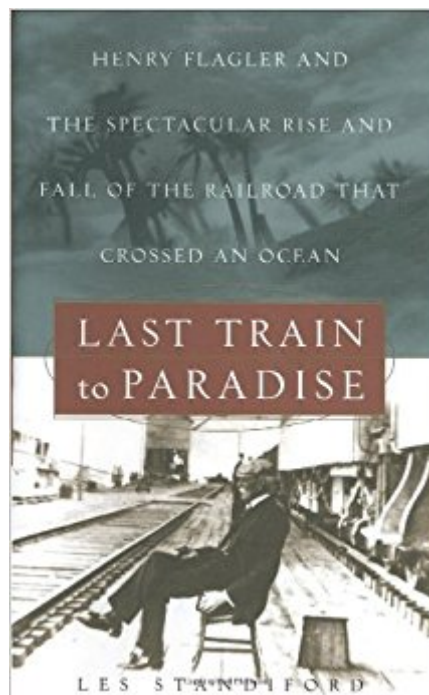




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Last Train To Paradise: Henry Flagler And The Spectacular Rise And Fall Of The Railroad That Crossed An Ocean



Synopsis

Last Train to Paradise is acclaimed novelist Les Standiford's fast-paced and gripping true account of the extraordinary construction and spectacular demise of the Key West Railroad—one of the greatest engineering feats ever undertaken, destroyed in one fell swoop by the strongest storm ever to hit U.S. shores. In 1904, the brilliant and driven entrepreneur Henry Flagler, partner to John D. Rockefeller and the true mastermind behind Standard Oil, concocted the dream of a railway connecting the island of Key West to the Florida mainland, crossing a staggering 153 miles of open ocean—an engineering challenge beyond even that of the Panama Canal. “The financiers considered the project and said, Unthinkable. The engineers pondered the problems and from all came one verdict, Impossible. . . . But build it they did, and the railroad stood as a magnificent achievement for twenty-two years. Once dismissed as Flagler's Folly, it was heralded as “the Eighth Wonder of the World” until a will even greater than Flagler's rose up in opposition. In 1935, a hurricane of exceptional force, which would be dubbed “the Storm of the Century,” swept through the tiny islands, killing some 700 residents and workmen and washing away all but one sixty-foot section of track, on which a 320,000-pound railroad engine stood and “gripped its rails as if the gravity of Jupiter were pressing upon it.” Standiford brings the full force and fury of this storm to terrifying life. In spinning his saga of the railroad's construction, Standiford immerses us in the treacherous world of the thousands of workers who beat their way through infested swamps, lived in fragile tent cities on barges anchored in the midst of daunting stretches of ocean, and suffered from a remarkable succession of three ominous hurricanes that killed many and washed away vast stretches of track. Steadfast through every setback, Flagler inspired a loyalty in his workers so strong that even after a hurricane dislodged one of the railroad's massive pilings, casting doubt over the viability of the entire project, his engineers refused to be beaten. The question was no longer “Could it be done?” but “Can we make it to Key West on time?” to allow Flagler to ride the rails of his dream. Last Train to Paradise celebrates this crowning achievement of Gilded Age ambition, a sweeping tale of the powerful forces of human ingenuity colliding with the even greater forces of nature's wrath.

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Customer Reviews

In *Last Train to Paradise* novelist Les Standiford has written a lively, felicitous account of the building of the Florida East Coast Railway, which, for a little over two decades, connected mainland Florida with Key West. Henry Morrison Flagler, John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil partner and, in many eyes, the true genius behind that company, embarked on the project in 1905 when he was 74 years old. The railroad, which crossed more than 150 miles of open sea, was an engineering feat nearly equal in scale and difficulty to the digging of the Panama Canal. Standiford's narrative skillfully blends tales of construction perils (not the least of which were escadrilles of mosquitoes) with brief, illuminating travelogues and natural histories, pocket descriptions of life in early 20th-century Florida, and a truly gripping description of an epic standoff between Mother Nature, in the form of a monstrous hurricane, and a stalled, 160-ton steam locomotive. With nary a single missed note, this fascinating tale is popular history at its best. --H. O'Billovich

