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FEEDING THE CANAL ZONE



Colon, C. Z.—In writing or talking about the Panama Canal the superlative degree is very likely to be overworked. The canal itself is the big gest thing of the kind ever undertaken; the locks are unequalled in size; the work of the department of sanitation is the most remarkable ever carried out, and so it goes.

But there is one other feature of the building of the canal that calls loudly for the superlative degree—the commissary department and the way in which it has fed the Zone. Not fed it only, either, but largely clothed it and supplied it with household necessities and even luxuries.

The commissary department is a department of the Panama railroad, which is owned by the United States and of which Chairman Goethals is president. As officially stated:

"The commissary department of the Panama railroad is operated by the subsistence department of the Isthmian Canal commission for the purpose of supplying employees of the Panama railroad and Isthmian Canal commission and their families with foodstuffs, wearing apparel and household necessities, and also supplying food for the hotels, hospitals, messes, and kitchens operated by the Isthmian Canal commission and for the United States soldiers and marines located on the Isthmus of Panama, and ships of the United States navy. It is estimated that the department supplies about 70,000 people daily, computing one dependent for each employee.

"The business of the department for the fiscal years ending June 30, 1912, was \$6,702,355.68, to transact which it is necessary to carry a stock valued at about \$1,000,000."

That sounds decidedly prosaic, but in truth the operations of this great business machine are almost romantic. The vessels of the Panama railroad in unending procession bring to the docks at Cristobal the vast bulk of supplies and as continually these are sent out to the score of stores maintained by the department along the route of the canal and at Porto Bello. Every evening each storekeeper telegraphs to the headquarters in Cristobal the list of supplies of which he is in need, and during the night the cars are loaded. At 3:45 o'clock each morning the long supply train starts out from Colon. It consists of 31 cars, 11 of which are refrigerated, and the food and ice are distributed along the route so that they may be delivered to the quarters of families by 8 o'clock.

In Cristobal is the biggest store of all, and it compares well with the huge department stores of American cities. There may be obtained all kinds of food stuffs, American and European; clothing for men and women, furniture, household wares, supplies for travelers, cigars and cigarettes—indeed almost anything one might call for except intoxicating drinks. Articles from foreign lands, being imported by the government itself, of course pay no duty, and consequently such things as fine English chinaware can be bought there at prices far below those charged in the states. It is said on the isthmus, and generally believed, that the members of congressional junketing parties which from time to time go down to inspect the canal always carry home with them a lot of this choice porcelain.

At the head of the commissary department is the subsistence officer, Col. Eugene Wilson, whose huge physical bulk is well matched by his great executive ability. It would seem that so better man could possibly have been found for the position, for he has in hand every detail of the immense business and it runs like clockwork. Seldom is a complaint heard from even the most exacting of housewives, and when one is registered it is courteously received and the fault, if one exists, promptly rectified.

"Cleanliness before godliness every time" is Colonel Wilson's motto and though it is not posted on any wall, every employe understands that his job depends primarily on his cleanliness. In Cristobal are the great cold storage plant, bakery, coffee plant, ice plant, ice cream plant, corned beef plant, butter printing plant and laundry, and in every one of them the unwritten rule "be clean" is adhered to with the utmost care. Nowhere, if it can be avoided, is there personal contact with the food, and the numerous and ingenious automatic machines are kept scrupulously clean.

Now let's get back to figures, in order to obtain some idea of the magnitude of the commissary department's operations. Take the cold storage plant first. In its 192,230 cubic feet of refrigerated space are kept constantly on hand meat and vegetable supplies for ten days at least, in some in-

stances much more. Hanging in long rows in the icy cold rooms are the carcasses of 400 beeves and hogs and sheep in due proportion. In other rooms, not so cold, are 150 tons of potatoes, and vast quantities of onions, turnips, beets, carrots, cabbages, yams, celery, tomatoes and other vegetables. In yet other rooms are ten tons of poultry, and elsewhere are boxes of fruit without number. And this enormous supply is daily depleted and daily renewed.

