



THE BAREFOOT MAILMAN

by Stuart McIver

If you think the mail is slow today, consider the service in south Florida in the early 1880s.

The route for a letter from Palm Beach to Miami, using official United States Post Office channels, went like this. The letter was sent first to the lighthouse community of Jupiter, twenty-two miles to the north. From Jupiter the letter went by an Indian River steamboat to the rail head at Titusville. Carried by train to New York's port, it was sent by steamer to Havana. From Cuba, it was transported by a trading schooner to Miami. A letter would travel three thousand miles to reach a settlement merely sixty-eight miles away! The time involved varied between six weeks and two months.

In 1885 the United States Post Office decided that the time had come for improvement in its Florida service and it established a mail route along the beach between the settlements at present day Palm Beach and Miami. E.R. Bradley, who lived on the shores of Lake Worth, bid for and was awarded the first contract to carry the mail. He made one round-trip each week and earned six

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hundred dollars per year. It was a physically demanding job, and Bradley was now a man of forty-five. For assistance, he turned to his son, Lou, a sturdy youth of seventeen. At least one source claims that on occasion, Guy, an even younger son of fifteen, helped by walking the route.

Lou Bradley was given the task of setting up the mail route. Rain, Florida heat, and the inlets and bays loomed as obstacles as these barefoot mailmen made "their appointed rounds." The Bradleys developed a transportation system to solve the problem of the inlets and it served them well. Their successor was not so fortunate. The one obvious weakness in their system eventually led to a fatal event that has become a part of south Florida legend.

Lou's job was to determine the logistics of the journey. At the Hillsboro Inlet, a remote location far from any settlements, he had to find a place to

hide a boat so that the southbound carrier would find it waiting for him. Then, having crossed the inlet, the mailman would need a spot where the boat could be concealed so that it would be there on the south side of the inlet, ready for the mailman's use when he came back to the north. Concealment was essential. If anyone else found one of the boats and used it to cross the inlet, the boat would then be on the wrong side of the water for the mailman's use. In the dry season, the mailman could wade across at low tide. When the rainy season arrived, however, the inlet was too deep and swift for safe swimming. Furthermore, sharks moved in and out of the inlets and, at high water, alligators and snakes were washed down to the inlet from farther inland.

the mailman left on Monday morning and returned to Palm Beach the following Saturday morning. Both the Orange Grove and Fort Lauderdale Houses of Refuge were used to provide shelter on the way up and on the way back. All together, the route was 136 miles, 56 miles via small sailboat and row boat, and 80 miles along the beach on foot.

Carrying his shoes over his shoulder, it was easier for the mailman to walk barefoot in soft, slipping sand. Furthermore, the firmest part of the beach and, therefore, the best walking was where the surf washes the sand. Also an area where waves splash the feet and legs, the carrier rolled up his trousers. Naturally enough, this was called the "barefoot route." The phrase "barefoot



Historical Society of Palm Beach County

This painting, as well as the one on page 23, is part of a six-scene mural painted by Steven Dohanos as a memorial to the barefoot mailman. It appears at the United States Post Office in West Palm Beach.

The Long Walk

As devised by Lou Bradley, the trip required that the mail carrier sail or row from Palm Beach to the foot of Lake Worth, walk down the beach to the Hillsboro Inlet, row across, and walk to the New River Inlet which had to be crossed by row boat. Then came a ten mile walk to Baker's Haulover at the head of Biscayne Bay where a small boat, fitted with oars and a sail, waited. The carrier always hoped for a breezy day, since the distance to the post office in Miami was twelve miles. After spending the night in Miami, the carrier would start his return trip. If all went well,

mailman" was not used at that time, but was coined later by Theodore Pratt as the title of his book, *The Barefoot Mailman*, published in 1943. The book was later made into a movie, starring Robert Cummings and Terry Moore.

The barefoot mailman developed a special way of walking because the slant to the beach was inherently exhausting. Thus, the mailman made his stride with the right leg, on the higher part of the beach, quicker than that of his left and reversed the process when going back north. This technique kept the legs and feet in excellent condition and kept them from tiring. A person who mastered this technique was called a good "beach walkist."