A good idea to have a novelist tell the story of Henry Morrison Flagler, the 19th-century mogul credited with developing Florida as a vacation paradise goes sadly astray here. Readers hoping to learn about the man will be disappointed, as will those looking for a good yarn about the engineering marvel that is this tale's centerpiece Flagler's creation, in the early 20th century, of a rail line that traversed 153 miles of open ocean to link mainland Florida with Key West. The narrative bumps along, frequently veering off into tantalizing detours that lead nowhere. Standiford presents pages about the power of hurricanes to destroy property and savage the human body, an emphasis that is the book's undoing: readers are led to believe that storm damage in 1935 was the sole reason for the railroad's abandonment. This prompts Standiford to argue that Flagler's undertaking was a

"folly" from the start, as his contemporaries claimed, and that his story constitutes a classic "tragedy." In fact, the Florida East Coast Railway (FEC) was undone as much, if not more, by a force Standiford never mentions: the internal combustion engine. After the hurricane of 1935, investors and the government considered rebuilding the FEC, but decided instead on a highway. The book's conclusion references Shelley's cautionary poem "Ozymandias," a gloss on the impermanence of man's works. The warning might apply to this unsatisfying book. 8 pages of b&w photos. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Just came back from 6 weeks in Florida and while in Key West saw the Henry Flagler exhibit at the museum there and wanted to learn more about him. This book is an interesting history of Florida and especially the Keys. We have been to the memorial for the Hurricane Victims of 1935 so this told me the complete story. Read this if you want to find out more about the beginnings of Florida and the snowbirds!

I read Last Train to Paradise because I was interested in learning more about the author and his writing. I not only discovered a very readable book by a talented writer, I learned a tremendous amount about Henry Flagler and his railroad to Key West. Most entertaining and educational. Les Standiford won me over in his first chapter where he does a remarkable job of conveying the intensity, the panic, and the devastation of a hurricane. He returns to this scene in his conclusion. In between there is the story of a man who persisted against great odds and I am left wondering what propels men like Flagler, who had it all and spent his final years pursuing a passion to build something as unimaginable as the Florida East Coast Railway? I'm sorry I got only the Kindle and missed out on the pictures. I plan to buy another copy as a gift.

If you like historical non-fiction, this is a great read. It's amazing the kinds of projects that men took on in the early 1900's. For Henry Flagler this was an enormous project that ended in ultimate failure. I gave this book 5 stars because the story was fascinating and the book beautifully written.

As a resident of the Gulf Coast of Florida for the past 17 years, I have not had very much exposure to Flagler's accomplishments. But I have heard of his building accomplishments and wanted to read this book. So GLAD I DID. It was well written and always interesting. I highly recommend this book.

This was an interesting read. Flagler is certainly a big name here in south Florida. The book

chronicles Flagler's struggles to build a railroad line through the Florida Keys and on to Key West. Struggling through three hurricanes, fighting swamps and disease, Flagler's company employed engineering marvels, building new bridges across the ocean from key to key, only to have hundreds of miles of tracks torn up and buried by the relentless sea. My only criticism was the organization, as the book started out to be about Flagler the man, and moved quickly into the railroad project which was about the the struggles. We never really got to look inside the man to learn more about his passion to finish, before his death, the rail line to Key West.

Enthralling. Hard to imagine the drive, industry and dedication focused on the building of the project. Harder to comprehend the cost, the privation, and the tragedy which would have dissuaded a less committed leader. This fast paced narrative puts faces on the names which are so commonly associated with the places and infrastructure of south Florida. The book also, incidentally, reminds us of the vulnerability of the residents of the keys and the tenuous link that community has with the vital services now taken for granted in the 21st century.

Great book! Full of history and things I was not aware of! The writing was very clear, not too technical and enjoyable to read. This is a must for any Florida History Buff! Amazing that Flagler was able to accomplish what he did!

This exceeded my expectations and, being a transplant to FLA, revealed a lot about the formation of the state. Reminiscent of the story of the building of the Transcontinental Railroad. Even if Flagler had not decided to take on this 'bridge too far', his imprint was already on the breakout of Florida from a swamp to a viable and productive state. Dramatic story, well crafted. Recommended. (The next big breakthrough for Florida was the coming of air conditioning allowing it to be a 12-month state instead of a 'seasonal' state).

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