Adjoining the cold storage plant is the bakery, in whose immense ovens are baked each working day about 20,000 loaves of bread, 2,200 rolls and 380 pounds of cake. The coffee department, which roasts and sends out about 300,000 pounds of the roasted berry each year, receives the especial attention of Colonel Wilson, for he is himself a great coffee drinker. He personally makes up the formulas for the blends, and as something of a coffee connoisseur myself, I can testify that he knows what he is about when he does it.

The people of the zone, white and black alike, are very fond of ice cream, and to supply the demand the commissary manufactures about 140,000 gallons a year, of three grades. The first grade is as good ice cream as one can get anywhere, and even the third grade is mighty welcome after a hot day in the Culebra Cut or the Pedro Miguel locks.

Are you tired of figures yet? If not, please consider that the ice plant at Cristobal makes nearly 40,000 tons of ice a year, the corned beef plant has an annual output of about 270,000 pounds, and that almost 335,000 pounds of butter is handled by the butter printing plant, all of the butter being brought from the United States. Then we will move to the laundry. In this spacious building, with its long rows of washing machines and drying and ironing devices, all the laundry work of the Zone, excepting that of the Ancon hospital, is done, and in addition that of all the steamship lines running to Colon except one. "We are now handling," said the manager, "an average of about half a million pieces a month, and in the months when the tourists come in greatest numbers the figures mount to about 800,000."

The figures I have been giving are approximate only, for they are changing continually with changing conditions. Here is a list of some of the more important importations of food products during the last fiscal year:

Peas and beans in bulk	1,195,008
Sugar	4,154,587
Tea	106,155
Preserved fruit in sirup in tins and glass	887,173
Jams, jellies and preserves in tins and glass	249,824
Milk, evaporated and condensed	1,025,399
Peanut and beans in tins	524,273
Pickles and sauces	308,891
Lard	619,899
Codfish	1,292,716
Rice	1,942,713
Flour	4,959,323
Confectionery	116,607
Macaroni, vermicelli and spaghetti	428,517
Fish, canned	200,443
Fresh meats	6,453,133
Cured and pickled meats	375,445
Cheese	142,786
Butter, fresh	427,853
Poultry	598,590
Potatoes, white	5,843,692
Potatoes, sweet	1,016,392
Onions	896,853
Turnips	836,110
Carrots	135,256
Cabbage	677,234
Yams	890,043
Other vegetables	741,627
Apples	615,622

As will be readily understood, the commissary is able and willing to sell food at very little above cost. Consequently the housewife on the isthmus can buy at prices that are never above those in the states, and that nearly always are considerably lower.

An important part of the commissary plant is the industrial and experimental laboratory in Cristobal, where all the foods are tested and many things, such as favoring extracts, are manufactured.

The commissary conducts more than a dozen hotels for white Americans, where good meals are furnished for 30 cents each; a score of mess halls for European laborers, where a day's board costs forty cents, and about twenty-five kitchens for West Indian laborers, where board costs thirty cents a day. Something like a million meals are served each month in these various establishments, for nearly every employe of the commissary eats at a government table. It has been said that no private contractor in the world feeds his employes as well as the Isthmian canal commissary. Very few of the men ever ate better meals than they are getting on the isthmus, and this is true of the Americans as well as of the Spaniards and West Indians.

No, you cannot avoid the use of the superlative degree in speaking about Colonel Wilson's commissary department.

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Attorneys at Law

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Fair Block Minot, N. Dak.

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Office over Citizen's Bank
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Nestos & Carroll
Attorneys at Law

C. A. Johnson Block
MINOT, - NORTH DAKOTA

E. R. SINKLER
Attorney at Law

Lee Block
MINOT, - NORTH DAKOTA

Chatfield & Fahey
Lawyers

Offices in Temple Court
MINOT, - NORTH DAKOTA

A. M. Thompson G. S. Woolledge
THOMPSON & WOOLLEDGE
Attorneys at Law

Office Telephone 181; Lee Block,
formerly Dist. Court Chambers
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P. J. ENGESETH
Attorney at Law
Local Collections a Specialty

Scofield Block, Suite 8
MINOT, - NORTH DAKOTA

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Roell-Blakey Block
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MINOT, - NORTH DAKOTA

Dr. J. R. PENCE
Physician & Surgeon
Office and Residence Room 14,
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