

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Fifty-Four

Completing The Canal

LESSON IDEA

To describe the gigantic engineering tasks that were required to finish building the Panama Canal; and to show why it is vital for the United States to retain control of this waterway.

PREPARATION

Collect some newspaper stories and magazine articles about current efforts to surrender control of the Canal, and plan to conclude this lesson with a discussion of the need to retain U.S. sovereignty over the Panama Canal.

* * * * *

AT THE BEGINNING of his third year in Panama, John Stevens could boast that yellow fever and malaria were on the way to being totally eliminated. But the Chief of Engineers was still having his problems with the Isthmian Canal Commission. And although almost two years had passed since the first American steam shovel bit into Panamanian soil, a decision had not even been made on whether to build a sea-level canal or a lock canal. Can any of you explain how locks on a canal work?

Before arriving in Panama, Stevens favored a sea-level canal. But once he had surveyed the proposed canal route, he realized that a lock canal would be cheaper to build and take less time to complete. Unfortunately, Stevens had no say in the type of canal to be built. That decision would be made in Washington.

In the summer of 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a Board of Consulting Engineers to study the various proposals. The Board met nearly forty times through the fall and winter,

and finally in January of 1906 it issued a report in favor of a sea-level canal. But the decision was far from being unanimous, and the board members who favored a lock canal invited Stevens to Washington to testify. Stevens told the board members that a lock canal "will provide a safe and a quicker passage for ships, and therefore be of greater capacity. It will provide, beyond question, the best solution of the vital problem of how safely to care for the flood waters of the Chagres and other streams . . . Its cost of operation, maintenance, and fixed charges will be very much less than any sea-level canal." To almost everyone's surprise, Stevens' presentation won the approval of the Isthmian Canal Commission, which rejected the decision by the Board of Consulting Engineers favoring a sea-level canal.

Stevens had the support of the Isthmian Canal Commission, the Secretary of War, and the President. But there was one more hurdle to pass — the U.S. Congress. Days became weeks as a Senate subcommittee debated the canal question. Stevens didn't wait in Washington for a decision, however, but returned to Panama to get ready to start construction. Then the subcommittee voted in favor of a sea-level canal, and Stevens hurriedly returned to Washington and spent the next two months pleading for approval of a lock canal.

One point of debate was the proposed Gatun Dam, which would be needed for a lock canal. When one Senator told Stevens, "I suggest to you that this dam ought to be made stronger," Stevens retorted, "The dam is strong enough. This is like killing a duck; when you kill him he is dead;

