

**Volume 4**

**Number 046**

**Medical Miracle of Panama - III**

**Lead: Sanitation made possible the construction of the Panama Canal.**

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

**Content: In the years following the Spanish American War, Army Surgeon Dr. Walter Reed had transformed the city of Havana, Cuba, virtually eliminating the tropical diseases of malaria and yellow fever. He did so by rejecting the common medical wisdom of the time that such illnesses were caused**

**by bad air or swamp gas. Reed went after the mosquito which, some scientists at the time believed, transmitted the diseases when it fed upon a victim. Reed cleaned up the city. Malaria and yellow fever were almost completely eradicated.**

**Colonel William Crawford Gorgas was the sanitary officer of the U.S. Panama Canal Commission. After many canal workers died in a particularly severe outbreak of yellow fever in 1905, Commission leaders finally gave Gorgas the money and personnel to duplicate Walter Reed's success in Havana. He too went after the mosquito. Gorgas started by fumigating the houses of those towns**

**at either end of the canal zone, Panama City on the south and Colon on the north. Brigades of troops would attack each house, seal it with old newspapers and rolls of brown paper, and then burn insecticide. When a case of yellow fever turned up, the house of the victim was immediately fumigated. Cisterns and cesspools were covered with oil to prevent the mosquitoes from laying eggs. The tradition of keeping water in open household containers was made unnecessary by running water from sanitary municipal water systems.**

**Within 18 months those tropical curses, malaria and yellow fever, were**

**banished from the canal zone and in that healthy environment, the canal was completed in 1914. Gorgas' efforts were a triumph of modern medical practice. He fought disease by going to its source and proved, beyond reasonable doubt, how malaria and yellow fever are spread.**

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

### **Resources**

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