

## LIFE AND LABOR ON THE PANAMA CANAL: AN OKLAHOMAN'S PERSONAL ACCOUNT

*By William D. Pennington\**

The recent controversy over the Panama Canal Treaties has caused Americans to take another look not only at the manner in which it was obtained and the expense involved but also the contribution made by American technology and manpower. For example, as many as 5,000 American laborers and technicians were working in the canal at any one time during the construction stage between 1904 and 1914. One of these Americans was an Oklahoman whose life and labor in the Canal Zone during the final years of completion illustrate why so many Americans have such a personal attachment for the Canal.

David Theodore Sherrard died in 1973 and is buried in a small cemetery east of Perry, Oklahoma. He had spent over fifty years as a resident of Perry where he had retired from the United States Postal Service. Among his personal belongings was found an old trunk containing some 100 letters written to his mother, Anna G. Sherrard. Included were many letters related to his two-year employment as an electrical engineer working on the building of the Panama Canal. They reveal an experience of a lifetime.

Following a childhood in Winfield, Kansas, Ted Sherrard attended Kansas State University where he received an engineering degree in 1910. He then took an apprentice course with Westinghouse Electric Company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The first of June, 1912, he made application for a job to work on the Panama Canal. Later that month, Sherrard received a telegram from the Isthmian Canal Commission in Washington, D.C. telling him of his appointment. The position was assistant switchboard operator and the "General Conditions of Employment" included free rent in the Canal Zone, transportation to and from the Isthmus, six weeks annual vacation and in case of illness or injury, "free medical care and attendance at the hospitals." He was to be paid \$112.50 per month which was based on an eight-hour day with time and a half for overtime. His foreman at the Westinghouse Plant said it was "the best thing in the world to do." Whenever he finished, the foreman told him, the government would find some other job for him providing he did well. "I will be on one

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of the healthiest chunks of soil that Uncle Sam owns," Sherrard wrote. "I have talked with fellows who have been down there and they say the conditions there are first rate."

The trip to Panama was an experience in itself. The ship *Alliance* left New York City, July 9, 1912, with about 100 passengers aboard. His "cozy little room about 6 x 6 feet" had an upper and lower berth but he was the only one staying in it. Besides being small, the room was located in the stern over the propeller which caused a noise which sounded "about like an empty lumber wagon on a rocky road." He ate his meals with four other men who were returning to Panama from their vacation. They indicated they liked "the place fine." The meals were first class but the menu, Sherrard said, was "Greek to me." He managed to get enough to eat by "ordering about the same as the other fellows." Quite a few of the passengers he noted became seasick. He felt dizzy several times but had not had to "feed the fish yet." While on board, he was vaccinated. The doctor told him they had to do it every three or four years in Panama.

On arriving in the Canal Zone, Sherrard was assigned to the Power Plant at the Miraflores Generating Station in the Pacific Division. The Canal Lock closest to the Pacific Ocean was the Miraflores Locks located about 200 yards from the Power House. The other two sets of locks were located at Pedro Miguel only several miles northwest and the Gatun Locks on the Caribbean Ocean entrance into the Canal.

The power plant supplied electrical power to three or four surrounding villages as well as construction equipment like cement mixers and pump motors. Sherrard described the role electricity was going to play with regard to the total project. "Practically the entire operation of the locks will be done by electricity. The gates and valves will be opened and closed by motors and the boats will be towed through the locks by electric locomotives. The electricity will be made by a hydraulic plant taking the water from Gatun Lake."

The actual work he did in the power plant was relatively clean. "I could wear my Sunday clothes if I wanted to and not get them dirty," he commented. His job was to see that the machinery was running all right. "If the Turbines run a little slow we can speed them up by pressing a button. If a bit motor down on the canal is started up we signal to the fireman for more steam. Then we have to make a record of the amount of electricity being used every half hour and the amount used each day. There is enough to do to keep us wide awake all the time." He noted that one worker was fired there for sleeping.

