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The Nicaraguan Transit Route From 1849-1853

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THE NICARAGUAN TRANSIT ROUTE FROM 1849-1853

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PREFACE

It has only been with the encouragement and help of the University of New Mexico faculty that it has been possible for me to complete this thesis.

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R. H. U.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Although the Isthmus of Panama was to become, and is today, the principal point of passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, considerable interest has been aroused periodically by the potential of a route in Nicaragua. The focal points of interest in Nicaragua have been the San Juan River and the Lake of Nicaragua which create a natural water passage for all but twelve of the 194 miles between Atlantic and Pacific. Yet, although men have dreamed of and planned for a passage through Nicaragua since the Sixteenth Century, the immediate pressures for transportation between the two oceans have been such that a rapidly completed overland route has promised greater rewards and more safety than an extensive and speculative canal.

The discovery of the Pacific, the foundation of the city of Panama shortly thereafter, and the establishment of Porto Bello as a port of call for the Spanish commercial "flota" created a pattern of commerce which was not to be broken even in the Twentieth Century. In 1539, however, an alternate route was suggested by the explorations of Alonso

Calero. The route ran from the Lake of Nicaragua to the Caribbean by way of the Desaguadero or San Juan River, as it had been named by Captain Diego Machuca, a member of the Calero expedition.[1]

The length of the proposed route was estimated at sixty leagues, thirty from Granada on the Lake to the mouth of the river and another thirty from the Lake to the sea. Although there were three sets of rapids on the river, only the central one called "la Casa del Diablo" impeded the passage of large ships, and it was estimated that the whole river could be navigated by ships carrying loads of no more than 400 arrobas.[2] The mouth of the river was described as safe for the entry and exit of all types of ships and only a short ninety leagues from Nombre de Dios.[3]

Seventeen years later, in 1555, and again in 1556, Ruy Lopez de Valdenebro offered to make the Desaguadero of Nicaragua navigable and in 1565 Jorge Quintanilla was contracted to discover a waterway between Lake Nicaragua and the Pacific Coast of the country. At about the same time the

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[1] Manuel M. De Peralta, Costa Rica, Nicaragua y Panamá en el Siglo XVI: Su Historia y Sus Límites (Madrid: Librería de M. Murillo, 1883), p. 738.

[2] An arroba is a Spanish unit of weight equalling about 40 pounds.

[3] Ibid, p. 740

port of Nombre de Dios in Panama was designated as the principal port of call for the "flota" and Felipe II gave up the projects for finding a waterway through Nicaragua. He further imposed a penalty of death for anyone who should attempt to find or disclose the existence of a better route than the overland route between Panamá and Nombre de Dios.[4]

In 1620, however, a Fleming, Diego de Mercado, in a description of Nicaragua, pled for a Nicaraguan canal to be built between the Lake and the port of Popagayo, which he described as "five leagues" from the Lake. Four leagues were low land and the fifth was of rock "like a wall" which could be broken and cleaned to join the two seas by way of the Lake of Nicaragua and the Desaguadero.[5]

Quite possibly the suggestion was the result of the use to which the route was actually put prior to the middle of the Seventeenth Century. For, although the Desaguadero was not to become of major significance among the trading routes of the Spanish Empire, it was to be used by the merchants of the Central American provinces. These traders preferred sending their goods down the river and from its

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[4]Clarence Henry Haring, Trade and Navigation Between Spain and the Indies in the Time of the Hapsburgs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), pp. 192-3.

[5]Ibid, P. 194.

mouth to Cartagena to meet the "flota" rather than sending them to Havana by way of the Gulf of Honduras where buccaneers preyed upon the traders' ships.

Granada on the Lake of Nicaragua was the principal port for this traffic and included among its inhabitants some very wealthy merchants. When the small fleet was being organized for Cartagena it was "one of the wealthiest in the north tract of America" with the goods of Guatemala and San Salvador arriving in trains of fifty or more mules.[6]

The journey across the Lake was easy for the little fleet, but the navigation of the San Juan could take up to two months. Despite the optimism of the early reports of the navigability of the river, the rapids were such that it was frequently necessary to unload the frigates while they passed through the most dangerous of the rapids and to carry the goods around by mule. Lodges had been built along the river to protect the trade goods and Indians tended both the lodges and the strings of mules kept near the rapids to transport merchandise.[7]

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[6]Thomas Gage, The English American: A New Survey of the West Indies, 1648 (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1946), p. 342.

[7]Ibid, p. 344.

Added to the inconvenience of loading and unloading the ships was the discomfort of the gnats, which abounded along the river, and the heat. Nor was there any regularity in sailing, for the presence of English or Dutch ships near the unprotected mouth of the river could result in an order from Guatemala forbidding the sailing of the fleet.

The river was not a one-way thoroughfare and it was not long before the Buccaneers began to use it for their own purposes. The first of the Buccaneer raids on the city of Granada was in 1640 when Mansfield ascended the San Juan, entered and sacked Granada.[8]

The first raid was followed by three more in 1665, 1666, and 1670. No attempt was made to fortify the mouth of the river, however, until the late Eighteenth Century. Spanish commerce was so far flung and the route itself of such comparative insignificance that it was easier to channel commerce overland to Guatemala. Instead, El Castillo was established during the latter part of the Seventeenth Century. on a 100 foot bluff overlooking the rapids which were later to take its name. During the Eighteenth Century a strong fort was built at the mouth of the river, at the point where

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[8]Clarence Henry Haring, The Buccaneers of the West Indies in the XVII Century (London: Metherun & Co. Ltd., 1910), pp. 137-8.

the lake emptied into it. Called San Carlos, the fort was on a short range of hills which ran north to south and which controlled the mouth of the river as well as the lake.[9]

As a part of the general revitalization of the Spanish Empire under the early Bourbons, a survey of the Nicaraguan route was ordered in 1779, to ascertain its practicability as a route for a canal to join the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.[10]

Made by the Spanish Engineer, Manuel Galisteo, the report, presented in 1781, indicated that the level of the lake was 134 feet above the Pacific Ocean and that it would therefore be impossible to build a canal.[11]

Although the construction of a canal was deemed infeasible by the Spanish government, the survey had aroused British interest in the area and one of the objectives of the British invasion of 1779-80 was to gain control of the Lake of Nicaragua both to divide Spanish America in two, and to command "the only water pass between the two oceans."[12]

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[9] Kemble Papers. II 1780-81 (New York: Collections of the New York Historical Society, 1884), p. 30.

[10] Haring, Trade and Navigation, p. 196.

[11] Alexander de Humboldt, Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent during the Years 1779-1804, XI, (trans. Helen Marie Williams: London: 1826), p. 120. Hereinafter cited as Humbolt, Personal Narrative.

[12] Letter of Admiral Horatio Nelson from the West Indies quoted in Haring, Trade and Navigation, p. 196.

The British ex pedition set up huts and built redoubts and a hospital at the mouth of the San Juan River and, proceeding up the river, established Cooke's Post on a large island 21 miles above the coastal harbor.[13]

From the mouth of the River to El Castillo was uninhabited except for the Rama Indians. The castle was supplied solely from Granada, by the lake and the river.[14] Trade was carried on in the country by overland mule trains from Guatamala rather than up the river. The presence of English and Dutch ships by the late Seventeenth Century had apparently made the San Juan River route impracticable for regular shipping, although the continued dominance of Granada as a center of trade, despite its location, suggest that it may have been the center of a contraband trade.

Commanded by Colonel John Polson, the English took El Castillo on April 29, 1780.[15] Although the next step in the invasion was to have been the capture of the fort of San Carlos, the failure of reinforcements to arrive, the weakened condition of the men, plus the intelligence received in August that the forces at San Carlos now totaled 610 and

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[13] Kemble Papers, II, p. 7.

[14] Ibid, II, p. 40.

[15] Ibid, II, p. 14.

that two large ships were being built on an island near Granada to be armed and used against the invaders, resulted in a decision in mid-December to abandon El Castillo after first destroying it. On the second of January two mines were set off which destroyed the northern portion of the fort. The following day, with a force of Spaniards sent to retake the castle in view, the English abandoned it and retreated to the mouth of the river and eventually to Bluefields, 60 miles north of the mouth of the San Juan, and today the principal Caribbean port of the country.[16]

Although forced to give up El Castillo and Cooke's Point, the British maintained their mandate over the East Coast or Mosquitía. Mosquitía had remained virtually the same since the conquest of the new world. In 1545,[17] 1559,[18] and 1560[19] the Governor of the Province of Nicaragua was instructed to have the province between Honduras and the Desaguadero explored and populated but the orders were not complied

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[16] Ibid, II, p. 401.

[17] Colección de documentos referentes al la historia colonial de Nicaragua (Managua: Tipografía y Encuadernación Nacionales, 1921), p. 30.

[18] Ibid, p. 54

[19] Ibid, p. 64

with and by the middle of the following century English and Dutch Buccaneers had become firmly entrenched in the area; the town of Bluefields actually derives its name from the Dutch pirate Bluveldt who had established his headquarters there. It was not until January 25, 1790 that a royal decree of the King ordered exploration of the mouth of the river with a view toward establishing a settlement there.[20] In March of 1794 a royal decree ordered the establishment of a colony at the mouth of the river[21] and a series of fortifications were planned to run along the coast from San Juan through Bluefields to Cape Gracias a Dios, while another was planned for the Machuca Rapids.[22] The posts proved to be difficult to maintain and were abandoned by orders of the Junta de Guerra and the presidente in 1802.[23]

Indeed, the area was not inviting. It was hot, humid, and densly forested. The Mosquito Indians had become mixed with Negroes shipwrecked on the coast, creating a population of Samboes which controlled the major part of the area which comprised Mosquitia. The Indians were nomadic, living on the

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[20] Ibid, appendix p. 32

[21] Ibid, appendix p. 35

[22] Ibid, appendix p. 17

[23] Ibid, appendix, p. 38

coast from the beginning of May to the end of September, when they fished for turtle, and moving inland, up the rivers and lagoons, during the rainy season, where they considered themselves safer from floods and gales.[24] Despite the belated attempts on the part of Spain to settle Mosquitia, the British, who had followed the Buccaneers, continued to control the Caribbean coast, although it would not be until plans for a canal were again being considered that she would move once more to control the port at the mouth of the San Juan.

Eschewing the question of the altitude of the lake which had troubled the engineer Galisteo, Alexander de Humboldt once again threw open the question of a Nicaraguan canal at the close of the Eighteenth Century. Humboldt pointed to the very narrow strip of land which separated the Lake of Nicaragua from the Gulf of Popagayo. Comparing the Lake Nicaragua-San Juan River route to the natural water communication found in the Scotch highlands between the River Ness, the mountain lakes and the Gulf of Murray, he concluded that it would only be necessary to pass over one narrow ridge and to make the River San Juan navigable in "some parts by means of wears or lateral channels."[25]

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[24] Kemble Papers, II, p. 419

[25] Humboldt, Personal Narrative, VI, p. 269.

Of the five possible routes across the Isthmus from Tehuantepec in Mexico to the Río Atrato-Río San Juan in today's Columbia, it was the Nicaraguan route which Humboldt felt offered the most practical advantages.

However, much Humboldt's thesis might have given rise to optimism in Nicaragua herself, it was obviously impossible for Spain to build a canal as her empire disintegrated during the first 25 years of the Nineteenth Century, and it was not until the creation of the Confederation of Central American States that the first concrete porposals for use of the route were advanced.

By 1825, despite civil strife at home, the newly created Confederation had sent Don Antonio Jose Canaz as envoy to the United States to suggest the possibility of opening a canal across the Isthmus of Nicaragua. Already an English company had sent to Nicaragua John Baily, a civil engineer, to survey the Isthmus and arrange for a contract between the company he represented and the government of the Confederation; and newly appointed U.S. Charge d'Affaires, Williams, started for his post with instructions to collect all the data possible on the practicality of the proposed canal and its probable cost.

The following year a company was formed under the auspices of De Witt Clinton, Stephen Van Renssalaer, and Monroe Robinson of New York; Edward Forsythe of Louisiana, C. J. Catlett of the District of Columbia, and A. H. Palmer was appointed General agent of the Company in Central America. With the aid of a Colonel De Beneski, an ex-Mexican army officer, a contract was agreed upon between the company and Confederation and signed in June of 1826.

