

WEST INDIANS IN PANAMA: DIVERSITY AND ACTIVISM, 1910s – 1940s

by

Robin Elizabeth Zenger

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## ABSTRACT

At least 50,000 working-class laborers from the West Indies, many of them poor and unemployed, remained with their families in central Panama after the construction of the Panama Canal in 1914. Over the next thirty years, along with a small number of West Indian professionals, religious leaders, and business owners, they established ways to sustain themselves in locales, both in Panama and the American-controlled Canal Zone, where they faced challenges and opposition. Their sizable presence interrupted ideals of elite politicians in Panama to Hispanicize the population. Nationalist Panamanians stigmatized them as culturally different competitors for canal maintenance jobs, and lacking in loyalty to the state because they clung to English and their British colonial citizenship. In the Canal Zone, they faced racial segregation and second-class status.

This dissertation examines critical physical and cultural spaces the immigrants created to foster community, provide social and economic security, educate their children, and as a corollary, develop new identities. Using archival material, land records, interviews and historical newspapers from Panama and the United States, and informed by a wide range of secondary sources, the chapters examine the activism of West Indians, in the context of Panamanian historical trends. The case studies analyze involvement of the immigrants in three particular settings: as members of voluntary associations called lodges, as renters and residents of neighborhoods, and as shapers of education for their children, who were born into citizenship in Panama. West Indians had come to Panama from different island cultures and maintained many differences, yet in these settings they developed commonalities and shared experiences as West Indian Panamanians. In the process, West Indian immigrants influenced Panama's development in ways little acknowledged in Panamanian or American national, social or economic history.

## INTRODUCTION

The year 2014 marked the centenary of the Panama Canal, an event celebrated in the Republic of Panama, which since 1999 assumed complete control over the famous “Big Ditch” that bifurcates its national territory. (See Map 1. The Canal Zone in Relation to Panama, Appendix.) Panamanians currently holding several high-ranking positions with the Canal Authority—including the Atlantic and Pacific Port Captains, heads of the Lock Division and Transit Resources, Chief Pilot, managers of Atlantic and Pacific tugboat operations and contracting services for the Canal, and Executive Secretary to the Canal Administrator—bear British surnames such as Cockburn, Simpson, Eversley, and Stewart, or French ones, such as Lavalas and Escoffrey.<sup>1</sup> They are Panamanians of West Indian descent. These names might be said to bestow a birthright to canal work, for they link their owners to forebears who came from British and French holdings in the Caribbean—the West Indies—to dig the Canal. I join historians in Panama, the West Indies, and the United States who have begun to explore the twentieth-century path many West Indians and their descendants followed, from humble laborers who remained in Panama once the Canal got underway, to full participants, not only in Canal affairs but in many areas of Panamanian national life.

During the decade between 1904 and 1914, as many as 200,000 young Afro-Caribbean men migrated from their home islands to labor for American engineers in charge of the United States government project to build the Panama Canal.<sup>2</sup> In the small country of Panama, sparsely

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<sup>1</sup> Carmela Gobern, ed., *Panama Cyberspace News* 15, No. 8 (May 1 and 15, 2015) [www.panamacybernews.com](http://www.panamacybernews.com) (by subscription).

<sup>2</sup> Historians can only estimate the number of migrants. Some arrived with official contracts, and many more by their own initiative. Some changed their names in order to move to better jobs and others perished in the jungle, in accidents or landslides and could not be accounted for, confounding even the meticulous recordkeeping of the Canal organization. Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 3-

populated by fewer than 300,000 inhabitants at the turn of the twentieth century, these migrants joined workers from virtually around the globe on the project.<sup>3</sup> By persistence and hard work, and because they accepted low wages, the West Indians became the majority workforce for the job, preferred by the American bosses.<sup>4</sup> Nearly 20,000 workers with contracts arrived from Barbados alone (and nearly as many Jamaicans, who paid an exit tax and their own transportation when their government barred contractors from the Canal); 5,500 from Martinique; 2,000 from Guadeloupe; 1,400 from Trinidad; and nearly 1,000 from tiny St. Kitts, not to mention thousands more that arrived on their own without contracts and were hired locally.<sup>5</sup>

While canal workers are rarely included in the heroic tale of American enterprise, they have begun to draw attention in the scholarly literature. Recent academic scholarship has examined the roles of the diverse West Indian laborers during the construction phase of the Canal. The American Interoceanic Canal Commission (I.C.C.) took on a residual cohort of administrators and laborers, primarily from Jamaica and Martinique, who had maintained the property of the defunct French canal company until the U.S. government bought it out in 1904. American representatives recruited more laborers from virtually all British, French, Dutch and

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4, estimates approximately 150,000 West Indian came during American construction period (1904-1914); on page 29, he estimates between 150,000 and 200,000 men and women came. Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 309, writes as many as 200,000 West Indians arrived on the isthmus from 1904 to 1914.