After a week on the day shift, he was moved to nights since he was the last man on the job. Normally he worked with four white and four black

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men on duty at the power house. In all, he mentioned there were 6,000 Americans and 25,000 blacks working on the Panama Canal.

One morning while walking along the canal, Sherrard met the superintendent for his area. "He wanted to know how I liked it here," he stated, "and if I thought I could handle the job alright." The superintendent told him he would get \$125 per month before long. A final comment is typical, "The super is alright except he is a little stingy about giving us days off."

After five months on the isthmus, Sherrard liked it better than he had at first. "If it wasn't for the night work I couldn't have any kick at all, but I reckon there are some drawbacks to every job." He further explained, "One big advantage over Pittsburgh is that I can keep clean and have good air to breathe all the time. I don't believe I care for any more city life." In another letter he mentioned not really needing a vacation since he was "having a good time and am not doing very much work."

Sherrard could not get on a day shift in the Miraflores Power House, so in August he was able to get a transfer to the Caribbean end of the Canal Zone to do "test work on the Gatun Locks." He was one of five men in a gang who tested the "lock apparatus" as soon as it was installed to see that it was working properly. "All the gates, valves, etc. are electrically operated," he wrote, "so it comes right in my line." There were about 500 motors on the Gatun set of locks alone. His specific job in the beginning was to test the emergency dams at the Gatun Locks. These "big steel structures" swung out "over the locks like a drawbridge." The dam is then let down in sections. The emergency dam was to be used in case of an accident to the upper gates.

As a result of his transfer to Gatun, Sherrard was right in the middle of the many events leading to the opening of the canal. The Gatun Locks were the first to be tested. The middle of September water was going to be let into the locks, but the valves, keeping the water from Gatun Lake out of the locks, stuck. "They have been in place for a year and a half," he remarked, "and I guess they have rusted so much that they can't be moved." A repair gang was able to get them working by the end of the month so the first boat could go through the locks.

Concerning this first boat, Sherrard wrote that his test gang had been busy for a week, even working until midnight getting the machinery ready. The day the boat went through, September 26, 1913, he worked from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. with only a half hour off for lunch. "The trial trip of the boat was a *Success* in every particular," he explained, "and marks a big step in the completion of the canal." The next morning the boat made the return trip from Gatun Lake to the Caribbean Ocean in one and one-half hours. He proudly said, "I operated the gates on one side of the locks all the way thru." This was his moment of glory.

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The following month, Sherrard noted another milestone in the completion of the canal. The Gamboa Dike in the center of the Canal Zone was blown up. "That was the last connecting link between the 2 Americas," he remarked. "The Canal now has water in it thru its entire length tho it is not deep enough in some places to float a very big boat. This equalized the water from Gatun Lake and Culebra Cut in the center of the Canal Zone with water flowing South from the Chagres River." He later mentioned that a boat was put through the Miraflores Locks, and before long one would go through the Pedro Miguel Locks.

In October and November, various dignitaries began to come to the canal to see how things were going. On October 29, President Woodrow Wilson's secretary of war, Lindley M. Garrison, came to the isthmus and "is riding around in special cars and motor cars inspecting the works. We put a boat thru the locks for his benefit today. He rood thru on the boat. It took just another hour to put the boat from the sea to Gatun Lake. Some floating islands at the Lake entrance of the locks, nearly stalled the boat, but it finally got thru them. These floating islands are going to cause a lot of trouble to navigation in Gatun Lake." Next came the Congressional Appropriation Committee for the canal to do their own inspecting. "They made a trip thru the locks here yesterday on a small tug," he said.

The last of December, Sherrard tested the spillway gates at Gatun Dam for the first time. "I was the first time that water had flowed over the spillway," he commented, "and it certainly was a beautiful sight. The water drops about 65 ft. then strikes the solid concrete buffles and is thrown 50 or 60 feet into the air in a white cloud of spray and foam." The spillway, a "soft" dam consisting of mud, sand and clay was constructed to let out the surplus waters of the Chagres River whenever needed. "All 14 gates were raised and lowered smoothly and the tests were regarded as thoroughly satisfactory," he exclaimed.

