



THE BAREFOOT MAILMAN HOTEL

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The Story of the Barefoot Mailman (1885 – 1893)

By David J. Castello

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In 1885 the sixty mile stretch of South Florida coastline between Lake Worth and Biscayne Bay had remained unchanged since Ponce de Leon sailed past here in 1513. Nevertheless, settlers in the area had become numerous enough to warrant the U.S. Postal Service to extend mail delivery south from the town of Palm City (Palm Beach) down to Lemon City (Miami). But a new route over what? At the time there were no roads, no railroad, nothing that connected the two points. Except that virgin coastline. Henceforth the “Star” or “Barefoot” route was created.

The hardy souls that traversed the distance became known as the legendary “Barefoot Mailmen”. And legendary they were. Have you ever trudged through a mile of beach sand? Try 80 miles. In the blazing Florida sunshine. With a large haversack stuffed to the hilt slung over your shoulder. And all for \$175 every three months.

The first contract was “awarded” to Lantana settler (and later Dade County school superintendent) E.R. Bradley, who shared the duties with his son, Louie. The route began Monday morning in Palm City where Bradley picked up the mail. From there he sailed down Lake Worth and was deposited on a sandy ridge near the present-day Boynton Inlet. It was here that the mortal mail carrier transformed himself into the “Barefoot Mailman”. Shirt off, shoes off, sometimes trousers off (who’s going to know?) and all stuffed into his haversack along with a canvas mail sack. The lightweight canvas mail sack was a major concession by the Postal Service. All other mail carriers in America were required to use the standard one made of cowhide.

The Barefoot Mailman walked five miles across Boynton Beach and rested his first night at the Orange Grove House of Refuge (for shipwrecked sailors) just north of Atlantic Avenue in Delray Beach. On Tuesday, he walked twenty-five miles of beach sand until he reached Hillsborough Inlet and crossed in a small boat he kept hidden in the bushes for his own personal use. Alternating between foot and small boat he reached Lemon City on Wednesday night and began his return early the next morning. The round trip was 136 miles. Eighty by foot and fifty-six by boat. The mail carrier reached Palm City by late Saturday, rested Sunday and started the arduous journey all over again on Monday.

To supplement their wages, some of the Barefoot Mailmen (there were 11) allowed a traveler to accompany them for \$5.00. They felt their fee was justified because the mail carrier was forced to slow down for the inexperienced walkers and ferry them across the various inlets.

The Barefoot Mailmen’s efficient route became widely known and probably led to the death of the second one, James “Ed” Hamilton. On October 9, 1887 Hamilton was southbound and he reached the Hillsborough Inlet. To his dismay, he discovered that the small boat hidden for his use was tied up on the opposite side (an investigation later revealed that the keeper of the Orange Grove House of Refuge had warned a southbound traveler the day before not to use the mail carrier’s boat. Obviously, he did.) Hamilton left his mail sack on the north side of the inlet and swam across to retrieve his boat. He was never seen again. The investigative report described the inlet as “infested with large alligators.”

In late 1892 the first county road from Lantana to Lemon City was completed. The following year the U.S. Postal Service did not renew the “Barefoot Mailman’s” contract.

David J. Castello is a member of the Boynton Beach Historical Society and has just completed his first novel, The Diary of an Immortal. If you have any questions, or know an interesting anecdote about Boynton Beach, he may be contacted at www.boyntonbeach.com