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"Flagler's Folly" linked Key West to Mainland

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



"FLAGLER'S FOLLY" LINKED KEY WEST TO MAINLAND

By HAMPTON DUNN

KEY WEST --- The unique Overseas Highway---the "highway that goes to sea"--- is a two-lane bridge and causeway combination which stretches for some 159 miles from Miami to Key West.

This is the end of U. S. 1 which terminates at the other end at Kent, Maine. The Overseas Highway, which provides an eye-filling tour from coral key to coral key, handles a heavy concentration of motor vehicles now. But originally it was the foundations of the old Florida East Coast Railroad Extension.

Henry Flagler, the great Florida developer who had leap-frogged down the East Coast, building railroads and elegant hotels, had one final ambition in life. That was to extend the FEC into Key West. It was a dangerous and expensive venture, and his scoffers termed the project "Flagler's Folly." Hurricane after hurricane struck his dedicated work force of 5,000 men. Finally, the structure was completed and presented to Flagler as a birthday present in January, 1912. Some 700 men lost their lives working on the job, which took seven years nine months of heroic effort and engineering ingenuity. It cost \$50 million. Flagler died a year later, at the age of 84.

The railroad continued to operate until that mighty hurricane which blitzed the Keys on Labor Day in 1935. The storm swept away 41 miles of FEC tracks and trestles and washed away many miles of fill. Railroad officials decided not to rebuild. An Overseas Highway and Bridge District was formed and eventually transformed the railroad bed into a roadway. It was formally opened in 1944. The Seven Mile Bridge on the highway, 35, 815 foot viaduct, is the longest continuous bridge over water in the world.

