

VF Davis, Ben T.

LOCAL HISTORY
COLLECTION

'How To Get Justice For Granddaddy' Bothers Tampan

By CAROLYN BOWER

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TAMPA — In the 1920's, Capt. Ben T. Davis built a causeway into Tampa Bay with his own money, but the depression stopped him from completing it.

With government help, Capt. Davis finished the causeway and operated it as a private toll road from 1934 to 1944. He died two years later.

TODAY, HIS grandson, George Davis, wants the causeway — the Courtney Campbell Parkway connecting Tampa to Clearwater — to be renamed after its builder.

According to George Davis, Courtney Campbell did not want the causeway to be named after him and no legal designation was made.

"The causeway wasn't named until after granddaddy's death, and Mr. Campbell died just after I began this campaign, so I couldn't get him to endorse it," Davis says.

CAMPBELL WAS responsible for the plants and shrubbery along the causeway, and his work on

beautification apparently prompted people to name the structure after him.



MAP SHOWS
... Controversial causeway
Orlando Sentinel
Sunday, April 23, 1972

"The question now is how to get justice for granddaddy" Davis says.

"Now that we have the truth on the causeway, I hope we can persuade people to correct an injustice to granddaddy that never should have happened," Davis adds.

CAPT. BEN — the title was honorary — not only began the causeway with his own money, but persuaded his friends to help in the construction.

"Granddaddy began the bridge with money he made in Mexico, but the depression tied up all his assets, and the causeway just ended out in the bay," George Davis says.

"He had begged, borrowed and about everything else to get it started, and he wasn't going to let a thing like the depression stop him, so he went right to Washington," Davis adds.

"HE HAD the gall to ask for a \$1 million loan to finish the thing — and he got it, too."

"The family actually lived over the tollhouse for a while, and when a reporter once asked granddaddy if

the cars didn't keep him awake at night, he said he would have a lot more trouble sleeping if he didn't hear them."

Davis recalls the "chicken coops" his grandfather built as play areas so the grandchildren wouldn't run into the path of approaching autos.

"WHEN THE bridge was sold to the government in 1944 it really tore him up," Davis says.

"He used to hitch a ride with motorists and talk for the whole 9½ mile trip about how badly he wanted to keep the bridge."

Davis says he feels a personal obligation to have his grandfather's name restored as the official name of the causeway.

"MY GRANDFATHER was from a pioneer family — he belongs to the history and the people of Florida," George says, adding, "to me, it's kind of a sacred thing, not to be tampered with."

Davis began his campaign, at the urging of his grandfather's old friends, in December.

"Granddaddy was related to Jefferson Davis and other Confederate leaders, was the first engineering graduate from the University of New Mexico, and built the first railroads



FIRST TOLL BOOTH
... Family once lived there

in Mexico," Davis said.

"HE BUILT all the wharves in the port of Tampico, and while there became friends with everyone — Pancho Villa and Zapata, U.S. Ambassador Dwight Morrow and his son-in-law, Charles Lindbergh," Davis says.

"He also ran into Gen. Robert E. Wood, John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford I, and made especial friends with Walter Chrysler, I guess, because our family still drives Chryslers," Davis jokes.

"His closest friends were Mayor Curtis Hixon, D. P. Davis, builder of Davis Island; Hav-a-Tampa Cigar founder Eli Witt, Manual Corral of Corral Vaga Cigars, Carl Ray of Silver Springs, and Governors Doyle Carlton and Spessard Holland."

DAVIS HAS unrestrained respect and affection for his grandfather.

"He touched everybody who was anybody in his lifetime," Davis says, "and I'm deeply concerned Floridians know his true story — it seems the least I can do for granddaddy."