

SOUTH AMERICA'S BABY REPUBLIC

A Chat With the President of Panama in the Government Palace—He Gives His Plans for the Development of the Country—Public Lands in Tracts of 12,000 Acres for Sale at From 30 Cents Upward Per Acre—A Big Banking Scheme—Two New Railroads and What They Will Do—Big Electrical Possibilities—Fortunes in Cocoanuts On the Bay of San Blas—Coffee Lands and Pasture Fields of Chiriqui—Opening the Mines of Los Santos—The Panama Exposition—A Great New Hotel—The Panama of the Future.

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I want to tell you something about the baby-republic of the South American continent. I have just had a long talk with its president in the government palace and he has laid before me the plans which are proposed for the present and future.

Before I give you my interview, however, I should like to say a word about the country and people. I have called Panama "the baby republic." It is so, in both size and age. It was born when the United States took over the canal proposition and that was only ten years ago. It is so small that it seems little more than the stubby tail of our sister continent, and, as it looks on the map, it might have been bitten off short, where it joins North America, as one bite of the tail of a dog.

Nevertheless, the case of Panama and South America just now is that in which the tail bids fair to do something at wagging the dog. Panama is the setting of our great canal, and although it is only one-hundredth as large as Brazil, one-thirtieth the size of Argentina and one-twentieth as big as Bolivia, it will for the next two years make more news than any of them in the world's journals.

Panama has but a small population, the whole country has less population than Buffalo, Montpelier or Cincinnati, and many of its people are Indians, some of whom have never been civilized.

Notwithstanding this, the country is rich beyond the dreams of avarice. It has a soil that needs only scratching to bring forth tropical fruits, and its hills are said to contain copper, silver and gold.

As to the Panama cocoanuts, it is claimed that they are the best on the market, having more oil than the nuts of other parts of the world. The Indians of Panama, it is said, are not in danger of being blown down, as is the case of the West Indian islands.

Understand that a Colon merchant, in settling out 50,000 cocoanut palms at Nombre de Dios, and that a grove of 100,000 is being planted near Almirante, where the United Fruit Company has its large holdings.

Other groves are being set out in Panama bay and Monto bay, but there is no land that surpasses that of the San Blas coast and its thousands of islands in the raising of this crop.

Cocoanut groves will fruit about five years after the sprouts are planted, and it is estimated that a grove of 10,000 trees can be brought into bearing for about \$3 per tree. When mature the trees should each net the owner something like a dollar per year.

During my chat with President Porras I asked him to tell me about the new land laws which his government has instituted since he took hold of the administration. He thereupon called in the secretary of public lands, Sr. Montoya, and Sr. Ramon Acevedo, and we chatted together as to the radical changes which have been made.

They affect the whole land situation and promise to rapidly develop the Panama republic. In order to understand them, I will first tell you that Panama is different from any of the other South American countries. It belonged to Colombia, and all the lands of the isthmus were once the property of the Spanish king, and he sold them from him by lease, as it were.

Each landowner paid so much a year, and this tax continued until the people met together and objected. They said they were willing to pay a good round sum for once and for all, but they did not want an annual tax. To this the Spanish monarch consented, and along about 1800 years ago, more or less, the lands became instead of being held by one man, into individual hands. They were common, no one having a title to any individual tract. These were known as the tierras indultadas, and the result of such ownership was that a man would cultivate a tract of land until it was worn out and then move somewhere else and take up another.

The titles to most of the lands have remained in the hands of the government, and as at the present the republic is practically in the shape of a new country, with the government having the right to allot the lands as congress decrees. President Porras and his officials have given a great deal of study to this question and it is from them that the present scheme which is now just to be put into operation has come.

These new land laws provide that hereafter, when the land as in the past with the provision that the purchaser shall cultivate the lands for five years before he be given a title thereto, the lands shall be sold outright in tracts not to exceed 5,000 hectares, or 12,500 acres, and the title shall go upon the payment thereof. In the past the land has been sold in large tracts, and it has been impossible for the small landowner to buy, for the reason that he could not afford to cultivate for five years before getting the title.

By the new laws he cannot buy more than 5,000 hectares of land until he has all of his first tract under cultivation or in use. Nevertheless, 12,500 acres is a very nice farm, and there are opportunities now for any one—American, European, or Panamanian—to buy one

estate near Monto bay owned by a New England company which has 400 square miles that will be set out in bananas, pineapples, cocoanuts and other tropical fruits. This company owns thousands of rubber trees from which it is annually gathering the sap. At the present time the tomatoes and other vegetables and fruits of the temperate zone are brought to Panama from the United States. President Porras tells me that the highlands of Chiriqui will raise the finest tomatoes and potatoes, and that a great trucking business might be developed which would supply the canal traffic as well as have a large market in the tropical lowlands.

