

LABOR AT PANAMA.

Work and Wages Among the Americans and Natives on Our Big Canal.

(Special Correspondence of the Deseret News by Frank G. Carpenter.)

PANAMA—Do you want a job on the Panama canal? More than 1,000 Americans are already employed here, and when the construction is well under way we shall need five times that number. Of these 1,000 will be technical and clerical men, such as engineers, draftsmen and clerks while 4,000 will be skilled mechanics. These must come from the United States, and they will constitute the cream of the labor on the isthmus. They will receive the highest wages and will be paid from 25 to 50 per cent more than similar men working at home.

In addition there will be about 15,000 common laborers, made up of Jamaicans, Colombians, Porto Ricans and possibly of Japanese, Chinese and East Indians. They will form the main supply to be used in the canal construction. That is bound to come from the tropics, the brains and skill will be furnished by the United States.

SILVER AND GOLD MEN.

Uncle Sam has already recognized this distinction. The men are classed on his pay roll as silver men and gold men. Raw muscle is paid in silver, brains and skill get their money in gold. Silver here is worth just one-half what gold is worth; so that the silver wages must be multiplied by two to equal the gold wages. The silver pay now ranges from 15 cents an hour upward. A native workman gets \$1.50 silver for 10 hours' work, or 75 cents gold a day. The American gold man may receive as much as 45 or 50 cents an hour, or \$3.50 or \$5 gold a day. He is often paid by the month, his salary ranging from \$25 upward.

NATIVE LABOR.

At present there are in the neighborhood of 2,000 silver men on the canal. In addition to the police and sanitary chiefs. There were only 750 when the chief engineer took charge and they worked exceedingly well, receiving low wages and laboring only enough to support life. Now they are on hand about two-thirds of the time. Their wages are high for this part of the world and the natives will probably grow more reliable as they acquire the habit of steady work. So far about one-third of the native force has been off all the time. If 100 men are employed the native foreman can be sure that a little less than 70 will turn up, and fully 30 per cent in excess of the actual needs must be carried on the pay roll.

These silver men are Jamaicans, natives of Panama, and Colombians, and stray Spanish, French and West Indians who have drifted to the isthmus. Some of them are skilled workmen, and not a few are excellent mechanics. Such men are paid in silver, but I shall reduce their wages to gold. Native carpenters, painters, masons, plumbers, tinmiths and pipe fitters are now getting from 10 to 30 cents per hour, the foreman receiving 35 cents and expert helpers 10 cents. Engine drivers are paid from 12 cents to 40 cents per hour, according to their grade, and from 75 to 125 cents per hour, while watchmen get from \$15 to 20 cents. These natives work better under American foremen. The supervising architect tells me that his product has increased 25 per cent since the native carpenters were boomed by American foremen. He says the natives learn quickly, and that by making a raw Jamaican a helper to a good carpenter, tinmith or plumber the raw man soon becomes a mechanic. He must, however, be boomed by an American foreman, for as a rule he does not think for himself and cannot understand anything outside the regular lines. He says the natives will never displace our high-priced American mechanics.

HOW JAMAICANS WORK.

The Jamaicans, for instance, have no such word as hustle. They don't understand the sentence "do it quick" and "do it now." They are proud, polite and need careful handling. They are quick to resent insult, and one cannot drive them by force. They are British subjects and must be treated as such. It is interesting to watch the Jamaicans work; they make four motions to the American's one, and every act in common with another man is one of ceremony. In making a request they will bow and scrape like French dancing masters. Suppose that Jamaica John Smith, a carpenter, wants Jamaica James Jones, his fellow, to hand him a board. He does not yell out, as the American would: "Jim, give me that board!" but says quietly: "Mistah Jones, would you be so kind as to trouble yourself to hand me that board lying beside you?" Mr. Jones looks up and replies: "I will be delighted to oblige you, Mistah Smith."

"I thank you very much, Mistah Jones. Just as soon as you can conveniently hand it to me I should like to have it."

"All right, Mistah Smith, I am delighted to help you. Here is the board." And with that he hands it up.

"I thank you, Mistah Jones."

"Don't mention it, Mistah Smith." By this time five or ten minutes have gone by forgetting that board from one place to the other. If it had been in America the two negroes would have been hit over the head with the board by the white foreman. But here the foreman has to speak carefully, which helps to prevent this kind of work as far as possible.

