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The Americans In Panama

Story of the Panama Canal From Start to Finish.

By Wm. R. Scott.

(Continued from last week.)

restraint under the control of regulations that the Americans considered essential to orderly existence.

From the first Mr. Wallace had kept close tabs on the cost of excavating dirt in the Culebra cut. The type to be chosen being still an unknown factor, he was in some measure working in the dark, except that the material removed would be useful for any type, provided the dumps were selected so as later not to get in the way of any route chosen. In 1912 the Americans had to remove a French dump near Culebra to prevent its slipping down into the cut. He finally announced a unit cost of 50 cents a cubic yard for either a sea level or lock type canal.

Messrs. Parsons and Burr, the engineering committee of the commission, after a personal inspection of the canal zone and taking Mr. Wallace's estimate, recommended a sea level type of canal. It was to cost, exclusive of improvements in Colon and Panama and civil government in the canal zone, \$230,500,000. Mr. Wallace had caused surveys to be made for a lock type of canal, and he estimated the cost of such a canal, with a summit level of sixty feet elevation, to be \$178,013,406.

All estimates missed the real cost of the respective types widely. Mr. Wallace's estimate of 50 cents a yard for excavation was far too low. As a matter of record, the cost reached 82 cents under Chief Engineer Stevens, rose to 91 cents under Chief Engineer Goethals and only once fell below the fifty cent estimate, in March, 1911, when it fell to 47 cents a yard. The average for the period from 1904 to 1911 was 88 cents. The mistake was made because solid rock underlay the surface, necessitating continuous blasting before it could be handled by the steam shovels, while the working day, which had been ten hours under Mr. Wallace, was cut to eight hours under Messrs. Stevens and Goethals, and wages rose sharply as well.

Persistent and vigorous complaints from Mr. Wallace about the hindrances of governmental methods of doing business found a receptive ear in President Roosevelt. The executive was just as eager to make the dirt fly as Mr. Wallace and readily agreed that a commission of seven members was an awkward and ill working management for the peculiar conditions of the job at Panama. Accordingly drastic action was decreed.

Secretary Taft on March 29, 1905, asked the entire commission to resign. Mr. Wallace was in Washington, and the president and Secretary Taft followed his suggestions almost to the letter, including the one that the chief engineer be made a member of the commission.

On April 1, 1905, the second Isthmian canal commission to be appointed by President Roosevelt was announced. Heading it was a new figure in canal affairs, Theodore P. Shonts, who played a decisive part in the enterprise for the ensuing two years. The personnel of the new commission was:

Theodore P. Shonts, chairman; Charles E. Magoon, governor of the canal zone; John F. Wallace, chief engineer; Mordcael T. Endicott, Peter C. Hains, Oswald H. Ernst and Benjamin M. Harrod.

There was the same number of commissioners, but the first three were named an executive committee which virtually should exercise the powers of the entire body. This power was taken from seven and concentrated in three members. Mr. Shonts was to be in charge of the Washington office and Messrs. Wallace and Magoon on the Isthmus.

Again following Mr. Wallace's suggestion, the directory of the Panama railroad was reorganized, the United States on April 15, 1905, for the first time electing the members. Mr. Shonts was made president and Mr. Wallace vice president and general manager. This would further concentrate control in the chief engineer over a vital factor in canal construction.

These changes and other matters kept Mr. Wallace in Washington from March 29 to May 24, about two months. The employees in the canal zone naturally caught something of the spirit of unrest which attended the reorganization of the commission, and, of course, the hostile press was playing up everything that could embarrass the administration and damn the project. Then the yellow fever epidemic broke out in April, 1905, to add a terrible phase to life on the Isthmus.

Having secured every change he desired, Mr. Wallace left Washington with expressions of cordial appreciation to the president and his secretary. He arrived at Colon on June 2, and the White House believed that a crisis in the career of the project had been passed successfully. They looked forward to smooth sailing with every confidence.

Their surprise and chagrin, therefore, were immeasurable when Mr. Wallace cabled Secretary Taft on June 8

that he be recalled to Washington for a conference. He intimated that the conference might result in his resignation as chief engineer. After a disheartened interview with the president Secretary Taft cabled him to return.

President Roosevelt and Secretary Taft then decided upon a drastic course toward Mr. Wallace as a means of reviving the morale of the canal workers and also of bringing the American people sharply to a realization that the canal project was in peril through a display of weakness in the face of danger that would make our experiment in Panama an international disgrace.