<sup>3</sup> The first national census of Panama numbered 275,675 inhabitants in 1904. John Major, *Prize Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903-1979* (New York; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Appendix A, notes nearly 24,000 of 29,446 workers in the Canal Zone in 1907 were non-U.S. citizens. In 1911 the Panama's total of 336,742 inhabitants (Canal Zone excluded) compared to the Canal Zone census of 48,876. The Canal area concentrated the foreign population in a small area at the center of the country. See Greene, *The Canal Builders*, Appendix, "Total Population Distributed by Place of Birth, Sex, and Period of First Residence in Canal Zone" for a breakdown of the official accounting of workers.

<sup>4</sup> Contemporaries also argued that the West Indians possessed hardiness and resistance to tropical diseases. The American supervisors appreciated that most West Indian workers spoke English.

<sup>5</sup> Senior

Spanish colonies and territories in the Caribbean Basin. They spoke various dialects of English, French, Dutch and Spanish, often combined with words from different African or indigenous languages. They practiced religions in differing degrees, reflecting different colonial, demographic, and social realities. For example, migrants from Spanish or French islands were usually Catholic, and some also followed rituals and beliefs from an African past. Belonging to certain Protestant denominations might facilitate class mobility for some workers from British islands, while others opted for a range of evangelical or Afro-Creole religions or practices, wholly or in combination with more established religions. Finally, although migration had become common, especially for young male workers in the region, the small and remote islands had developed parochial subcultures that portrayed residents of other islands as strangers. Island economies remained primarily agricultural, although Jamaica, for example, had an urbanized populace that included many artisans within a society stratified by color and class.

From whichever Caribbean island served as their homeland, the voyage to Panama was the first venture in migration for many young West Indian men. Recruiters from the Canal offered free passage, living accommodations, board and return home after 500 days of a labor contract. As returnees showed material rewards of their labor, would-be workers flocked to sign up, or arrived at the Isthmus on their own. Many of the young men had known only a rural existence before venturing across the sea to work on the industrialized construction project, but artisans, educators, and tradesmen and women also came, to ply their trades or work as common laborers. Many had been conditioned to see those from other islands as rivals and only encountered them for the first time in Panama. Nevertheless, this sundry workforce set about wielding the shovels, picks, machetes, drills, dynamite, and spray cans, that drained swamps, cleared the jungle, controlled mosquitoes, and moved the earth that made the Canal possible.

Some came for a brief sojourn before returning home, changed by the experience and hopefully in possession of some “Panama money.” Others migrated from Panama to other locales as part of the great historic diaspora of African peoples. Countless workers lost their lives on the isthmus through accidents or disease, but a significant number of the survivors—some 50,000—remained in the Republic of Panama once the Canal opened. Together, Panama City and Colón, at either end of the Canal, along with the Canal Zone, contained the largest concentration of West Indians outside the Caribbean territories in the early twentieth century, more than in any other West Indian enclave.

Few scholars have followed these immigrants as they settled in Panama, or explored the impact of their endeavors on their subsequent lives or the lives of their descendants there, and their impact on Panama itself. Indeed, the West Indian canal workers have been accorded little weight in the national histories crafted by Panama and the United States, though each nation ascribed great symbolic and strategic importance to the Panama Canal for its global standing. Whether they left the Isthmus or stayed, veterans of the Canal became agents of change, through direct action, participation in global labor movements, through artistic, cultural and intellectual networks, or merely through the weight of their collective number. The extent of their impact remained invisible to most Americans. Political factions in Panama also filtered public awareness about the influence of the West Indian minority through pejorative rhetoric about their difference and foreignness.

Scholarship examines the history of West Indians in Panama through the construction period, and jumps to the late twentieth century, as their descendants achieved inclusion in Panamanian society through their own efforts and government initiatives. Less of their story

before the 1950s has reached the public eye, despite efforts of some West Indian journalists and advocates to document their presence in Panama after the early twentieth century.

The closely realized case studies in this dissertation explore the history of this critical group by analyzing physical and cultural spaces within which West Indian migrant-workers-turned-immigrants sustained themselves as they negotiated living and livelihoods in early twentieth-century Panama. Collectively they created institutions that fostered community, and then developed and redefined their identities within shifting national and world conditions, as they adapted to new political and economic realities.

### **West Indians and Society in Panama**

The Caribbean immigrants to Panama faced racial, ethnic and citizenship divides. They arrived primarily from the British Antilles, and most retained their identification as British colonial subjects. Descended from slaves emancipated in 1838, black citizens in the British colonies occupied positions in a racial hierarchy that reserved the top echelons for whites and light-skinned mulatto minorities by the end of the nineteenth century. In the Republic of Panama a small minority of Spanish or European descent also held most positions of wealth and power, while the overwhelming majority of Panamanians, including members of a small bourgeoisie, were people of mixed indigenous, European, and African ancestry. Panama, a distant province of Colombia, had emancipated slaves in 1852 and established universal manhood suffrage the following year. By the turn of the twentieth century, the many descendants of African slaves and freed people in independent Panama had assimilated the national culture as Spanish-speaking Catholics.

