Anamaniacs Song

Travel through the canal
The Panama Canal: Its History

by Sheri Skelton

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For many years, a ship sailing from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean had no choice but to go around South America. A ship going from New York to San Francisco traveled over 13,000 miles. The voyage took several months.

How could the distance between the two oceans be shortened? A French company believed it had the answer. In the 1880s, a French company began hacking a path through the jungle across the Isthmus of Panama.
The leader of the project was Ferdinand de Lesseps. He planned to build a sea level canal. He had successfully built that type before. He had been in charge of the construction of the Suez Canal. Once a path had been cut through the Panama jungle, workers began digging. The French had brought in modern digging equipment. There were steam shovels, locomotives, tugboats, and dredges. Progress was slow but steady.
Then the rains came. The rains were heavy and relentless. They often erased a day's work of hard labor. Men, equipment, and supplies were buried by mudslides. The Chagres River also stood in the way. The winding river crossed the canal route multiple times. De Lesseps developed a plan to change the river's course with dams. The plan didn't work.
Rains and the river weren't the only obstacles. Swamps, sweltering heat, and insects made working conditions miserable. Disease began to take its toll on the workers. Malaria and yellow fever were the most common illnesses. By the end of 1888, only 11 miles of the canal had been dug. The cost of those miles was around 287 million dollars. Twenty thousand men had died. The French abandoned the canal project.
The early 1900s brought renewed interest in building a canal across Panama. President Theodore Roosevelt supported the project. The U.S. made an agreement to purchase the rights to the canal property and equipment from the French. Since Colombia controlled the area, the U.S. had to negotiate with that country also. The two countries couldn't reach an agreement. Colombia wanted more money than the U.S. was willing to pay.
Panama gained its independence in 1903. The U.S. and Panama signed a treaty giving the U.S. complete control over the Canal Zone. The strip of land was about 51 miles long and 10 miles wide. In May 1904, construction of the Panama Canal was resumed. Progress was minimal during the first year. The arrival of engineer John Stevens would be a turning point. He believed that good working and living conditions for his labor force would be a key factor in the canal project.
Dr. William Gorgas was put in charge of improving sanitation conditions. He set out to eliminate the mosquitoes responsible for transmitting yellow fever and malaria. The task was huge. Swamps were drained. Vegetation was cleared. Pools of standing water were covered with oil. Spiders, ants, and lizards were unleashed to feed on the mosquito population.
The method of construction for the canal itself also changed. The design was now a lake and lock canal. The plan developed by Stevens still involved making a dam on the Chagres River. This dam, however, wouldn't attempt to change the course of the river. Instead, the dam would create a lake. A ship on the Atlantic side would begin its journey through a sequence of locks. The locks would raise the ship to the level of the lake.
The ship would then travel across the lake. Another sequence of locks would lower the ship to the level of the Pacific Ocean. Monstrous steam shovels began scooping out tons of dirt. Railroad cars transported the earth to the dam site. Progress was slow and grueling. Extreme heat, equipment loss, accidents, and shortages of labor and materials continued to plague the project. In February 1907, Stevens resigned.
George Goethals stepped in to take over the project. He was an army engineer with experience in building lock canals. He coordinated the construction of the canal along with making certain that workers had adequate housing and other facilities. His efforts earned him the title "Genius of the Panama Canal." Goethals stayed with the canal project until its completion. In August 1914, the first ship officially passed through the Panama Canal.
Panama Canal

- 51 miles
- Opened in 1914
- To increase trade from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean
- Cut through Panama instead of going around South America
- Ships go through 3 locks
- Water level rises and lowers as locomotives guide ships