

WORKING ON THE RAILROAD
by

CARL FOLKE SAHLIN

This interview was conducted by ^{Maggie} ~~Harry~~ Bartel Kivel. This session was conducted in the home of an internationally known artist, Carolyn Fuller, who had with her two guests--one of whom was Carl Folke Sahlin. The other guest was Gerhardt Root, who is the publisher of the Swedish North Star in New York--a 103 year old paper. Carl Folke Sahlin, a native of Stockholm, is 90 years old. He is an artist himself, and a member of the Explorer's Club; but, more important, he worked on the famous railroad that went to Sea.

"May I begin this ^{Halayan} story with the very fact that I did not come down here to work on the railroad but I came with the mistaken idea that I could act as a waiter in the ~~House and Home~~ Hotel where the Dupont Building stands today in Miami. I got fired the first day as I didn't know anything about the things that I should have known. So after I got fired, I walked around the waterfront of Miami harboring \$1.65. That was in 1905. I came to a flat car and some people were sitting there. I asked them if anyone knew where I could get a job. They said "sure", so I hopped on the car with them just like that. So, we rode down about 20 miles south to Homestead. By that time, everything got too muddy and everything stopped, just for a while, but it continued on when it dried up and we knew that eventually this railroad would end in Key West. Can't remember that I had definitely heard of Key West before but had good geographical knowledge so it is possible that I had heard of it. I was just a laborer shoveling dirt.

After about a week, I applied for a job in the water gang. Nobody wanted that job so that was easy as nobody would stay at this more than three days. So, I stayed on this job for nine months. Along the terrain were two dredges--they were pretty large clumsy sort of affairs--they lifted up dirt and put it up on the grade and eventually worked its way forward. So the water gang had to build a near water-tight fence around the dredge so that it could float and move freely. Then in addition, which was the hardest job, we had to take a ^{West} rope over your shoulder and carry it over to a hammock. An Everglade Hammock is almost ~~impenetrable~~. We didn't have to go any further than to the first good sized tree that we could sling a rope around.

As to the hot summer months, when you're 19 years old, you take things more or less as they come. We ran into many unusual circumstances; one that I remember mostly was when all supplies stopped and we lived on nothing but frankfurters.

At that time, the alligators were abundant. We became so familiar with them that the young ones we tied up around our camp. We had to improvise as there were about 80 men sleeping in long rows. They were of all nationalities--particularly the camp that I was in. They evidently had been recruited off ~~The~~ Bowery in New York. There was no liquor in the camps at all and there was a restriction that no liquor came down there either. Of course, when we'd get to Homestead, things were different. I didn't drink but often went with other fellows who did. They'd buy hair tonic or bayrum; that's supposed to be a killer but it didn't kill anyone in the camp. However, as they were recruited off ~~The~~ Bowery, their stomachs were pretty well adjusted to anything that came down.

We worked six days a week, 10 hours a day but to a young fellow, this was not considered a hardship. To the fellows from the bowery, it probably increased their life span. Because I arrived with a high collar, I was christened "The Baron" of the railroad. We were paid \$1.65 a day, free lodging, but had to pay \$3.00 a week for our food.

Except for the period when we were stuck with the frankfurters, I probably ate better there than I did for quite a few years afterwards while living in New York and Texas.

The sun and the bugs did a marvelous thing to me. I was a blonde Scandinavian and most kids my age were bothered with acne. The Florida sun cured that perfectly. I had skin like a baby.

Getting back to the water depth, and working in it, it seemed to vary with the season, but I'm six feet tall and mostly it reached to my chest which kept us cool.

To explain again the 500 feet of rope used, the rope was fastened to the work barges, and they didn't move forward all day long; but there was a wheel that was ^{shortening} ~~shortening~~ this rope and finally came up to a point where they couldn't be certain anymore, and then a new hammock had to be found further up. In those days, and I suppose even today, you can spot the hammocks in the Everglades. They're 1000 ft. apart or perhaps one mile apart.

During the nine months I worked there, we started 20 miles south of Homestead and when I finished 9 months later, we were at Jewfish Creek. When I left there, I had a peculiar ambition to become an artist and didn't believe my working in the Everglades would help my art career very much. But, many times going through my head, I had seen this country and was in love with it. So, I said to myself: "Carl Sahlin, perhaps you will do better--just stay where you are and grow up in this country." That night I was wise but didn't follow it and went on to New York and became an artist.

At the time I was working on the railroad, I had no idea of the obstacles-of the things that would be encountered in building the railroad, but was so pleased when I learned of its completion and so sad when I learned of its destruction in the hurricane.

i.e. reeling it in to propel the dredge forward