The mail pouches used by the mailman were custom-built for the barefoot route. At that time regular letter pouches were made of heavy cowhide. Pouches for the beach route were made of lightweight canvas, about fifteen inches wide and thirty inches long. Most of the time this pouch could be rolled into a small bundle and carried in a haversack slung on a strap over the shoulder. On hot days a carrier might even roll up his trousers and shirt into a bundle and place them inside the sack. In fact, a later mailman, J.J. Burkhardt, was called the "naked mailman" because he used the route to insure a total sun tan which he thought was beneficial to the entire body.

New Mailcarrier

In the early summer of 1887, E.R. Bradley relinquished the barefoot mail route. The Bradleys had operated the route for nearly two years without any undue complications, but the job was a restricting, demanding one. And Bradley was a restless man. In giving up the route, he also proved to be a lucky one.

The mail route was taken over by George Charter and Ed Hamilton, who had come to Hypoluxo Island from Trigg County, a small rural county in western Kentucky. It was to be a tragic move for the young Kentuckian.

The fall of 1887 was extremely stormy, even by south Florida standards. No hurricanes struck that year, but squalls and gales pounded the coast and drenched the tiny settlements with torrential rains. The rivers overflowed along the entire coast. It was a time to stay close to home, if one could.

Ed Hamilton, a man who couldn't stay at home because he had a job to do, arrived in Hypoluxo on Sunday, October 9, from Palm Beach enroute to Miami. At that time Hannibal Pierce, assisted by his son, Charlie, was the postmaster. During dinner at the Pierces' that night, Hamilton complained of not feeling well.

"Why don't you spend the night here?" suggested Charlie. "Louie can make the trip with you tomorrow."

Ed shook his head and told them that he carried his own medicine chest: a bottle of Perry Davis Pain-killer and a spoon. He insisted he could continue and made a good case for going on. After all, for a man of his strength and conditioning, the walk that afternoon to the Orange Grove House of Refuge should be easy enough.

Hamilton had no particular difficulty in reaching the station. He chatted for awhile with his friend, Steve Andrews who was keeper of the House of Refuge, and then turned in for a night's

sleep. In the morning Mrs. Andrews gave Ed a good breakfast and sent him on his way toward New River and his next overnight stop, the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge. On his head was a wide-brimmed hat; on his back was a black oilcloth knapsack containing medicine, food, water, and utensils, plus the locked mail sack.

The Hillsboro Inlet was a half-days walk south from the Orange Grove station. Hamilton should have reached the inlet by noon that Monday. He would then be due to check back in with the Pierces' at the Hypoluxo Post Office around noon on Saturday, bringing with him the mail from Miami.

But Ed Hamilton did not return at noon Saturday. As the afternoon wore on, Charlie Pierce became uneasy, recalling that Ed had left the Pierces' home in poor health. Give him another day, he thought. Sickness may have slowed him down.

On Sunday morning Charlie sailed over to the haulover to wait for Ed. He could look to the south to see Ed whenever he would appear on the beach. But Ed never came. Charlie notified Ed's partner, George Charter, who became extremely upset.

Unsuccessful Search

Charlie then had to take a short trip to Palm Beach. Upon his return Wednesday evening, he was met by his mother and his sister who told him that Ed Hamilton had vanished. George had led a search party to the inlet and had found all his possessions, including his knapsack and underclothes. But, there was no trace of Ed.

Charlie sought out George who had just returned from Hillsboro Inlet.

"Hamilton's gone," George said. "Sharks got him. Sharks ate him. He tried to swim the inlet and sharks got him."

George related the grim details. He and another mail carrier had spent the night with Steve Andrews at the Orange Grove station. After supper they sat in the living room reviewing, over and over again, the meager scraps of information on Hamilton.

Then, they heard a faint call from the beach. They stopped and listened. It was a man's voice. Could it be Ed Hamilton?

Rushing out of the house, all they could see was the dark form of a boat at the water's edge and a man struggling to pull the boat up out of the reach of the waves. They ran to the boat calling for Ed.

But it was not Hamilton. The man in the darkness was Charles Coman and he, too, was

looking for Hamilton. Coman, keeper of the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge, reported that Hamilton never had reached his place on the trip south, although he should have arrived on Tuesday. When he did not come, Coman wisely became uneasy. On Monday, the day when Hamilton was due at Lauderdale, a stranger had appeared, walking down the beach from the north. Coman asked how he had crossed the Hillsboro Inlet. The man told him that a party of hunters with a portable boat had carried him across the inlet. Coman, however, did not believe the story. He believed that the man had used Ed's boat. When Hamilton failed to arrive on time, Coman decided it was time to investigate. He found no traces of Hamilton on the south side of the inlet.