Unlike the more fluid racial hierarchies in the Caribbean or Panama, where education, skill, or wealth could influence social acceptance, administrators in the American enclave of the

Canal Zone, adopted binary Jim Crow segregation. Explanations for this social practice generally link it to contemporary de facto segregation in the U.S., as well as to European and American corporate labor practices in the circum-Caribbean region at the turn of the nineteenth century. Though separated by the color line in the Canal Zone, British West Indians spoke English dialects and often belonged to Protestant sects, which tied them culturally more to Americans than to the people of Panama.

Panamanians used the term *antillano* to refer to West Indians, including those from French colonies. Rising generations of their descendants, citizens by birth in Panama, sometimes referred to themselves as *criollos*. I use the terms “West Indian,” “colored,” and “silver” interchangeably in this dissertation, reflecting racialized terminology used in historical documents; such terms as “Afro-Caribbean” and “black” are more common in current use.

This terminology held specific historical meanings and cultural resonances. Consider the term “silver,” for example. The French canal operation of the late nineteenth century (1880-1894) that predated the American one had paid local labor in local Colombian silver currency, Panama being then a province of Colombia. Americans continued this practice, with silver currency of newly independent Panama, but paid American-citizen employees in gold dollars, worth two to three times as much as the silver currency, to attract skilled workers and reduce turnover. This difference in payroll became enshrined as the “gold roll,” officially linked to U.S. citizenship, and the “silver roll” for non-U.S. citizens. During the construction era these categories were somewhat fluid. Some non-U.S. citizen skilled workers could earn incentive pay raises and even sometimes be paid on the “gold scale.” Some workers, who as non-U.S. citizens were on the silver roll, particularly southern Europeans, were accepted as white, and paid at a

higher rate than the majority of “silver” workers, who were men (or a few women) of color.<sup>6</sup> During a massive downsizing of the labor force after the construction ended in 1914, pay scales were collapsed so that all non-U.S. citizens received the lowest silver pay. Gold-silver segregation hardened and extended to all aspects of community life in the Canal Zone, including living quarters, townships, consumer and recreation facilities, and services, including schools and transportation. The gold-silver divide thus came to encompass not only pay, but citizenship and race.

### **Historiography**

This project draws on three overlapping areas of scholarship—Panama Canal-Canal Zone studies, Caribbean diaspora studies, and Panamanian social history. U.S. scholarship on Panama has largely explored diplomatic relations and the canal building era. Diplomatic historians, including Walter LaFeber and John Major, address the complicated, asymmetrical diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and Panama since the nineteenth century, but pay less attention to the conditions of diasporic labor communities.<sup>7</sup> The comprehensive accounts of the Panama Canal by David McCullough and others feature the scientific, engineering and medical feats of great men who “built” the Canal, and devote little space to the thousands of global workers who actually performed this dangerous work. Works by Aims McGuinness and Julie Greene give due attention to the role of West Indian labor in American imperialist ventures in Panama, and the

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<sup>6</sup> Julie Greene, "Spaniards on the Silver Roll: Labor Troubles and Liminality in the Panama Canal Zone, 1904-1914," *International Labor and Working Class History* 66 (Oct 2004): 78-98. European workers were paid more than West Indians at first, on the assumption they were more efficient. Over time, West Indians gained skills and became as efficient as the Europeans, who in turn proved less appealing when they organized to make demands for special treatment. Many Spaniards moved to other countries when their contracts terminated, where they had access to better jobs, unlike West Indians.

<sup>7</sup> Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); John Major, *Prize Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903-1979* (New York: Cambridge [Eng]: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

place of these ventures in Panamanian history, for the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Olive Senior's recent comprehensive account of the West Indian labor migration to the isthmus covers these periods as well as the French canal era, and the effects throughout the Caribbean, but especially in Jamaica, of returned migrants with, and sometimes without, "Panama money."<sup>9</sup> Bonham Richardson focuses on the effects of the American construction on Barbados.<sup>10</sup> Contributions by U.S. historians on the political, legal, and intellectual history of Panama also provide context for this study.<sup>11</sup>

My work on the West Indian experience in Panama builds on these studies, as well as scholarship on discriminatory Canal Zone systems of labor, education and social organization, particularly Michael Conniff's groundbreaking analyses of the West Indian experience as Canal workers and the process of their settling in Panama as immigrants, which draws heavily on the work of West Indian Panamanian journalist, sociologist, diplomat and activist George W. Westerman.<sup>12</sup> Their accounts are complemented by John Major who addresses the Caribbean

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<sup>8</sup> Aims McGuinness, *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Greene, *The Canal Builders*.

<sup>9</sup> Olive Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal*, (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2014), 184, shows contracted labor in the construction period.