After the spillway, the "test gang" was busy "testing the working of the lock apparatus." Sherrard was working at times nine to eleven hours. He told that most of the operation was on remote control with all the motors regulated from a control house in the center of the locks. He exclaimed that it was "some job." On Sunday, January 11, a tug was put through the locks on its way to Colon for repairs, making the complete trip from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean. However, he noted that no boat had yet made the entire trip through the canal in one journey. He also put the tug, *Reliance*, through the locks. Two years before it had made the trip around Cape Horn and was considered the first boat to entirely circumnavigate South America.

The first towing locomotives arrived on the isthmus the first of February.

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Located on each side of the locks, the job of these locomotives was to pull the ships through. They worked on electricity like the locks. A total of forty locomotives were to be needed on the three sets of locks. Sherrard noted that he worked on the new locomotives. "One weighs 50 tons and has two speeds of 2 and 5 miles an hour," he said. "It climbs right up the inclines without any trouble. The steepest part of the incline is at a 45° angle."

By March, 1914, Sherrard was ready to take a vacation. He said he was leaving April 1 to "see if I can't get a job in the States." He went on to explain, "the best of the work is about done here now and I don't want to take an operating job if I can help it." He said in passing, "I will be almost sorry to leave here tho, I have certainly enjoyed the work and the life here in Gatun."

In addition to describing his role in the construction of the canal, Sherrard told about living conditions, the role played by the Y.M.C.A. and life in general in the Canal Zone. The living quarters provided for the American employees were quite adequate. Sherrard lived in the married quarters in Corozal for the first week he was in Panama. It was a building constructed by the French about twenty-five years before. He then moved into a hotel which was the bachelor quarters housing about 125 other men.

One of his roommates there was a "big two-fisted Irishman named Pat Maloney," who was married but had sent his family back to the states. He was in charge of the dirt car dumping with about 200 laborers under him. Maloney was in the hospital for a week with malarial fever in February. This gave Sherrard an opportunity to explain the problem of malaria. "There is a lot of fever this time of the year," he said. "It is mostly the men who have been here 3 or 4 years who suffer from it. They got it in their blood before the mosquitoes were killed off. We see a mosquito once in a while at the power house but they don't give us much bother."

Aside from his job and living quarters, Sherrard, like most other Americans, spent most of his time at the Y.M.C.A. After being in Panama only a week, he wrote that the "Y" was the "only source of amusement." The "Y's" or Isthmian Commission Clubhouses were built and furnished by the commission but were managed by "Y" secretaries. There were six on the isthmus, each having a reading room, parlor, pool room, barber shop, bowling alley and a gymnasium. Sherrard explained, "The gymnasium is kept busy every night with games, motion pictures, or lectures. A dance is held about twice a month. Interest in various activities is stimulated by leagues and tournaments among the various clubhouses. Basketball, chess, and tenpen leagues are in progress at the present." He went on to say, "It would certainly be a dull life here if it wasn't for the Y.M.C.A.'s.

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About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the young men in the village spend their evenings here. There is a circulating library of about 600 to 700 books too."

Soft drinks, sandwiches and other food could be bought at the "Y" and even smoking was permitted. "They wouldn't have very many members if they didn't allow smoking." Sherrard said the Y.M.C.A.'s were not as good there as those in the states, but "they undoubtedly do a lot of good in keeping the men out of Colon and Panama and furnishing a place for good wholesome amusement." The admission fee was \$10.00 per year. This admitted the member to basketball games, motion pictures lectures and the such. Week-old newspapers were available in addition to a paper from Panama which came every morning giving the latest news by "wireless."

Sherrard got his money's worth at the "Y" participating on teams in such sports as basketball, bowling and indoor baseball. A typical weekly schedule was "basketball practice 2 nights and a game Saturday night, Spanish lessons 2 nights, and moving pictures one night."

