

# The Daily Morning Astorian.

VOL. XXIII, NO. 89.

ASTORIA, OREGON, TUESDAY APRIL 14, 1885.

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**LIFE IN COSTA RICA.**  
Some Queer Railroad Building—Piling Up a Debt of Twenty Millions.

SAN JOSE, (Costa Rica) April 4, 1885.

If anybody supposes that Costa Rica is a barbarous country, filled with half civilized creatures, unmanly and uneducated, he makes a great mistake. But I know there is a prevailing impression that it is an outlandish sort of place. I thought so myself, but have learned the contrary. There are peculiarities among every people and I've no doubt that a Costa Rican goes to the United States he sees things just as odd and strange as we see them here; perhaps he writes to the newspapers about them, as I have done. But they are as intelligent, enterprising and cultivated as our own people, and can surpass our best society in knowledge of languages, in grace of deportment and equal it in musical and other accomplishments. They have keener perceptions than we do and not only have the faculty of talking in three or four languages, but are blest with a remarkable "gift of gab."

No Costa Rican lady or gentleman is ever embarrassed; they always know how to do and say the proper thing, and while their courtesies and good manners are said to be only skin deep, they are the most charming of companions, the most generous of hosts and the most polite of gentlemen. No laborer ever passes a lady in the street without lifting his hat, and he always touches that always dirty and generally dilapidated portion of his apparel when a gentleman passes him. If a lady approaches a group of men digging a cellar or repairing the street, or what not, even though some of them may be half naked, they always salute her respectfully, and in the rural districts no one ever needs you without saying, "May God prosper the object of your journey," or "May Heaven smile upon your errand," or something in Spanish like that. The same man will swindle you out of your eye teeth if he gets a chance and if you ask him how far it is to the next place he will undoubtedly tell you a falsehood. He does not care a copper whether you ever reach the end of your journey and has no more regard for your welfare than the flea in the grass, but he recognizes a beautiful custom and says "God be good to you," as if he meant it for a blessing.

And this politeness permeates all classes and castes. If you enter a store with a lady every man there will salute you and remove his hat out of respect to her; on the streets the people will stand aside to let you pass—and it is necessary for them to do so, for the cars and locomotives are less than two feet wide. If you go into a hotel office, a barber shop, restaurant or any other public place, everybody present will salute you with "Buenos Dias," or some other friendly welcome. While there is not a particle of sincerity about all this; while the object and end of life in the Spanish code of ethics is to get along with as little work and as much swindling as possible, they are certainly to be praised for cheating you in the most polite and agreeable manner possible.

Although Costa Rica is burdened with a public debt of about \$10 per capita of her population, the government supports a university and public schools in every city and village, and education is compulsory. The schools are free except an enrolling fee of \$2 for each pupil annually, and teachers are paid from \$35 to \$50 per month. In a total population of 200,000, there are 30,000 children enrolled, and the average daily attendance last year was 72 per cent. Between the ages of 8 and 14 attendance is compulsory, but above the age of 14 the pupil may attend not only the public schools, but the university free of charge. There is more attention paid to the education of women here than in other Spanish-American countries, and they are not kept in cages like wild animals or canary birds, as is the case nearly everywhere else. But moralists resent this freedom as disastrous to society, and point to the fact that 25 per cent of the births here last year were illegitimate as an evidence that the two sexes cannot mingle without harm. The president of the university, one of the most accomplished and progressive men in the country, thinks that this social condition will soon correct itself. Although a Spaniard, he believes in the equality of sexes and does not recognize the inferiority of woman in any respect.

