

THE DAY THE TRAIN CAME IN  
Jan. 22, 1912

By: Mrs. Violet Pierce Stickney, and  
Mrs. Gertrude Lowe Sandquist

The day the train came in, Mrs. Violet Pierce Stickney was 13 years old and Mrs. Gertrude Sandquist was 16.

Gertrude tells us that she and a friend of hers, also 16, felt grown up enough to welcome the train without going with their families. We were very excited watching it come in. We had little flags and roses.

Violet tells about the Key rock roses which grew abundantly in Key West. Remember that my mother made me a new white dress for the occasion of Mr. Flagler's arrival. I don't remember what kind of material it was but, no doubt, it was of cotton. The children from different schools were on the platform singing. Dr. Fogarty who was mayor of the City at that time escorted Mr. Flagler across the platform. We sang and waved small American flags and threw the roses at his feet. The song we sang was one composed especially for Mr. Flagler and his men.

Although there were other special representatives from foreign countries on the train, I don't remember who they were because we were mostly interested in Mr. Flagler and his group on that particular day.

Gertrude and her friend being older with varied interests tells this story: "We had been around a bit more and knew several of the engineers; they had been working night and day and had no rest whatsoever. Some of them had gone to the bunk house and fell asleep and didn't even see the train come in. We milled around with the crowd and after the dignitaries left, one gentleman from the group accompanying Mr. Flagler came up to us and asked if we'd like to go aboard. Being typical 16 year olds, we did. He offered us champagne. Of course, we'd never had champagne before but we took just a sip--enough to give us the feeling of the celebration--but that was all. We knew better."

Violet recalled that the train seemed quite long--perhaps ten or twelve cars and explained that they brought all types of supplies down to be reloaded on boats and taken to Cuba. In other words, this train was not only for passengers but would become a freight service as well. There were two ferry boats to carry the supplies to Cuba named the Olivet and the Mascot. Of course, these boats also carried passengers too. They'd come right up to the dock and load the supplies and passengers. Mr. Flagler had this in mind--not only to anchor Key West to the mainland but also to anchor Cuba to Key West, and the U. S.

So, on this particular day, a most eventful day, the City of Key West was connected to the mainland by the vision of the pioneer, Henry M. Flagler.

Gertrude tells how so many engineers desired to come down here and build this tremendous railroad that extended 156 miles from the mainland. Seemed all the young men graduating from colleges in engineering applied for these jobs. My husband graduated from Yale in 1910 and, of course, he was very flattered to be chosen to begin his career down here on this project.

When he came down, the road was only as far as Knight's Key. From there, the boats went to Cuba. The rest of the road was under construction. He came from Knight's Key to Key West on one of the railroad's push-carts. They all

v bunked down there what is known now as Turbo Point; anyhow, they all worked very hard on it. At the time that the plans were being drawn, they had to have some steps going down into the water for the yachts that would come in so the passengers could be transported right over to the train. He worked mostly on the plans for the dock and the steps, which were his own design. At this time, however, he was my future husband; we were married in 1924.

There were many Civil Engineers from all over. I have a beautiful picture of about 25 of them which I looked for recently but just couldn't find it to bring it along.

(Violet)

This railroad was called the 8th wonder of the world. I remember the first time I crossed the Seven-Mile Bridge. I held my breath until I got over it and kept my eyes shut most of the way. It seemed it was taking so long but actually it was only 10 or 15 minutes. But, it was a wonderful trip.

I didn't know Gertrude at that time. My maiden name was Pierce. I went to the parochial school and she went to the Russell Hall school. My father and mother were both born in Nassau. My father came over here when he was very young so when he became of age, he was made an American Citizen. His occupation was sponging.

My husband would meet the train each time it was due to come in. He would deliver the express and other perishables that would come in; he'd deliver to the homes, stores, whatever. He had a wagon drawn by two horses; he had a colored man to do the driving while he did the delivering. The perishables were fruits, vegetables, ice, ice cream packed in sawdust, poultry to be delivered to the stores. The pineapple came from Cuba by freighter but we did have a pineapple factory here at that time.

Gertrude tells her recollections of the young engineers who were carrying our Mr. Flagler's vision. "One of the things I remember is that they were paid \$75 a month which was considered excellent pay in those days. Newspaper coverage was very limited prior to the time that the train actually came in to Key West. However, there were all kinds of reporters around that day. A prior notification of this historic day was sent all over the country so there were reporters here from all over. There were around 10,000 people milling around that day--all the schools were let out--the businesses closed. And when the train actually arrived, there were whistles blowing, bells ringing, and lots of noise. There was quite a celebration.

The social life was especially active. There were teas, and other parties (they didn't call them cocktail parties then); they had cotillions held at the LaBrisa where the Sands is now. They had a large ballroom there entirely surrounded by a veranda, and inside was an enormous ballroom with a beautiful dance floor. Key West was a great town for dancing as we had to make our own amusements here. When they had the cotillions out there, it was a very fancy affair, everyone in their long gowns and men wore tails. Key West was very social minded those days. I was a little too young to participate in all of this at that time but can remember much of it. My mother and father attended these affairs; just can't remember exactly what my mother wore but I know it was very fancy. Some of the dresses of those days are being preserved today at the Martello Towers Museum.