In addition to the regularly scheduled activities, the "Y" sponsored special events such as lectures, concerts and "smokers." Sherrard described one smoker, "There was singing, speaking, wrestling, hypnotism and a few other stunts. Lemonade, sandwiches, and cigars were served." Another smoker had "singing, clog dancing, music by the Filipino string band and some athletic stunts."

On holidays or special days, the "Y" sponsored some elaborate celebrations. For example, on election night in 1912, the gym of the "Y" was the site of quite an event. Sherrard described it as follows, "While waiting for the election returns there were stereographic viewer, speeches, a torchlight parade and a mock election. The suffragette party carried the town and Roosevelt the national ticket."

Another big holiday in the isthmus was Panama Independence Day in November. Sherrard and four other fellow employees spent the day on a sailboat on Gatun Lake. He wrote, "It was very interesting to sail along the shore and see the different kinds of tropical plants. We made one short trip into the jungle and that was enough. The undergrowth was so thick that we had to cut our way thru with a machet, then the mosquitos were pretty bad too."

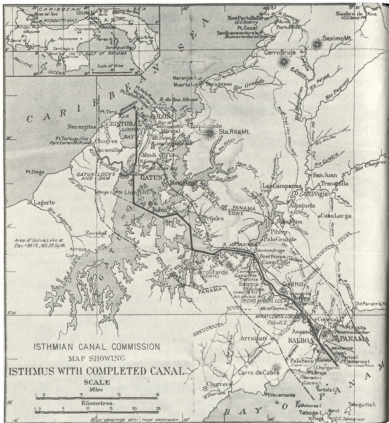
Another popular activity in the Canal Zone was a lottery drawing held in Panama every Sunday. It cost 50¢ a chance with prizes varying from \$10.00 to \$1,500. It netted the owner \$50,000 a year. Three-fourths of the people on the Isthmus took a chance at it. "Americans," Sherrard said, "have drawn the big prize several times."

A fitting conclusion to the life and labor of an Oklahoman's experience on one of history's greatest achievements would be to quote from the certifi-

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cate presented to him on his leaving Panama. "This is to certify that Ted Sherrard . . . has rendered regular service to the Isthmian Canal Commission . . . in the building of the Panama Canal. This testimonial is evidence that the holder thereof has the distinction of having performed useful service in the accomplishment of the greatest engineering feat undertaken in the history of the world, uniting the nations of the earth in friendly commerce and thereby extending the bounds of civilization and strengthening the brotherhood of man."

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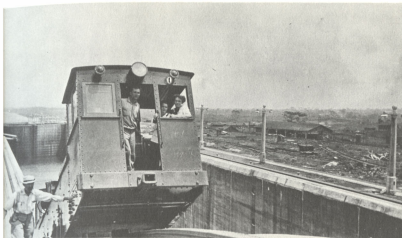
Above: Map of completed Panama Canal

Upper right: Electric locomotive which towed the boats through the canal at Gutun. Lock gates can be seen in the background. Sherrard is the gentleman in the middle of the photograph

Below right: Culebra Cut looking south. Right hill is 404 feet above sea level. Left hill is 532 feet above sea level

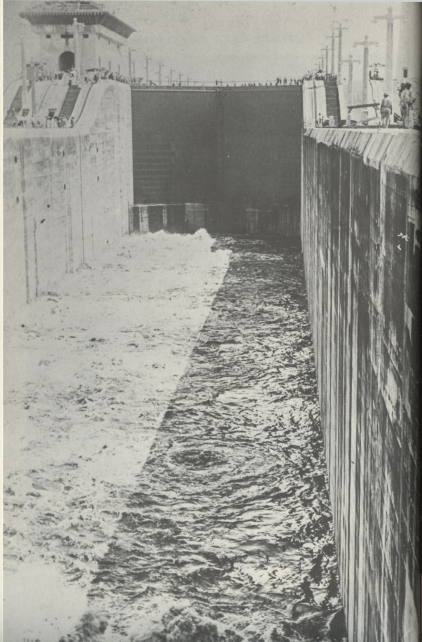


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*Culebra Cut Looking South. Right Hill 404 Ft. above Sea Level.  
Left Hill 532 Ft. above Sea Level, Panama.*

