

Panama Duty Career Highlight

An elaborately handcarved rosewood table, a walking cane made from a railway tie with a 113-year-old history, and a medal with the image of Teddy Roosevelt and the legend, "The Land Divided, World United":

These are all graphic reminders for Vernon's Roscoe Rainwater of a personal role he played in one of the greatest engineering undertakings of the century.

Not that he could forget the experience, for even today the memories which flood his mind and those of his wife—who joined him in this historic adventure which they shared with some 5,000 other Americans in white-collar jobs and an additional 35,000 laborers imported from all over the world—mark it as one of the high points of his life.

The rosewood table, long a feature of the livingroom at the Rainwater home at 2128 Mesquite, was made by a native craftsman. Mr. Rainwater, himself, made the rosewood cane from one of the original ties laid in 1850 when the first railway was built across Panama.

The Roosevelt medal, together with accompanying bars, was presented to him for four years of service in Panama from 1905 through 1909, while the Panama Canal was being constructed. The project was started under the administration of President Teddy Roosevelt and completed under President William Howard Taft in 1913.

It was a year after receiving his "sheepskin" for shorthand, banking and accounting at Hill's business college at Waco that Mr. Rainwater decided to give up his auditing job in the Houston office of Southern-Pacific Railway Company to go to Panama as a stenographer to work in the auditor's office for the vast labor force the United States was massing to dig the Panama Canal.

Mr. Rainwater arrived by ship in June of 1905, and went to the city of Panama on the Pacific side of the newly independent nation.

He and the other Americans arriving there had been promised quarters by the Isthmian Canal Commission in addition to a pay scale roughly double what they could expect for similar jobs in the United States.

It was shortly evident that they would earn this pay. The quarters at this stage had not been prepared. Panama was a town of 45,000 persons with no paving, no sewers and no water works.

Deadly epidemics of yellow fever, bubonic plague and malaria were rampant and the men on



and utilizing railroad trestles built into the swamp areas to dump the earth and rock excavated in digging the canal, the workmen began completing the work started in 1887 by a French canal company.

The task ahead included digging some 48 miles of canal, plus preparing approaches into the ocean, building huge jetties to keep the canal from refilling with silt and sand brought in by the tides, particularly on the Pacific side.

The 24-foot tides along the Pacific made it necessary to build an extra lock not necessary on the Atlantic side as workmen prepared the canal lock system which would lift ships 85 feet above sea level for their journey across the Isthmus.

Workmen had to make a 210-foot cut through a solid rock mountain, with almost endless blasting and hauling necessary before they could clear the way for the world sea traffic which would eventually be passing that way.

Mr. Rainwater worked first as a stenographer to the chief clerk, then as stenographer to the auditor, and later helped to set up a new department as receiving teller for the treasurer of the Isthmian Canal Commission.

Subsequently, he became one of five paymasters who rode in a railway pay car along the canal route, meeting a very close schedule in which they were met by groups of workers who filed through the pay car past special teller windows.

Four of the paymasters, including Mr. Rainwater, paid the workmen in silver, issued to the paymasters in bags of \$1,000 each which weighed 55 pounds per bag. A fifth teller paid in gold coin white collar workers and laborers who had contracted for their pay

He joined the old King Bank and Mercantile Co., owned by Mont and Bass King, later buying the business, himself.

In 1913, the First State Bank in Oklaunion was organized from the banking portion of the business, and Mr. Rainwater headed the bank as president.

Mr. Rainwater sold out the mercantile part of his business in 1920, but he continued with a variety of business sidelines, including a hardware store at Elliott. He farmed some 3,500 acres of land, bought and sold cotton and grain in season, and operated an insurance agency in Oklaunion, which he started in 1909.

When he left active participation in the bank in 1929, Mr. Rainwater moved his insurance agency to Vernon. He continued in the insurance business and making farm mortgage loans.

He maintained his Rainwater Insurance Agency, although he was joined as a partner by his son Johnnie Rainwater after the war, until his retirement in January of 1961.

Since that time, he and Mrs. Rainwater, who have never lost the love of travel they developed in Panama, are gradually visiting the places they've missed over the years.

Behind them already is a 1955 flight to Hawaii during the time that active volcanos were erupting, and visits to Mexico. But Mr. Rainwater notes that they still have 24 states they haven't yet visited.

Mr. and Mrs. Rainwater have four children, in addition to the first child born in Panama.