The same conditions largely obtain as to Colombian labor and there is no doubt but that it will be to the advantage of the canal work if Chinese, Japanese and East Indians can be employed. When Seeley Taft was here last fall, he went to Jamaica, intending to hire from 5,000 to 10,000 negroes for the canal. He found the governor of the island averse to losing that number of men. The governor said that Jamaica was already drained of its mechanics and laborers and that this would result in the government having to support many parishes throughout the island. Even now East Indians are imported by Jamaicans to work their plantations and to aid in the shipment of fruit. The Jamaicans are not as industrious or thrifty as the Chinese and they cannot be so easily handled. There is a strong feeling on the part of the officials to employ Asiatic labor if it can be done in accordance with the laws of the United States.

AMERICAN MECHANICS AT PANAMA.

The mechanics who have come here from the United States and have been willing to rough it have done well, and they are likely to do better. They are paid about the same and, in some cases, a little more than at home; but the climate is such that they can get in many more days per month or year than in the United States, and on this basis wages are higher. Blacksmiths, boiler-makers, machinists, molders and pattern-makers are now receiving 45 cents per hour, or \$4.50 per day. Made their helpers get from 25 to 35 cents per hour. Plumbers get \$1.50, and so do skilled mechanics of many kinds. If the men prefer it they are often taken on at

salaries of \$100 per month, a large number of the mechanics being employed by the month instead of by the day, and in such cases the wages are often raised after a time if the men prove good.

KICKS AND KICKERS.

Many of the mechanics, however, do a large amount of miscellaneous kicking. Some begin to find fault the moment they land, and others want to go back immediately with a free trip to the states. On the steamer which took me to Panama we had a dozen carpenters who had contracted with the canal commission to work for \$100 a month on the basis of 10 hours per day. One of these was given a room in a cottage at Christy's hotel. His house faced the sea. It was newly painted and was as bright as a new pin. The man objected saying he wanted better quarters, but he was told that the accommodations were as good as anyone could expect, and that if he did not like them he could take his discharge. He went back home.

Many of the kickers object to the 10-hour day, although the hours are specified in their contracts with the commission, and others want an increase of wages upon their arrival. One plumber, for instance, demanded \$125 per month before going to work. He was told that if he could show that he could earn \$125 he would get it, but not before. This man, before he left Washington, had contracted for \$100 a month, and as yet he had not done a day's work.

I find that the salaries here are rapidly increased in proportion to merit. I have in mind a plumber who came down a few months ago at \$15. He was closely watched, and it was seen that he could handle men. At the end of the first month his salary was raised to \$100, and he is now getting \$125. This has been so in many cases.

SOME UNION MATTERS.

Mechanics who come here must not expect the same labor conditions they have had in the United States. They must be willing to turn their hand to anything and the foremen must expect to use tools if necessary. I talked the other day with Mr. Stockburg, who has charge of the plumbing of the zone. He says that many of his American plumbers, needing \$4.50 per day, recently objected to using tools, saying they had been hired as boss plumbers only. Said he:

"I told them we would have to do everything we could to get the work done and that I had worked with tools myself during the first three months of my stay. As I said this they replied: 'Go away! What are you giving us? You look like a dry goods clerk.'"

"Well," I said, "how I look makes no difference. I tell you I used tools every day during that time. Using tools is a part of the trade of a plumber. I expect to use them whenever it is necessary, and I expect you men to use them now that it is necessary."

After that I had no further trouble.

It is the same with boss carpenters and boss mechanics of all kinds. Those who come here are expected to do what they are ordered, and they cannot draw the line as to their work as they do in the United States. The only men who are absolutely independent in this respect are the steam shovel men and the crane men, who work under an ironclad agreement with their union and who receive from \$15 to \$175 per month. I understand these men have a representative in Washington, through



Photographed for the Deseret News by Frank G. Carpenter—These Boys Get an Average of \$112 a Month.

whom they deal as to their work. As to hours, the 10-hour day is a necessity here, and it is a question whether it can be changed as far as mechanical labor is concerned. If eight hours are given to certain classes of American mechanics, it will be with a provision as to overtime and the men will have to work the 10 hours in order to not disarrange the native labor. When the construction of the canal is in full swing there may be three shifts of eight hours each day, the work going on by means of electricity all night through.

Some mechanics tell me that \$3 a day in the United States is as good as \$15 a day at Panama. I doubt this. The mechanics have their quarters furnished, and, although the new commissary arrangements, living will be better and cheaper. It will be well, however, for all to make fixed contracts as to their wages before coming to Panama. Good men will be in steady demand, and wages will be increased in proportion to efficiency and skill. The best mechanic will always command the highest wages, but the poor workman is liable to be graded according to what he actually does, and that without regard to the union rules of the United States.

