A MAN, A PLAN, A CANAL : PANAMA! By Si Frumkin

(PALINDROME: *A phrase or word that reads the same in either direction. Example: see the title above)*

I don't believe that there are many among us who can identify the Isthmus of Darien – it sounds like the planet of extraterrestrial invaders in a bad sci-fi TV series. But it isn't all that exotic – it is simply the name of the land bridge that connects Central America with the South American continent. The Caribbean is on one side, the Pacific on the other and it is split by the Panama Canal. Canal's history is a fascinating thriller of diplomacy, deception, incredible waste of money and human lives, creation of a new country and victory over a deadly disease. It's a story with two larger than life heroes: The Vicomte Ferdinand de Lesseps and the 26th U. S. President, Theodore Roosevelt.

A canal across the isthmus was a grandiose undertaking but the 19th century was a time for grandeur. Anything was possible through science and engineering and the Suez Canal and the Union Pacific Transcontinental Railroad were just two examples. The world was ready for a glorious scheme that would unite two oceans and eliminate the months and thousands of miles it took to go around the Horn of South America.

The Americans were interested. During the administration of President Grant alone there were 27 expeditions to the Isthmus to survey, measure, explore and suggest the best canal route. Most concluded that the route across Nicaragua was the best, easiest and cheapest. A canal across Panama, which at that time was a province of Colombia, was considered and rejected. Panama had a horrible climate, uncharted mountainous jungle terrain, unpredictable floods, pervasive and incurable tropical diseases. The Nicaraguan canal, while considerably longer than the Panamanian, would include the 56 mile-wide Lake Nicaragua and 70 miles of the San Juan River that made the total mileage practically equal.

The French were interested as well. Ferdinand de Lesseps, the charismatic architect of the Suez Canal, spoke of being interested in a canal across the Isthmus as early as 1857 – 12 years before the Suez Canal was completed in 1869 - before he became one of the world's most admired and honored men. He was a diplomat and was neither an engineer, a financier, nor an administrator. He had, however, the ability to convince and to inspire.

In 1876, seven years after the Suez inauguration, Lesseps formed a syndicate to investigate the isthmus and consider suggestions on location, cost and feasibility. A survey team returned

from Panama with a proposal that displeased Lesseps by calling for a canal with locks that would lift he ships to a giant tunnel on top of he route. Lesseps rejected the proposal: no locks, no tunnels, sea level only, he insisted.

The International Congress on the Inter-Oceanic Canal opened in Paris in May 1879. U. S. sent the largest delegation of the 22 foreign countries with 136 delegates. The Americans made a strong case for Nicaragua – it could be built cheaper and simpler– at the cost of $65 million, 1/3 less than the original French proposal for Panama.

Lesseps was opposed by most of the engineering professionals, but his prestige and participation were essential to raise money from the public. There were heated debates behind closed doors; at the final technical committee vote 20 members - nearly half of the committee – walked out. Finally, only Lesseps and 18 others voted, and of those, 3 opposed him. When the result of the committee vote was submitted to the full Congress the result was a landslide: 74 yes, 8 no, 16 abstained, 38 absent – with Gustave Eiffel, the builder of the Eiffel Tower casting a "no" vote. The vote approved a sea level canal in Panama, at the cost of $240 million to be constructed in 12 years.

The sale of the Canal stock was one of the most astonishing events in financial history. The shares were offered at $100 each – nearly a year's wages for half of the working French population – and within 3 days there were orders for over 1,200,000!

Work began in 1881 with a crew of 200 - by 1883 there were 19,000. But yellow fever, malaria, smallpox, earthquakes, floods, lack of organization and other obstacles were insurmountable. An estimate by Bunau-Varilla, the director of the project, was that out of every 100 new arrivals at least 20 died, and of the survivors only 20 were left strong or mentally capable enough to do meaningful work.

. The mortality rate in hospitals was 75% and no one knew what caused the diseases or how to treat them.

Lesseps – without consulting anyone or explaining his decision - had meanwhile reduced the estimate for the cost of the canal from the original $240 million to $131 million. He kept issuing optimistic bulletins that were published by heavily bribed French newspapers.

In 1885 the original cost estimate of $240 million was restored but the newspapers in Britain and the U.S. began predicting that the company would fail. A commission of inquiry sent from

France came back with a report that drastic changes were needed to complete the job and finally, Lesseps agreed to a canal with locks, at the estimated cost of $331 million.

By then the French public had supplied $200 million. Lesseps was asking for $120 million more but it was too late. On February 4, 1889, the company gave up the Panama Canal project.

There were trials, convictions, suicides and escapes abroad. Lesseps was never indicted – his son Charles was sent to prison – and he died on December 7, 1894, at the age of eighty nine.

The scene was now set for the other hero of this story – Theodore Roosevelt, the cowboy, scientist, Nobel Prize winner and war hero who created both the nation of Panama and the Canal named after it.

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