<sup>10</sup> Bonham Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> Donald Lee DeWitt, "Social and Educational Thought in the Development of the Republic of Panama, 1903-1946: An Intellectual History," Ph.D., University of Arizona, 1972; Trevor O'Reggio, *Between Alienation and Citizenship: The Evolution of Black West Indian Society in Panama 1914-1964* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006); Sharon Phillipps-Collazos, *Labor and Politics in Panama: The Torrijos Years* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991); Larry LaRae Pippin, *The Remón Era; An Analysis of a Decade of Events in Panama, 1947-1957* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Institute of Hispanic American and Luso-Brazilian Studies, 1964); William Francis Robinson, "Panama for the Panamanians: The Populism of Arnulfo Arias Madrid," in *Populism in Latin America*, edited by Michael Conniff, 2nd ed. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012); Steve Ropp, *Panamanian Politics: from Guarded Nation to National Guard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982); Peter A. Szok, *La Ultima Gaviota: Liberalism and Nostalgia in Early Twentieth-Century Panamá* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*. Westerman was born on the Isthmus to immigrant parents from Barbados, spoke Spanish, and actively concerned himself not only with issues affecting West Indian immigrants (racial discrimination, labor, civil rights, education, housing, sports, the arts, among other things), but he also

“silver” workers in the Canal Zone in substantive detail through the lens of U.S. labor and foreign policy, which only touches on their broader experience in Panama.<sup>13</sup> Most scholars of the West Indian experience in Panama refer to the seminal work of sociologists John Biesanz and Mavis Biesanz, whose observations of the people of Panama in the late 1940s and 1950s provide a baseline snapshot from an American academic perspective of the era.<sup>14</sup> I join other scholars in drawing on original research and analyses in dissertations and theses produced during the past decade that focused on particular aspects of Canal Zone history, some of whom have West Indian, West Indian Panamanian, or Canal Zone roots, and employ global, transnational, regional, literary, and diasporic perspectives.<sup>15</sup>

Recent research on Afro-Caribbean migration recognizes the importance of Panama as a migrant locale, as well as placing it in a larger historical context of regional and transnational networks, the African diaspora and global trends. Olive Senior’s scholarship offers a comprehensive analysis of West Indian migration to Panama from the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth century. Velma Newton, Elizabeth Petras, Bonham Richardson, and Victor Bascara offer historical accounts of Caribbean labor streams and “Panama money” through the 1930s; Rhonda Frederick analyzes a literary trope of the adventurous and alluring “Colón

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participated in Panamanian politics, and relations between the U.S. and Panama. He represented Panama at the United Nations and maintained U.N. connections from the 1950s to the 1980s.

<sup>13</sup> Major, *Prize Possession*.

<sup>14</sup> John Biesanz and Mavis Biesanz, *The People of Panama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Nicole Butzke, "British West Indian in Panama: An Analysis of Linda Smart Chubb's Memorandum in the Forgotten People," M.A., Lakehead University, Ontario, 2008; Kaysha Lisbeth Corinealdi, "Redefining Home: West Indian Panamanians and Transnational Politics of Race, Citizenship, and Diaspora, 1928-1970," PhD diss., Yale, 2010; Ariana A. Curtis, "Becoming More and More Panamanian": Contemporary Constructions of West Indian Identity in Urban Panama, Ph.D., American University, 2012; and Katherine Anne Zien, "Claiming the Canal: Performances of Race and Nation in Panama, 1904-1999," Ph.D., Northwestern University, 2012, among others.

man.”<sup>16</sup> Lara Putnam explores many aspects of transnational and regional West Indian commercial and cultural networks and “circuits,” throughout the Caribbean, of which Panama was a major hub.<sup>17</sup> Research on Marcus Garvey and Garveyism in the Caribbean region (Jorge Giovanetti, Tony Martin, Marc McLeod, Frederick Opie), including several recent dissertations, is relevant. Although it may not focus on Panama specifically, this research confirms that widespread chapters of Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.) sometimes lent organizational power to local needs in ways that conflicted with Garvey’s principles, including in Panama.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Garvey’s U.N.I.A. publication, *The Negro World*, traversed and connected West Indian communities, particularly of the working class, throughout the Caribbean and Central America, including Panama.