The government of Costa Rica is like all of the Spanish-American countries—a republic in name, but a monarchy in fact. Every one of the republics is controlled either by an autocrat or a family, or a clique of politicians, who have gained power and keep it with the sword. The people rather like that sort of government, at least they are contented with it, having known no better, and it is such an improvement upon the tyranny, plunder and persecution which their fathers endured under Spanish rule, that they regard their more recent oppressors in the light of benefactors. This applies not only to Costa Rica, but to all the other republics as well. They submit to a dictator and let him steal as much as he likes of their money, providing he lets their persons and property alone. Costa Rica got her freedom in 1821 without a struggle and therefore the people do not understand nor appreciate the true nature and value of political liberty. The power was at once usurped by persons of wealth and social influence, and they maintained it until overthrown by other families of the same circumstances and ambition. The revolutions that so impoverish other republics have not been frequent in Costa Rica; there have only been three or four since the dissolution of the Central American confederacy, and all of them have taken place without much bloodshed; but the country has been kept poor by desperate financial operations more for the pecuniary benefit of the persons in power than the public good.

The national debt is now nearly \$20,000,000 and is owned in England, where the money was borrowed for the construction of railways and other great national improvements, but it is a notorious fact that but a small portion of ever reached the actual object for which it was incurred. Commissions as high as from 12 to 24 per cent, were paid to persons who had the influence to secure the loans, and every clerk under the government got his share of a division of a great part of it. When every friend of the ruling power got all he wanted the remainder was devoted to the construction of one railroad seventy miles long, a second twenty-six miles long, and two cart roads, one forty-two miles and the other twenty-eight miles. The longer railroad cost \$12,000,000, or nearly \$170,000 a mile—at least that is the amount borrowed and used in the construction of a track which ought to cost not more than \$20,000 per mile and could be replaced for that amount. The road is leased to a man by the name of Keith, from Brooklyn, who pays the government \$100,000 a year for the use of it, and openly admits that he pockets a net profit of over \$100,000 per month. But Mr. Keith is solid with the government, having married a daughter of the secretary of state and de facto president of the republic. The other railroad, twenty-six miles long, represents an expenditure of over \$5,000,000 and cost nearly \$200,000 a mile, while it could be replaced for less than the other one—from \$15,000 to \$18,000 per mile. It is said the road cost as much as if its rails had been made of solid silver!

This road represents one of the most remarkable feats of engineering that was ever witnessed. It was intended to run from San Jose, the capital, to the Pacific slope, a distance about sixty miles. All the rails and supplies were brought from England and landed at Punta Arenas, the Pacific terminus. But instead of beginning the road there and continuing it up into the mountains, where it was intended to go, these remarkable engineers carried all their rails and supplies up the cars and locomotives to a muleback to San Jose, and there commenced to build down by the place the stuff was brought from. And what was more remarkable still, when it was discovered that some of the heavy iron could not be carried on muleback, these brilliant scientists stopped operations to construct a cart road, so that the stuff could be hauled up by oxen. The result was that the entire loan was exhausted before the road was completed halfway and the government was not able to borrow any more money. It is said that it cost \$6,000 to transport each of the five locomotives in use on this road sixty miles. They were taken apart and most of the pieces carried on muleback. When they got here the government had to send to England for men to put them together again. If the road had been built in the natural way, from Punta Arenas eastward, it need not have cost one-third as much, and the entire sixty miles could have been completed with about two-thirds of the money that was expended upon less than half of it. The road is now operated by the government at a loss of about \$500 a week. People have offered to lease it and pay the government a handsome sum for its use, but the president prefers to keep it as a planting.

The road will eventually fall into the hands of the bondholders, and will then be completed to the Pacific and be a paying concern, although the debt might as well be canceled and the government go through bankruptcy and begin anew. The country is rich enough in its natural resources to make the roads it has and many more pay. Two hundred thousand people occupying an area that would easily sustain ten millions. There is no richer country on the globe, but it needs population and capital. The people are industrious and in a measure prosperous, but they are taxed outrageously and the lack of facilities to get their crops to market costs them the greater part of their profits. They are not given to politics, and although once in four years the form of electing a president is gone through with, not one out of ten of the legal voters casts a ballot. There are said to be about 30,000 legal voters in Costa Rica, but often not more than 2,000 votes are cast at a presidential election, and those mostly by the soldiers. There is seldom but one candidate—the nominee of the administration.

*Carr. S. F. Chronicle.*

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