

Medical Miracle in Panama - I

Lead: Before breaching the Panamanian land bridge, the builders of the Isthmus Canal knew they first had to deal with disease.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: After his brilliant construction of the Suez Canal, Ferdinand de Lesseps set out in the 1870s to duplicate his achievement by crafting a shipping canal across the Isthmus of Panama. He failed. De Lesseps underestimated the enormity

of the task, his technology was much too primitive, and the French design for a sea-level canal was fatally flawed, but much of the failure can be attributed to a deadly pair of diseases. Malaria and yellow fever took thousands of lives and put many more in bed for weeks of convalescence and depression. Engineers freshly graduated from the École Polytechnique in Paris would arrive in Colon filled with enthusiastic anticipation and die within a week. Thousands of manual laborers recruited from Caribbean islands fell victim in this grim harvest of death.

Malaria and yellow fever had been the scourge of the world's tropics for

centuries. Malaria produced chills, a high fever, and a terrible thirst. Yellow fever had similar symptoms followed by a darkening of skin color. Most authorities during the French era in Panama believed these diseases were due to “bad air” or swamp vapors since generally they were rampant in low-lying, hot, humid areas with lots of sewage, decomposing vegetation, and dead animals. Yet, as early as 1854, some scientists had concluded that the mosquito was instrumental in the spread of these diseases. In 1880, Dr. Alphonse Laveran discovered a mysterious microscopic organism in the blood of malaria victims. Seven years later, English physician Ronald

Ross concluded that a particular mosquito, the species *Anopheles*, transferred this organism when it was feeding on animals and humans. Such discoveries came too late for the French effort in Panama which collapsed in the 1880s amid charges of corruption and incompetence and so it fell to the United States to challenge the Isthmus. Next time: Gorgas versus the mosquito.

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

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