early Florida Cracker Cabin.

The land was bountiful, but communication and commerce with the outside world was difficult, and their Florida Cracker culture developed in the freedom of relative isolation.

Less than forty miles to the east as the egret flies, a different breed of settlers began taking title to the lands along the St. Lucie and Indian Rivers that had been abandoned in the Indian scare of 1849. With immediate access to the outside world on navigable waterways leading to the ocean, settlers along the coast had always been able to rely on the transportation opportunities created by the rivers and ocean to market their goods to cities on the east coast.

Many earlier settlers had laid out pineapple and citrus plantations before abandoning their claims during the Indian Wars. Many of the new settlers along the Indian and St.

Lucie Rivers were businessmen and entrepreneurs who rekindled those commercial dreams and gave new breath to those industries.



Figure 48: Early Pineapple Plantation on the Indian River.

In the 1880's, settlers from New York and Germany started a town on the banks of the St. Lucie River, where Stuart is today. One of the first settlers made his living building boats, which started an industry for which Stuart remains famous in the 21st Century. Soon, there was a store, and the foundations of a new town were laid.

The third group of newcomers were harbingers of change who ushered in the modern era. They were the tourists and adventurers who published tales of their journeys into Florida's east-coast wilderness in popular magazines during the 1870's. The stories of their explorations into the country's southernmost frontier – which included the Martin Grade area - read like Livingston's travels in darkest Africa.

They described encounters with giant alligators and writhing snakes, killing panthers in mangrove swamps with Bowie knives, shooting bears on the beach while hunting turtle eggs, eating gopher tortoises cooked with swamp cabbage with the Indians, shooting wild turkeys that weighed

25 pounds, catching 12-pound bass by the boatload, and waves that crashed like thunder or artillery shells on Lake Okeechobee but remained unseen behind an impenetrable cypress forest.

Their tales of adventure amidst abundance tantalized east coast sportsmen with time on their hands and a taste for exotic adventure. One of the key allures of darkest south-central Florida was that it was just a short steamboat trip down the east coast from the wealthy cities of the coming Gilded Age. Newly-wealthy residents of the northeast could experience such wondrous adventures on short vacations. It was even accessible to the not-so-wealthy, as one writer touted how to take a three-month trip to Florida for \$100.

These writers also reveled in the winter weather which they described as a cure for anything that ailed the modern eastern city dweller. In response, the first "Snowbirds" started coming to Florida to spend the harsh northern winters hunting, fishing, and soaking up the sun. Thus, the seed was sown for Florida's number one industry, tourism, even before the railroads reached the Treasure Coast where the Martin Grade area lay sleeping.

Within this bubbling melting pot that was Florida at the turn of the 20th Century, the Martin Grade started out as a "cut and grub" path through the wilderness that was impassable during the wet season. After Martin County became the last county created on Florida's East Coast in 1925, it

announced that it would build the Martin Highway which would become Florida's newest road connecting two county seats – Stuart and Okeechobee City. It was proudly named for the governor who had helped create the County.

This was the height of the 1920's Florida land boom during which the Okeechobee Canal was completed and the Seaboard Airline Railroad was built to connect Tampa to Okeechobee City and West Palm Beach. Where the two crossed, at the old Seminole Town, the new town of Indiantown was created. The future was coming at last! And then the bubble burst.

Only then was the true nature of the Martin Grade Story revealed. The Martin Grade became Florida's forgotten highway. It was not even graded as a county road until the 1950's. Even then it was left alone on Florida's sleeping bosom – almost untouched by modern man, living and breathing in the soul of nature.

By the early 1990's, nature had built a linear oak hammock along the raised roadbed. It was a Green Cathedral of trees that sheltered the road and those of God's creatures who crossed or traversed it. When plans were laid, to make the Grade what appears to have been the last highway in Florida directly connecting two county seats to be paved, the people of Martin County recognized the gift they had been

given by time and nature and demanded that the road be paved in a manner that did not destroy the tree canopy.

So, the story of the Martin Grade is not the story of a road that brought the disparate groups of settlers together in Florida's 20th Century melting pot to form the new Florida.

It is the story of how those settlers, the land around them, and the road that connected them ignored the rest of the world as it rushed past them and drifted as if lost in time and space, maintaining their separate cultures and life styles for 100 years.

Today, at the start of the 21st Century these communities are beginning to come together – but not with the thought that they are one community with a single heritage. Instead, they recognize each other as unique and respect and honor each other's history.

The Martin Grade Scenic Highway stands as the symbol of that coming together – that linkage between the uplands and the shore, the east and the west, the slow and the fast, the old and the new.

The one thing they all agree on is that the tree canopy that grew up to shelter them through this transition epitomizes the best of all of them. It is too beautiful to lose.