With the signing of the contract, the Central American and United States Atlantic and Pacific Canal Company was formed with an initial capital of $5,000,000. Unable, however, to raise the additional revenue needed to finance the canal, the Company turned to Congress for aid. A bill which would have provided for government participation in the project died in committee, however, and the whole project was abandoned.[26]

In 1835 Congress ordered an inspection of the various routes, and Colonel Charles Biddle was sent to make them. He, however, became embroiled in the intrigues in New Granada surrounding the Thierry canal grant and was

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[26] Lindley Miller Keasbey, The Nicaragua Canal and the Monroe Doctrine (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), pp. 141-144

recalled.[27] In 1837, a Mr. Leggett was appointed to make the inspection left undone by Colonel Biddle. Leggett, however, died during his return voyage to Washington, and John L. Stephens was appointed to finish the survey in 1839.

Stephens, traveling up the west coast of Central America, traced the route laid out by Baily, who had remained in Nicaragua and who had surveyed the route in 1837 for the Central American government. Stephens' survey actually covered only the western portion and the proposed canal, the distance along Baily's route being 15 2/3 miles.[28] Although the Lake of Nicaragua was navigable to the largest class of ship, the river had an average fall of 1 6/7 feet per mile to the Atlantic, according to Baily. This obstacle

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[27] On May 27, 1835, the government of New Granada granted to Count Charles de Thierry, an English national although of French birth, a charter to build across the Isthmus of Panama a canal, a railroad, or road. Despite the liberal concessions made by the government, the Count was unable to fulfill his contract and turned it over to the French house of Messrs. Salamon and Toly de la Sable of Guadaloupe the following year. The contract was finally cancelled in 1845. Niles National Register LXIV (July 8, 1843), p. 303. Keasby, pp. 152-3.

[28] John Lloyd Stephens, Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan, I (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1850), p. 410.

Stephens suggested surmounting by either clearing out the bed of the river, or, if that were impossible, through a series of locks and dams or a canal to run along the bank of the river. He roughly estimated the cost at $20,000,000 to $25,000,000 if a canal were built and did not hesitate in recommending such a project.[29]

In 1850 Baily published a small book about Central America in which he incorporated his own suggestions for making the route navigale for ships of up to 1200 tons.[30] The primary problems presented by the river, according to Baily, were the Rapids of Castillo, Toro, Balas, and Machuca; the silting of the lower channel caused by the Colorado, and the depth of the main channel. He proposed clearing away the rocks at the rapids, closing the mouth of the Colorado, and then deepening the channel. Of the three operations, it was only the first which he felt would require modern engineering techniques.[31]

From the Bay of Papagayos to the Lake, Baily proposed a canal which he estimated at 21,000 yards. The most unique feature of his plan was adapted from the French plan of M.

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[29] Ibid, p. 414.

[30] John Baily, Central America (London: Trelawney Saunders, 1850) p. 147.

[31] Ibid, pp. 133-38.

Garella for Panama and involved tunneling 1,997 yards through the narrow strip of cordillera which formed the principal impediment to the digging of the canal.[32] Possibly hoping to be hired for further surveying work, Baily suggested as an alternative, a canal for the 33 miles between Realejo and the Lake of Managua to be connected to the San Juan after the widening of the Tipitapa which runs between the two lakes.[33]

Despite optimism about the project expressed by both Baily and Stephens, the latter at his first sight of the proposed terminus on the Gulf of Popagayo wrote:

> the scales fell from my eyes. The harbour was perfectly desolate; for years not a vessel had entered it; primeval trees grew around it; for miles there was not a habitation. I walked the shore alone. Since Mr. Baily left not a person had visited it; and probably the only thing that keeps it alive in memory is the theorising of scientific men or the occasional visit of some Nicaraguan fisherman, who, too lazy to work, seeks his food in the sea. It seemed preposterous to consider it the focus of a great commercial enterprise; to imagine that a city was to rise up out of the forest, the desolate harbour to be filled with ships, and become a great portal for the thoroughfare of nations.[34]

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[32] Ibid, pp. 143-45.

[33] Ibid, p. 148.

[34] Stephens, I, p. 400.

It was, in part, to the very desolateness of the route that some of the unpleasantness complained about by early travelers in 1851 was due. It offered to them none of the conveniences, albeit crowded and uncomfortable, of the oft-traveled, well-settled, Panama route. Nor was there much hope of a canal being built, for as Stephens pointed out, the country was wracked by civil war after the disintegration of the Central American Confederation; a civil war caused by the rivalry between Granada and Leon, and aggravated by the constant bickering and petty skirmishing between the five states which had once formed the Confederation. It was not the time for foreign capital to invest heavily in Central America.

Although an attempt was made by Captain Sir Edward Belcher, who had visited Nicaragua during a voyage of HMS Sulpher, to revive interest in a canal which would connect the Atlantic and Pacific by way of the Estero Real and the lakes of Managua and Nicaragua, generally speaking interest in building a canal or even in a transit across the Isthmus was theoretical.[35]

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[35]"The Proceedings of the French in the Pacific," Edinburgh Review, LXXIX-LXXX (January, 1844), p. 59.

Despite the contracts signed, the surveys made or promised, the urgings of the idealists who saw in a canal a radical and beneficial change in the geography of the world, and the schemes of the realists, who counted up the dollars to be made by it and through it, there was to be no immediate need for a transit route through the Isthmus until the discovery of gold in California. Only from that need were the first routes to be re-established along the same lines as the earliest routes suggested by the Spanish, and for substantially the same reasons.

CHAPTER II

PRE-TRANSIT NICARAGUA

The majority of the Nicaraguan population in the early Nineteenth Century, as it is today, was to be found in the fertile plains surrounding the lakes of Managua and Nicaragua. It is there that the two rival cities of Leon and Granada were founded by the Conquistadores, and it is this area which has been the center of trade and commerce since colonial times. The two chief routes of trade during the first half of the Nineteenth Century were from Realejo or the Gulf of Fonseca, across the plains and down the lakes to Granada, or, alternatively, down the San Juan from Granada. At the mouth of the river the village of San Juan de Nicaragua had sprung up.

Realejo had been founded during the Sixteenth Century and was to remain the principal port on the west coast of Nicaragua until the establishment of Corinto a few miles to the northwest. The harbor itself is formed by the deep, well-protected Bay of Realejo which it was estimated could

contain a thousand ships[36] and which remains today one of the few really good ports on the west coast of Central America. It had been a center of ship-building during the colonial period. The port of Realejo was by 1839, however, visited by few ships. The town itself lay "two or three leagues inland" and was surrounded by a thick forest. It had only "two or three streets with low, straggling houses" and it was customary for the Central American to travel from Leon through the large village of Chinandaga to the town of Viejo where Bungoes could be hired.[37] The Bungoes left from Naguiscolo on the Estero Real and crossed the Bay of Fonseca to La Unión while mules and merchandise traveled overland around the bay.[38] Only the traveler to or from Mexico generally disembarked at Realejo.

One of the few Americans who had extended his interests to Central America, a Mr. Higgins of New York, had built a cotton factory near Chinandega. Conditions in

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[36] Stephens, Incidents of Travel, II, p. 30.

[37] Bungo is a native flat-bottomed canoe. Bungoes were poled up the rivers of Central America transporting passengers and freight. Descriptions and pictures of Bungoes can be found in both editions of Squier's Nicaragua which will be cited later, and his Notes on Central America and The States of Central America.

[38] Stephens, II, pp. 31-33.

the country were so unstable, however, that by 1839 the factory had been sold to Mr. Foster, the English Vice-Consul in Leon.

Indeed Englishmen dotted the countryside in 1839. To the south of Chinandega was the Hacienda of Mr. Bridges, an Englishmen from the West Indies, an estate where both cotton and sugar were raised.[39] Mr. Baily, who had first come to Nicaragua in 1825, had remained on half-pay as a British officer and lived in Granada, while nearly opposite him lived an English woman whose husband had dies in Nicaragua in 1837, and whose home served as an hotel for Englishmen or foreigners who were traveling through the country. Among the leading merchants of Granada could be counted Don Federico Derbyshire, an Englishman born in Jamaica, who with the aid of his English secretary, ran both a trading company and a cattle estate called "La Granadina."[40]

The major portion of the foreign element in Nicaragua lived in the spacious stone houses of Granada each of which was half-store and half residence.[41]

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[39] Ibid, II, pp. 28-29.

[40] Ibid, I, pp. 422-23.

[41] Ephraim George Squier, Nicaragua (rev. ed.), (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1860), p. 116.

Although Granada was the center of Nicaraguan commerce, it boasted no waterfront or wharf. Goods brought to the city by Bungo were carried to shore on the backs of the boatmen while passengers relied on the broad backs of the sailors. As Squier recalled at his first attempt to land at the city:

> a surf like that of the ocean broke on the shore. We had a practical answer, however, shortly. The cable was let out, so as to bring us as far in shore as was safe, and then three or four sailors leaped overboard, their heads and shoulders just appearing above the water and invited us to get on! Pedro explained that we were to put our feet on the shoulders and seat ourselves on the head of one, and hold with our hands to the hair of another just in advance.[42]

The town of Leon, although as large and old as Granada, had not been a trading center during colonial times nor was it to become one during the early national period. Once the seat of the Bishopric, and distinguished for its churches, convents, and seats of learning, it had become the center of the revolutionary turmoil of the country. The once large houses were dismantled and roofless, and occupied by half-starved wretches, pictures of misery and want.[43] Many of the wealthy had moved to their country estates and those who had not, had, for the most part, lost

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[42] Ibid, p. 113.

[43] Stephens, II, p. 24.

their fortunes. Both the University and Tridentine College remained within the city, yet conditions were such that it had "been reduced to insignificance and comparative poverty."[44]

The city was the seat of the government of Nicaragua until 1845 when it had been sacked by the conservatives of Granada and the capital was moved to Managua. As the capital of the country, Leon was also the headquarters of the army and the ragged bands of ruffians termed soldiers roamed the streets at night, occasionally jangling out to war with neighboring Honduras or San Salvador, with rival "armies," or with the wealthier Granada.

Of the estimated population in 1846 of 300,000, the majority mestizo, almost 200,000 lived in the provinces of Granada and Leon,[45] generally in villages clustered along the sides of the lake. Indeed the lakes were the center of village life. Along their shore from early morning to late evening could be seen women washing and filling jugs with water, herds of cattle drinking, men fishing, while children raced and tumbled to add to the general confusion. Inland, from the lakes on the plain, maize, wheat, sugar, cotton,

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[44] Baily, p. 117.

[45] Squier, Nicaragua (rev. ed), p. 648.

coffee, tobacco, indigo, cocoa, and rice flourished, if it was not commandered or burned by roving bands of soldiers.[46] The mulberry grew well near Masaya and the climate was considered suitable for the raising of silkworms, while silver and gold ore existed in the mountains, although the veins, presumed to be rich, had not been tapped.[47] Cattle were raised for export to the other states of Central America, and cheese was produced for home consumption.[48]

Goods and produce were easily transported within the area which formed the major center of population. While the roads were mere cart-tracks, there were few abrupt passes between the areas of Leon, Granada, and Realejo, and the land was generally level or gently undulating. Oxen were, as a rule, employed to pull carts which consisted of rough beams and planks mounted on a strong wooden axle. The wheels were always of solid timber. While a cart ride was slow, seldom exceeding four leagues a day, and uncomfortable,[49] it was not the principal impediment to Nicaraguan commerce or travel.

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[47] Baily, p. 123.

[48] Squier, Nicaragua (rev. ed.), p. 650.

[49] Baily, pp. 119-20.

Despite Nicaragua's potential wealth, political conditions were such that a traveler never started on his journey without pistols and a sword.[50] Soldiers patrolled the streets and were stationed in the squares of the cities and villages and the challange "Quien vive?" and occasional shots punctuated the nights while the heavy, wooden doors of the windowless houses were bolted each night and remained closed until morning. Nicaragua was always at war.

While near anarchy reigned for the troubled years after the failure of the Central American Confederation, Great Britain began to extend her interests on the east coast. Belize became an official British colony after the independence of Central America and, at least according to legend, in 1841 the old King of the Mosquitoes died and in his will left the area of Mosquitia to Queen Victoria. In August of the same year the new king, Clarence, selected by the British, arrived at San Juan in an English sloop-of-war commanded by the English Superintendant of Belize and the Mosquito Coast, Colonel McDonald. There he officially laid claim to the Nicaraguan port.[51] Using the complaints of British citizens as an excuse, an English sloop-of-war

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[50] Stephens, II, p. 421.

