

Ocklawaha County

By Lars Andersen

In 1860, when 32 year old mail carrier Hubbard Hart proposed a steamboat service on the Ocklawaha River, people thought he was crazy. It was common knowledge that this tributary to the St. Johns River` was too narrow and twisting for a paddle wheeler. But, several months and a lot of channel clearing later, Hart piloted his new steamer, *James Burt*, on it's maiden voyage to Silver Spring. By the end of the decade, Hart Line steamers were making regular trips to the river's head at Lake Griffin. It seemed Hart was all out of surprises when, in 1869, he amazed the river folk once again with the introduction of his newest boat – the *Panasofkee*. It wasn't the boat that set the rumor mill spinning, it was the name. Panasofkee is the name of a lake that lies a dozen miles west of Lake Griffin and flows into the Withlacoochee river – a tributary of the Gulf of Mexico. Hart's intentions were clear. He was planning to dig a canal to connect the Ocklawaha to the Withlacoochee!

It wasn't a new idea. Beginning with Pedro Menendez de Aviles, founder of the first European settlement in Florida and continuing to the present, there has been an endless parade of schemers and visionaries who've dreamed of a cross-Florida waterway. And no river has felt the brunt of this enterprise more than the Ocklawaha. It seemed like the perfect choice.

In it's natural state, before being altered in the 20th century, the Ocklawaha flowed northward from it's source at Lake Griffin as a moderately paced, tannic brown stream. After passing through several miles of open marsh lands, the river entered one of the most beautiful, species rich, floodplain forests in the state. Twenty-five miles downstream, the river took on new life as the crystal clear Silver River joined it from the west, adding an incredible 550 million gallons of artesian spring water daily to the flow.

From here, the clearer, swifter river continued north through a mile wide swamp forest of cypress, red maple, ash, tupelo and many more water tolerant trees. With no real "banks" to direct it's course, the river carved a twisted path as it continued north. After another thirty miles, after receiving the flow from Orange Creek, the river curved eastward toward the St. Johns River. As it approached the St. Johns, the channel became a bit wider, as did the adjacent swamplands where a maze of braided creeks could confound even the most seasoned woodsman.

In the rich forests along the lower river, evidence of prehistoric Floridians could be seen at abandoned village sites. For generations, they occupied these sites, all the while tossing broken pottery and empty mussel shells into nearby refuse middens. Many of these, as well as burial mounds such as those at Davenport Landing can still be seen. By the time European explorers arrived on the scene, the Ocklawaha was home to a tribe of Timucua speaking Indians called the Acuera. Spanish explorer, Hernando de Soto was the first white man to encounter these fierce warriors and, after watching them riddle his dog Bruto with nearly fifty arrows, was the first to realize they were best left alone.

After the demise of the Acuera and all of north Florida's Timucua tribes in the 1700's, Creek migrants, soon to be called Seminoles moved into the Ocklawaha region. It was they who gave it the name Ocklawaha, the "crooked river." Several generations of Seminoles would call the area home, living in relative isolation well after other, more 'hospitable' parts of the region had been over-run with settlers. But with the cession of Florida to the United States 1821, a new wave of white pioneers poured in from the north and tensions escalated. Within two years, the situation forced the creation of a large reservation in central Florida. The Indian Agency, headquartered near Silver Spring, would be the seed from which the town of Ocala would eventually grow. Predictably, the imaginary reservation boundary proved untenable.

In 1835, war broke out. For nearly seven years the Second Seminole War kept the Florida Territory in constant turmoil. Throughout the early years of the campaign, the Indians found safe refuge in the dense forests of the Ocklawaha river basin. But, in the end, like the Acuera before them, the Seminoles were forced out.

With the Seminoles reduced to a manageably small population in the Everglades, white settlers moved in. North and west of the Ocklawaha, plantations and orange groves were established. While to the east, the high, sandy 'scrub' discouraged all but the most determined pioneers. Along the river itself, the ancient forest echoed with the sound of loggers axes and crunching wood as huge, virgin cypress trees crashed through the canopy. Once they were bucked and dragged to the river, dozens of the giant logs were lashed together and rafted to one of several river-side sawmills. It was a tedious job working a log raft down the twisted channel of the Ocklawaha. So too was 'poling' a barge load of cut lumber down to the St. Johns. But, it was the only way. Everybody knew you couldn't get a steamboat up there. Everybody, that is, except for Hubbard Hart.

In Hart, Menendez' 300 year old dream had found a new champion. But it had changed in 300 years. Where Menendez and the early Spaniards had believed there was a natural passage, later visionaries, faced with the realization that no such waterway existed, began considering the possibility of digging a canal. In 1826 and again in 1832, Congress authorized surveys to determine the feasibility of such a project. Both concluded that the idea was impractical. But, they left the slight germ of hope for future schemers by concluding that "if" such a canal were to be dug, the best route would be up the Ocklawaha and across to the Withlacoochee.

In the end, lacking government approval, Hart abandoned his plan. But, the steamboat route he created had opened the area for commerce – and more importantly – tourists.

By the late 1800's, there were few "wild frontiers" left in the country. So, compliments of the Harts steamers, tourists of all sorts could undertake a quaint little adventure into the Florida wilderness. Writers, artists, politicians and well-heeled socialites, stood shoulder to shoulder with backwoodsmen and naturalists along the railings of the little steamers as they turned off of the wide, open channel of the St. Johns and headed up the dark, tea-colored waters of the Ocklawaha.

In his 1875 travel guide, writer Sidney Lanier suggested that travelers on Ocklawaha steamers hike their feet up onto the railing, lean back in their chair and, looking up into the tree canopy overhead, “ sail, sail, sail through the cypresses, through the vines, through the May day, through the floating suggestions of the unutterable that come up, that sink down ...and so shall your heart forever afterwards interpret the Ocklawaha to mean repose.”

By the end of the 1800's, railroads had all but eliminated the need for steamboats on the Ocklawaha. Gone were the writers and artists. Gone were the days of romance. And into the void returned the canal developers.

As the 20th century dawned, industrial age technologies and Victorian ideals of conquering nature had joined forces and were wreaking environmental havoc throughout the world. In Florida, a statewide campaign, of ditching and damming wetlands, both for land reclamation and water transportation, built to a crescendo which, predictably, led once more to the banks of the Ocklawaha.

After first gaining legislative approval during World War II, the project lay mired in a funding and logistical quagmire until 1964, when construction of the Cross Florida Barge Canal began. During that same time, a growing understanding of the complexities of natural systems prompted concerned citizens to speak out. One such person was Marjorie Carr, whose unprecedented determination and concern for Florida's natural heritage led to the founding of the Florida Defenders of the Environment.

In 1969, just as it was beginning to look like Menendez' 400 year dream would be realized, and with a 9,000 acre reservoir in place, the steam roller of 'progress' came head to head with Marjorie Carr, the FDE and the swelling ranks of environmentalists.

Today, the partially completed Cross-Florida barge canal remains in limbo. With deconstruction already approved, Floridians of the 21st century watch and wait as a handful of politicians cling desperately to 19th century values and continue to hold the river hostage.

Meanwhile, upstream and downstream from the Rodman Reservoir, the Ocklawaha flows on. Undaunted by the turmoil that has surrounded her, she is still one of the “sweetest waterways in the world.”