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<sup>16</sup> Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama 1850-1914* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1984); Elizabeth McLean Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration; White Capital and Black Labor, 1850-1930* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1988); Bonham Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985); Victor Bascara, "Panama Money: Reading the Transition to U.S. Imperialism," in *Imagining Our Americas: Toward a Transnational Frame*, ed. Shukla, Sandhya Rajendra and Heidi Tinsman (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 365-386; Rhonda Frederick, *"Colon Man A-Come": Mythologies of Panama Canal Migration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Lara Putnam, "The Making and Unmaking of the Circum-Caribbean Migratory Sphere," in *Migrants and Migration in Modern North America: Cross-Border Lives, Labor Markets, and Politics*, ed. Dirk Hoerder and Nora Faires (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Jorge L. Giovanetti, "The Elusive Organization of "Identity": Race, Religion, and Empire among Caribbean Migrants in Cuba," *Small Axe* 10, no. 1 (2006): 1-27 doi:10.1353/smx.2006.0008; Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1976); Marc McLeod, "Garveyism in Cuba, 1920-1940," *The Journal of Caribbean History* 30, no. 10 (Jan 1996): 132-168; and "Garveyism and the Universal Negro Association in the Hispanic Caribbean," ed. Jorge L. Giovanetti and Reinaldo Roman, special issue *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (Jan. - Jun., 2003). For work that focuses on Garveyism in Central America, see Ronald Harpelle, "Cross Currents in the Western Caribbean: Marcus Garvey and the UNIA in Central America," *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (Jan. - Jun., 2003), 35-73; Frederick Douglass Opie, "Garveyism and Labor Organization On The Caribbean Coast Of Guatemala, 1920-1921," *The Journal of African American History* 94, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 153-171; Anne Macpherson, "Colonial Matriarchs: Garveyism, Maternalism, and Belize’s Black Cross Nurses, 1920-1952," *Gender and History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 507-27. Burnett, 183, notes that in Panama, UNIA members organized to support a union, although Garvey was against unionism. Garvey himself, however, sent a donation to the strike fund, in support of the racial solidarity it represented.

Literature on Caribbean transnational and diasporic communities includes historical accounts of West Indians who worked on railroads and banana plantations in Central America (Philippe Bourgois, Aviva Chomsky, Ronald Harpelle, Lara Putnam, and J. A. Zumoff on Costa Rica; Frederick Douglass Opie on Guatemala, and Darío Euraque and Glenn A. Chambers on Honduras).<sup>19</sup> Also influential are works addressing blacks and blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean by Lowell Gudmunson and Justin Wolfe, Norman Whitten and Arlene Torres, and more recently, by Manning Marable and Vanessa Agard-Jones, and Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah Thomas.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Philippe Bourgois, *Ethnicity at Work: Divided Labor on a Central American Banana Plantation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Aviva Chomsky, *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); Ronald Harpelle, *The West Indians of Costa Rica: Race, Class, and the Integration of an Ethnic Minority* (Montreal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Lara Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); J. A. Zumoff, "'Ojos Que No Ven': The Communist Party, Caribbean Migrants, and the Communist International in Costa Rica in the 1920s and 1930s," *The Journal of Caribbean History* 45, 2 (2011): 212–247; Frederick Douglass Opie, *Black Labor Migration in Caribbean Guatemala, 1882-1923* (Jacksonville: University Press of Florida, 2009); Darío Euraque, "The Banana Enclave, Nationalism, and Mestizaje in Honduras, 1910s-1930s," in *Identity and Struggle at the Margins of the Nation-State: The Laboring Peoples of Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean*, ed. Aviva Chomsky and Aldo Lauria-Santiago, 151-86 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Glenn A. Chambers, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010). An extensive literature on recent Caribbean patterns of migration and return covers multiple destinations but seldom mentions Panama, except as a frequent historical destination for laborers in the past, or in terms of the economic and cultural impact of past laborers on their families or homelands. Elizabeth Thomas-Hope, *Caribbean Migration* (Barbados: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), offers multi-generational case studies of migrations within the Caribbean region as well as to other locations, primarily Britain; Mary Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return* (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1997); Mary Chamberlain, *Caribbean Migration: Globalised Identities* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998). Other authors feature Caribbean migration to-and-from the U.S. (Constance Sutton and Elsa M. Chaney, eds., *Caribbean Life in New York City: Sociocultural Dimensions* (New York: Center for Migration Studies of New York, 1987); Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), and Canada, Daiva K. Stasiulis and Abigail B. Bakan, eds., *Negotiating Citizenship: Migrant Women in Canada and the Global System* (Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Lowell Gudmunson and Justin Wolfe, eds., *Blacks and Blackness in Central America: Between Race and Place* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Norman Whitten and Arlene Torres, eds., *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean: Social Dynamics and Cultural Transformations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Manning Marable and Vanessa Agard-Jones, eds., *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas, eds., *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

