

VF Davis, Ben T.

Davis Causeway Bill For Builder

LOCAL HISTORY
COLLECTION

DADE CITY — Mrs. Margaret Hawk, Dade City, a 35th year in the Pasco elementary school system as a teacher here and at Pinellas, remembers crossing when she was "a little girl" the "Davis Causeway" across Tampa Bay. The privately-built route lost its official name over the years, and has been called in later years Courtney T. Campbell Causeway. "I definitely remember it as built by Capt. Ben T. Davis and was called Davis Causeway," she said. Charles F. Touchton, insurance businessman, Dade City, also recalled knowing Capt. Davis personally and how he went

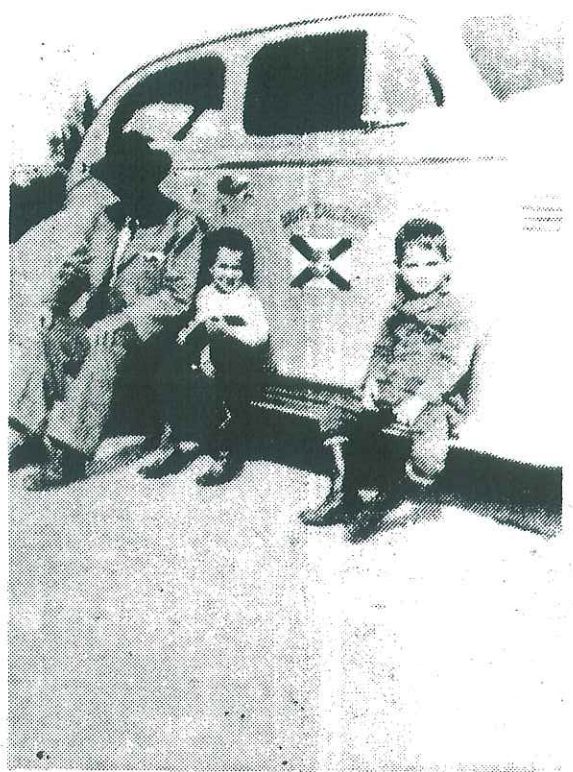
about the country soliciting money to complete the Davis Causeway. "I've still got some files on it," he said. Those were back in the days when a traveler from Dade City to Pinellas County had a choice of routes: Overland via Odessa and around the north end of Tampa Bay, Davis Causeway or Grandy Bridge. "Davis Causeway," Mrs. Hawk recalled, "was the short cut to Clearwater from here and a time-saver into the thumb-shaped Pinellas County peninsula." Capt. Davis' most noteworthy engineering feat was the 9½-mile causeway from Tampa to Clearwater, longest built over water in the nation from the time it was started in 1927 to its completion in 1934. It is now

designated as State Road 60. Capt. Davis, however, never could raise sufficient funds to complete his project and sold it in 1944 to the state and federal government for a measly \$1,085,861. He had collected tolls of 25 cents a car and lived in the tollhouse, where he raised his children. His grandson, George T. Davis, who played at the site as a child, has secured the help of Sens. Julian Lane and David McClain, to introduce a bill in this legislative session to officially re-name the causeway in honor of the builder as it was originally with appropriate markers. With the proceeds of the sale of the causeway, Capt. Davis moved on to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, where he bought an 8,000 acre ranch near Raymondville.

According to grandson Davis, a little park on the cause way dedicated to the late Courtney T. Campbell when he was chairman of the Florida state road department. By wrongful publicity concerning the park dedication, the causeway got itself a name change, Davis said.

He says his grandfather gave a great many Tampa Bay area families food on the table by providing jobs during an era of Florida's post-boom days, when the depression was at its worst. The Ben T. Davis causeway meant something personal to them, he said.

His grandchild remembers a pet black snake being kept in the public restroom on the causeway by his family. It gave the toll customers an extra thrill in passing.



Causeway builder Capt. Ben T. Davis with the tour car with flag for "Davis Causeway" and his grandsons, Ben C. and George T. Davis, right, now employed by Wackenhut Detective Agency.

George remembers that his grandfather's grandfather grafted the famous Ben Davis apple in Kentucky, and Capt. Ben T. Davis was direct descendant of President Jefferson Davis and the attorney general of the Confederacy, George T. Davis.

Ben T. Davis was the first graduate in engineering from University of New Mexico and made his start by building the first railroads in Mexico and half

ever built in that country. He and four others developed Mexico City's deluxe Chapultepec Heights subdivision.

From Mexico to Tampa to Texas, Capt. Davis counted the leading citizens of that day among his personal friends. The Davis family sold the ranch and moved back to Tampa about 1953.