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TELLS OF THE PANAMA CANAL

Interesting Interview With Mr. Charles Roberts Who Has
Spent Past Year In Canal Zone.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Roberts, who arrived in from Roseburg yesterday, have recently returned from a year's sojourn in the Panama canal belt, where Mr. Roberts, who is an engineer, was engaged in constructing a pipe line for the Union Oil Company, of California. Recognizing in Mr. Roberts a man who could furnish something interesting for the readers of the Times, a reporter interviewed him and learned much about the conditions on the Isthmus.

It would perhaps be well to describe the pipe line enterprise before taking up the canal interview. The pipe line built by Mr. Roberts extends from Panama to Colon, across the Isthmus and is an 8-inch pipe for the distance, about fifty miles. The company obtained concessions from the government before undertaking the enterprise, as the work could be executed at about one-fifth the cost by running near and on the railroad right of way than it could had the company been obliged to build it away from the railroad and across swampy parts of the country, where the cost is enormous in building foundations. Under the concession, the company was allowed to follow the right of way, but this was not done for the entire length of the line, as in some places it was more convenient to follow other courses.

The work of construction occupied the best part of six months, and the labor was done by West Indies negroes and other foreigners who are immune, or practically so, from the enervating effects of the humid atmosphere of the tropics. The oil is forced through the pipe at the rate of 600 barrels per hour from the pumping station at Panama, on the Pacific side of the Isthmus. This station is operated by a 500-horsepower engine, and the highest elevation on the route is 370 feet. The line is built over this elevation.

Mr. Roberts' canal talk was more interesting, if anything, than the story of the pipe line. A thing which is not commonly known is the fact that the Panama, or Pacific end of the canal will be twelve miles east of the Atlantic entrance. This is owing to the peculiar twist of the Isthmus at the location of the canal where it lies almost directly north-west and southeast. It has been noticeable of late that little fault is being found with the government respecting the building of the canal. This absence of fault-finding Mr. Roberts ascribes to the fact that the canal is under actual construction, and that the head officials are working in harmony. Since the resignation of Engineer Stevens, whose health was breaking down, the conditions which were at that time about perfected, have grown better, and everything has been going along without friction.

There are now working on the various sections of the canal between 35,000 and 40,000 laborers, most of whom are employed on the tremendous Culebra cut, of which the public has read from time to time in the newspapers. These laborers are for the great part West Indies negroes, and these were the first class of laborers who engaged for the work. They are the original canal builders, but the canal commissioners found they are not so efficient as desired, and therefore other nationalities have been imported to expedite the construction. There are about 4,000 Italians and 2,000 Spaniards on the zone, and both nationalities are better workmen than the negroes. A scale of wages has been adopted since learning the value of the various workmen which gives the negroes 10 cents an hour. They buy provisions from the government commissary and support an army institution, a mess. Here the men are boarded at the rate of 10 cents per meal. The Italians and Spaniards are paid 20 cents per hour and have the same system of living.

No Chinamen have yet appeared in the zone for work, and it is believed there will be none there, since so much objection was raised throughout the country when it was ordered by the War Department that Chinamen be engaged and brought here for the construction work. Most of the negroes are educated and were reared under British sovereignty in the various islands, among them being Jamaica, Barbados, Bahamas. These are descendants of the Africans brought to the islands in early days by traders and the slave merchants.

For amusement the subjects of Great Britain play cricket and baseball, and Mr. Roberts says they don the white duck suits common where cricket and its accompaniments draw society crowds.

The health conditions at the present time have become nearly per-

fect, owing to the zealous and untiring efforts of the government to eradicate the common enemy of the tropic inhabitants, yellow fever. This fact, according to the opinion of Mr. Roberts, is a matter that should be thoroughly disseminated throughout the United States, since so many believe the canal zone nothing more than a hot bed of the deadly fever. Mr. Roberts related an instance showing the dread of fever which prevails in this country. His company had need for an efficient stenographer and typewriter and engaged an expert from New York City. This man had his plans all made for sailing but happened into an insurance office to bid a friend good-bye. While there, a man came in and wanted to insure, saying he was going to the Isthmus of Panama. He was told he could get no insurance from that company or from any other, and so the stenographer unpacked his trunk and staid in New York.

The great Culebra cut is the biggest work on the canal. This cut will be about eleven miles in length when completed and for the whole distance will average 200 feet in depth, with a maximum depth of 300 feet. The canal for the whole distance will have no narrower width than 300 feet at the bottom. Here the steam shovels are scooping out the dirt which is hauled away to some other part of the work and used for grading or building dams. The canal will carry forty feet of water for the entire distance and in the lake which the Gatun dam will make, the depth will be much greater.

A little ancient history is not amiss in summing up this matter, and Mr. Roberts gave some facts about what the French people had done under the guidance of DeLesseps. The American engineers found that the French measurements and surveying were accurate in all particulars and much admiration for the lost cause and its projectors is held by the Americans who are now going to accomplish what France failed to do.

Probably the greatest wonder to the home public regarding this enormous work is the Gatun dam, which will be constructed about four miles inland from Colon. Here is the difficulty which promised to upset the whole scheme at one time. The Chagres river flows through the country and floods at times so great that engineers were for a time at a loss to overcome the apparent insurmountable trouble. The Gatun dam was the solution of the problem. This work will be constructed of earth and will be a mile and a half in length, 135 feet high, 2600 feet thick at the base, 300 feet wide at the top and 360 feet in thickness at the water level which is 85 feet, leaving the top of the dam 50 feet above the water.

The Chagres valley will be transformed by this dam into a vast lake, the extreme distance of which will be 20 miles from the dam, and will contain 140 square miles of water. The dam will have a spillway of 100 feet width for the escape of surplus water. The approach to the lake will be made by three step locks and the lake will carry the traffic for twenty miles. This lake will enhance the value of the canal, since it will be possible for ships to make much greater speed on a broad expanse of water than when they are creeping through a narrow 300-foot waterway. At the end of this lake, the canal will enter the Culebra cut and after traversing the eleven miles which it constitutes, drop again to sea level through one lock.

The Panama railroad has been double-tracked since the American government purchased it and many evidences of the French occupation remain, but these are fast disappearing. A striking fact is found in connection with this railroad. It was constructed in the years intervening between '52 and '57. The ties used for the work were made from native woods, lignumvitae and cocobola. They are practically in as good a state of preservation as when they were laid fifty years ago. When spikes were driven in the ties from these woods, holes had to be bored before the spikes could be driven.

In speaking about the desertions among the Americans at work in the zone, Mr. Roberts said that this class of men, as a rule, belong to the large throng which is yearly thrust upon the country from colleges only partially equipped for the work they have chosen to follow. Many incompetents are discharged who get into the government service on the canal work, and they must make some excuse when they return to the States, and so, instead of telling the truth and representing conditions in

the correct light, they hand out knocks.

There is another class of men, competent engineers, who stick to their work and enjoy good health. Good quarters are furnished the employes, Americans, and the government furnishes commissary supplies for them, feeding guests at good clean restaurants and hotels for thirty cents per meal. Mr. Roberts and his wife boarded at one of these restaurants and obtained good fare.

The canal zone is policed by soldiers who served in the Spanish-American war, and privates or patrolmen are mostly negroes trained in the British constabulary service. The American negroes are a "Cocky" lot, feel superior to the British colored men, and do not fail to let the foreign negroes know it. The government lately imported a large consignment of mules from New Orleans and negroes were sent along to drive them. The British and American negroes, like birds of a feather, flock together.

The government has built many club houses along the canal right of way for the convenience and entertainment of the American colony.

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