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TAKE THREE

Labor Migrants Who Changed the World

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A young man named Edgar Lewellyn Simmons sailed out of Carlisle Bay, Barbados, on a Royal Mail boat in January 1908 to work on the Panama Canal. After two weeks he reached Colon, and officials found him a place to sleep for the night. The whistle blew at 6 a.m. the next morning. When the workers lined up, the boss picked every other man and gave each a pick and shovel. Simmons thought with pleasant surprise he would get a better job, since he had not been chosen yet. Then came "one of our own West Indian fellow men" who took him to a dump car filled with coal, handed him a shovel, and told him to get to work unloading it all. The bosses called him Shine.[1]

Edgar Simmons was one of the tens of thousands of men and women who traveled to Panama during the construction decade from 1904 to 1914. They left homes in Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Antigua, the Bahamas, Grenada, and other Caribbean islands. Simmons' story is held in Box 25 of the Isthmian Historical Society Collection at the Library of Congress, along with 111 other first-person testimonies by canal workers. The testimonies resulted from a competition in 1963 for the "Best True Story of Life and Work" during the construction of the Panama Canal. The idea was to capture the experiences of that vast army of Afro-Caribbean laborers who, decades earlier, had built the spectacular Panama Canal. First-person accounts by Afro-Caribbean workers, the true "canal builders" whose work reshaped the western hemisphere, are rare. These provide not only information on their experiences, but also new ways of thinking about the relationship between archives, memory, and power.

During the construction decade, from 1904 to 1914, nearly 200,000 people worked to build the Panama Canal. The vast majority of them were men and women of African descent from across the Caribbean.[2] They dug, shoveled, dynamited, cooked and cleaned, and labored in the massive industrial sites as blacksmiths, carpenters, and machinists. In the early 1960s, as the fiftieth anniversary of the Panama Canal's completion in 1914 approached, Ruth C. Stuhl, President of the Isthmian Historical Society, designed a competition open to all non-U.S. employees. The Historical Society placed ads for the competition in newspapers in Panama, Jamaica, Barbados, British Honduras, Trinidad, Antigua, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, and Grenada, and sent notices about the competition in several thousand food packages distributed to

[1]Edgar Simmons, testimony in "Isthmian Historical Society Competition for the Best True Stories of Life and Work on the Isthmus of Panama," held in the Isthmian Historical Society, Canal Zone Library-Museum Panama Collection at the Library of Congress. The testimonies are also available online at the University of Florida George A. Smathers Library website: http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00016037/00086/allvolumes.

[2]Bonham Richardson estimates 140,000 people migrated from Jamaica and Barbados alone. Adding the smaller migratory flows from other islands of the Caribbean would easily move the numbers above 150,000. Bonham Richardson, "The Migration Experience," in *General History of the Caribbean, Vol. V.*, ed. Bridget Brereton (New York, 2007), 441; see also Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama 1904–1981* (Pittsburgh, 1985), ch 2.

disability relief recipients. People who had trouble writing, or who were not literate, could ask a friend or family member to write for them, according to the rules. Men of African descent from the British Caribbean wrote nearly all the testimonies. Their entries ranged from mere fragments to richly detailed and lengthy narratives.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Marisa Fuentes, and other scholars have explored the complex history of archival production, the ways archives emerge out of existing power relations, and the silences built into them. They note the need to read archives carefully to comprehend fully the agency, subjectivity, and experiences of people caught in the surveilling power of official archives.[3] Yet the Box 25 testimonies provide a challenge somewhat different from the cases upon which much scholarship about power and archives focuses, because they were written by the workers themselves—men and women who occupied a complex position. Their lives and aspirations were profoundly shaped by U.S. and British colonialism and by their structural position within global capitalism. The competition was designed to frame, sanitize, and publicize the benefits of U.S. colonialism. But it also provided an opportunity for Afro-Caribbean workers to express themselves—to create an archive that more faithfully reflected their own agency and subjectivity and made it possible to subvert the hegemonic narrative of racial capitalism and colonialism. The voices of the mostly male workers who entered the competition sing out clearly, articulating the deprivation and struggles they experienced. The work of oral historians like Alessandro Portelli and Daniel James is helpful here, reminding us to be alert not only to silences, but to inaccuracies as well. As they note, the moments when their subjects *misremember* the past illuminate how power dynamics have shaped their historical memories. Just as silences exert causal agency, wreaking violence upon our understanding of the past, collective or individual inaccuracies do so as well. Those moments provide a window into the ways individuals' structural position in the world has contributed to generating their memories and understandings of reality.[4]