Violet stated she could remember her mother making some of the dresses for the ball. One of them had yards and yards of baby blue ribbon and the skirt was very, very full. I can't remember what kind of slippers they wore with these dresses but I'm sure they were pretty.

It was so difficult to settle down after this big celebration because we were always thinking and talking about it. All of the events have been pretty well documented but it's hard to put into print the true feelings of individuals and record the memories of that momentous day.

The engineering fete was the thing that made the headlines around the world because to build 27 bridges was an unheard of undertaking.

Gertrude told about filling in the land at Trumbo Point, to make the station there. (Tape ended).

Violet's recollection of a Sunday afternoon.... "Every Sunday afternoon, me and my friends, and it seemed everyone else, would walk down on Trumbo. There were little shells all over the beach. We'd gather them up and make necklaces out of them.

Getting back to the bridges, they were built on concrete viaducts. One of the engineers (Nora Smiley's brother) has said that the marl they used was the best rather than bricks. The hurricanes would destroy the bricks but the marl being more porous could absorb the water. Seems the engineers were very pleased with themselves when they worked out using the native marl. The marl is kind of a mixture of little coral animals, and those viaducts have held up all though three hurricanes. That was the encouraging part of it because the rose beds wouldn't wash away.

Violet tells of her experiences in a hurricane she remembers the most. It was in 1910. My mother and my sister and brother and I were alone in the house. My daddy had gone down to secure his boat. The scaffolds on the upstairs blew off and the water just came down all through the house. After the storm was over, we had about a foot of water all through the house. We thought for sure that my daddy had gotten lost but all of a sudden, there was a knock on the door and there he was. We were so very happy as we thought for sure he'd been lost at sea.

Gertrude remembers these things about the same hurricane but she thought it was in 1909. I lived right opposite the Convent gate. The water was half way up the convent fence--about 2 ft. anyhow. It didn't quite come into our house but it was right up to it. Word would reach us that part of the bridges were washed away. Key West has, however, survived many hurricanes. We were primarily built here by old New England ship carpenters. They built the houses so well that we really weren't too disturbed. The real old buildings are put together with wooden pegs. These buildings were built to last.

Seems however, that up the Keys, they didn't feel so confident when a hurricane struck. The first bad one was in 1906, and the 100 mph wind struck a construction camp located at that time on Long Key which is now Knight's Key. Work on the first major ocean crossing, the Long Key viaduct, was damaged. and more than 160 men died as wooden house boats were swept away by the pounding tide. Millions of dollars were lost and many thought this was the

end of Henry Flagler's dream. But, the railroad owner wired the workers, "Go on to Key West" and the work was begun again.

About a year after this hurricane, the work at Long Key viaduct was completed and the word spread to Key West that the train soon would be running.

However, the train could travel only 31 ft. above the ocean sea for two miles and that was really the first test of ocean travel. Mr. Flagler was determined to bring this railroad all the way to Key West so the next big task was to build the mammoth 7-mile bridge, between Knight's Key and Bahia Honda bridge,, the highest bridge. Actually the bridge was 9 miles in length if you include the approaches. The land could scarcely be seen from the center of the span. A 250 ft. swinging bridge in the center of the channel allowed the ships to pass between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. Foundations had to be built almost 30 ft. below the water line in a swiftly flowing current. I understand that professional divers were brought from Tampa to do the underwater work. The work continued until another hurricane hit in 1910. It struck the Keys and underand almost all of the road bed under the 7-mile bridge washed away. Bug again, the concrete viaduct that we spoke of stood the test.

In the meantime, Mr. Flagler's health was failing fast. His one dream was to ride his train all the way to Key West. So the work was pushed ahead at top speed in order to fulfill Mr. Flagler's dream.

So, on January 22, the Extension Special left Miami carrying Henry Flagler and an array of dignitaries.

Mrs. Frank Malone, present at the interviews with Gertrude and Violet, tells about the worst hurricane in 1935, long after the train had been running.

"My husband was the City Editor of the Miami Daily News. He was also a veteran of World War I and was very interested in the remains of the Veteran's Army, the CCC Camps. They had been moved from Washington and came further down and wound up finally in Matacumbe. My husband spent many hours getting permission from Washington to send a train which was already made up, to get those men from Matacumbe. It took nearly the whole day to get the approval. Finally the train got a little bit beyond Homestead and it was blown off the tracks. The railroad was destroyed and never rebuilt. It was said that 500 people lost their lives in that hurricane; they even found bodies in the trees. It was a terrible disaster.

Finale: There are a great many stories that old timers can tell about hurricanes, and yet as we think back on things that have happened to Key West, perhaps the day the train came in was the happiest day for everyone, and carries the most vivid memories.