At daylight the next morning Charter, the new carrier, and Coman set out from the Orange Grove station and walked down the beach along the route which Ed would have taken. They saw nothing. When they reached the inlet, they headed straight to the place where the barefoot mailman hid his boat. They discovered his knapsack hanging on the limb of a sea grape tree. In the bag were the mail pouch, his trousers and shirt, a spoon, and a bottle of Perry Davis Pain-killer. Near the edge of the water lay his underclothes.

The only conclusion they could reach was that Ed had removed his underwear just prior to entering the water in order to swim the inlet. It looked as though he just did not make it.

The little settlement at Hypoluxo was stunned by the news. Hamilton was a very popular man on the island. The cause of Hamilton's apparent death continued to disturb Charlie Pierce.

"The indications," Pierce reasoned, "were only too plain that on his arrival at the inlet he saw his boat on the other side and without stopping to think of the danger, pulled off his underclothes and plunged into the water. Those not familiar with the situation, or Hamilton himself, would say that he drowned trying to swim the inlet. I could not believe this. He was only thirty-three at the time, strong and active, six feet tall in his stocking feet, and weighing 180 pounds. He was an excellent swimmer and well able to take care of himself on land or in the water. The inlet where he attempted to swim was not over 200 feet wide and was far enough from the ocean that the current was not very

strong . . . I did not believe the shark theory that others seemed to think settled the matter."

Another Investigation

Charlie and Lou Bradley were convinced that another search should be made. They set sail in the *Ibis*, arrived at Hillsboro Inlet in mid-afternoon, and made camp on the south point near the usual place where the mailman kept his boat. Lou took the *Ibis* and searched upriver. Charlie walked along the beach a mile or so reasoning that, if Hamilton had drowned, his body would have come ashore somewhere to the south of the inlet.

He found no trace of Ed, but he found many alligator tracks. The alligators had been carried outside the inlet and into the salty waters of the ocean by the swift-flowing fall tides. Fresh water creatures, they had been forced to swim to shore and then crawl over the beach in order to make their way back to the river and to the Everglades beyond.

On the south side of the inlet lay a long, narrow and shallow lagoon that in normal times contained very little water. Now, Charlie noted, it was deep enough for a large number of gators, even big ones. When they had sailed into the inlet that afternoon, Charlie had commented to Lou on the great number of alligators.

"The place was actually swarming with them," he recalled later. "Seeing all those tracks brought my mind back to the alligators and their presence in such unusual numbers around the inlet. I had not the least doubt that they played a sinister part in Hamilton's disappearance. Many times I had visited this inlet . . . and had never seen more than one or two gators. Now they could be seen everywhere within the inlet, their black ugly heads on the surface of the dark water wherever one might look."

Lou returned with nothing to report. The next day they made a thorough search of the creeks and bays near the inlet, but no trace of Hamilton could be found. The search was over.

Some years later a cruising party spent a few days near the Hillsboro Inlet and found part of a man's jawbone, containing a gold-filled tooth. The jawbone was found on the west side of the same lagoon where Charlie and Lou encountered so many alligators. No one could recall, however,

whethern or not Hamilton had any gold fillings.

The man whom Coman had suspected of foul play was later charged with tampering with government property and tried in Federal Court in Jacksonville. He was acquitted and his name never found its way into court records.

The government continued the barefoot route until late 1892 when a rock road was completed from Jupiter to Miami and the Bay Biscayne Stage Line took over the mail contract. Today, on the grounds of the Hillsboro Lighthouse on the north side of the inlet, there is a plaque to the memory of the Kentuckian:

In Memory of
JAMES E. HAMILTON
United States Mail Carrier
Who Lost His Life Here in Line of Duty

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CORRECTION

In Eugene E. Wiley's article, "Life Saving Station #4" (October 1976 and January 1977), his bibliography incorrectly attributed a Master's thesis first to "Dr. Stephen Kerber," then to "Dr. Stephen Kersey."

Our apologies to Mr. Stephen Kerber, the author of the thesis, and to Dr. Harry Kersey, who graciously found humor in the error.

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