The hundreds of thousands of men and women who left the British Caribbean for the Panama Canal Zone, despite their anonymity as individuals, exerted a tremendous influence on the history of the Americas. They dominated the construction of the Panama Canal between 1904 and 1914, an undertaking that generated several waves of migration and proved to the world that the United States was a dominant power in the Caribbean and Latin America. People migrated from across North America, Europe, and Asia to build the canal, but the largest numbers by far came from British Caribbean islands like Jamaica, Barbados, St. Lucia, Antigua, and Grenada. The majority were men, some of whom signed labor contracts with the U.S. government, while others traveled on their own to the isthmus to seek a job. Over time, several thousand women joined them, working often as laundresses or domestic servants. Some brought children with them, and others gave birth in the Canal Zone, so gradually canal life became a family experience for many. They boarded a ship for the isthmus in hopes of earning more money, acquiring new skills, or simply wanting to see the world. Many think of these workers as providing the brutal, unskilled labor demanded by the canal project, and to be sure a great number worked as diggers and dynamiters. But gradually thousands of Afro-Caribbean men received training and began working at jobs originally limited to white North Americans, for example as carpenters or machinists.[5]

[3]Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 2015); Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC, 2021); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016).

[4]Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY, 1991); Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC, 2000).

[5]For more on Afro-Caribbean women's experiences, see Joan Flores-Villalobos's essay in this feature, and her book *The Silver Women: How Black Women's Labor Made the Panama Canal* (Philadelphia, 2023). On occupational mobility of Caribbean canal workers, see Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York, 2008).

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The narratives in the Isthmian Historical Society competition take us to the beginning of that larger, hemispheric story. The men and women who chose to submit testimonies to the competition traveled to the Canal Zone to escape harsh environments in islands across the Caribbean, where most earned wages so low as to be near starvation. They had heard about jobs helping build the Yankees' canal and heard too that the pay was good. Surely, they knew, it would be far more than they could earn in St. Lucia, Barbados, or Jamaica. They hoped they could save enough money to return home and buy a piece of land or open a shop. When the canal opened to great acclaim in 1914, Afro-Caribbean canal workers found other jobs. Some kept working for the Isthmian Canal Commission, helping maintain the canal operations, while others moved home, or onward to plantations across Central America, or saved their money and headed to New York City. Decade upon decade passed by, and in 1963 when the competition was announced, the original canal builders were now aged men and women. No longer working, typically confronting severe poverty as well as the ravages of time on their bodies and souls, dealing with disability and disease and sometimes the approach of death, they looked to this competition as a possible lifeline. They wrote up their memories or asked a son or daughter to write for them. They placed stamps on envelopes and sent in their testimonies with hopes the prize money would afford them a few days of comfort.

Afro-Caribbeans had disembarked from their ships at the Canal Zone in the early twentieth century to confront a sea of white faces. The white bosses and supervisors were tough task masters, and they deployed rigid segregation—the "silver and gold" dual payroll system, which paid white U.S. citizen workers in gold and other workers in silver—to manage and discipline workers. The Canal Zone became one of the most modern and industrialized places on earth as the U.S. worked to turn Afro-Caribbeans into an efficient army of labor. However, the competition narratives and other records demonstrate the myriad ways Caribbean workers subverted the goals of U.S. officials and foremen, forced revisions to their policies, and created working or living conditions more to their liking. Workers often refused to live in government housing, disliking both the surveillance there and the requirement that they eat in government cafeterias, which charged a high price and, they believed, served execrable food. They changed their names and their jobs, or they worked more slowly than the bosses ordered. The testimonies provide a record of the construction years that clashes with the official record. Although officials stressed the safety of working conditions and bragged about a low rate of mortality, the Box 25 writers felt haunted by illness, avalanches, and premature dynamite explosions. Death stalks the testimonies. Descriptions of death were often matched by comments noting the apparent indifference of white officials. Barbadian Clifford Hunt related: "Men in my gang tell the boss I am going out to ease my bowels and they die in the bush and nobody look for you." Or as digger Constantine Parkinson described the death that surrounded their lives: "In construction days people get kill and injure almost every day and all the boses want is to get the canal build." Some of the testimonies are particularly evocative. When Parkinson lost his leg in a train accident, for example, he described the aftermath: "After coming out of the operation in the ward I notice all kinds of cripples around my bed with out arms foot one eye telling me to cheer up not to fret we all good soldiers."[6]

