

The Panama Railroad

*Beyond the Chagres River
Tis said – the story's old
Are paths that lead to mountains
Of purest virgin gold!*

*But 'tis my firm conviction,
Whatever tales they tell
That beyond the Chagres River
All paths lead straight to hell!*
James Stanley Gilbert

On our recent Lunch and Learn presentation on the Routes to California we briefly touched on the importance of the Panama Railroad to the California Gold Rush. The Panama route was considered to be the easiest route to California even in the very first few years of the Gold Rush. Most women coming to join their husbands came by way of Panama and most miners, successful or not, returned home via Panama. Most of the gold shipped out of California went by this route also. Here is a bit more on the continuing Routes to California theme.

The idea of connecting the two oceans was not a new one in the 1840's. As early as 1827, the President of Columbia investigated the possibility of putting the newly invented railroad across the Isthmus. In 1836 President Andrew Jackson commission a study of a route and in 1838 the French were given a concession to link the two oceans by railroad or canal. All these came to naught however until the United States gained the territory of Upper California and Oregon in 1846 and the need to bring more settlers to the almost inaccessible possession was realized and a treaty between the US and Columbia was signed. (Keep in mind the governments of the Panama region changed hands often, sometimes ruled by Columbia, sometimes called New Granada)

Mail delivery and passenger service was the driving force behind the railroad idea. In 1847, the US Congress established two line of mail steamships, one from New York and New Orleans to Panama and the other from Panama to California and Oregon. William H. Aspinwall secured the line on the Pacific side and George Law the line on the Atlantic side. Before either company could get its steamships built and running, the California Gold Rush began in 1848. By the time, William Aspinwall got his first steamship built, the gold rush was a mad storm. The SS California made it around Cape Horn and arrived in Panama City in January 17th of 1849. There it was besieged by seven hundred desperate gold seekers. They took onboard some four hundred and made it to California by February 28, 1849.

Aspinwall and other capitalists in New York were quick to see the need for an even better route to California. Aspinwall and John L. Stephens and Henry M. Chauncey incorporated under the name of the Panama Railroad Company and signed a formal contract with the government of

New Granada on April 15, 1850 to build “an iron Railroad between the two oceans across the Isthmus of Panama.”

It was thought that the railroad could be completed in six months at the cost of one million dollars. From the very beginning though it was realized that this estimate was mere folly.

The conditions of traversing the jungle proved almost impossible from the very beginning. One man described it as “a morass of pestilential dangers infested with snakes and poisonous insects, the laborers left at dawn in the drenching rains, the steaming muck and gumbo. They labored all day like lost and forgotten slaves. Up to their necks in muck, they stumble, slipped, struggled and cursed. Over their heads black clouds of mosquitoes whined and buzzed. They emerged at night soaked to the skin and caked with mud.”

Everything had to be shipped in and most of the labor had to be imported. They came from every part of the world., West Indians, English, Irish, German, Chinamen, death so thinned their ranks until it looked for a time as if the work would have to be abandoned. The area became known as the “Hell Strip.”

Sickness took such a terrible toll that men could work only one week out of three. The company didn't keep any records but during the five years of construction it is estimated that six thousand died and some historians say it was probably twice that. The story in the gold fields was that there was a dead man for each rail laid.

One contingent of eight hundred Chinese was imported and their conditions were so horrible that if they didn't die from sickness they committed suicide. Barely two hundred men were survived.

After the Chinese experiment failed, they imported seasoned Irish “navies” who had experience building canals and railroads across England. They almost immediately succumbed to the fatal fevers, the few survivors were shipped to New York where most died from diseases contracted in Panama.

The disposal of dead bodies was a huge problem and the company soon established a “thriving trade” in the shipping of cadavers, pickled in large barrels to medical schools and hospitals all over the world.

The worst year was 1852 when cholera swept across the Isthmus, of the American technician then employed some fifty engineers, surveyors, draftsmen – all but two died. A large military detachment, several hundred men including dependents, crossed in July of that year and 150 men women and children died. Capt. Ulysses S. Grant, later President of the US, was among the survivors.

Eventually the company found that West Indian Negroes were more resistant to the fevers and more accustomed to working in the heat, it was these men who continued the work on the railroad.

About two years into the construction, they only had seven miles of track laid but gold-hungry men kept arriving and demanded to take the railroad as far as they could. The company used flat cars to transport the men at \$25.00 to ride the seven miles and \$10.00 to walk on their right of way. In this fashion, more money was raised and slowly and painfully the tracks wormed their way across rivers, through jungles and over mountains. Despite the millions poured into the construction, the railroad's losses were soon overtaken by its revenues.

The road was successfully completed in 1855, five years from the date of the start of construction with a total expenditure of over seven million dollars and countless lives.

The railroad would later play an important part in the eventual construction of the Panama Canal but when the Canal opened in 1914, the importance of the railroad was over and the road became very run down. It was only in November of 2001 that the railroad reopened for passengers and freight.

The above was adapted and paraphrased from the website www.panamarailroad.org/history and *Panama Railroad* on Wikipedia.com