

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

January 5, 1966

Keepsake Series

The Book Club of California has sent out its Keepsake Series for 1965 and we must admit it is one of the best of eight that I have received since becoming a member of this most worthwhile organization. The title is "The Panama Canal: The Evolution of the Isthmian Crossing." No. 1 folder is the data on "The Gold Rush Crossing," including a drawing on the Chagres route.

The series of keepsakes consists of 12 folders issued by the club, edited by John Haskell Kemble. Reproductions have been printed by George Waters Color Productions, Inc. The series has been designed and printed by Andrew Hiyem, San Francisco. The lithographed map is from a copy in the Mariners Museum, Newport News, Virginia and is reproduced through the courtesy of the institution.

The map of the Chagres route as reproduced here forms the middle band between two pictures of the mouth of the river in a lithograph whose full title reads: "View of Chagres, Lorenza Castle, Indian Village of Chagres; correct map of Chagres River; with distances. West Chagres of American side. Taken on the spot June 16, 1850 by George P. Alarke." It was published by Stringer & Townsend, 222 Broadway, New York, in 1850.

The Panama Railroad, which has operated for 110 years, is one of the shortest important railroads ever built. When completed, it stretched only 47 miles, yet it was the first true transcontinental railroad. The road's construction consumed four years, eight months, about \$8,000,000. Work on the railroad began on a Sunday morning in May 1850. It is said that John Muir wept with delight when he saw the beauty of the virgin jungle in the Chagres Valley. The railroad route intersected so many water courses that 170 bridges had to be built along the short length. Construction of the railroad was completed in a downpour on a trestle fifty feet high at midnight on Jan. 27, 1855. The first train to run the full length of the line chugged into Panama City the following morning, another Sunday.

"The man whose vision and drive contributed most to the launching of the project was John Lloyd Stephens, noted American explorer and travel writer, who revealed an unexpected knack for business affairs," according to the editor of the Panama Canal series,

Wesley S. Griswold. Mr. Griswold is west coast editor of Popular Science Monthly. He is the author of "A Work of Giants: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad," McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York, Toronto, London, 1962.

Folder three: "The Tehuantepec Ship Railway," is edited by Robert Greenhalgh Albion, Gardiner professor of Oceanic History, Emeritus, in Harvard University. He is the author of "Forests and Sea Power," "The Rise of New York Port, 1815-1860," "Square Riggers on Schedule," "Sea Lanes in Wartime," and other distinguished maritime history. The print on the cover is reproduced through the courtesy of the Mariners Museum, Newport News, Va.

The most obvious means of solving the problem of — the Isthmian crossings at Panama and Nicaragua, which had served tolerably well for passengers, mail, and treasure freight, was the construction of a canal, to take loaded ships from ocean to ocean at the American Isthmus. The Cape Horn route would retain primacy for intercoastal cargo transportation.

"Although the enthusiasm for canals and railroads largely passed Tehuantepec by, in 1880 it became the object of attention of James Buchanan Eads, a distinguished civil and mechanical engineer. He had won fame and fortune by building ironclad river gunboats during the Civil War, the construction of a great stone and steel bridge across the Mississippi at St. Louis, and the design and installation of jetties at the mouth of that river below New Orleans," so the editor relates. But Eads died in 1887, after he lobbied long and diligently in Washington with impressive drawings of ocean steamers riding majestically through the jungle, which remain the principal legacy of the Tehuantepec Ship Railway.

Number four in the series is "The French Effort," edited by John Hussey, an official in the National Park Service on the west coast.

Work started by the French in 1881. Among the extravagant measures deemed necessary to mark the occasion, Sarah Bernhardt was brought to Panama to present a drama.

After many failures and excessive spending, a new canal company was formed in 1894, and work continued on a limited scale. Four years later the concession, equipment and improvements were offered for sale to

the United States. Congress voted in 1902 to pay \$40,000,000 for the French interest.

John A. Hussey wrote: "Contrary to common belief, the French effort produced a substantial amount of construction and was of material help to the United States in completing the canal. 'We got more in value than we paid,' declared one American engineer."