

EARLY DREDGING IN THE LAKE OKEECHOBEE REGION

Conrad Menge

In about 1880 the Hamilton Disston Company (also known as the Atlantic, Gulf Coast and Okeechobee Land Company) purchased four million acres of land located throughout the southern part of the State of Florida. The purchase price was approximately one million dollars. It was the plan of the Disston Company to reclaim the marsh lands surrounding Lake Okeechobee and some of the lake bottom itself so that this land could be used for general farming. In order to reclaim the land, it was necessary to lower the level of the lake by about 4 feet. All of the dredging carried out during the decade between 1880 and 1890 was undertaken with the purpose of draining the marshes and lowering the water level in Lake Okeechobee.

The first dredge used on this project was built in 1882 or 1883 by my two brothers, Joseph Menge and J. Fred Menge. This dredge was constructed at Cedar Keys. This dredge was 20 feet wide, 80 feet long, and was of the elevator type, using 24 buckets. The mud was dumped in a hepper and from there into a wooden chute into which was pumped a stream of water to keep the mud sliding out on the bank. This dredge was able to cut an average of 250 lineal feet, 24 feet wide and 6 feet deep in ten hours in soft muck. This type of dredge was invented by my father, Anten Menge, and was known as the Menge Patented Dredge.

After the dredge was delivered to Fort Myers, J. Fred Menge stayed to take charge of the dredging operations for the Disston Company. He took the dredge to Fort Thompson Falls under its own power, using a stern paddle wheel operated by a chain belt from the main engine.

Beginning at Fort Thompson a few spots were dredged out in the river from there to Lake Flirt. A channel was then cut through Lake Flirt and following the narrow stream bed on to the north end of Bennet Lake. It was necessary to cut a channel in both of these lakes since in some places water was not deep enough to float the dredge. The main idea in this preliminary dredging was to get the dredge to the point where it could begin digging a canal from Bennet Lake to Lake Hicpochee.

The first real canal was the one that connected Bennet Lake and Lake Hicpochee. This work was begun sometime in 1884. The canal was cut in two widths, that is, 48 feet wide.

After the cut into Lake Hicpochee was completed, the dredge was moved over to the east side of the lake and the second canal was started which would connect Lake Hicpochee and Lake Okeechobee. This second canal became known as the Three-Mile Canal. A lone cypress tree on the edge of the canal near Lake Okeechobee was named the Flat Top Cypress and soon became famous as a landmark. It carried a flag on top of it as a beacon so that anyone in that region could easily locate the Three-Mile Canal. This canal was completed in late 1884 or early 1885.

After the Three-Mile Canal was finished, the dredge was taken back to Fort Thompson to cut off some of the short bends in the river. All of these first phases of dredging were completed by the latter part of 1886.

As it turned out, the canals from Okeechobee to Hicpochee, from Hicpochee to Bennet Lake, and the channels through Bennet Lake, Lake Flirt, and on to the Caloosahatchee Valley did not succeed in lowering the lake level by

4 feet as originally planned. In fact, there were times during the rainy season when the direction of the current in the river between Fort Thompson and Eicpochee was reversed, that is, the water flowed "backward" or toward the lake. The Disston Company then made plans to dig another canal from the south shore of Lake Okeechobee, beginning at Ritta River which would drain into the Shark River Valley. It was believed that this additional canal would provide the drainage needed to lower the lake level.

I arrived in Fort Myers on December 8, 1886, the day after my twenty-first birthday, to go to work as engineer on the dredge of which my brother was captain. I went to Fort Thompson where the dredge was then located, having just completed the job of making some cuts to take bends out of the river. We took the dredge immediately to Coffee Mill Hammock where we stayed for about a month, making extensive repairs of the machinery and equipment in preparation for digging the next canal.

When the repairs were completed, we took the dredge into Lake Eicpochee and cut a short canal from the southwest side of the lake back to the pine timber. This was early in 1887. The canal, about a mile long, was called "Wood Yard Canal". Its purpose was to get to the supply of wood which was used as fuel on the dredge. Wood was cut in 4 foot lengths and hauled to the end of the canal by ox team. A man by the name of Joe Horn contracted with the Disston Company to supply wood at three dollars a cord, delivered to the canal. The wood contracts were made for 100 cords at a time. When in operation, the dredge used about a cord or a cord and a half of fat pine wood each day.

As soon as the weed canal was finished, we moved the dredge to the east side of Hiopechee and began cutting a canal from there toward Sand Point. This canal called Nine-Mile Canal was started in about March, 1887. The only purpose of this canal was to provide a waterway for hauling weed from the Weed Canal to the new location at Ritta River where the next drainage canal was to be dug. Otherwise it would have been necessary to haul all of the weed up and across Hiopechee and through Three-Mile Canal, then down and across Okechee to Ritta River.

By the time we finished digging Nine-Mile Canal, the dredge was worn out. We took it to the south side of Lake Hiopechee and abandoned it there. Perhaps today you could still see some of the old hull resting on the bottom.