The testimonies in Box 25 focus mostly on the work—the dangers, the illness, the authoritarian or racist bosses. The food provided by the government, which they generally found to be execrable, received attention as well. They also lavished praise on the U.S. government, perhaps in hopes of currying favor and winning a prize for their testimony. Berisford Mitchell, who signed his entry as "retiree and vetterant," related several near-death experiences while working on the canal and concluded:

[6]Clifford Hunt and Constantine Parkinson, testimonies in the Isthmian Historical Society Competition, http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00016037/00010.

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> So my dear Sir I have plenty to thank God for that my life is still speared to this day. I have plenty to thank the Americans for. I have to say you all are a blessed people a nation which God bless, and to you Sir I hope through my rough toils and my experances of the Panama Canal, that the Lord may send us a blessing for our hard toiling, and that you may see fit to give me one of your prizes.

The writers said little about other matters we know were important to them—life with their wives and children, ties to their home island, or religion, for example.

Interrogating the testimonies tells us much not only regarding what canal workers experienced during the construction era, but also how they confronted the challenges of old age. In imploring the Isthmian Historical Society to choose their testimony as a winner, and writing in the early 1960s, they graphically described the impoverishment and frailty they were experiencing as older men. John Morgan of Colon wrote only a few sentences for the competition, relating some jobs he had held, and then got to his main concern: "I am not getting any pension. I took sick before it start to give out, and up to know I am still sick going 30 years now. I am asking you to see what you can do for me." Clifford Hunt of Cristobal declared, "I cry sometime to see how I put this Canal through up to [now] they don't pay us no mine today men are walking in and have everything sweet … we are dying for starvation but I ask God to open all you hearts and have mercy on us…."[7]

There are many ways to discuss the impact of the Panama Canal's construction. It helped create the infrastructure for a global economy, officials developed innovations in the racialized management of labor, and it broadcasted U.S. technological power to the world. But perhaps no aspect of it was more important than the migratory labors undertaken by legions of Afro-Caribbean men and women. Movement had long been important in Caribbean history, but this vast wave of migration to the Panama Canal Zone changed the Americas forever. Many migrants settled permanently in Panama, making that young republic a profoundly Caribbean and African-descended nation.[8] Tens of thousands more moved onward across Central and South America, the Caribbean, and farther along to the U.S. after completion of the canal construction project. The origins of the Caribbean-American community in the U.S., with its powerful impact on music, literature, and politics, are owed predominantly to the impact of these forefathers and mothers who traveled to Panama to work on the canal. And as they moved, their culture and political perspectives—a hybrid of African diasporic influences and the impact of British colonialism—migrated along with them. Afro-Caribbean canal workers carried with them a personal history of colonialism, manifested via the impact of disease and the remnants of scars from their labor, their bodies a "secret archive of harm," as one novelist phrased it.[9] In Box 25, 112 men and women tell their own stories. Despite the fragility of their memories, the frailties of old age, and the poverty they confronted, their testimonies provide subversive documents of migration and a vast labor project that changed the world.

[7]Alonzo West, John Morgan, Albert Banister, and Clifford Hunt, testimonies in the Isthmian Historical Society Competition, http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00016037/00010.

[8]On this, see Kaysha Corinealdi, *Panama in Black: Afro-Caribbean World Making in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, 2022).

[9]The phrase is from Omar El Akkad's novel about the refugee crisis in Europe, *What Strange Paradise* (New York, 2021), 201.

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