

Will it be Davis Causeway again?

LOCAL HISTORY
COLLECTION

VF Davis, Ben T.
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Capt. Ben T. Davis spent seven years of his life, four of them during the hard times of the Depression, masterminding construction of a causeway between Tampa and Clearwater.

Now, the salty captain's descendants have a special interest in seeing the up-in-the-air plans for a new causeway come down to earth: they'd like to see Davis' name restored to the old route.

"Everybody in the family feels, well, that it would be nice," grandson George T. Davis said as he thumbed through some old photographs of the causeway in the courthouse historical room.

The photograph, published here for the first time, shows the then newly-completed causeway straddled by a combination horn-tollhouse. Davis rescued the pictures from a decaying family album and donated them to the historical society.

Davis lives at 130 Maxwell Place with his father, George W. Davis, son of Ben T. The Davises and other members of their clan are gentlemen in the old southern tradition and are anxious not to step on toes with their desire that the causeway once again bear their name.

Courtney Campbell, the former state road board chairman, grandson Davis is quick to point out, is living in Clearwater. Campbell was the man who had the causeway widened enough to provide a recreational corridor, and the road board affixed his name to it in 1947, while he was chairman.

Now, the state department of transportation, successor to the road department, wants to fill along the north side of the causeway, creating, in effect, another highway.

This highway would be a high-speed through-way, a limited-access road. The old section would be fenced off and transformed into a first-class recreational area, with controlled exits and entrances. It is this part that the Davises would like to see reverted to its old designation.

"We like to think that people would want it changed back



Grandson George Davis superimposed on old causeway photo

automatically, if the new section was built," grandson Davis said. "It's just not practical now, because it would create a lot of hard feelings."

But, according to John Burdin, transportation department district planning engineer, the plans for a second causeway are awaiting the results of a complex bay study being undertaken by the University of South Florida and the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council.

The idea, which the transportation officials say will cost \$14 million, has run into flack from conservationists who fear the dredging would further harm Upper Tampa Bay.

The transportation experts say that the improved causeway will be sorely needed by 1974 or 1975.

Back in 1963, there was another move to restore the Davis name to the causeway, with Mayor Julian Lane a supporter of the plan. City council, however, voted instead to name the new municipal beach after Davis. There have also been several schemes to build statues to Davis near the causeway entrance.

The causeway has seen a lot of controversy and a lot of traffic since it was opened on a rainy June day in 1934. It had

taken \$1.5 million to build, a sum land developer Davis had to scrape up by his wits over the seven years the road was in the making. (The causeway's Davis was no relation to the Davis Island Davises, although both projects were built during the same era.)

Ten young girls opened a palm and flower-bedecked gate during the opening ceremonies under the tollhouse, which was to become home to the Davis family. Ben T. Davis even made a two-sentence speech:

"I've never faced a mike before. I'd rather get out and build another bridge than make a speech."

Grandson George T. remembers startling motorists by his antics as a child in his roadside playroom beneath the tollgate.

"Grandfather built us this room with a sort of cage front and swings and things inside. He used to call us his little monkeys."

But in 1944, the federal government decided the roadway was needed for defense, and the Davis family, which had been charging 25 cents per car toll, was forced to sell.

With the sale, eventually went the name, since the federal