The others are a daughter, Mrs. Christine Lee of Chula Vista, California, who has served in the Navy as a member of the Waves for a number of years; and sons Johnnie Rainwater, a former Vernon mayor who is in the insurance business here; Eugene Rainwater of Fort Worth, who is teaching in the Internal Revenue Service school at Dallas, and Clois Rainwater of Tyler, who is a Boy Scout Executive.

The daughter attended Baylor University, while Compton, Eugene, and Clois all attended Texas Tech.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Rainwater have been active in church work most of their lives. Mr. Rainwater has been a Deacon for 52 years, first at Oklaunion, and then at the First Baptist Church in Vernon.

He has taught a number of Sunday School classes, served as a Sunday School superintendent and choir leader.

A 32nd degree Mason, he has

ver, bubonic plague, and malaria were rampant and the men on the job there often worked almost around the clock.

A case of the fever meant almost certain death, and Mr. Rainwater saw it all around him. Among those to die were the head auditor in his office, and the man in the desk next to his own.

Somehow he and, of course, many others escaped illness as the Americans began the task of paying Panama streets, and putting in water and sewer lines. The process of getting a place in a condition so that people could live took a year and a half.

Laborers began to arrive from everywhere. Jamiacan Negroes plus local Panama natives made up the initial work force, but the Commission also went to Spain and Italy to contract for thousands of laborers, who became perhaps the best work force.

Mr. Rainwater returned home on vacation after his first nine months in Panama and on May 23, 1906, married childhood sweetheart Gertrude Caughron, daughter of a Taylor, Texas farmer and railroad man.

He and Mrs. Rainwater returned to Panama, living in the city of Panama for about six months before moving out "on the line" of the canal construction area at Empire, an administrative center and residential city of some 300 housing units built for the canal project.

Using steam powered equipment

white collar workers and laborers who had contracted for their pay in this manner when they were recruited.

The paymasters averaged disbursing \$100,000 each per day during a four-day trip across the Isthmus, then spent the fifth day balancing up. They made up any shortages out of their own pocket, including possible losses for forged time cards.

Although one paymaster lost several hundred dollars to forgeries on a single trip—all later recovered—Mr. Rainwater luckily never had to make up any such losses.

He and Mrs. Rainwater found this period extremely rewarding. Although Mr. Rainwater had worked many hours both through the day and late at night when he first arrived, once the project was rolling, he found he was able to take local Panama holidays as well as American ones.

This permitted him and his wife side trips into the interior for days at a time, mostly on boat or by foot. They also managed trips up to coast into Columbia and on several times visited Pearl Island and other idyllic spots along the Pacific Coast.

The Rainwaters—with their oldest child, Compton Rainwater, now a rural mail carrier at Oklaunion, born in Panama—returned home to this country on vacation in 1909.

While home, Mr. Rainwater decided to resign his Panama job and remain in Wilbarger County.

A 32nd degree Mason, he has been a member of the Vernon Blue Lodge for 52 years; and is a member of the Vernon Commandery, Chapter and Council; and Maskat Temple at Wichita Falls, and the Dallas Consistory. He was secretary of the Vernon Lodge for ten years and recorder of the Commandery for 15 years.

In addition, he has been a member of the Vernon Optimist Club since 1930, a number of these years as secretary.

Mr. Rainwater is a son of Mr. and Mrs. Josiah W. Rainwater. His father was a Union veteran, who served as a captain under General Grant in the Civil War.

Mr. Rainwater was born on July 4, 1883 at Waterloo, in the Mammoth Cave area of southern Kentucky. He was next to the youngest of nine children.

He has four surviving sisters, Mrs. R. L. Luttrell of 2007 Beaver, Mrs. Minnie Powers of Electra, Mrs. Charles Aderholt of Taylor, and Mrs. A. F. Gaston of Gordon Grove, Calif. Another sister, Mrs. J. P. Aderholt of Vernon, died only last week.

The family moved from Kentucky to Texas by train in December of 1890, and his father began farming near Taylor, Tex. His father also established a Post Office at Waterloo, Tex., and served as postmaster for a time.

The father moved to Oklaunion in 1907, while Mr. Rainwater was in Panama, remaining there until

1919, when he moved to Vernon. He died here in 1934.

Prior to his departure for Panama, Roscoe Rainwater taught school for several years at Sandoval and Beukiss, attending Normal School at Gerogetown in the summer months.

He attended Hill's Business College in Waco during the summers of 1903 and 1904, then worked as a stenographer and bookkeeper at Coleman and Laredo before making the move to Houston, which led him to apply for a job in the Canal Zone.

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