Secretary Taft met Mr. Wallace at the Manhattan hotel in New York on June 25. Secretary Taft listened to his reason for resigning, which in the main was that he had under consideration a position that would carry with it a remuneration of approximately \$65,000 a year.

Secretary Taft did not conceal his disappointment in Mr. Wallace's course. He began by reviewing how the government had taken him from a position paying \$15,000 a year to make him chief engineer of the canal at \$25,000 a year; how the formidable obstacles to be met and the supreme necessity of a canal to the nation made it a patriotic work for any American and an honor to be placed at the head of the greatest enterprise of the age.

"For mere lucre," Mr. Taft continued, "you change your position overnight without thought of the embarrassing position in which you place your government by this action."

Secretary Taft then reviewed how the commission had just been reorganized to meet Mr. Wallace's wishes and every change had been approved by the chief engineer. He closed by demanding the immediate resignation of Mr. Wallace. This came the next day and was made public on June 28, with Secretary Taft's hot rebuke, which in the canal zone had a most salutary effect. It put an entirely new complexion on their work to be told that the nation expected every man to do his duty; that they were not down there for the money they could make, nor were they expected to leave because of the hardships they would meet, but that the object of their exile was to give the nation something vital to its welfare. The deserts began to diminish at once, and the announcement on June 30 that John F. Stevens had been appointed chief engineer further strengthened the morale of the canal organization.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Canal Under Stevens.

ANOTHER notable figure in the railroad world had been chosen chief engineer of the Panama canal, John F. Stevens in 1903 was general manager of the Great Northern Railroad company, and



John F. Stevens.

or his selection as chief engineer James J. Hill said that if the whole country had been ransacked no better man could be found.

It is not possible to estimate the mischief that might have resulted if the selection of a successor to Mr. Wallace had been long delayed. His salary was to be \$30,000 annually, or \$5,000 more than that paid to Mr. Wallace. He was facing a situation in Panama that justified the figure.

The yellow fever epidemic was still uncontrolled. An invoice of the situation as left by Mr. Wallace showed that considerable pioneer work had been done, but the housing, feeding and general preparations for the comfort of employees were unsolved problems.

Mr. Stevens arrived at Colon on July 27, 1905. As a railroad man his eye first was attracted by the congestion of freight on the wharfs and the self evident fact that the Panama railroad was in a near state of collapse. Freight was piled up in the streets in prodigious quantities and was moving

over the railroad at a snail's pace.

As for the railroad tracks in the Culebra cut, he said they were "lines which by the utmost stretch of the imagination could not be termed railroad tracks." Mr. Wallace had found the Panama railroad, after half a century without competition, far behind the times in equipment, and practically no discipline or efficiency existed among the employees. When Mr. Stevens took charge there was an improved situation, but the long absence in Washington of Chief Engineer Wallace

and his sudden departure had caused the railroad to begin a retrograde movement.

For thirty-one miles the main line of the railroad had been retracked with American rails, and the work of double tracking it was just getting under way. The principal shops were at Matabichin, with a capacity of overhauling five locomotives and 150 dump cars a month. The canal employees soon saw the caliber of man at their head by the way Mr. Stevens straightened out the railroad tangle, for the freight began to move, lax methods were rooted out of the system, and the semblance of an efficient organization, operating along modern lines, appeared.

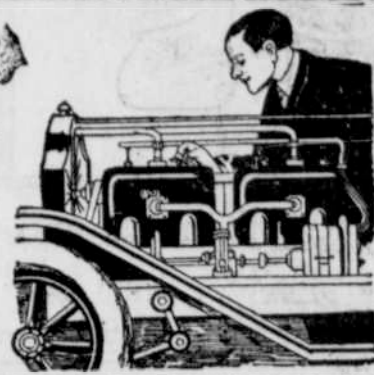
The commission visited the Isthmus in July and August and with Mr. Stevens reached the conclusion that construction work should be reduced to a minimum, even to turning away employees, and all energies bent to building up a system of feeding and housing the men and their families. Preparatory work was given the right of way over construction, which accounts for the comparatively little excavation done under the Stevens regime. The general verdict was that the ground work done by Mr. Wallace was good in spite of disorganized conditions and that no insuperable obstacles stood in the way of building the canal.

There were 8,312 men in the department of engineering and construction, and other employees brought the total to 9,500, not including the Panama railroad. Municipal improvements in Colon and Panama and certain canal zone towns were well under way. Effective progress had been made in the work of surveying the canal route, in making borings for lock sites and in other engineering preliminaries. As noted,

(Continued next week)

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