

“History Repeats Itself on the Tamiami Trail”

By: Michael Widner

“Work on the Tamiami Trail between Estero and Fort Myers progresses slowly with no apparent improvement, but some say we hope to be surprised at its completion.”

This sounds like something out of today's paper, but it was written 65 years ago by a member of the Koreshan Unity. We are all frustrated with what seems to be the slow pace of construction on US-41 (Tamiami Trail) and other roads in the area. However, as history teaches us, “what goes around comes around” and “History repeats itself”.

What is now US-41 was once nothing more than a dusty, sandy “lane” which passed through an outpost called Estero. In fact, in the earliest days of Estero there was no road at all. Koreshans and everyone else got to Estero by taking a boat from Punta Rassa to the Estero River. Later on a “trail” was developed and yet it still took hours to get from Estero to what the Koreshans called “Myers”. That's all there was.



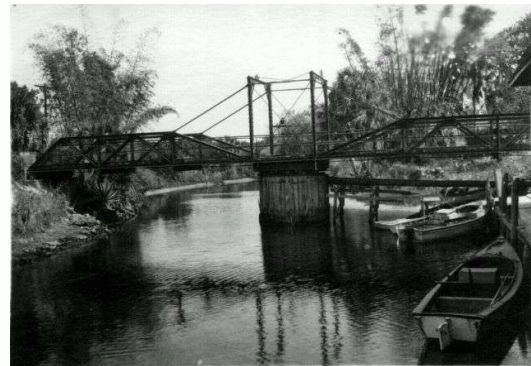
[PHOTO – 1: KSHS 3-078] *The bridge across the Estero River. You can see the dual tracks of a horse and buggy in the background.*

After the turn of the century, when the amount of motorized traffic began to grow, the need for a new bridge was recognized. In August 1916, a Koreshan named D.J. Richards wrote:

IN CONNECTION with good roads, new bridges are being constructed along the way, and our beautiful winding stream is going to be spanned with a new steel drawbridge. The contract was awarded to the Converse Bridge and Steel Co. of

Chattanooga, Tenn., for the sum of \$4,500. The bridge is to be ninety-one feet long and twelve feet wide. The base is to be built of concrete; the central pier is to be eleven feet in diameter; and each end will have concrete abutments. This work will take about 440 bags of cement and an immense quantity of rock. Mr. W. D. Clarkson of Chattanooga, is superintending the work, which the company expect to complete by September first. We are exceedingly well pleased with this development. The fruit traffic on the river has enormously increased in the last few years and it was necessary to build larger boats to meet the extra demand, but exceptionally high tides would prevent our boat and those of others going under the old bridge and would necessitate a wait until the water receded; this difficulty will be eliminated and much time will be gained thereby.

What has been known as the “Swing Bridge” was the result. As was mentioned in the article, this bridge allowed the boats laden with Koreshan fruit to get out to Estero Bay without having to wait for the tide to recede.



[PHOTO – 2: KSHS 4-105] *The so-called “Swing Bridge” spanning the Estero River*

As Koreshan commerce increased there was not only a need for river access, but obviously a need for better roads. This not only included the road through Estero, but throughout the state of Florida. In the early 20's there were only one or two ways to get across the state to Miami. In April of 1923 a group called the “Trailblazers” set out to cross the Everglades in automobiles for Miami. They hoped to show the world that a southern route through the Everglades was

possible. They crossed through swamp and mire, stopping at Everglades City which, at the time, was part of the Collier empire.

By 1925 the Koreshans were pushing for better roads not only across the state to Miami, but also in Lee County. At the “*Fourth Industrial and Art Exhibition*” held at the Koreshan Unity in 1925, a song was introduced with the words:

“Gone are the days when any road would do, Gone are the days when oxen pulled 'em through. Gone are the days when cars were very few, O'er all the state they're loudly shouting, Build Good Roads. ... Why should we growl that a detour gives us pain? Why should we swear we'll not come that road again? Think of the time when they're finished and we gain Them as reward for loudly shouting: Build Good Roads!”

Pressure on the state grew. The state did not deny the need, but money was not plentiful. Baron Collier invested his own money. Obviously Collier had a great economic stake in a completed highway, Collier got the project underway with his own money. Knowing that a road had to be built the state finally raised the funds necessary to finish the remaining section of the Tamiami Trail. In 1928 the Trail was officially extended to Miami.

The opening of the Trail led to a more vibrant economy. The Koreshan store and gas station did well and many of the Koreshan writings tell of people from all over stopping by the Unity, either to visit with friends and relatives or to satisfy their curiosity. Stories are told of how Koreshan gas station attendants would engage customers in conversation and tell them about Koreshan beliefs.

As time passed, the two lane road seemed smaller and smaller and traffic increased. There was need for expansion and widening of the road to four lanes was begun. The Koreshans fully supported this expansion.



[PHOTO -3 KSHS 5-057] View of the Tamiami Trail as seen from the southern edge of the Estero River. The Koreshan “Art Hall” and main gate can be seen on the right.

However, by the time the expansion was to begin, parts of the Koreshan property had been designated as an historical district which meant that it was unlawful to make changes in the property. Alternate routes just to the east of the present day highway were proposed. Eventually a plan was agreed upon and the present Koreshan store was cut back 8 inches to accommodate the widening of the road.

As we travel along the trail, I am reminded of the line from the “*Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy*”; “*History is an illusion caused by the passage of time, and time is an illusion caused by the passage of history*” Who knows what kind of problems will plague travelers on the Tamiami Trail in the year 2105?

Visit the Koreshan State Historic site on the web at:

<http://www.floridastateparks.org/koreshan/>

or our archival site at

<http://koreshan.mwweb.org>