[51] Niles National Register, LXI (October 16, 1841), p. 98. Article quoted from New York Herald.

carried off the customs inspector, Colonel Manuel Quijano, the following year. By mid-1842 the United States had sent a U. S. sloop-of-war to San Juan to make inquiries into the purported robbery of the brig Galen. The commander landed a party of sailors and marines, took temporary possession of the port, and put on board his ships the best goods in the custom house, demanding a sum of money in addition from the residents.[52]

On the eleventh of August, Admiral Adams, commander-in-chief of the British West India naval forces announced the port was being blockaded and although the blockade was lifted the following month, Great Britain did not give up her pretensions to the port which would form the terminus of any transit route projected across Nicaragua. Instead during the spring of 1843, she demanded that the Nicaraguan authorities surrender the village to her.[53] On July 6 of the following year, the British took formal possession of the Mosquito kingdom, hoisting the British flag at Bluefields. During the minority of the young king, the west coast was divided into three sections, each to be governed by an

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[52] Ibid, LXII (July 2, 1842), p. 275. Article quoted from New York Commercial.

[53] Ibid, LXIII (April 29, 1843), p. 63.

appointee of the British crown: the northern part by Admiral Lowrie, the central part by James S. Bell, and the southern part by Captain Shepard. Thus Great Britain had effectively gained control of the eastern terminus of any projected canal through Nicaragua.

As Central America degenerated into anarchy and Great Britain assumed control of the eastern seaboard, United States interest in acquiring some more rapid means of communication between the east coast and her new settlements in the Oregon territory increased. In 1842 a survey was completed of the Tehuantepec isthmus route but it was contracted to Don Jose Garay who later sold his interest to the English firm of Manning and Mackintosh. Although Stephens had recommended the building of a canal through the Isthmus of Nicaragua, the political instability of the country itself virtually precluded such a venture. There was sufficient interest in acquiring such a route however that when the United States Charge d'Affaires at Bogota, William M. Blackford, had the opportunity to complete a postal convention with New Granada to permit the use of the Isthmus of Panama for the transport of the U. S. mails, he signed the agreement without first taking the time to send it back to Washington for verification. As a consequence

the 1844 Postal Convention between the United States and New Granada was one of the very few which has ever had to be ratified by the U. S. Senate.

The Convention signed in March, 1844, and ratified by the Senate in June of the same year provided that United States war ships leave sealed bags or packets of mail at Chagres or Porto Bello on the east coast to be forwarded to Panama, for thirty dollars each, where they would be called for by United States ships of war in the Pacific. Mail would be similarly transported from Panama to Chagres or Porto Bello. The Convention also provided for establishment of a line of packets between the United States and New Granada to carry the mail and provided for exemptions on duties on coal if steamers were used. While New Granada would transport mail across the Isthmus, the United States would in exchange carry all mail of the government of New Granada to and from the United States and New Granada or from port to port in New Granada, free.[54] Thus the foundation for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company and its 1848 contract with New Granada had been laid long before the company came into being.

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[54]Hunter Miller (ed.), Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States Doc. 80-121: 1836-46 IV (Washington: USGPO, 1934), pp. 529-36.

CHAPTER III

NICARAGUA IN 1849: TREATIES AND TRAVELERS

As an outgrowth of the California gold rush, the number of people desiring to travel to California by way of the Isthmus of Panama was so great, it is little wonder that before long American entrepreneurs again began to speculate on the possibilities of a transit route through Nicaragua. Before concrete plans, which involved any considerable capital expenditure, could be made, however, it was necessary to effect a treaty with the government of Nicaragua and come to some settlement of the question of British claims over the Mosquito Coast, in view of the fact that San Juan del Norte or Greytown was the natural trans-isthmian terminus on the east coast. For these purposes two missions were sent out in 1849.

On March 17, 1849, the Compañía de Tránsito de Nicaragua had been formed by Brown and Company in New York. Mr. Elijah Hise, United States Charge d'Affaires to Central America, was instructed to obtain a treaty which would settle the British question. On June 21, 1849, a special

convention was signed in Guatemala City between Hise and Don Buenventura Selva of Nicaragua. The convention provided that the United States "should enjoy the perpetual right of way through the territory of Nicaragua" and could charter a company to build a canal or railroad through the Isthmus with the additional right to fortify the transit route and a grant of land two leagues square at either terminus to serve as sites for two free cities. In exchange for these concessions, however, the United States guaranteed to protect Nicaraguan territorial rights including the Mosquito Coast.[55] The convention was never brought before the Senate to be ratified and Mr. Hise, who had completed it on his own account and with no instructions from the government, was speedily recalled.

In the meantime, the Compañía de Tránsito de Nicaragua had been absorbed by the Atlantic & Pacific Ship Canal Company and upon Mr. Hise's recall, Ephraim George Squier was sent to Nicaragua. Squier had first achieved distinction as an archaeologist and journalist, publishing the results of his research on the "Mound Builders" through the Smithsonian Institute in 1847. Active politically in Ohio, New York, and Connecticut, he sought a political assignment in New York after the return of the Whigs to

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[55] Squier, Nicaragua (rev. ed.), p. 681.

leadership with Zachary Taylor in 1849. Through the influence of William H. Prescott plus favorable publicity about his previous aervices to the party, he received the appointment of Charge d'Affaires to Guatemala in 1849. Once in Nicaragua, Squier apparently joined forces with David L. White, the representative of the Canal Company.[56] His instructions were to obtain a treaty with the Nicaraguan government for the construction of a canal to be open to all nations and, above all, not to involve the United States in the Mosquito Coast question.

At this point treaties were being made on two levels. While Squier and White were negotiating with a disappointed Nicaraguan governemnt, which had hoped to use United States desire for a transit route to settle the Mosquito question, talks were beginning in Washington between British Minister John Crampton and U. S. Secretary of State John M. Clayton over the roles of the respective governments in Central America.

It was only after guaranteeing verbally that the American goverrnment would protect the rights of the parties involved that a charter was finally signed between Vanderbilt's

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[56] Michael E. Thurman, "Ephraim G. Squier and the Inter-Oceanic Railway Company in Honduras" MS,(University of Southern California, 1961).

Atlantic & Pacific Canal Company and Nicaragua on August 27, 1849.[57] At the same time a Treaty of Amnesty was signed between the two countries.

The charter itself provided for the building of a ship canal only, and one of a size which would provide for passage of the largest ships. Preliminary surveys were to be made of the canal route within one year and the canal was to be completed within twelve years. The Company was to pay Nicaragua $10,000 upon the ratification of the contract and $10,000 annually until the works were completed. In addition the Company was granted exclusive rights of navigation of inland waters of the Republic during the period of construction of the canal in exchange for which it would pay Nicaragua ten per cent of the net profits from any such route. The company further acquired the right to eight sections of land on the line of the canal in the valley of the San Juan, six miles square each and at least three miles apart.[58]

Negotiation of a treaty to resolve some of the difficulties presented by the British occupation of the eastern terminus of the projected route was to take longer,

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[57] Squier, Nicaragua (rev. ed.), p. 683

[58] Department of State Dispatches from United States Ministers to Central America, 1824-1906, National Archives Microfilm Publications, Dispatch #6, Borland to Secretary of State, October 8, 1853, enclosures. Hereinafter cited as Department of State Dispatches.

however, and it was not until April 1850, that the Clayton-Bulwer treaty was presented to the Senate for ratification. As a treaty it was a masterpiece of double-talk that would create more headaches than it would solve. Its object was

> to establish a commercial alliance with all great maritime states for the protection of a contemplated Ship Canal through the territory of Nicaragua to connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and, at the same time, to insure the same protection to the contem-- plated railrays or canal by the Tehuantepec and Panama routes, as well as to every other inter-oceanic communication which may be adopted to shorten the transit to or from our territories on the Pacific.[59]

It was ratified the following month by a voice vote. Both the United States and Great Britain agreed by the Treaty not to attempt to obtain or maintain exclusive control over any canal to be built. The question of Mosquitia was vaguely spelled out, however, and the provision of Article IV that both governments should use whatever influence they exercised to "procure the establishment of two free ports--one at each end of the said Canal" was an open invitation to Britain to stay right where she was.[60]

As the Atlantic & Pacific Canal Company, Great Britain, the United States, and Nicaragua wrangled over

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[59]U.S., President, 1849-50 (Taylor),"Message to the Senate on the Presentation of the Proposed Treaty," Senate Journal, 32d Cong., 2d Sess., 1852-53, p. 365.

[60]U.S. Senate, Diplomatic History of the Panama Canal, Senate Pub. 6582: Doc. 474, 63d Cong., 2d Sess. (Washington: USGPO, 1914).

the weighty problems of international diplomacy involved in the acquisition of a right-of-way through Nicaragua and the Mosquito Coast, a group of 136 young Yale graduates in search of adventure decided to travel to California on Gordon's Passenger Line via Nicaragua and Realejo. The enterprising promoter of the line, George Gordon, promised them a passage to San Juan de Nicaragua and from there, by the steamboat Plutus, to the most convenient place on Lake Nicaragua for landing and a subsequent passage from Realejo to San Francisco.[61] The route, however, was scarcely as advertised.

San Juan was a small settlement with a double row of huts, mostly of reed and thatched with palm leaves, ranged in a line parallel to the water. In the center of the town was a square on which stood the largest building in town, also of reed with a thatched roof. It was surrounded by a high fence of cane and near one end of the fence there was a stumpy flag staff from which hung the flag of the Mosquito King, bearing a striking resemblance to the Union Jack.[62] The principal and only street was called King Street.

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[61] Roger S. Baldwin, "Tarrying in Nicaragua," Century Magazine, XXXIX (October, 1891), pp. 911-912

[62] Squier, Nicaragua (rev. ed.), pp. 23-24

Both the passengers of Gordon's Line and, a few months later, Squier, were to find accommodation in the custom's shed along with a quantity of half-cured hides waiting for export.[63] The town boasted one store, the Maison de Commerce, owned by a self-styled Viscomte, and an assortment of colorful drifters including Captain Shepard, at one time commandant of the southern portion of the Mosquito Territory,[64] and a French trader, Monsieur Sigaud who had once been a grenadier under Napoleon. It would be during his term as Mayor that the U. S. S. Cyane would bombard the town in 1854. Two black Jamaicans formed the local constabulary and the collector of customs, J. M. Daly, appointed by the British Crown, with his constables, was the government.[65] Squier estimates that the value of the port business prior to 1848, on the basis of custom's receipts, was $500,000.[66] Exports were indigo, Brazil wood, hides and bullion, and were carried chiefly by the British West Indian Line of steamers which called monthly.

An occasional Italian or French ship would stop

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[63] Ibid, p. 31.

[64] Thurman states that Samuel Shepard and his brother Peter, were Americans who had become friendly with the Mosquito King in 1846, receiving almost two-thirds of the King's territory along the coast. He adds that by 1849 the brothers had sold their holdings, 22,500,000 acres to another American, Henry L. Kinney. Thurman, "Ephraim G. Squiers."

[65] Ibid, p. 35.

[66] Ibid, p. 47.

in the port along with some nondescript coasters of New Granada or Venezuela.[67]

For three weeks the young Yale men who had traveled to Nicaragua worked in San Juan trying to put the Plutus together. Finally realizing that the boiler and the machinery were worthless,[68] they started up the river. Seventy-five of their number poled up river in the large frame which had been built for the steamboat engine,[69] while the remainder rented the bungoes which lined the shore of the little town and were traditionally used for transporting goods and passengers up the river. For eight days the "Californias", or "goode bys," as they were called by the Nicaraguans, poled up the river to San Carlos where there was a two day wait for bungo men to sail them to Granada. By mid-April, the travelers had reached that city and the promised passage time for the whole trip had now been spent.

It was to the imposing, morisco-towered Convent de las Mercedes, abandoned by the nuns during one of the sporadic uprisings in the country, that the future Californians first went. They were offered room and board at a dollar a day apiece by some enterprising Nicaraguan or Englishman of the town and there they stayed in supreme comfort as compared with

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[67] Ibid, p. 46

[68] Baldwin, p. 914

[69] Squiers, p. 112

living conditions in Panama. They slept in their hammocks or on hide beds in large airy rooms, and received two large meals a day.[70] By the end of May, the adventure had somewhat palled, however, and the last of the young men, who had by now split up into several smaller groups, left the city, except for the engineer of the Plutus. He had become ill and decided to take his chances on returning down the river.[71] The young men traveled from Granada to Leon by mule on the next leg of their trip, stopping for one night in the town of Masaya, and finding themselves in the midst of another of the inevitable revolutions which followed each election. The combatants were General Muñoz, commander-in-chief of the army, and Bernabé Somoza characterized by the government as a bandit chief. On arriving at Masaya, as a consequence of the rumors of Somoza's eminent appearance, the posada had closed and the young men found themselves forced to stay in the kitchen of a small house. This was to be a very minor discomfort, however, for after a second night in a comfortable posada in Managua, they had arrived in Leon.