My analysis also incorporates recent Panamanian racial and ethnic historiography to contribute a fresh perspective on the West Indian contribution to Panamanian national history. Prior to the 1980s, Panamanian scholarship reflected the bias of the elite, minimizing West Indians, ignoring them, or deeming them a “problem.” Mid-century researchers, for example, largely failed to record histories of still-living West Indian immigrants who had worked on the Canal construction, because of their liminal status in Panama. A search revealed only one published collection of personal recollections (by the American-based Isthmian Historical Society in the Canal Zone, 1963) and one unpublished oral history collection (by U.S.-trained West Indian Panamanian sociologist Eunice Mason, in 1974) of this population.<sup>21</sup> A generation of scholars trained in Europe, other Latin American countries, and the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s and their students published new research including on labor history and minorities in Panama by the 1980s, using historical resources such as newspapers and other newly-cataloged archives. Key among these works are social and labor histories by Panamanian scholars that offer critical case studies (Alberto Barrow, Virginia Arango Durling, Alfredo Castellero Calvo, Alexander Cuevas, Diogenes de la Rosa, Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, Gerardo Maloney, Anthony McLean H., Armando Muñoz Pinzón, María Rosa de Muñoz, Luis Navas, George Priestley, Ivan Quintero, Eyra Rivas Reyes, Ricaurte Soler, Everisto Tomlinson H., Jorge Turner, and Alvaro Uribe, among others.)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “Letters in a Competition for the Best True Stories of Life and Work on the Isthmus of Panama during the Construction of the Panama Canal,” typewritten manuscript, Balboa, Canal Zone, Isthmian Historical Society, 1963; Eunice Mason, unpublished interviews, 1974. For a recent digital archive and oral history project, see “Voices from Our America (TM): Panamanians of West Indian Descent,” Vanderbilt University, Associate Professor of English Ifeoma Kiddoe Nkwankwo, Director, <http://voicesamerica.library.vanderbilt.edu/home.php>.

<sup>22</sup> Alberto Barrow y George Priestly, *Piel oscura Panamá: ensayos y reflexiones al filo del centenario* (Panamá: Editorial Universitaria "Carlos Manuel Gasteazoro," 2003); Virginia Arango Durling (de Muñoz), *La inmigración prohibida en Panamá y sus prejuicios raciales* ([Panamá]: Publipan, [1999]); Alfredo Castellero Calvo, ed, *Historia general de Panamá*. 4 Vol. (Panama City: Comité Nacional del Centenario de la República, 2004); Alexander Cuevas, *El movimiento inquilinario de 1925* (Panamá: Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos "Justo Arosemena,"

As *antillanos* demanded political and social inclusion, Panamanian scholars, including West Indian-descendants, such as Gerardo Maloney, George Priestley, Melva Lowe de Gooden, Eunice Mason, and Alberto Barrow, began to explore their history and sociology. Perhaps signaling their official inclusion after a century into Panamanian history, a centennial four-volume comprehensive history of Panama, edited by eminent Panamanian historian Alfredo Castillero Calvo, contains a chapter by Maloney on the history and contributions of the *antillanos*.<sup>23</sup>

U.S. and Panamanian studies must go further to show the richness and depth of experience of West Indian descendants in Panama from the 1920s to the 1950s and place them in a diasporic continuum. This study increases the historical recognition in both Panamanian and U.S. historical literature of this large minority on the isthmus. At the regional level, much existing work on the Caribbean diaspora examines continuities of migration, but I address people who “settle out” of the migration pattern. Finally, while recent Panama history focuses heavily

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1980); Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, *Sociología del arrabal de Santa Ana en Panamá* (Panama City, Panama: Impresora Panama, 1978); Omar Jaén Suárez, *La población del istmo* (Panama: Imprenta de la Nación, 1978); Gerardo Maloney, "Panamá 1920 - Cronología de una lucha," *Revista Tareas* 55 (Aug 1982-Jan 1983): 31; Anthony C McLean H., *Una Cronología Histórico Biográfica Antillano* (Panama: Edtoria Sibauste, 2003); Hernando Franco Muñoz, *Movimiento obrero panameño, 1914-1921* (Panama: n.p., 1979); Anthony C. McLean H[amilton], *Una Cronología histórico biográfica antillano Panameña* (Río Abajo, Panama: Editora Sibauste, S.A., 2003); María Rosa de Muñoz y Armando Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda helga inquilinaria de 1932; documentada análisis del movimiento que unió las clases populares para alcanzar sus reivindicaciones sociales* (Panama: Editorial Protobelo, 2006); Luis Navas, *El movimiento obrero en Panamá (1880-1914)* (Panamá: Autoridad del Canal de Panamá, Biblioteca de la Nacionalidad, 1999) (first published 1974, Panamá: Editorial Universitaria); George Priestley, *Military Government and Popular Participation in Panama: The Torrijos Regime, 1968-75* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986); Iván Quintero, *El sindicato general de trabajadores* (Panama: Centro de Estudios Lantinoamericanos "Justo Arosemena", 1979); Eyra Marcela Reyes Rivas, *El Trabajo de las mujeres durante la construcción del Canal de Panamá (1881-1914)* (Panama: Editora Sibauste, 2000); Ricaurte Soler, *Panamá, dependencia y liberación: selección de textos, prólogo y notas de Ricaurte Soler* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1974); Everisto E. Tomlinson H., "Las huelgas inquilinarias de 1925 y 1932," *Lotería* (Oct-Nov 1973), *Suplemento*; Jorge Turner, *Raíz, historia y perspectivas del movimiento obrero Panameño* (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Signos, 1982); Alvaro Uribe, *La ciudad fragmentada* (Panamá: Centro de Estudios Latinoamericano "Justo Arosemena", 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Gerardo Maloney, "Significado de la presencia y contribución del Afro Antillano a la nación Panameña," In *Historia general de Panamá*, ed. Alfredo Castillero Calvo (Panamá: Comité Nacional del Centenario, 2004) 3, pt. 1: 152-171.

on the American-run Panama Canal—its construction at the beginning of the twentieth century and its turn-over to Panama at the end—I provide a new perspective on important mid-century social changes on the isthmus by combining local, regional and global contexts of historical change.

