

Canal Zone Is in an Identity Crisis as U.S.

By RICHARD SEVERO
Special to The New York Times

CRISTOBAL, C.Z.—At first glance the 70-year-old Panama Canal Zone—from its country clubs to its shopping centers to its points of historical interest and orderly flow of traffic—resembles just about any community in the United States.

But since it cuts the Republic of Panama in two, it is criticized from without and is beset by morale and identity problems within. To the visitor who spends some time here, it presents a striking mixture of pride and shame, order and confusion.

The 533-square-mile Zone was born in 1903, when Panama was, as a result of a revolution against Colombia that both Panamanian and United States leaders wanted—the Panamanians, for reasons of self-determination, the Americans so they could build a 53-mile canal that President Theodore Roosevelt called “one of the great works of the world.”

Now neither Panama nor the United States wants to continue the treaty that created the Zone, but they have not been able to agree on a new one. The Canal Zone, meanwhile, remains on the brink of turmoil.

Issue-Cuts to Quick

Incredibly, amid the large and vexing differences that have impeded agreement, lawn-mowing has become a sensitive issue.

“Whatever you write, please don’t say we have manicured lawns,” admonished a public-relations man for the Panama

Canal Company, a United States Government agency.

The term “manicured lawns” has been much used in speeches by Panamanian leaders, who have pointed to them from a slum neighborhood in Panama City, which is separated from the American city of Cristobal by only a roadway.

“Well, as a matter of fact, we do have manicured lawns,” said the Canal Zone’s Governor, David E. Parker, adding that “the more manicuring we do, the better we keep the mosquito population down.”

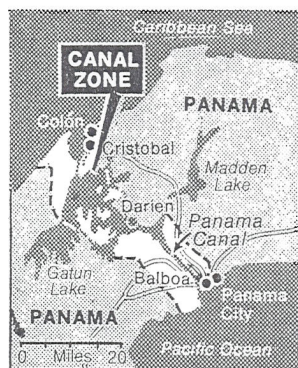
“Unfortunately, all that lawn mowing gives the Canal Zone a look of luxury,” he went on, “but if you take a close look at some of our housing, you might find it not quite as luxurious as some would imagine.”

Barracks Architecture

A tour carries a visitor past attractive houses but also past many of considerably vintage, apparently inspired by barracks architecture. There are two-story walk-ups of plywood with exposed wooden studs, saved from an unrelenting institutional look only by the determination of the occupants.

Mrs. Sandra Brady, relaxing behind a coffee table consisting of a large piece of glass over several dozen neatly stacked beer cans—one of several ingenious efforts to make the place livable—said, “I suppose I’m not the typical Zonian.” Her mother is Panamanian and her father American, and she is married to Joseph Brady, a hydrologist employed by the Canal Company.

“I understand the Panamanians’ feelings and I also understand their playing for all it



The New York Times/Nov. 23, 1973

is worth,” she continued. “But relations have improved tremendously in recent years and the improvement hasn’t really been given the credit it is due.”

“Panamanians are happy to mix with Americans and vice versa,” she said. “Today the ugly American is gone.”

Old Isolation Waning

Mrs. Brady and her husband spend a great deal of time with Panamanians. She is fluent in Spanish; he has a working knowledge and struggles to make it better.

Mr. Brady appears typical of younger Americans being hired by the Canal Company, many of them critical of an older generation that refused to try to learn Spanish and avoided trips into Panama City if they could.

The ugly American may not exist for the Bradys, but he does for Panamanian politicians. The day Mrs. Brady made her observation, the leader of the Panamanian Government, Gen. Omar Torrijos Herrera, who was vacationing in Spain, said on seeing Gibraltar: “Like the Panama Canal Zone, Gibraltar is an outpost of inter-

national colonialism. When Panama and Spain are freed of the Anglo-Yankee colonialism, I will come again to visit the Rock and to salute the Spanish flag on it.”

In the Zone a growing number of United States citizens are trying to overcome the old image of colonialist. There appears to be a new social consciousness, a predisposition to self-criticism.

John McTaggart, who works in the Canal Company’s personnel department, thinks that more of his colleagues must learn Spanish. Company records indicate that about a third of the 3,000 United States employees speak the language.

Some Marry Panamanians

About 13 per cent have Panamanian spouses—Mr. McTaggart is one—and nearly 24 per cent of the Americans living in the Zone are second- or third-generation Zonians—descended from people who regarded a job with the Panama Canal Company as one of the most secure things on earth.

Mr. McTaggart would prefer to live in Panama City, but he would get no living allowance for such a venture. Rents there are at least triple what they are in the Zone for comparable housing—the Bradys estimate that their \$80 apartment would cost \$275 in Panama City—so the American enclave remains intact.

Older Panamanians employed by the Canal Company have bitter memories, particularly of the days when there were so-called gold and silver payrolls. The gold roll was the pay scale for white Americans; the silver roll was for Panamanians, both black and white, and for any

and Panama Haggles

American blacks who might work for the Canal Company. The system was abandoned in the middle nineteen-fifties.

There remain two wage scales, one based on skills available locally and one designed to attract professionals from the United States and other nations. Panamanians can qualify for both.

In 1959 only 144 of them were on the preferred wage scale; by 1972 the number had risen to nearly 2,000. Moreover, the thrust of hiring now clearly favors the Panamanians, who constitute about three-quarters of the 20,000 employees of the Canal Company and the United States military forces.

The Zone's school system remains a sore spot.

Small groups of Panamanians, most of them black and descended from the West Indian workers who built the canal, live in four communities in the Zone, towns that are holdovers from construction days. Their children are educated by a special school system.

Samuel H. Blenman, a black who has served the Canal Company 42 years, regards the system as inferior and would prefer to see the Panamanian youngsters in the Zone's American schools. But Dr. Charles L. Latimer, deputy superintendent of schools, says the Panamanian Government does not want the two systems integrated, arguing that it would tend to Americanize the Panamanians and make life that much more difficult.

The Panamanian communities in the Zone are shrinking, and children are not permitted to take over the housing occupied by their parents. The

school population reflects this. Ten years ago 3,500 Panamanian residents of the Zone attended the so-called "Latin" schools; now the enrollment has dropped to 1,300.

Discussing relations between Zonians and Panamanians, Davis Stephenson, an American with an insurance agency in Panama City whose wife works for the Canal Company, said he believed there could be more amity if the Zonians really tried to understand the culture of the country across the street. "It has to be more than taking Panamanian kids out to see the locks," he said.

Ernesto Cordovez, a Panamanian who is in charge of the Zone's ground maintenance, acknowledges that he disliked the Zone before he started working for the Canal Company "because it was like coming into a strange country." But he has enjoyed working there.

"I am very nationalistic," he said. "I owe allegiance to Panama, but I also owe allegiance to the company, and I've formulated my own concept, which is to be professional in my work."

Some Americans like Mr. McTaggart, the personnel man, think the development of a larger Panamanian middle class will help improve relations.

A Canal Company economist, Donald Schmidt, disagrees: "There is an affinity between Panamanians and Americans—both are very materialistic—but the bigger the middle class gets in Panama, the more aware it will be, and it will tend to compete with the American middle class, not complement it."