In Leon, for the first time, a wily Nicaraguan politician and the American passengers for California came into

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[70] Ibid, p. 918

[71] Squier, Nicaragua (rev. ed.), p. 131.

contact, and the results, while only offering a diversion to tired travelers this first encounter, were to have much greater and more disastrous consequences in the future. Nine of the travelers had preferred taking up residence in Leon to staying in Chinandega, at that time the commercial center of the northwest, and where both their baggage and the majority of the travelers were staying. The nine who had remained in Leon had rented a small house on their arrival in May. Three weeks later, however, they received a message from the Supreme Director of the country offering to exchange houses so that their house could be fortified against a presumably imminent attack by Somoza. Apparently thinking nothing strange in the offer, the nine agreed and, moving into the President's house, were treated "quite as a distinguished party" that first evening.[72] Thoroughly confused, at least according to one of the members of the party, Roger S. Baldwin, they were greeted the morning following their move with the information that they were to form a honor guard for the Supreme Director and to protect him in case of an uprising within the city itself. For his part of the bargain, the Supreme Director gave them each a large room in his home around the central court and

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[72] Ibid, p. 925

their meals. It was at this point, however, that the nine drew their line although "the government had been in every way trying to procure our services" in the war against Somoza.[73]

Although the travelers refused to join the Nicaraguan forces, they did, at the request of Dr. Joseph W. Livingstone, American consul in Leon, agree to escort Squier from Granda to Leon through the by now revolution torn countryside, great portions of which were occupied by Somoza's forces. Procuring the best horses they could find, outfitting themselves in uniforms of red shirts and white trousers, belting pistols and knives around their waists, and carrying short carbines, obtained from the Director's armory, at the pommels of their saddles, they rode from Leon to Granada and back again with Squier.[74] With the American flag waving in front of them, they entered the towns along their route, galloping four abreast, scattering children and animals to the right and to the left, and leaving a lasting impression on General Muñoz who, two years later, would use Americans in his own attempted revolt against a newly-elected government.

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[73] Ibid, p. 926.

[74] Ibid, p. 926-28.

Once Squier had been successfully escorted to Leon, the nine adventurers moved to Chinandega to join the rest of their party. There Thomas Manning, who had replaced Foster as British vice-consul, offered them the use of his house. Finally on July 20 most of the original 136 sailed on the brig Laura Ann for California, four months to the day since they had arrived in San Juan del Norte.

CHAPTER IV

AN INTERIM

Although little was actually done with the route across Nicaragua for almost two years, the effects of the signing of the treaty were to be felt. A hotel, the Fonda Americana, was opened in Granada in anticipation of the traffic which would result, and about one-third more land was under cultivation than in previous years.[75] Occasional parties of Americans crossed Nicaragua and it was the town of Realejo which first felt the effects of the increased trade. The population had, in the space of the year between the departure of the first travelers across the Isthmus and a visit of Mr. Squier paid the following year, grown to 1200. Most of the residents were employed in loading and unloading the ships which stopped in the port for fruits and provisions during their trip from Panama. Docks and warehouses had been built at the harbor and depots for coal had been established for the steamers which stopped there

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[75] Ephraim George Squier, Nicaragua (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), p. 207.

regularly for supplies.[76] Travelers, however, usually still stayed in Chinandega waiting the ariival of a ship to carry them to California. The situation of Realejo, halfway between Panama and Acapulco, as a convenient place to coal the steamers, probably also accounts for the growth in the agriculture reported by Squier during this period rather than the anticipation of a large traffic passing through the country itself, for Nicaragua was more interested in the canal than in a more immediate short range project such as the railroad across Panama promised to be and which would have enabled Vanderbilt to usurp the traffic to California.

In compliance with the charter of the company, W. O. Childs arrived in Nicaragua in August, 1850, to survey the route of the proposed canal. Beginning at the little town of Brito, slightly north of San Juan del Sur which was to become the western terminus of the Accessory Transit Company route, Colonel Childs laid out a line 194 1/3 miles in length. For convenience, Childs divided his estimate into four principle divisions.

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[76] Ibid, p. 350.

The western division from Brito to the mouth of the river Lajas on Lake Nicaragua was 18.588 miles.[77] Section number one ran from the lake along the Lajas for 1 1/2 miles and section number two for 5 1/2 miles to a junction with the Río Grande which ran to Brito Harbor. Excavations in both sections would be through clay and rock. Sections number three and four were ten miles in length and encompassed 13 locks[78] each with an eight foot lift as the canal moved down 104 of the 111 feet to the harbor of Brito.[79] The fourteenth lock was to be placed at the junction of the canal and the harbor at Brito and would have a lift of 7 47/100 feet.[80] An artificial harbor was projected for the port along with two breakwaters and a lighthouse. The estimated cost of the Western Division was $13,896,603.34.

Covering slightly more than a quarter of the distance was the middle or Lake Division, estimated at 56 1/2 miles. It required only the excavation of the Lake at the mouth of the Lajas and the building of piers to form an entrance to

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[77] Wilbur O. Childs, Report of the Survey and Estimates of the Cost of Constructing the Inter-Oceanic Ship Canal from San Juan del Norte to Brito, (New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., 1852), p. 101.

[78] Ibid, pp. 194-5.

[79] Ibid, pp. 111-117.

[80] Ibid, p. 117.

the canal and a similar excavation and the placing of protective piling between Fort San Carlos and the "Boccas" Islands, which were five miles into the Lake. The estimated cost of this division was $1,025,676.14.[81]

It was the San Juan itself which would pose the greatest difficulties, in Child's estimation, requiring 14 locks, seven dams navigated by short canals, the construction of a canal through the delta of the San Juan, and the excavation of the river's bed from San Carlos to El Toro Rapids, from El Castillo to Las Balas Rapids, and around the Machuca Rapids. The locks would have, as in the Western Division, a lift of eight feet except number 14, which would have a lift of 6 23/100 feet,[82] and number four, which would have a lift of 6 1/2 feet.[83] It was necessary to descend from the Lake to the east as it had been to descend to the west. Nor was the harbor of San Juan entirely adequate and, as at Brito, Childs suggested the construction of two breakwaters and a lighthouse. The total cost to make the San Juan navigable Childs estimated at $12,502,346.21

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[81] Ibid, p. 119.

[82] Ibid, p. 135.

[83] Ibid, p. 128.

Although Childs found an adequate supply of timber for the proposed locks, he was more pessimistic about the durability of the stone, especially that which would be exposed,[84] and the quality of native labor. Nor was he optimistic about the ability of foreign labor to function to its maximum capacity in the Nicaraguan climate.[85]

The original contract of the company called for the building of a canal which would admit vessels of the largest draught which could be projected. But the canal would not have met these requirements although it would have been "of much greater dimensions than any hitherto constructed in this country."[86] The canal would have permitted the passage of ships with a draught of up to 17 feet of water and it was argued by Childs that once ship owners became cognizant of the value of the canal, they would build ships of a size which could conveniently pass through it. In addition, he added, only 15 of the 261 steamers used on the Atlantic drew over the 17 feet maximum.[87] It was calculated that it would take two days for a steamship to navigate the canal and lake, allowing 20 minutes for the passage of each of the 28 locks,

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[84] Ibid, p. 52.

[85] Ibid, p. 61.

[86] Ibid, p. 92.

[87] Ibid, p. 91.

18 hours for navigating the two canals, 12 for navigating the River, and five for the passage of the lake. Sailing vessels would require slightly more than three days. They would be towed by steam tugs on the river and Lake and by horses on the canals.[88]

The plan was submitted to both the War Department and the British Government and approved by both. However, it was another matter entirely to finance such a speculative venture, for the estimated cost was $31,538,319.55.[89] Since protection of the canal was to be a joint responsibility of both the United States and Great Britain, it was only natural that Vanderbilt should turn to the large English house of Baring Brothers, offering them half interest in the undertaking. The offer was rejected, however, and with it all interest in a canal. From this point on, the Atlantic & Pacific Canal Company set out to obtain a separate charter for its Accessory Transit Company. The Company would, by means of rail and steamer, transport passengers, bound for California gold fields, across the Isthmus in competition with the Panama route.

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[88] Ibid, p. 88.

[89] Ibid, p. 137.

CHAPTER V

THE PASSAGE IN 1851

Perhaps the best analysis of the events which were to occur in Nicaragua from 1849 to 1853 can be found in an 1853 dispatch from Solon Borland, U. S, Charge d'Affaires to Nicaragua in 1853, to the State Department. He wrote:

> I find myself every day, more and more reason to believe that more detriment, alike, to this country and people, in those who with fair purpose, have sought intercourse with them, and to enterprises of real value in connection with them, has resulted from partial observation, hasty conclusions, and badly managed undertakings than from any difficulties inherent in the country, the people, or the enterprises themselves.[90]

There was little reason to suppose that Vanderbilt began the projected canal without intending to complete it. Indeed, a survey was completed, overtures were made to the English financiers, and it was only after the failure of these early attempts to finance a canal that the Accessory Transit Route was begun in earnest, and begun with inadequate knowledge of the difficulties inherent in both the

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[90] Department of State Dispatches, #6, Borland to State Department.

terrain to be traveled and the complex politics of the country. Of the problems to be faced by the Company and to be created by its presence, the geographical were the most easily overcome.

The first natural obstacle to be overcome was the Machuca Rapids. At this point the river bed in jagged with rocks and stones and the river itself races through with a strong current. Bungoes poling up the river had traditionally kept close to the north shore and descending had shot the rapids.[91] The small steamship Orus, sent out by the Canal Company in 1851, became one of a long line of victims of the rapids during its first trip. At the same rapids, a ship of the Calvero expedition had become wedged in 1536; Kemble, in his expedition up the river, had been forced to leave his frigate, and, undoubtedly, this was one of the rapids described by Gage, at which the small Spanish fleet of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries had been forced to unload and travel around by mule.

The second and the major obstacle of the river was the Rapids of El Castillo. Stretching the width of the river, the Rapids fall "eight feet in but little more than the same number of yards."[92]

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[91]Squier, Nicaragua (rev. ed.), p. 116.

[92]Ephraim George Squiers, The States of Central America (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858), p. 356.

Traditionally, at this point, passengers and freight unloaded and while the passengers walked around the rapids, by a foot path and the freight was carried around by the small garrison of the Castle, the boatmen pulled the bungoes over the rapids.[93] The process was repeated in reverse when descending the river.

Nine miles above the Castillo were El Toro Rapids, which were considerably more easily navigated than those of El Castillo and Machuca. Once past El Toro Rapids, the river becomes wide, flowing with a deep regular current, and is, in fact, more of an estuary or extension of the lake than the turbulent river, which according to Child's survey falls sixty-two and one-half feet in the seventy miles between El Toro and Serapiqui.[94]

Nor were the difficulties encountered in the navigation of the River San Juan the only ones. There was, in addition, the problems of a port on the Pacific. Although Realejo, with its deep and well-protected harbor formed by the bay, was the most logical western port, to provide water transport, even by the smallest steamers, would have meant widening and deepening the small Tipitapa River which runs

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[93] Squier, Nicaragua (rev. ed.), p. 79.

[94] Ibid, pp. 659-661.

between the Lakes of Nicaragua and Managua, as well as a longer overland journey from a point of the Lake to the port. To the south, Brito was inadequate. It was only partially protected by a low ledge of rocks and to be made practicable it was suggested by Childs that a thirty-four acre artificial harbor be built. The Port of San Juan del Sur, to the south of Brito, called into existence because of the Transit Company, was equally inadequate; but it was the shortest distance from the lake.