Diverse West Indian migrants arrived in Panama divided by class, place of origin, ethnicity, education level, and employment status, and new divisions among them grew, depending on the location of their residence on the Isthmus. Based on these distinctions, I extend the argument by Michael Conniff, that the immigrants developed a West Indian subculture in Panama by the 1920s, to suggest that different subcultures evolved in the Canal Zone and the Republic of Panama, although many individuals fluidly crossed the national and cultural boundaries between them. Recent research confirms that post-war descendants who grew up in Canal Zone, in Colón and in Panama City came to identify themselves differently from each other, a phenomenon that intensified with rapid changes on the Isthmus in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> These differences could result in asymmetries, for example Canal Zone workers benefited from stable employment and subsidized housing, but West Indians living in Panama experienced more opportunities to learn Spanish, which facilitated their acceptance there.

### **Organization**

This dissertation proceeds with four chapters. Using archival material, land records, historical newspapers, and personal accounts from Panama and the United States, and informed by a wide range of secondary sources, the chapters examine the activities of West Indians in the context of Panamanian historical trends and West Indian presence in Panama before the

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<sup>24</sup> Curtis, "Becoming More and More Panamanian," *passim*.

American era, and in three particular settings: as immigrants: as members of voluntary associations called lodges, as renters and residents of neighborhoods, and as shapers of education for their children, who were born into citizenship in Panama. Within these arenas, the immigrants crafted overt and covert ways to protect their heritage, humanity, and tenuous livelihoods. In the process, West Indian immigrants influenced Panama's development in ways little acknowledged in Panamanian or American national, social or economic history.<sup>25</sup>

Chapter 1 sets the context for analyzing West Indians immigrants who arrived in early twentieth-century Panama to build the Panama Canal. Though they were the latest and most numerous of several waves of short-term workers to come to Panama, I argue West Indians had already influenced Panamanian history and social development. During the second half of the nineteenth century, they had introduced labor activism to Panama in advance of local working class formation with spontaneous and organized strikes. As renters during the French Canal era in the 1880s, they contributed to the formation of a class of Panamanian landlords separate from the wealthy commercial class. They had formed settlements and farms at the end of the railroad and first canal project that developed and changed the landscape. They had contributed to the economy by performing domestic and other services and expanding the availability of produce. The better educated worked in offices or professions. A few became entrepreneurs and public servants—at least one fought in the War of a Thousand Days that preceded Panamanian independence.<sup>26</sup> When the Americans arrived West Indians had a long-established society on the

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<sup>25</sup> *Antillanos* participated in other physical and cultural spaces as well, of course, among them music, sports and religion, and similar groups migrated to work in the banana plantations of the United Fruit Company in western Panama and other parts of Central and South America, but these topics and regions are not addressed here.

<sup>26</sup> The Conservative faction won this bloody war that engulfed Colombia from 1899 to 1902, the latest of a series of conflicts between Liberals and Conservatives over three-quarters of a century since the 1830s. Fighting devastated Panama during the last year of the war.

Isthmus, with old and young members, religious organizations, and by the 1890s, fraternal societies subsidiary to organizations in Jamaica.

The American canal effort from 1904 to 1914 established new conditions for the workers. The I.C.C. imposed tight control over expenditures and timetables, as well as over most aspects of the lives of workers, eventually weeding out those who adapted poorly to this industrial regime. The diverse West Indian men and women who faced illness, accidents, inclement weather, and regimentation found ways to provide for their mutual physical and financial support and preserve their cultural practices—through benefit societies, religion, education and social action. They actively agitated for better food, confounded regimentation by changing their names and jobs at will, and abandoned barracks life to squat in the jungle or commute on work trains from rented rooms in the cities.

In Chapter 2, with evidence from newly available archives on lodges in Panama, I examine the proliferation of West Indian voluntary mutual-aid, fraternal, and religious societies—collectively called lodges—across the Isthmus of Panama. Lodges assumed an important role in workers' lives. Many began as death benefit societies for low-paid workers who pooled meager resources to provide security in case of death by accident or illness in a new industrial work environment far from home. Others united artisans or people from the same island or religious background, or carried on more exclusive traditions of fraternal brotherhoods (sometimes with women's auxiliaries) I argue that widespread participation in these lodges during the construction era built resources and relationships that sustained unemployed laborers and their families who stayed in Panama after completion of the Canal through uncertain economic times of the nineteen tens. Lodge culture was also vitally important to rapid unionization that would culminate in a watershed but ultimately unsuccessful strike in 1920.