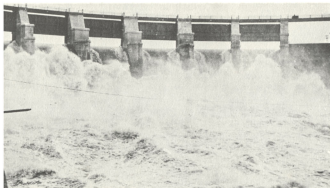




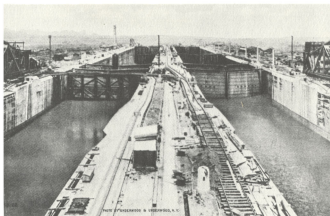


**Left and above: Filling Gatun locks for the first time. The building in the upper left corner is the control house from which all the machines on the locks were controlled**

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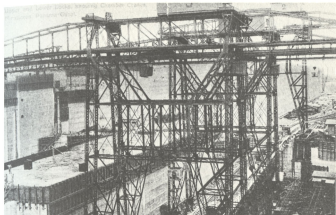


**Gatun spillway, with seven of the fourteen gates up**

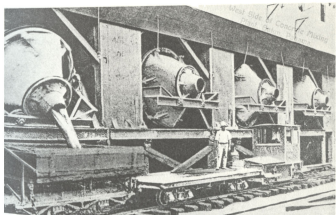


**General view of the upper locks looking north from the lighthouse, Gatun**

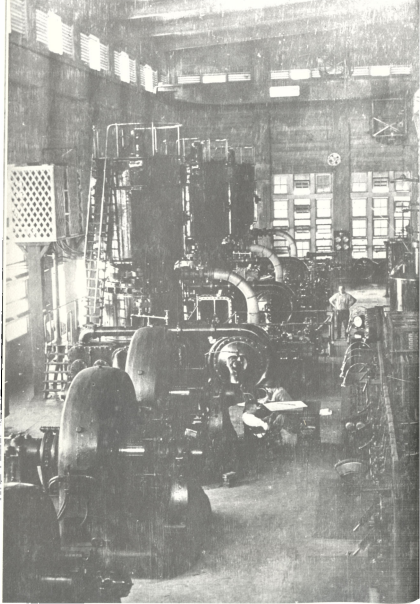
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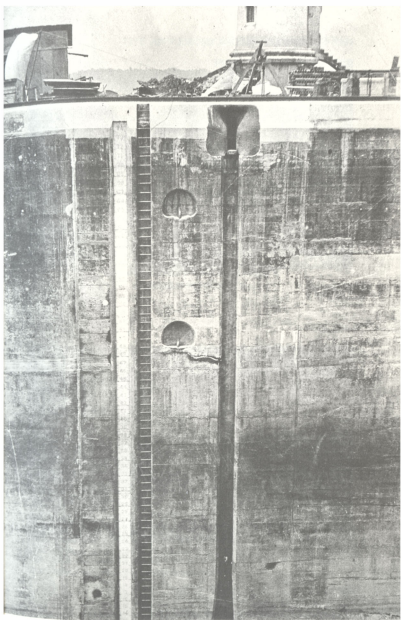
Upper and lower locks, showing chamber cranes



West side of concrete mixing plant, Gatun



Miraflores powerplant. Sherrard can be seen in the far end

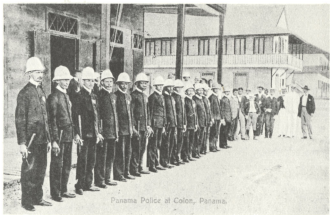


Locks at Gatun showing water levels

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A typical native street of interior of Panama



Panama Police at Colon, Panama.

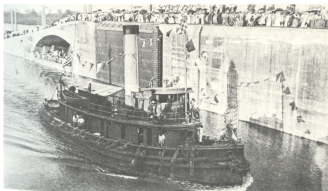
Panama police at Colon



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High tide in Bay of Panama



The first boat to pass through the Gatun locks on September 26, 1913, observed by an enthusiastic, cheering throng