The Disston Company then built a new dredge at Kissimmee. It was similar to the Menge Dredge, using a hepper and chute for depositing mud on the bank. It was equipped with tumbling wheels, however, instead of sprockets, and it had two pontoons, one bolted on each side to make it more stable. The new dredge was dismantled and shipped on barges from Kissimmee down the Kissimmee River to Lake Hiopechee where it was again set up.

The first work done with the new dredge was to dig two cross canals a short distance from where the canal west of Lake Hiopechee entered the lake, that is, between Coffee Mill Hammock and Lake Hiopechee. These were experimental canals, their purpose being to drain the marshes on either side of the main canal to find out whether the soil would grow rice.

Some rice was sown and it grew so tall on account of the rich soil that the stalks fell over of their own weight before the heads matured. These rice stalks grew over 5 feet tall. After this experience we gave up the idea of growing rice.

After digging the two cross canals, the dredge was dismantled again and towed down to Ritta River by a little stern wheel steamboat called "The Rosalie".

Before beginning on the new canal, which was to go from Ritta River south toward Shark River, it was decided to take soundings for rock in order to determine the exact course the canal should take. We sent out two different parties to make this sounding and they both returned to the dredge at the end of a couple of days, reporting that they could not get through the swamp and sawgrass. My brother and I and our cook, John Weatherford, then decided that we would make the sounding ourselves. We took one canoe and a sneak boat. Our equipment consisted of three woolen blankets, three rubber blankets, and three 16-inch boards, each 7 feet long. These boards were placed across the canoe and sneak boat at night as a bed. This was during the dry season and there was practically no water in the marshes in the Everglades. We had to drag our boats practically all the way. In spite of the dry weather, the mosquitoes were so bad that we had to go to bed as soon as the sun went down to have the protection of our mesquite bar which was suspended over our board bed.

For 17 days we traveled making soundings as we went along. By this time our provisions were getting so low that we had to turn toward the pine timber and back toward the dredge to get more supplies. Our food supply gave out completely two days and a night before we reached the dredge, and I ate sawgrass buds to stave off hunger. (They tasted pretty good). We finally reached the dredge and secured an additional supply of provisions and were ready to start out again and complete the sounding. Fortunately, heavy rains set in at about this time and we were able to finish the soundings by boat.

We started digging the canal from Ritta River south during the latter part of 1888. After dredging about 12 or 13 miles, we ran into a rock ledge and the canal was abandoned. This canal became known as Thirteen-Mile Canal.

This was the last canal dug by the Menge brothers in this region. The dredge was dismantled and put on barges for shipment back to Kissimmee. During the trip across Lake Okeechobee, a storm came up suddenly and the dredge broke loose from the tow boat. It sank in Lake Okeechobee and was never located again. This ended the early dredging done in the region.

My brother and I dug all the canals in the vicinity of Lake Okeechobee. We did not work on any of the canal projects that went to the east coast from the Everglades region and we were not connected with the St. Cloud operations on the Kissimmee River.

It was quite a problem to move the dredge across the lake to a new location. The dredge wasn't very seaworthy and couldn't be handled by the tow boat at all in even a moderate breeze. Towing was always done at night because there was very little wind on the lake between sundown and sunrise. The dredges were towed to location by small steamboats. We used three of these during the course of our work as tenders for towing wood barges and for hauling supplies as well as for towing the dredge.

The names of all the boats and dredges used on the original job were:

(a) Menge Patented Dredge. This was the first dredge used.

It was worn out on the job and was abandoned in Lake Hicpochee in 1888.

(b) The Gopher. This small stern wheel steamer about 25 feet long was used to haul wood and to get supplies for the dredge. It was the first tender used on the job and was out of commission in 1886.

(c) Mamie. This was a small steamboat (propeller drive) about 25 feet long. It was the second of the three tenders used on the job.

(d) New Dredge Built in Kissimmee. This dredge was built by the Disston Company in 1888. It did not have a name. It sank in Lake Okeechobee in 1890.

(e) Rosalie. This was a small stern wheel steamboat about 45 feet long, the largest of the three tenders we had on the job. The boat, named after Captain Rose's daughter, was brought down from Kissimmee. Captain Rose was the general manager for the Disston Company. It was the boat we used to tow the dredge to Ritta Island after the two small side canals were dug across the main canal west of Lake Hicpochee.

(f) Hamilton Disston. This was a two-deck stern wheel steamer about 75 feet long. Its home port was Kissimmee and it was used to bring officials of the company down to look over the progress of the work.

Kraemer Island in Lake Okeechobee was named after James M. Kraemer, engineer for the Disston Company. I do not know how Observation, Ritta, and Torry Islands got their names.

I do not know how Fort Thompson got its name originally, I remember someone telling me that a person found an old rusty coffee mill on the high ground of the hammock east of Fort Thompson and that this is the way Coffee Mill Hammock got its name. This place was known as Coffee Mill Hammock long before I came to Florida in 1886.

I first met Captain Clay Johnson in Fort Myers some years after we had abandoned the dredging operations. Captain Johnson and I became great friends during the years when we were both in the steamboat business. His home was in Kissimmee. He owned and operated three boats which I knew well: the Roseada, the Lilly, and the Osceola. These were passenger and freight steamers which operated on the Kissimmee River during the summer. During the winter season Captain Johnson often made trips down through the lake to Fort Myers carrying tourists on sightseeing and fishing trips. The Lilly was the largest of the three boats and was the one most frequently used in making these trips.