The engineer corps at Panama is bound to be a high priced one. The head of the commission, Mr. Shonts, gets \$20,000 a year, the chief engineer, Mr. Wallace, \$25,000, and the governor of the canal zone \$17,500. The subordinate engineers are now receiving something like \$2,000 and less, the young engineer, just out of college, getting

a salary not higher than that of the average government clerk. Such men, however, have great opportunities for advancement. The fact that they are employed upon the canal is a credit to them, and those who do well here will become famous as specialists in the world over. Real one of the chief engineers to use the other night:

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GOVERNMENT CLERKS.

Among the worst kickers at Panama have been the government clerks. During the winter great dissatisfaction prevailed, and in the height of a yellow fever season, had there been free transportation home, Uncle Sam would have lost three-fourths of his employees. Conditions are better now, salaries have been advanced in many cases and there is a much better spirit among the men. Our clerks are of a superior class. They are above the average in intelligence,

and, I might say, culture; but it seems to me they are below the average of sturdy Americans in endurance, ambition and stick-to-itiveness. Most of them come from cities where they have been accustomed to all sorts of luxuries, and a large number are from the government mills at Washington, which invariably grind the ambition out of a man and make him a constitutional kicker. Many of them are soft and pretty-like. They came down here for a good time and the trip, and they have been scared by diseases and a little hardship. Hence the dissatisfaction.

As far as I can learn many of the clerks came to the isthmus under false representations. The recruiting offices of the old commission painted Panama as a paradise. They told the clerks they would be given luxuriously furnished quarters and the coconut trees and other beauties of the tropics; that pleasure would be plenty and living cheap. When the men came they found everything in a preparatory stage. Two or three clerks had to sleep in one room, and in some cases the furniture was scarce. They found board higher than they had expected, and it cost them \$5 per week for their eating. There were no street car lines and cab fares were 10 cents a trip.

As to pleasure, there was nothing but a bull fight on Sunday or a walk alone on the Panama wall. There were plenty of girls, but they were of all colors except white, and those of the cream or chocolate varieties could not be courted except standing on the street corner with the madden in an iron balcony overhead. One pretty American boy of

18 plaintively remarked to me: "that he did not dare to look at a girl more than three times before her father came around and asked his intentions; and as for seeing a fair, blue-blooded Panamanian outside the presence of her whole family from the infant in arms to the gray-haired grandmother in glasses, it was absolutely impossible."

And still Panama is a good place for the young man who is willing to rough it and who wants to make the most of himself. The wages are high and advancement, for good men, is rapid. I know many clerks who came here at \$15 per month who are now getting \$100 and even \$125 or \$150 per month. The average monthly salary of such men is about \$112. Good men here can easily show what they are doing and the salaries are advanced in proportion to the work. As to health, the isthmus has few more dangers than the United States, and in many respects the climate is better. There is almost no grippe or pneumonia, and with a six-week vacation—which is granted with full pay—the man who is careful ought to keep well.

As to expenses, board is now higher than in the United States, but furnished rooms are given the clerks, and the young man who wants to save can do so. The trouble with many of Uncle Sam's young employees is that they have extravagant habits. One for his monthly expenses: Table board, \$25; laundry, \$5; room cleaning and bed

making, \$5; riding to and from office at 10 cents a trip, \$4; horseback rides on Sunday, twice a month, at \$4, \$8; total \$19. This young man is just starting life. He gets a salary of \$125 a month and in addition to the above expenses says that seven hours' work is for much. His office hours are from 8 to 12 a. m. and from 2 to 5 p. m.

I told this clerk that if he were anxious to save and make his way it would not hurt him to walk the distance of less than a mile from his quarters to the administration building and save \$4 thereby; and that he might be an additional \$5 ahead if he cleaned his own room and made his own bed. I also spoke of the \$5 for horseback riding something of an extravagance, and cited the early lives of John Barret, who at 14 was teaching school for \$34 a month, and of John Finley Wallace, who did his first work as an engineer at \$2 a day, sleeping at the farm house nearby. I mentioned Andrew Carnegie, the telegraph boy, at \$3 per week, John Wamamaker and Levi P. Morton, country store clerks at \$6 per month, and closed by referring to a recent talk I had with Speaker Cannon, in which he said that the first five years of his working life brought him an average of \$4 per week, of which he saved half, and thereby got enough money to support himself while studying law. I fear, however, that my sermon was vain, for the young man has since thrown up his job and returned to his home.

FRANK G. CARPENTER.

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