

VF Davis, Ben T.



HERITAGE

By Sun Staff Writers

LOCAL HISTORY
COLLECTION

Ben T.'s grandson sticks to his dream

By DEBORAH QUINN
Sun Staff Writer

Take two proud families. Add money, political influence and a difference of opinion. Shake well.

What do you have? Standard television soap opera fare. And a genuine home-brewed feud involving real-life characters living in the Tampa Bay area.

The plot focuses on the tug-of-war over the identity of that 9½ mile-long concrete link between Tampa and Clearwater generally known as the Courtney Campbell Causeway.

Pulling from the Tampa end is the family of the late Ben T. Davis, causeway builder.

Ben's grandson, George T. Davis, wants the highway known by its original name, Davis Causeway.

"All I want," Davis said, "is for my granddaddy to get his due."

On the Clearwater end is Henrietta Campbell, widow of Courtney Campbell, former State Road Board chairman whose name has become affixed to the causeway.

Davis's hope to rename the Tampa-Clearwater link is a "fanatic dream," said Mrs. Campbell, who, needless to say, likes things just the way they are.

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This controversy about names began in 1972, but in the past five years it has retreated from the public spotlight to the deep recesses of family and social circles.

Then, in the November issue of the Journal of the Tampa Historical Society, writer Hampton Dunn again brought the issue into the limelight in an article titled "Will Its Original Name Be Restored To Davis Causeway?"

In Clearwater last week to turn over a file of newspaper articles about the causeway to the public library, George Davis vowed it will.

"Me and Mrs. Campbell may die first (before the name is changed)," Davis said. "But to hell with us. My granddaddy is the real hero, and

there will be no satisfaction until this business is straightened out."

Capt. Ben T. Davis had the kind of storybook career children dream of.

Born in Kentucky, he moved with his family to Texas as a youngster and made four trips to Oregon along the Chisolm Trail herding cattle.

The first graduate in engineering from the University of New Mexico, Davis left the states for Mexico where, as a member of the government engineering team, he helped build one of the country's first railroads. He acquired the prefix "captain" during a previous job there as port captain for the Standard Dredging Co.

Among the developments Davis was contractor for in Mexico were a viaduct, a steel bridge and several buildings. He was one of five men who developed the exclusive Chapultepec subdivision of Mexico City, and all wharves in the port of Tampico were constructed under his supervision.

While on a dredging job in Florida, Davis discussed with some leading Tampa citizens the possibility of bridging Old Tampa Bay.

The project began in 1927, but it was brought to a standstill by the Florida real estate boom and the Depression. It resumed in 1932 with a \$600,000 loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corp. Davis invested \$900,000 in the causeway with money borrowed from friends.

When the project was completed in 1934, it had a price tag of \$1.5 million. The causeway was the longest span across an open body of water in the country, shortening the drive between Clearwater and Tampa by 10 miles.

Tolls to cross the causeway were 25 cents per car and driver, and 5 cents each for additional passengers; horse and rider, 5 cents; bicycle rider, 5 cents; motorcycle, 10 cents; and trucks and buses, 30 cents and up according to weight. A round trip for passenger cars and all pas-

sengers was 50 cents.

The State Road Department and the federal government seized ownership of the causeway to aid the war effort in 1944. Davis was reimbursed \$1,085,861 and the tolls were removed.

In 1947, nine months after the death of Davis, the State Road Board decided to honor Courtney Campbell, former chairman of the board, by naming after him a causeway beautification project begun during his tenure.

Campbell came to Florida during the 1920s land boom.

Before being appointed to the road board by Gov. Millard Caldwell in 1942, he was a member of the law firm T.M. Shackelford Jr., and later was a vice president and general manager of the Florida division of Food Machinery and Chemical. In the latter job, he was responsible for pioneering several packaging processes.

In 1952 he successfully ran for a congressional seat. In addition, he was a charter member of the first Pinellas County Park Board and was one of the founders of WLCY television.

The naming of the causeway is a mystery.

American Automobile Association maps refer to the development as Courtney Campbell Causeway. Davis's name appears on signs at Tampa's municipal beach on the east end of the causeway. Two 7-foot markers at either end of the causeway designate it the Courtney Campbell Parkway.

A March 1972 article in the Tampa Tribune's Florida Accent magazine quotes Geoffrey Dobson, general counsel for the Department of Transportation, as saying the only official move taken was a State Road Board action naming the beautification project, and that the road itself could be called anything. Most highways, he said, never are legally

See HERITAGE, Next Page

named.

The story also cites a Sept. 19, 1952, letter from Florida's then-Attorney General Richard W. Ervin to Frank Caldwell, campaign manager for Campbell, who was seeking the congressional seat.

Ervin explains in the letter that the State Road Board, acting on a June 1947 Hillsborough County Commission resolution, ordered by formal resolution that the highway beautification and roadside improvement project on the causeway be named the Courtney Campbell Highway Beautification Project.

In addition, Ervin wrote that Campbell had opposed naming the project after him in the first place, the article said.

George Davis organized a drive to rename the causeway in 1972, after the death of Campbell. A resolution to effect this goal was introduced in the Florida Legislature, but nothing ever was resolved.

There was much name calling between the parties embroiled in the controversy. Rex Farrior Sr., long-time friend of Mrs. Campbell and her lawyer in the matter, threatened Davis with a lawsuit. "Mrs. Campbell and the family of Courtney Campbell will strongly oppose any effort to change

the present status," Farrior was quoted as saying.

"I know this sounds like a Hatfield-McCoy fight," Davis said of the controversy last week. But, he added, "we have an injustice here."

He maintains there never has been a legal name change for the causeway, and since his grandfather built the span, "he should get the credit for it."

"He (Capt. Ben Davis) has thousands of fans," Davis said. "The reason so many people for so long have wanted to see Granddaddy's name restored to the causeway is that, during the Depression, he gave jobs to thousands of people, which meant the difference between eating and starving to death."

Davis offered a "compromise proposal" he would like to see submitted to the Legislature. He said State Rep. Jim Foster of

Tampa recommended it to him a couple of years ago.

The proposal, Davis said, provides for the installation of two signs at each end of the causeway. One would designate the road Davis Causeway; the other would designate the land along the road Courtney Campbell Park.

"Now what could be fairer than that?" Davis asked. "Mrs. Campbell can even put neon lights on the sign if she wants to."

Foster said there is "considerable sentiment toward recognition of the Davis Causeway, and I will be glad to work with him (George Davis) again."

Does that mean introduction of a new resolu-

tion during the 1980 legislative session?

"It's too premature right now to say," Foster said.

"He (George Davis) seems to have this fanatic dream of getting the name back," said Mrs. Campbell, who lives at Clearwater Beach. "He has made it his life project."

"We'll go to Tallahassee again if we have to."

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