

Roadside Tree Planting in Florida Then and Now

by Dick Workman



Driving through small Florida towns, such as Alva, Arcadia, or some of the back streets of LaBelle near Lake Okeechobee, one cannot help but be impressed with the peaceful beauty of streets lined with giant live oaks. I have often heard people remark at how wonderful it would be to have trees lining the streets throughout our communities and ask why it isn't done now.

One good way, I thought, to research the subject is to find out how—one hundred years ago—we were able to accomplish what we cannot do now. A visit with some “old timers” and a review of the Florida Statutes from 1901 sheds some light on the subject of tree-shaded roadways.

Chapters 74 and 121 of the 1901 laws of Florida provide for the following:

Sec. 1. The County Commissioners are empowered to improve by shading the public roads and highways of their respective counties.

Sec. 2. It is the duty of said Commissioners upon petition of a majority of the freeholders along any public road to improve the same by planting suitable shade trees on such part as is mentioned in the petition, the work to be done in regular order and at proper season.

Sec. 3. Provides that upon petition of landowners the Commissioners shall set shade trees not less than three nor more than six inches in diameter, and not less than ten feet high, at a distance of one eighth mile apart and fifteen feet back from the center of the road on each side in two parallel lines [as markers] to guide the setting of remaining trees.

Sec. 4. Provides that after markers and guides are set as per Sec. 3, Commissioners shall purchase suitable trees and cause them to be set by contract, not less than ninety feet nor more than one hundred and ten feet apart, to be placed so as to alternate with trees on opposite side of road. Trees are not to be paid for until they have put on sufficient growth to insure continued life; not more than twenty-five cents shall be paid per tree. The trees must be purchased from

freeholders and taxpayers, and not more than ten dollars shall be paid to any one in one year.

Sec. 5. Provides for paying the expense of planting out of the road tax fund.

Chap. 121, Laws of 1901.

Sec. 1. Provides that it shall be unlawful for any person to cut any shade tree within fifteen feet from the center of roadbed without permission from proper authority.

Sec. 3. Provides that an offender shall be fined not less than five dollars nor more than twenty-five dollars.

With mounting evidence that one of the best ways to counter global warming is to plant trees, and with hundreds of miles of unshaded roadways, it makes sense for us to be at least as wise as our grandfathers were a century ago. Perhaps you could organize a “majority of freeholders” along your street and petition your local government to provide an opportunity for you to plant trees along it. If we don't reduce energy consumption and plant trees soon, there won't be people in this part of Florida one hundred years from now.