Despite the difficulties presented by the route, the first steamers were sent out in January, 1851. The ill-fated Orus was to survive only briefly, but the Director was hauled over the fall at El Castillo and by the end of the month, was on the Lake of Nicaragua.[95] In July, the steamship Bulwer was sent to San Juan to replace the Orus and the line was officially opened with the steamer Pacificqsailing from San Francisco and the steamer Prometheus sailing from New York. During the time the two ships companies passed across the isthmus, the steamers were to continue to Panama and Chagres respectively, returning in time to pick up the Nicaraguan passengers, depositing them in San Francisco or New York before any other passengers by the other routes had

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[95]"Review of the News of the Year," New York Times, January 1, 1852.

crossed.[96] To accomplish this object of a rapid transit up the river and across the lake, the steamer Clayton was added to the line to run from San Juan del Norte and the Central American, after five days of work was pulled over the Castillo Rapids and by mid-December had joined the Director on Lake Nicaragua.[97]

The Vanderbilt Line had acquired five steamers to run between San Francisco and San Juan del Sur: the Gold Hunter, San Francisco, Independence, and North America and Pacific, both of which had been built on the east coast and sailed around the Horn to join the Pacific fleet. On the Atlantic, the Northern Light, Prometheus, and Daniel Webster ran regularly between New York and San Juan del Norte, while the Brother Jonathan joined the fleet to run from New Orleans,[98]

The original plan had been for the small steamers Clayton and Bulwer to travel the length of the river. It became apparent, however, after the first trip that this was impossible and by October, the lake steamers had been ordered to run the Rapids of El Toro, which had been marked by buoys, and to carry passengers as far as Castillo. During the same month the steamers Clayton and Bulwer were ordered to run the

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[97] Ibid, December 10, 1851.

[98] Ibid, September 15, 1851.

Machuca Rapids. Between the first trip in mid-July and October, passengers had been forced to disembark at Machuca, where they had boarded bungoes in which they had traveled past the Castillo to the Toro Rapids where again they had boarded a steamer for the trip across the Lake.

As advertised, the route sounded much better than it was in 1851:

> Passengers by the Pacific will have the option of crossing via Nicaragua or proceeding on to Panama. From San Juan del Sud on the Pacific to the Lake Nicaragua there is twelve miles of land travel, through a most healty section of country, and on the Lake, steamers will be in waiting to convey the passengers at onee to San Juan de Nicaragua on the Atlantic, where they will find the new and magnificent steamer Prometheus for New York direct.[99]

The trip sounded easy in advertisements and in the glowing reports of some of the newspapers that it took only 29 days, but the passengers had been far from content.[100] Leaving New York on July 14, 1851, on the Prometheus, the first party to cross the Isthmus from east to west under the auspices of the Accessory Transit Company, was a distinguished one, including among its number, two directors of the company, Vanderbilt and E. L. White.[101]

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[99] San Francisco Herald, July 12, 1851

[100] Ibid, October 22, 1851

[101] Alta Californian, September 3, 1851

The company arrived in San Juan del Norte on July 24 to be met by the Bulwer which had just made her first trip up the river, and in a few hours they had loaded their baggage. Embarking "a la pic-nic" the following morning,[102] the group reached the bar across the mouth of the river in a half hour where the pilot, inexperienced in navigating the river, missed the channel and stuck fast in the mud. The passengers jumped into the water and after three muddy hours spent in attempting to pry the little steamer loose were ready to give up the ship when the Captain of an English Man-of-War in the harbor came to their rescue. As one irate passenger was later to write, "five running hours were consumed in going one mile."[103] By nine the following morning, the Bulwer had successfully passed the Machuca Rapids, heading for Castillo. During the whole evening of the second day, an attempt was made to pull the steamer over these rapids at the instigation of Mr. Vanderbilt.[104] The current, however, proved too much as she was brought broadside to it, and she was swept upon the rocks on the left shore of the river. With the strenuous efforts of all the able-bodied male passengers, she was pulled back to her moorings and

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[102] San Francisco Herald, September 6, 1851.

[103] Alta Californian, September 3, 1851.

[104] Ibid.

the exhausted passengers decided to continue their trip by bungo.[105]

Squeezing themselves into the bungoes "in good old Chagres River fashion," the passengers spent the whole of the third day going nine miles against a strong current while a good rain "kept us cool."[106] Finally boarding the Director at El Toro Rapids that evening, the passengers found little improvement in accommodations. Similar to tug-boats, the little steamers had no cabins. They were two-decked with an awning over the upper deck to offer a little protection. The tired traveler could stretch out on the deck to sleep,[107] but on the lake, which ran as high as the Atlantic, water washed continually over the sleepers.[108] The main deck was almost entirely filled with the engine, the fire room, and the baggage; nor was there any provision made for meals or cooking.[109]

The western shore offered even less comfort than the little steamers, for the the first passengers. The

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[105] San Francisco Herald, September 6, 1851.

[106] Alta Californian, September 3, 1851.

[107] Ibid, September 18, 1851.

[108] Ibid, September 3, 1851.

[109] Ibid, September 18, 1851.

morning of the fourth day, cold, hungry, and exhausted, the travelers arrived at the western shore of the lake, only to find an angry surf beating on the little beach. An attempt was made to disembark them by bungo, but it turned over in the surf. Finally the major part of the company took the steamer's boat while a few hardier souls trusted themselves to be carried in the manner described by Squier. Among those so carried was Joseph L. White, who was dropped by his native bearer, receiving an unceremonious and thorough dunking in the waters of the lake. It was hardly an auspicious way to begin his mission to the Nicaraguan government on behalf of the Transit Company. Four more days were spent at an improvised hotel in Rivas kept by and English ex-captain of Dragoons, and on the twelfth of August the passengers started for San Juan del Sur. Another three days passed while the passengers waited on the beach or in the one, lone shed of the Transit Company for the appearance of the steamer Pacific. In all, by the time the travelers reached San Francisco, the trip had taken slightly more than one month and had cost them about $300, including the $40 charge made to haul baggage and passengers by mule train to San Juan del Sur from Rivas and the $2 per day paid to stay in Rivas.

By mid-August, the route had become thoroughly established, possibly because the first travelers had not brought back their reports yet. The cut in prices of all transportation had had the effect of crowding the ships, and three lines offered regular service to San Juan del Sur: White's Line, People's Independent Line of Steamships, and Vanderbilt's own line. In addition, sailing vessels advertised for San Juan and Realejo and passengers were cautioned that tickets for the Atlantic steamers would not be accepted unless they had been issued by the authorized agent of the line.[110] The route had become established on a relatively permanent basis with ships sailing every two weeks. And, as a rule, ship captains returning up the Pacific reported two or three ships in the harbor of San Juan del Sur. Within a month of the first crossings "six or eight good sized ranchos" or pensions[111] had been built in San Juan del Sur to serve as hotels. Although the price asked for transportation across the Isthmus from this point was $40 per person and $10 per arroba of baggage, the going rate was actually $25 and $5 respectively.[112] With his fare paid, a passenger

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[110] Ibid, August 9, 1851

[111] Ibid, September 18, 1851.

[112] San Francisco Herald, September 22, 1851.

received mule transportation to La Virgen, a distance of twelve and one-half miles which was completed in four hours. The first four miles of the road led through the woods and was the only really difficult portion. It was necessary to cross three shallow streams in this distance, climb several hills, and wade through mud six to eight feet deep during the rainy season on this portion of the road despite the fact that the company advertised that the road was planked.[113] La Virgen had spring into existence on the shore of the lake with six or eight hotels. The steamer Director waited for passengers off shore, and bungoes were available to transport passengers to her.[114] From La Virgen, a wet hungry voyage awaited the traveler. It took almost two days for the steamer to run as far as the Toro Rapids where bungoes waited for the travelers, and, although,the trip down river takes only two days by bungo as compared to the eight day trip up and it actually took only five hours to reach the Machuca Rapids and the steamer Bulwer, the steamer had to wait until the following morning to begin its journey since the river was not safely navigable at night, and it was noon of the fourth day before the travelers reached San Juan del Norte. The

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[113] Alta Californian, September 18, 1851.

[114] Ibid, September 22, 1851.

actual crossing took as little as fifty-one hours of traveling time, although delays along the route made it necessary to spend over six days on the crossing, the better part of it without food or shelter, causing one traveler to point out that "some sixty of the passengers hired mules at San Juan del Sur at $5 each for Virgin Bay; there took a schooner and bungoes to this place (San Juan del Norte) for $10; had plenty to eat and got through in four and one-half days."[115]

With the addition of the Clayton and the Central America to the small fleet of steamers however, and the orders that the steamers should run the rapids of Machuca and El Toro and meet at El Castillo, the main impediment to a rapid passage had been eliminated although there were still many improvements necessary: portage around El Castillo, a road between La Virgen and San Juan del Sur, and docks for the steamers at the two towns. And there was still to be an occasional problem with the steamers, for it was not unheard of for one of the lake steamers to approach too near El Castillo Rapids and be carried over by the current, only to be hoisted back with four or five days hard work.

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[115] Alta Californian, September 18, 1851.

Although the development of the transit route was to add another factor to the already complex politics of the country, it was from Realejo and Granada that the first forewarnings of the future course of the company and the country emanated.

It was Realejo which experienced the greatest growth during the first two years of the California traffic. While the regular steamers of the reputable lines sailed from Panama to California stopping for coal at Realejo, Acapulco, or Mazatlan, many of the independent shipmasters sailed from San Francisco and found "it very convenient to be out of stores and in unseaworthy condition just off the point of Realejo." Most of the passengers on these ships had started for home "with just enough on a calculation of rigorous parsimony to pay their way and there are others, faily destitute of means."[116] It was these passengers who jammed the town of Realejo. By January of 1851, there were some eleven hotels in the west coast town and a small transport line charged a fare of $20 to cross the Isthmus.[117]

The majority of the population was forced to stay where it was, however. The flotsam and jetsam of the Isthmus traffic, they included a deaf and blind American who had lived

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[116] Department of State Dispatches, Dispatch #4, Kerr to Webster, October 2, 1851.

[117] Alta Californian, January 27, 1851.

in the custom's shed since 1850,[118] three Dutch swindlers with their Chilean brides who had attempted to swindle their fellow inhabitants by planting gold in a nearby stream,[119] several Frenchmen who owned at least one of the hotels, and Colonel Henry Myers who, with the aid of another American, embezzled the funds of the transportation company in February,[120] only to return the following fall and, with a French partner, Mon. Desbou, purchase a large tract of land near Realejo in order to open a sugar plan-- tation.

Thus Colonel Myers swelled the ranks of the land owning Americans in Nicaragua to three. Dr. Livingston, a long time resident of the country and consul at Leon until 1851, owned a large sugar and cotton plantation in the north-west.[121] Heraldo Woeniger, an American of German descent, had attempted to grow cotton on the Island of Ometepec on Lake Nicaragua, until the murder of his wife and a nearly fatal attack on himself, after which he had fled to the mainland, settling in the vicinity of Rivas.[122]

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[118] Department of State Dispatches, #5, Kerr to Webster.

[119] Alta California, January 27, 1851.

[120] Ibid, May 25, 1861.

[121] Ibid, November 3, 1851.

[122] Squiers, Nicaragua, (rev. ed.), p. 507.

In July of 1851, the first and only edition of an English language newspaper called The Flag was published in Granada. According to the claims of The Flag, some 300 or more Americans and other foreigners were living in Nicaragua, most of them engaged in business or commerce. It was frankly expansionistic in tone, urging Americans to settle the rich farm lands where sugar, cotton, coffee, cocoa, rice, indigo, tobacco, and maize could be produced "in the greatest abundance" and to explore the districts of Chontales, Matagalpa, and Nueva Segovia which "are rich in silver and gold."[123] Its publication in the San Francisco Herald was promptly followed by a notice signed Joseph Casafourth, Consul General of Nicaragua, reminding all prospective settlers that they must apply first for a passport and that "none need apply but such as can produce the most satisfactory certificates of good character."[124]

Indeed such an insistence was well timed, for the country was thoroughly divided. There were in effect two governments: that of Leon with Estanislao Gonzales as Supreme Director and Muñoz as Secretary of War and that of Granada with Laureano Pineda as Supreme Director and Castellon

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[123] Alta Californian, November 3, 1851. San Francisco Herald, September 22, 1851.

[124] Herald, October 4, 1851.

as Secretary of War. It was at this point that Mr. White arrived in Granada to negotiate a treaty which would separate the Accessory Transit Company and the Atlantic and Pacific Canal Company, allowing the Transit Company exclusive navigation of the inland waters of the republic and the right to make improvements on the route it deemed necessary. The trip was the result of the revocation, in June, of the grant of an exclusive privilege to navigate the interior waters of the country.[125] The revocation itself may well have reflected Nicaraguan disappointment in the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty and the failure of the United States to bring Great Britain to terms over the question of Mosquitia and Graytown.

Whatever the causes of the revocation, Mr. White quickly negotiated his treaty with the government of Granada which could be expected to derive the principal benefits from the trade. His job was only half finished, however, and the government of Leon refused to accept the treaty with Granada or, under the current political circumstances, even to open negotiation with him on the subject.[126]

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[125] New York Times, January 1, 1852.

[126] Department of State Dispatches, Dispatch #3, Kerr to Webster, enclosure, Estanislao Gonzales to J. L. White.