I asked the president as to his plans for the development of the country in the raising of tropical fruits. He replied that the banana industry could be greatly increased, and that he had already begun to open up a cocoanut and very nut industry along the Caribbean sea south of Porto Bello in the province of San Blas coast, and to induce immigrants to settle there and go into cocoanut raising. That whole region is spotted with cocoanut islands. The trees grow without cultivation, and they are sold by the Indians to traders, who go from island to island and in boats.

The San Blas Indians are semi-savage and until now they would have nothing to do with the whites. President Porras has some way secured their friendship, and they are conferring with the Panama government as to its plans for the development of their country. These plans include a new road built on a beautiful bay near the mouth of the guada creek on the Gulf of San Blas.

The secretary of public works tells me that this law has been in effect since last July, and that it is working well. It will bring in a population of land-owners whose estates will be comparatively small, and it will lead to the immediate and active development of the country. Dr. Porras says that the government has also reserved some of its lands to give to the poor. It will allow five hectares to every person who will give himself to be such, and ten hectares, or twenty-five acres, to each immigrant family.

"Another thing we expect to do," said the president of the republic, "is to establish here at Panama banks of issue, with charters from the government. They will for the most part go into force very soon. As it is now there is practically no opportunity for the small land owner to borrow money on long time. The banks here will not usually loan for more than six or nine months, and some years ago before the national bank was organized the interest paid was often as high as 10 or 12 per cent a month. These new banks will loan money on mortgages, which may extend as long as twenty years, according to contract, and the interest must not exceed 3 per cent per annum. We expect that the people who will take up these public lands and pay for them will borrow money of these banks in order to develop their plantations and to maintain themselves until their lands come into bearing.

"What are you doing as to other public works?" I asked. "We have laid out the construction plans for two railroads that will form the initial development of the interior of the country. One of these is in the province of Chiriqui, of which I have already told you and the other is in Los Santos, which slopes down to the Gulf of Panama. Both of these roads will be electric. Fuel of all kinds is very high here, but we have swift flowing rivers with great falls, which will give us enough electricity to light all our villages and cities, to run our railroads, and in addition move many great industries. We have already tested the Caldera river, which is to supply the power for the Chiriqui road, and also for the road which will run to Los Santos. The Chiriqui road will be about thirty miles long. It will go from David to Boquete, with a branch to Concepcion. There is now at Boquete a colony of about twenty American families and five English families. The most of them are raising coffee, but they cannot report their crops at all, because of the cost of carting it to the seacoast. When the road is completed, it will go down upon it. The road in Los Santos will not only develop the agricultural possibilities of that part of the republic, but will open up a mining section which is rich in copper, gold and silver. This will be supplied by the Lavilla river.

"What do you expect to do for the tourist when the canal is completed?" "We shall make them comfortable," replied President Porras. "We have already put up several hotels in Panama and Colon and we have just now made a contract with an English firm for a big hotel to accommodate all our tourists. This hotel is located on the sea, but facing the canal on the large of Panama City. It will be largely patronized and it ought to pay for the start. We had 25,000 tourists here last year and we expect to have 40,000 during 1914. If they spend \$25 apiece, which is not a high estimate, they will leave on the isthmus one million gold dollars.

"What are your plans connected with the completion of the canal?" I asked. "We have a number of important measures under way," President Porras replied. "For one thing we expect to have a large exposition here in 1915. This will be participated in by the countries of North and South America and we hope by those of Europe and Asia as well. We want the merchants of the world to bring samples of their goods and show them at Panama, and we hope that many of them will leave their samples here, making a permanent commercial museum along the line of the canal. All such samples will be admitted free of duty.

"How about goods in bond?" "That is another measure I am trying to further. I want to establish two large bonded warehouses at either end of the canal, where goods can be exchanged and sent onward without paying duty for the privilege of making the exchange at this point. We believe that this will result in a great

carrying trade, by which goods will be brought to Panama and transhipped. The larger lines of steamers will have their feeders that will go up and down the coast of the continents collecting freight for their larger vessels, upon which it will be taken through the canal and to other parts of the world."

"Is it your idea that Panama will grow rapidly?" "Not immediately," said the president of the republic. "As soon as the canal is quite finished many of the employees will be dismissed, and for a year or so, perhaps, our business may be dull. It will spring up with the increase of the traffic through the canal, and from then on there will be a steady growth in the country and cities. I expect that Panama itself will, within ten years from now, have 100,000 people, and that Colon will then have half as many. As to the republic, that is bound to grow as soon as its resources and the great opportunities we offer to investors and colonists become generally known."

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such tract and hold it for speculation or cultivation as he pleases. The prices at which this government land is to be sold are from \$1.50 to \$2.50 per hectare of two and one-half acres, or from 10 cents to 15 cents per acre, according to the character and locality of the land. Think of getting 12,500 acres of land for \$7,500! That is one of the possibilities that Panama is now offering. Such land can be mortgaged or subdivided and sold. Formerly the poor man who took up public land could not make money out of it. He had no title until he had cultivated it for five years. Now he can sell a portion of his purchase or he can make a loan on it and put in such crops as coffee, cocoa or rubber, which take some years to come into bearing.

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MARIE DEY.

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