The Suwanee was purchased from Captain Prince by the Menge Brothers Steamboat Line in about 1905. This was a two-deck stern wheel steamer about 75 feet long. It was designed for carrying passengers and freight.

The boat has quite a history having once belonged to the newspaper "Times Democrat" of New Orleans, Louisiana. At that time it was named the "Susie B". I am not sure where Captain Prince bought the boat but at any rate he brought it to Fort Myers from the Withlacoochee River. He used the boat mainly to take parties fishing. After purchasing the Suwanee from Captain Prince, we also used it quite frequently for that purpose. Winter visitors from the north would charter the boat for several days or perhaps for a week or two to make trips up to Lake Okeechobee or out into the Gulf on fishing trips. Mr. Edison took more trips on the Suwanee than on any other boat between 1905 and 1913. Mr. and Mrs. Edison, usually accompanied by a party of friends, would charter the Suwanee for two or three days or a week. They made these trips every season for a number of years. Sometimes they would make several trips during the season. Mr. Edison was very fond of fishing and liked to go both up the river and down the river to the Gulf.

The Suwanee was also chartered each season to parties from New York and other large cities in the east. These people often came to Punta Gorda in their private railroad cars. Since there was no railroad to Fort Myers at that time, the Suwanee would pick them up at Punta Gorda for trips up the river and along the Gulf Coast. I am sorry that I cannot remember the names of any of these parties now.

The Suwanee was wrecked in a hurricane in the fall of 1926. The storm blew the boat ashore on the south side of Lake Okeechobee near Moore Haven.

When Mr. Ford came to Fort Myers in 1927, he inquired about the Suwanee and stated that he wanted to build a replica of the boat to be placed in his museum in Dearborn, Michigan. He was interested in the Suwanee mainly because Mr. Edison had spent so many happy days on it.

Mr. Ford, Fred Menge, and I drove to Moore Haven in the winter of 1927 to see if we could find some parts of the old boat which could be used in the Suwanee which was to be rebuilt. We easily located the boiler on the south shore of the lake where the boat was wrecked. We could not find any of the original hull or super structure. One of the engines was sticking out of the ground near the boiler and after digging around in the sand and mud, Mr. Ford found the second engine.

I was employed by Mr. Ford to build a replica of the old boat. The hull was constructed on the old Menge brothers' ways on Orange River and was shipped to Dearborn on flat cars along with the boiler and two engines which had been salvaged from the lake shore near Moore Haven. I went to Dearborn shortly after the hull was shipped there in 1929 to finish building the boat and to install the boiler and engines which had been reconditioned and put in perfect running order. The "new" Suwanee powered by the original boiler and engines is now in Greenfield Village, Dearborn, Michigan. During the summer months the boat carries passengers on a small river in the Village.

It is hard to name any particular place in the Lake Okeechobee Region where the black bass fishing was especially good. It was good everywhere! When I was working on the dredge, one of my favorite pastimes on Sunday

was to sit with a cane pole, using a piece of bacon rind for bait and catch bass as fast as I could pull them in. I used to catch them on one side of the barge, unhook them, and throw them back in on the other side. I recall that I used to catch a great many fish in Bonnet Lake, in Nine-Mile Canal quite near Lake Hicpochee, between Lake Flirt and Bonnet Lake, and in Lake Hicpochee near the south shore. A friend of mine told me that he caught a 16-pound bass in Fish Eating Creek (this was in 1888). I didn't actually see the fish so I don't know whether it was that large or not.

There is one experience with black bass that I do remember very well. We were digging Nine-Mile Canal and had cut through a small pond. After the canal had been cut through this place, the water was still 8 or 10 inches deep on each side of the cut. One of the men on the dredge told me one day that he wanted to show me where he had found a great many bass. We got in a small skiff and rowed back to the pond, paddling the boat over the side of the canal and up near the edge of the sawgrass a few feet away where the water was only about 8 inches deep. At this point, the pond narrowed down so that by turning the boat sideways we could block the opening out into the canal. Both of us then sat on the same side of the boat so that it touched the bottom and at the same time, we hit the surface of the water with our oars. As soon as the first oar hit the water, the bass started coming out of the sawgrass where they had apparently been feeding and tried to get out into the canal. They couldn't get by the boat and began jumping. About 25 or 30 fair sized bass, weighing from a pound and a half to four pounds, jumped into the boat. Bass were hitting me in the chest, legs, and arms. I remember yelling to my companion that

we had better get out of that place fast or they would sink us! I do not remember ever doing any bass fishing out in Lake Okeechobee so I cannot say whether there were many fish in the big lake in those days or not.

I do not know where the Disston Company secured funds to buy the land and start the dredging. It may have been a stock company or it might have been a private fortune that was used. The Disston Company had general offices in Jacksonville. The two officials who often visited the dredging locations were E. R. Rose, general manager, and James M. Kraemer, engineer.

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SIGNED Conrad Menge
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