Nothing as concrete as the negotiations of Mr. White were needed to set off a revolution in Nicaragua on its usual biennial schedule, however his machinations may have precipitated events. Mr. White's attempts to negotiate a treaty were turned down on August 22, and by the beginning of September, Munoz, mindful of his American helpers of 1849, was busily recruiting from the Americans living in Realejo. He was not long in acquiring the services of John McLean who had served in the Mexican War[127] and who had been living in the vicinity of Realejo for some time. Commissioned a Colonel in the Nicaraguan Army of Muñoz, McLean sailed for San Juan del Sur with some twenty other American adventurers with two principal objects: that of recruiting passengers from the Company into his band and then crossing the lake by way of the Director to San Carlos and capturing the custom's house and the fort. He had, however, made no secret of his intentions[128] and the Commandante of San Juan del Sur, receiving reinforcements from Rivas, captured McLean and his band on their arrival, although not without a gun battle during the course of which two Americans, Isaac Jerome and a Negro cook were killed.[129] The incident provoked a sharp

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[127] Alta Californian, October 3, 1851.

[128] Department of State Dispatches, Dispatch #4, Kerr to Webster.

[129] San Francisco Herald, October 4, 1851.

protest from Charge d'Affaires Kerr, beginning very dramatically "blood has been shed and by Americans,"[130] to which Gonzales replied that any foreigner wishing to restore peace to the country would be welcome in the army.[131]

McLean was released to the custody of the passengers of the North America, then in port, and presumably safely on his way to California the following day, September 20. He disembarked, however, in Acapulco and, recruiting some thirty Americans at that town which was very similar in population to Realejo,[132] he returned aboard the Therese to be received publicly in Leon by Muñoz, riding into the town at his right hand.[133] With the entrace of Honduras into the conflict, however, the course of the war changed. Muñoz and his Americans were forced to abandon Chinandega on November 11 and retreat to Leon. Most of the Americans during the short campaign had suffered seriously from exposure and the same diseases of the country which were to later wreak havoc with Walker's troops in 1855. From Leon most of the Americans who

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[130] Department of State Despatches, #4, Kerr to Webster.

[131] Ibid, enclosure, Gonzales to Kerr.

[132] Alta Californian, November 29, 1851.

[133] Department of State Dispatches, #5, Kerr to Webster.

survived the campaign passed on to Granada where some were to enter the service of the new government of Castillon as mercenaries, although the major part of them would attempt to continue their voyage home to New York or New Orleans.

The last report of McLean, himself, suggests that he was ill in Leon at the end of the campaign.[134] It is possible that he returned to Los Angeles[135] and equally possible that, given the ap parent filibustering inclinations of the man, he came into contact with both Cole and Walker and that it was from McLean that the original idea of invading Nicaragua came. If so, it would ironic, for the filibustering expedition in 1855 cost Muñoz his life.

By the end of 1851, the first step to alleviate the condition of Americans in Realejo and San Juan del Sur was taken with the temporary appointments of consuls in both the west coast ports. In Realejo, it was to be Lewis L. Bradbury of Maine, a business man of the town, and in San Juan del Sur, the company of Loomis & White Esquire, which, along with Mr. Horn, the forwarding agent of the company, and Thomas G. Thurston and G. Musgrave of Musgrave, Thurston & Company, owned most of the real estate in the town.[136]

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[134] Alta Californian, November 29, 1851.

[135] Department of State Dispatches, #4. Kerr to Webster.

[136] Ibid, Dispatch #5, enclosure, December 15, 1851.

CHAPTER VI

PROBLEMS DEVELOP ALONG THE ROUTE: EL CASTILLO AND GREYTOWN

The Mclean episode had resulted in no worse consequences than to rid the country of Muñoz; and subsequently, Charge d'Affairs Kerr pointed out in his first dispatch of 1852 that "it is fortunate circumstance that the Americans whom the Transit has drawn are scattered off from any of the large towns and in a line of country hitherto neglected and suffered to remain wilderness."[137] The increased traffic was still to present more problems than it would solve throughout the year, however.

Among the first acts of the new government of Castillon was to place an export duty of four reales to the fanega of[138] maize. Despite pleas of the shipmasters who stopped in Realejo and bought there for consumption on their voyage,[139] the duty was not lifted and on March 15, the government

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[137] Department of State Dispatches, #7, Kerr to Webster.

[138] A fanega is a grain measurement equal to 1.6 bushels.

[139] Department of State Dispatches, #9, enclosure #2, Kerr to Zeledon.

prohibited the export of all corn because of the plague of locusts which had nearly destroyed the whole crop.[140] This may account for the increased number of vessels which, according to shipmasters, were to be found in the harbor of San Juan del Sur by mid-1852.

Yet, none of the areas along the transit route could point to a growth comparable to that in Panama during this period either. The government of Nicaragua had allowed in its contract with the company only a limited area of land which could be settled along the San Juan River. Neither terminus to the route had been conceded in the original contract, and the government's land policy was to appear very narrow to the adventurers who came to the transit route in hope of making a quick profit.[141] Lots were not sold but rented monthly, the rent to be paid to the state, and, in addition, the export of the principle commodities such as beef and corn remained a monopoly of the government. These conditions prompted William Walker to point out after he had attempted to raise money in San Juan del Sur that "there were, in fact, few sources of revenue."[142]

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[140] San Francisco Herald, April 17, 1852.

[141] Department of State Dispatches, #9, Kerr to Zeledon.

[142] William Walker, The War in Nicaragua (Mobile: S. H. Goetzel & Co., 1860), p. 99.

Early in 1852, the agent of the Company in Managua, Mr. Doyle, had suggested the commissioning of Americans as Alcaldes to provide some semblance of law along the route for the towns had attracted adventurers of the worst sort.[143] The suggestion met considerable resistance in Nicaragua, Mosquitía and the terminus of Greytown were a different matter, however.

A better harbor than San Juan del Sur, Greytown soon attracted ships sailing the east coast of Central America, and by mid-February, twenty or more ships could be seen in the harbor. Two hotels had been built to take the place of the custom's shed which had sheltered Baldwin and Squier. Mr. Samuel Shepard had become the agent of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company in town, and a fire in early February destroyed four stores, although it left three large and several small warehouses untouched. More was destroyed than the whole town had contained three years earlier, and the extent of the destruction was only estimated at one-third of the business property.[144]

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[143] Department of State Dispatches, Dispatch #7, Kerr to Webster.

[144] New York Times, February 14, 1852.

Greytown remained under British control however, and it was in this town that the first friction appeared along the route, and was produced directly as a result of that route. In January Vanderbilt's ship, the Brother Jonathan, arrived in Greytown only to be requested upon her departure, to pay port duties of $123 to the Mosquito kingdom. The British brig-of-war, Express, fired a shot across her bow as she left the harbor and in the exchange of letters which followed between the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Granville, U. S. Minister to the Court of St. James, Abbot Lawrence, and Secretary of State, David Webster, it was pointed out that Greytown was a free port, and that, although the government of the town had the right to collect port charges, the United States would not pay them to an English ship-of-war.[145] By the end of the month, the American residents, led by one of the largest warehouse owners, Mr. Deforest, had formed a secret organization called the "Gallinappers."[146] Constituting the entire business portion of the local population[147] and with the obvious purpose of taking over the town for themselves, they refused to pay their taxes and requested aid

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[145] Ibid, February 15, 1852.

[146] Ibid, March 8, 1852.

[147] Ibid, March 24, 1852.

from a United States sloop-of-war in the harbor. Although the request was granted, the departure of Consul Jimmy Green for Bluefields and his threat of reprisals[148] must have left them doubtful of their position and two days after the first meeting, a delegation of thirteen was appointed.[149] to go to Managua to obtain a grant and charter for the city from the Nicaraguan government.[150] The delegation arrived only to find, however, that the question of United States encroachment in Mosquitia had become as much a political issue as had that of British action in the area.[151] In Nicaraguan eyes, the actions of the Gallinappers in writing a constitution, electing a mayor, and establishing courts had been a declaration of independence from Nicaragua not from the British protectorate of Mosquitia.

Added to the insult of the inhabitants of San Juan del Norte, were the actions of fifteen or twenty Americans, led by Mr. Weiner, who had been proprietor of the Union House in Greytown. Receiving a concession from the Canal Company of land along the San Juan, in accordance with the original

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[148] Ibid, March 8, 1852.

[149] Ibid, March 24, 1852.

[150] Department of State Dispatches, Dispatch #7, Kerr to Webster.

[151] Ibid, Dispatch #9.

contract signed with the Company, the men had determined to build hotels at El Castillo which was to become the first stop of through passengers of the company after the establishment of its headquarters on Puntas Arenas, a sand spit in the harbor. With the concession, but without prior consultation with the Nicaraguan government, the men proceeded to El Castillo. There, using material from the walls of the castle and the platform which extended over the water and at which the bungoes traditionally stopped, they built houses, an hotel, and a bar. Despite government protests, they continued with their work to the extent of building a wall around their structures and placing a piece of artillery on it from which they, according to the Nicaraguan government, shot broken bottles at passing bungoes.[152]

By July the question of Greytown and El Castillo had become so pressing to the Nicaraguan government, that it balked at signing the boundary agreement drawn up by Crampton and Webster in Washington unless some solution were offered. The agreement was aimed at settling the question of right of navigation on the San Juan and its southern tributaries which run only a short distance within the Nicaraguan border.

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[152] Ibid, enclosure Gaceta del Salvador, San Salvador, May 28, 1852.

Although Costa Rica signed the agreement in June, Castellon turned down the treaty on July 20, despite the arguments of Kerr and the conniving of Company agent White. Kerr had pointed out that it was necessary to arbitrate the question if businessmen were to pour millions of dollars into a canal which would run along the river,[153] while White had made clear his intentions to negotiate "with the means which never fail of success among Spaniards."[154]

Nine days after the refusal of Nicaragua to ratify the treaty, Castellon offered three additions to it which, if incorporated, would make it acceptable to the government. The first would have acknowledged that Mosquitía was a province of Nicaragua, although San Juan would have been allowed to continue as a municipality in its existing form. The second would have recognized a portion of the original contract of the Company in which Nicaragua was not to permit any obstruction on the river in the form of wharfs, moles, or walls. The third would have made it imperative that the Company subscribe the capital sufficient to construct the canal.[155] Thus, the government would have settled the three

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[153] Ibid, #10, enclosure June 23, 1852, Kerr to Castellon.

[154] Ibid, enclosure, White to Kerr.

[155] Ibid, #11, Kerr to Webster, enclosure Castellon to Kerr, July 29, 1852.

principal issues facing it. Negotiations closed at this point.

Despite the difficulties encountered by early travelers on the route and the unsettled disputes between the parties concerned with the route, it remained open and attracted a small though growing share of the passengers both to and from California. During the month of April only 250 passengers arrived in San Francisco from San Juan del Sur as compared to the over 4,000 who had traveled by way of Panama.[156] By May, however, the number crossing Nicaragua had risen to almost 2,000 while the number crossing Panama had remained substantially the same. Despite the increase in passengers, shipments of gold dust through Panama continued to surpass those through Nicaragua, for Panama was the route taken by the United States Mail. During March, April, and May of that year, $9,250,000 was shipped to the east coast by way of Panama, while only $108,000 was sent through Nicaragua.[157]

By April, most of the road between La Virgen and San Juan del Sur had been graded and it took only two and a half hours riding time to travel the twelve miles.[158]

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[156] San Francisco Herald, May 3, 1852.

[157] Ibid, June 16, 1852.

[158] New York Times, April 1, 1852.

The following month plans were completed for moving the town of Virgin Bay two miles to the north where it would be easier to build a wharf and warehouses for the Company, and passengers were notified that the "spacious hotel" built by Mr. Weiner at El Castillo was open. Total travel time from San Juan del Norte to San Juan del Sur had been pared to 40 hours. The Northern Light had been officially added to the Atlantic fleet of the Company, and the first three shallow draught steamers,[159] the Rescue, the J. N. Scott, and the Machuca[160] had been launched on the San Juan. The little boats were capable of navigating the river even during the dry season from September to May, and could carry up to 300 passengers.[161] The Company had discovered, during its first winter managing the route, that the Clayton and the Bulwer were unable to take freight up the river except that arriving by their own steamers and that it was only with difficulty that passengers could be transported during the months of little rain.[162] While the Transit Company continued to improve its route, aroused interest in Central

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[159] San Francisco Herald, May 18, 1852.

[160] Walker, pp. 350-63.

