

Conclusion

The creation of an Internal Improvement Fund by the State of Florida in 1835 marked the beginning of the reclamation of the Everglades. The early efforts of the Board of Trustees of that Fund to encourage reclamation through grants of land to railroads, land companies, and other alleged developers involved the area in a confusion of land ownership and land interests which was not conducive to suitable drainage and land use. Out of this situation came the establishment of a Board of Drainage Commissioners and direct attempts to construct facilities with funds from the sale of lands. The failure of the Drainage Board to achieve any real progress was followed by the creation of the Everglades Drainage District with the authority to raise funds for reclamation by levying a drainage tax on the overflowed lands.

The history of the early operations in the Everglades clearly shows distinct phases with regard to reclamation and public reaction in such questions as the feasibility of drainage, the worth of the lands for agricultural use, and the sufficiency and permanence of those early operations. To answer these questions the several boards of Trustee-Commissioners hired several groups of engineers to examine the problems of reclamation and to report on the practicability and the feasibility, and to recommend continuance of the project.

All of the engineering examiners sponsored by officials

of the State of Florida recommended the reclamation of the Everglades as physically practicable. Little attempt was made, however, by these examiners to report on the vital need for intelligent water management as an absolute necessity to conserve the organic soils, on the importance of progressive unit development, or on comprehensive plans which would have coordinated the physical needs of reclaimed portions with those of the unreclaimed portions.

The persistence of drainage operations on the part of the State since 1900, together with the activities of the sub-drainage districts and the control of Lake Okeechobee through federal participation has resulted in the present agricultural use and commercial development of the land in the Everglades. As has been seen, however, the absence of definite plans and central authority to control water management is resulting in a serious state of affairs. Contemporary agricultural and economic enterprises are exacting a terrific toll at the expense of the natural resources of the Everglades. Until these conditions are recognized and works undertaken to conserve these resources these irretrievable losses will continue.

The alteration of the physical characteristics of a region almost invariably results in the creation of new problems relating to the utilization or conservation of that area. The drainage of peat and muck lands has almost always resulted in too low a water table and consequent

over-drainage which, in turn, causes excessive soil oxidation and subsidence. The over-drainage which has occurred in the Everglades of Florida is similar to that which has taken place on such reclamation projects in other organic soil areas. Records of organic soil reclamation in other sections of the United States and in other countries of the world show that deposits of these soils as deep as those found in the Everglades have entirely disappeared under agricultural development.

The permanence of the soils and the life of the agricultural and commercial enterprises in the Everglades are challenged, the investment in improvements and drainage facilities is threatened, and the unreclaimed areas and east coast metropolitan water supplies are all jeopardized by the lack of adequate water control. The tremendous value of the Everglades under proper management and water control makes the present system of waste a concern of the entire nation.

The problems of overproduction and marketing of vegetable crops are far from solved. Also unsolved is the problem of suitable agriculture or industry that may some day use the remainder of the area that can be made available for settlement. The problem of soil conservation is of great importance from the historical standpoint since, if better care is not taken of these soils, they can not endure beyond a few decades. Further than this, if better thought

is not given to the present and future care of those sections that are still undeveloped, those soils certainly will not be available for development at such time as they are needed.

In all of this important question of soil and water conservation and the determining part it is to play in the future of the Everglades, there is one asset available in this section that is also found in other pioneer agricultural areas. This asset is the great admiration and respect that the Everglades farmer has for the land he is working. These feelings spring largely from the prolific fecundity of the black soil. This conscious love of the land, more than anything else, will bind owners and tenants alike into a rigorous observance of rules, once a technical leadership has been developed that can show them what they must do if they would protect this fertile earth against complete destruction.