[161] San Francisco Herald, May 18, 1852.

[162] New York Times, March 8, 1852.

America brought a Californian who had operated steamers along that coast, Thomas Wright, to Central America to establish a line of packets to connect the Pacific ports from Guatemala to Punta Arenas, Costa Rica.[163]

By the end of 1852, the Company had not only graded the major portion of the road which connected La Virgen and San Juan del Sur, but had built bridges over some of the major ravines and had appointed Mr. Herald Woeniger superintendent of the road. But, like the rest of the long-time resident Americans in Nicaragua, Woeniger's fate was to be an unhappy one. After leaving Omotepe, he had accumulated property worth at least $12,000,[164] moved to Virgin Bay and by December had been suggested as Consul in San Juan del Sur. He was the only candidate acceptable to Supreme Director Castellon with whom he was a personal friend.[165] On the night of December 10, he was murdered, however, on a small bridge about two and a half miles outside of La Virgen. The purpose was apparently to steal some "300 and odd dimes" which he was carrying in his saddle bags.[166] The murderers

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[163] Department of State Dispatches, #13, Kerr to Webster, enclosures Oct. 27, Kerr to Guatemala, Nov. 1, Kerr to Castellon, Sept. 21, Kerr to San Salvador.

[164] Ibid, #14, enclosure Lowery to Kerr, Dec. 11, 1852.

[165] Ibid, enclosure Kerr to De la Rocha, Dec. 11, 1852.

[166] Ibid, Lowery to Kerr.

were never to be caught, rather the blame was to be laid to his attempts to discover his wife's nurderers.[167] His father, Mr. August Woeniger, an accounting officer in a New Orleans customs house, was to be his only heir.

While in some instances there was a legitimate right to complain about the treatment of Americans in Nicaragua, quite often it was the fault of the injured party rather than that of the residents of the country. Protests against the bayoneting of a young Doctor Donaghue in Granada for failure to answer a hail of a sentinel, for example,[168] were to no avail, for after investigation it was found that the young man and his two young German companions had delibertly provoked the guard.[169] In other instances English or English-speaking adventurers claimed American citizenship in the belief that it would add strength to their frequently fraudulent claims against the government.[170]

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[167] Ibid, Kerr to Webster, Supra, p. 59.

[168] Ibid, Dispatch #10, Kerr to Webster.

[169] Ibid, Dispatch #14, Kerr to Webster.

[170] Ibid.

CHAPTER VII

NICARAGUA 1853 AND 1854: THE END OF THE ROUTE

Again, in the first months of 1853, the Company would attempt to negotiate a treaty with the Nicaraguan government which would allow the Company to transport passengers across the Isthmus by means of rail, carriage and water communication. Company agent J. W. Edmonds cited the difficulties caused on the route by the "unpunished murder and robbery of the officers of the Company," the delay caused steamers at San Carlos where the passengers were forced to go through customs, the failure of Nicaragua to ratify the boundary convention, and British aspirations in the area to force a favorable decision.[171]

Pineda, Supreme Director, pointed, however, to the question of the status of Greytown, the lack of interest in the route, the attempts to introduce contraband articles into the country, the protection of the route offered by the Nicaraguan army, and, finally, the failure of the Company to pay its debt to the Nicaraguan Government, in refusing to

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[171] Ibid, #15, Kerr to Webster, enclosure #1, Edmonds to Pineda.

concede a contract for a lesser canal or a railroad.[172]

While the legal limbo in which it operated may have deterred the Company from making permanent improvements on the route, it did continue to make those of a more temporary nature which would facilitate the transport of passengers. Now it was faced with the competition offered by the Panama Railroad, rapidly drawing to its completion.

The town of Virgin Bay had been relocated at the foot of a small hill on the shore of the lake. At the edge of the village, which consisted of a dozen or so hotels, was a large wooden store house surrounded by palisades. The transit road ran to the edge of the lake where a small wharf had been built which ran into the lake.[173] Several large iron launches had been brought to the lake by the Company and were used for transporting freight and passengers from the wharf to the lake steamers.[174] In addition a wharf had been built at Granada.[175] By 1855, Walker was able to raise a company of nearly fifty Americans from the residents of Virgin Bay and an almost equal number from San Juan del Sur

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[172] Ibid, Pineda to Edmonds, January 26, 1853.

[173] Walker, p. 91.

[174] Ibid, p. 332.

[175] Ibid, p. 336.

for his conquest of Nicaragua. Most of the resident Americans were employed by the Transit Company, itself.[176] A coal ship was kept anchored in the harbor of San Juan del Sur and a contract had been let to a resident of the town for mules and carriages to carry passengers and freight to Virgin Bay.[177] The town was described by Squier as white cottages rising against the emerald green of the forests which ran down to the shore and which had, at his first visit, been all that could be seen.[178]

A passenger by the line could then land in San Juan del Sur, climb into one of the little blue and white carriages, of the company, and in the space of two or three short hours be on the lake steamer. As an institution of Isthmian travel, even a half-way house had been built. As the name implies, the half-way house was located half-way between the terminals of the various routes. In Panama the half-way houses moved as did the route. They were situated between the latest terminus of the railroad and the city of Panama.[179] In Nicaragua, the half-way house was located between San Juan del Sur and Virgin Bay. It was owned by an American and was

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[176] Ibid, p. 179

[177] Ibid, p. 89.

[178] Ephraim G. Squier, "San Juan de Nicaragua," Harper's Monthly, XI, (December, 1854), p. 50.

[179] "Crossing the Isthmus of Panama," Household Words, VI (February 12, 1853), p. 523.

a combination restaurant, bar, and hotel.[180] The main terminus of the Company was to be on the east coast, however. Appropriating a sand-spit in the harbor, the Company had built there storage sheds, workshops, and houses for company officials. The hull of one of the ships in the harbor had been run aground on the point to hold coal, and near it had been built a forge. It was here that the Company built the small steamers, which were to navigate the river.[181]

The harbor itself was crowded with ships, sailing vessels, steamers from New Orleans and New York, the British mail steamer from Jamaica. Since the advent of the "gallinappers" and the incident of the Brother Jonathan, Transit passengers had been forbidden to land in San Juan and, instead, were placed directly on the Company's steamers on which they traveled up the river.

On the large island which had been Cooke's Point and a supply post for the Kemble Expedition, an American, Charles Myers,[182] had cleared the forest and "stocked with plaintains, yucas, and other necessities."[183] At the junction of the

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[180] Walker, p. 90.

[181] Squier, "San Juan de Nicaragua," p. 55.

[182] Harper's Weekly, April 18, p. 248.

[183] Squier, "San Juan de Nicaragua,", p. 58.

Serapiqui and the San Juan, A german, naturalized in the United States and named Hipp, had started a plantation and had applied for a grant to colonize the area from both Nicaragua and the King of the Mosquitoes.[184] Mr. Mancosos, a hotel owner of Gretyown, had received a grant from the Company to settle at the Machuca Rapids[185] where he was employed in cutting wood for the steamers.[186] At El Castillo a wharf had been built below the falls, a piece of railway transported passengers past the prtage; there were a dozen well-built frame houses and several hotels had been added to the original one built by Mr. Weiner.[187]

By August of 1853, the Vanderbilt Independent Line could boast that the shortest passage on record had been completed by a group of passengers which had left San Francisco on May 16 and arrived in New York June 8. It had taken only thirty hours to cross the Isthmus, and the total time for the trip had been only twenty-three days and three hours.[188]

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[184] Ibid, p. 59.

[185] Department of State Dispatches, #9, Wheeler to Marcy.

[186] Squier, "San Juan de Nicaragua," p. 60.

[187] Ibid, p. 61.

[188] San Francisco Herald, August 1, 1853.

Unlike Minister Kerr, who had been required to travel to his post in Nicaragua by way of Chagres and Panama in 1851,[189] Minister Borland had had put at his disposal one of the Transit Company steamers in San Juan del Norte. Leaving San Juan on September 3, he had traveled to El Castillo where he had spent the night. Boarding a lake steamer there, after touching at San Carlos for customs and at Virgin Bay to unload the passengers for California, he had arrived in Granada on the morning of the sixth.[190] A journey across Nicaragua, while the steamer might still be hot, crowded, and uncomfortable, had changed radically since 1849, and even since 1851. The years 1853 and 1854 would be the peak years of the Transit traffic with an estimated 2,000 passengers per month making the two-day journey from Puenta Arenas to San Juan del Sur.[191]

Only San Juan del Norte was to be excluded from the Transit route; the town itself had a population of about 300 and contained in all some 50 or 60 dwellings. Business was concentrated in the hands of a polygot group: English, French, German, and American who, after the failure of their attempt to

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[189] Alta Californian, July 21, 1851.

[190] Department of State Dispatches, #5, Borland to Marcy.

[191] "Nicaragua and the Filibusterers," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, LXXIX (March, 1856), p. 314.

receive recognition from the Nicaraguan government, had continued to use their town council and elect a mayor annually. In 1853 another American, Theo. J. Martin, had followed Deforest as mayor, and in 1854, the French Trader Sigaud would be elected to the office.[192]

In mid-1853 Martin had met Minister Borland in San Juan harbor with an American flag flying at the mast of the city's official boat although he had prior to then rather ostentatiously flown the Mosquito flag.[193] For all practical purposes by that time the British had ceased even trying to exercise any authority in the name of the Mosquito King and Mr. Foote, the British vice-consul, had been instructed to leave the town and take up his residence in San Salvador.[194] There was in effect no government in the town and the population was similar to that of the west coast ports of Realejo, Mazatlan, and Acapulco.[195]

Despite the refusal of the Transit authorities to land their passengers at the port of the town, it had continued to grow, for it was the natural terminus of the Isthmian travel. A large wooden hotel, the St. Charles, had been brought out

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[192] Department of State Dispatches, Borland to Marcy, Washington, May 3, 1854.

[193] Ibid, #4.

[194] Ibid,

[195] Ibid, unnumbered, Borland to Marcy.

from the United States and was on the former site of the British Consulate. A second two-story hotel with a wide balcony running entirely around it, porticoes and colonades, had been built. King Street was a broad avenue along which had been built many large frame houses.[196]

By September of 1853, Minister Borland had suggested that Joseph W. Fabens, commercial agent at San Juan del Norte, be made "Consul for Nicaragua at San Juan del Norte." Thus, the United States would have recognized Nicaragua's persistent and rightful claim to the town and possibly created a framework within which some type of law and order could be maintained.[197] Borland's suggestion went unheeded, however, and Fabens continued as commercial agent until November, 1855, when he was appointed Director of Colonization in the Walker Cabinet.[198]

Perhaps it was as much resentment of Borland's attempt to bring Greytown under the control of Nicaragua, as it was the smoldering feud between the Transit Company and the town which led to its destruction by the U.S.S. Cyane. By 1854 the feud between San Juan del Norte and the Accessory Transit Company had a concrete base. The Company had accused the

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[196] Squier, "San Juan de Nicaragua," p. 57.

[197] Department of State Dispatches, #5, Borland to Mercy.

[198] Walker, p. 144.

residents of the town of stealing some Company property, and a bungo captain had been shot by Captain T. T. Smith of the river steamer Routh. When an attempt to arrest Smith was made, Borland, who was returning to the United States and was on the steamer, stepped in to protect Captain Smith. A riot followed during which Borland held off the residents of the town with a gun. Escaping the mob which had attempted to take Smith off the steamer, the passengers landed in Punta Arenas. The same evening Borland paid a visit to Fabens at the consulate in Greytown. There Borland was arrested and held for the remainder of the night by the town council. He was, however, allowed to return to Punta Arenas the following day, and from there he returned to Washington where he requested that a United States ship-of-war be sent to San Juan to protect Americans.[199] Arriving at San Juan, the commander of the Cyane gave the residents of the town 24 hours to raise the $24,000 damages demanded by the Transit Company as the cost of damages caused by the riot during the attempt to arrest Smith, and the value of the property stolen earlier that year. The money was not forthcoming and on June 13 Commander George H. Hollins bombarded the town and then,

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[199] Department of State Dispatches, unnumbered dispatches, Borland to Marcy.

landing a party of marines, burned it to the ground.[200]

Undoubtedly the bombardment of San Juan proved a setback to the Transit Company and more were coming. Slightly off-schedule, Nicaragua's biennial revolution did not start until 1854 when the liberals of Leon attempted to overthrow Pineda's conservative government. The conservatives soon found for themselves allies in Guatemala and the liberals approached Byron Cole of California requesting his aid in return for large land grants. Cole turned over his interest in the projected expedition to William Walker who arrived in Nicaragua in June, 1855, and who was to keep the country in turmoil until May, 1857, when he finally surrendered to an American war ship. Indeed for the better part of this time, the route was completely closed and by the end of 1857 most of the Americans in Nicaragua had been forced to leave the country; even Dr. Livingston, who had been held hostage at one time by the conservatives and whose life had been spared only on the condition that he leave his home of ten years.[201]

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[200]"Record of Monthly Events," Harper's Monthly, IX (July, 1854), p. 544. Squiers, Harper's Monthly, XI, p. 60. Hubert Howe Bancroft, The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, VII: Central America 1821-1887, III (San Francisco: The History Company, 1887), p. 255.

[201]Walker, p. 237.

There would be attempts to revive the route and on November 6, 1857, the steamer Washington, the first in over a year, sailed from New York to San Juan del Norte and the Hermann awaited the Company's passengers at San Juan del Sur.[202] Few more would sail, however, for the Panama Railroad had been completed by January 27, 1855,[203] and the trip across Panama took only four and a half hours.[204] Nor was the Nicaraguan government eager to see the grant awarded to the Vanderbilt Company and in 1858, a contract was signed with the French company of Felix Belly. But in 1861 Belly's contract was mullified and once again Nicaragua was in the business of selling a canal.

By 1870 the right to operate steamers on the inland waters had been granted to Hollenbeck and Associates of San Juan del Norte. An English naturalist, Anthony Belt, traveled up the river finding it as peaceful as the river of Baldwin's day, if slightly more populated. San Juan del Norte was "small but neat with streets of well built wooden houses."[205] Ten years earlier its population had been established as between 400 and 500 by Belley.

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[202]Harper's Weekly, II (November 6, 1857).

[203]F. N. Otis, The Panama Railroad (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1861), p. 36.

[204]"Notes on the Isthmus of Panama," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, LXXXII (November, 1858), p. 541.

[205]Anthony Belt, Naturalist in Nicaragua (London: 1873), p. 5.

Machuca was a single-house settlement 27 miles above San Juan del Norte, and Castillo was a little town with a single, dirty street. Twelve miles above Castillo, Belt found a German plantation, and San Carlos still existed as a port of call for all steamers entering the lake.[206] La Virgen would continue to exist on the western shore of the lake, but Corinto was to become the most important Pacific port of the country, replacing both Realejo and San Juan del Sur.

On his return in 1872, Belt found the only packet still used on the San Juan waters had been wrecked. The only transportation available from San Juan del Norte to the interior of the country was a bungo, just as it had been the only available transportation in 1849.[207] An era had come and gone in regional history.

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[206] Belt, pp. 27-32.

[207] Ibid, pp. 297-8.

CONCLUSION

It would only be during the one short period of the gold rush that the Nicaraguan Transit Route would be used extensively. A late comer to the various methods of passage, it could never have achieved any permanence unless a canal had been built during the period, and a canal project was too expensive to be feasible for fledgling American business. Nor was interest to be found in Europe.

English and French opinion held that there would be no distinct commercial advantage in building a canal across the Isthmus. The primary interest of the two countries was their Eastern trade and these three arguments against the building of a canal. First, the estimated distance around Cape Horn was 200 miles shorter and a week's less sailing time than the distance by way of the Isthmus. Although Childs was to estimate the distance as less, it was not substantially so, involving only one day by steamer. Second, it was argued that the building of a canal would open the Eastern trade to the United States under more advantageous circumstances than those which existed with Europe. Third, and perhaps the

most influential, was the argument that there were not enough bottoms afloat, even allowing the charging of maximum rates, to make the canal a financial success.[208]

Thus, although Vanderbilt was to be offered an opportunity in 1853 to join with a group of prominent Frenchmen in forming a new steamship line between France and Central America,[209] he would never receive backing for a canal.

Unlike New Granada, which offered the Comte de Thierry the alternative of building a canal, a railroad, or a commodious road of some description, and granted the Pacific Mail Steamship Company a contract to build a railroad, Nicaragua steadfastly insisted upon a canal. Her 1826 contract with the Central American and United States Atlantic and Pacific Canal Company, and her 1830 contract with the King of Holland both called for canals only, as would her 1849 contract with Vanderbilt. Nor does it seem likely that a railroad would have been projected.

Using Childs figures, it would have required about 140 miles of railroad plus 54 miles of lake navigation to cross Nicaragua, as compared to the 40 miles across Panama.

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[208] "The Proceedings of the French in the Pacific," p. 59.

[209] John Overton Choules, The Cruise of the Steamship North Star (Boston: Gould & Lincoln, 1854), p. 192.

In Nicaragua it was always the lure of the San Juan and the Lake of Nicaragua which attracted speculators. Childs report, however, and the subsequent experiences of the Company, which according to Squier lost numerous small steamers on the rapids,[210] proved the difficulty of making the river navigable except through an extensive system of locks, dams, and canals.

While Vanderbilt made an effort to attract European capital to help finance the route, he was most interested in establishing a successful rival to the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. By 1853 the Vanderbilt Company had poured some $2,500,000 into the transit which was paying a net profit of 40 per cent annually during the same year.[211] It must have been obvious, however, to Vanderbilt and his associates that the Transit would be short-lived for the Panama Railroad was rapidly nearing completion.

Vanderbilt and his corporation had paid Nicaragua neither its annual payment of $10,000, its per centage of the net profits, the $10,000 draft due on the signing of the contract, nor donated to the country the requisite shares of stock in the Company. Threatened with cancellation of its contract and failing to attract foreign capital, the Company

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[210] Squier, "San Juan de Nicaragua", p. 61.

[211] Department of State Dispatches, Dispatch #6, Borland to Marcy.

became increasingly reluctant to pay its debt to Nicaragua, and Nicaragua became increasingly insistent in her demands. The total indebtedness of the Company by March, 1856, less the value of the expropriated Company property, was placed at $412,589.96.[212] by the Commission appointed by the Rivas government. It was on this basis that the contract of the Company was cancelled.

By 1852, the failure of the Company to begin the Canal and its continued attempts to negotiate a separate treaty which would recognize the Accessary Transit Company as independent of the Atlantic & Pacific Canal Company, had caused the Nicaraguan government to question the motives of Vanderbilt and, through its Minister in Washington, to threaten to publicly the cancellation of the Company's contract.

The optimism of the Nicaraguans at the signing of the original treaty had two sources: first, the fulfillment of their cherished dream of a canal, and, second, an opportunity to enlist an ally in their attempts to rid the Mosquito Coast of the British.

A canal was to be considered a potentially major source of revenue to Nicaraguan governments until the signing of its 1916 treaty with the United States. To the impecunious governments of the small republic, its waterway was the one natural

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[212] San Francisco Herald, August 5, 1856.

resource which could be unfailingly leased for a profit and it became increasingly obvious that the only profit to be made by the transit traffic would be made by Vanderbilt.

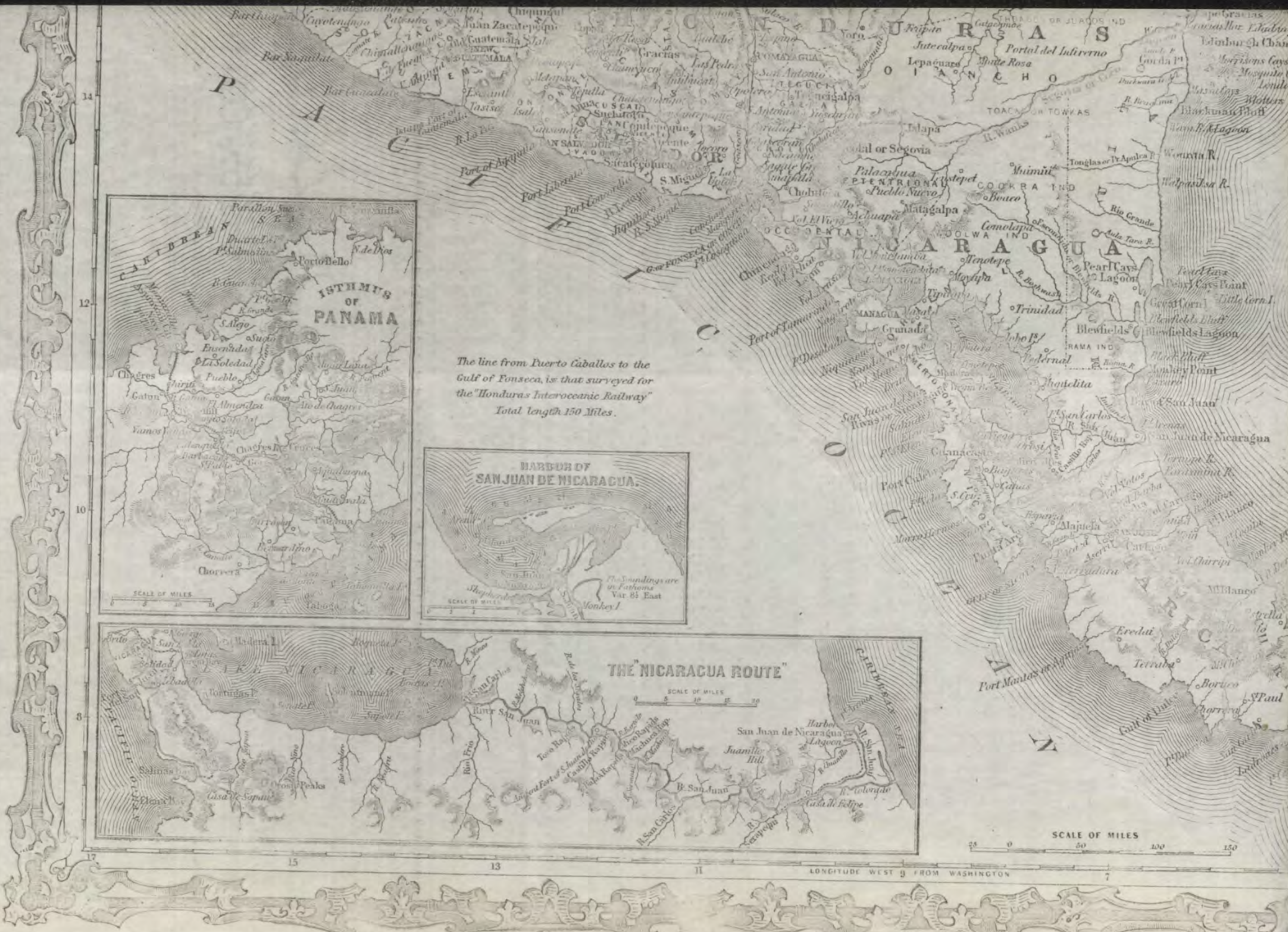
On the second point Nicaragua was soon disillusioned, too. With the signing of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, the subsequent refusal of the Company to negotiate on the status of Greytown in 1852 and 1853, and the refusal of the United States to recognize Fabens as Consul of Nicaragua at San Juan del Norte, it became obvious that nothing would or could be done through the Company to force a change in the status of the town.

Added to the poor faith of the Company, the difficulties of the route, Nicaragua's insistence upon a canal and refusal to sign a separate agreement with the Accessory Transit Company, and Britain's policy of enlightened self-interest, was the political situation in Nicaragua herself. In 1849, 1851, and 1854 revolutions broke out in the country. At times there was no legitimate government; at times there were two. Unfortunately, both for Nicaragua and the United States, the transit route, unlike those in Panama and Tehuantepec, passed near enough the center of the country to allow the more unscrupulous passengers an opportunity to offer their service to the revolutionary armies. These men

were to join Muñoz in 1849 and again in 1851, paving the way for the invitation to Walker and his American Phalanx in 1855.

Although Walker was to be supplied by the Accessory Transit Company with both men and arms, it was the instability and disunity of Nicaragua which allowed him to operate until the forces of all the Central American states and both Nicaraguan parties combined to defeat him.

It was left to Walker to supply the coup de grâce to the dying route and leave a legacy of bitterness in his wake.


PACIFIC OCEAN
NICARAGUA
HONDURAS
ISTHMUS OF PANAMA
CARIBBEAN SEA
HARBOR OF SAN JUAN DE NICARAGUA.
The Soundings are in Fathoms
Var. 8½ East
THE "NICARAGUA ROUTE"
LAKE NICARAGUA
SCALE OF MILES
The line from Puerto Caballos to the Gulf of Fonseca, is that surveyed for the "Honduras Interoceanic Railway" Total length 150 Miles.
LONGITUDE WEST 9 FROM WASHINGTON

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