When the administration banned unions in the Canal Zone after the failed strike, the lodges, which operated in relative privacy, allowed the immigrants to keep alive ideas and practices of both race- and labor-consciousness that had coalesced in the strike movement.

These social and labor organizations continued to provide West Indians with financial and social security, as well as opportunities to foster leadership, manage their own affairs, and develop strategies to adapt to new realities, not only in Panama, but wherever their migrations might take them. These associations connected Afro-Caribbean men and women to a rich cultural repertoire that included a past of slavery and exploitation, concepts of rights and citizenship as British colonial subjects (or French citizens), and a sense of belonging to larger communities that transcended national borders. West Indian activism coincided with labor activism not only in Panama, but throughout the Caribbean and Latin America during the 1920s and the Depression years of the 1930s. Although lodges linked the immigrants and their descendants both to a larger world, and to more intimate communities, and to ideas of multiple “citizenships,” as time passed, they also began to connect them to the Panamanian working class and to their formation as citizens of Panama.

Chapter 3 examines the urban presence of West Indians renters in working-class barrios in Panama and in the first mass movements in Panama, the Rent Strikes of 1925 and 1932. I argue that West Indians—a majority of the residents of Colón, and of several neighborhoods in Panama City, in all Canal Zone “silver” townships, and the Canal Zone overall—used opportunities to exploit their strength in numbers to improve their conditions. They did so openly by joining unions, participating in spontaneous and organized strikes for better working and living conditions, and through repeated challenges through representatives to the Canal Zone Governors and other officials; and acting overtly and covertly in solidarity with the Panamanian

working class. Whether with veiled support to avoid the threat of deportation, or by using their voting rights as native-born citizens, their numbers situated West Indians squarely in important political history of Panama. The strikes provided spaces for them to assert West Indian needs and rights, and their participation influenced changes in the Panamanian government, including forcing it to intervene on behalf of the broad lower classes and limit the impunity of urban landlords.

By the 1940s, as retirement forced long-term workers to move out of the Canal Zone, they sustained economic and cultural links with other West Indians in the developing suburbs, to make the transition from substandard housing in the Canal Zone to property ownership in Panama. The wave of retirements prior to World War II, occurred as Panamanian lawmakers transformed long-building anti-immigrant rhetoric into laws that targeted West Indian-born residents and other immigrant groups. The Panamanian government had pressured the Canal Zone to repatriate unemployed West Indians the Depression, but relatively few agreed to go. A law passed in 1935 requiring that fifty percent of employees in any business be Panamanians affected West Indian retail businesses and retail employees in other businesses. A 1938 law taxed lodges as insurance agencies, forcing many to close. In 1941, a newly elected government instituted a new Constitution of 1941, which revoked citizenship of children born to parents of unwelcome foreigners, including West Indians.

Despite these heavy blows, many immigrants stayed in Panama. They had lost connections and family members in the islands and set down roots as they raised their families on the Isthmus. Pressure from liberal factions in Panama and from the U.S. constrained implementation of most of these legal restrictions, and World War II opened up employment in the Zone for younger workers which helped sustain the community. Immigrants in Panama and

the Canal Zone alike took serious measures to strengthen their positions in Panama, including by becoming property owners, a category protected from deportation. When a new Constitution of 1946 restored citizenship to their children, providing they spoke Spanish, adopted Panamanian customs, and learned the national history, many of the parents had chosen this path.

Using notarial records in the Panama National Archives and cadastral housing census information I analyze the transition to home ownership from the late 1930s to the 1950s. I demonstrate that West Indians used resources from recently established Canal retirement annuities and adapted strategies practiced in many of their lodges and voluntary associations to acquire newly available lots in suburban settlements, to seek economic security and advancement in Panama. By pooling money and sharing risks, a group of relations, friends or lodge members might jointly be able to buy property and construct more substantial buildings than the wooden tenements they left behind in the Canal Zone or Panama barrios. The new owners installed plumbing for indoor bathrooms, in contrast to the quarters they left behind, and often included separate rooms for rent on a ground floor or in a second building, to create income.

Investment in housing improved the economic standing of West Indians and their descendants and cemented their relationship to their adopted country. The needs of the immigrants who had settled in the Canal Zone and outlying communities in Panama also influenced the Panamanian government and banks to create incipient housing programs and ways to finance them that responded not only to the West Indians, but to other working class Panamanian that had been excluded from property ownership.

In Chapter 4 I explore the way West Indians—both in the Canal Zone and in the Republic of Panama—sought educational equity through the first decades of the twentieth century. I argue that, like the simultaneous efforts in housing and by lodges and unions, the cultural spaces

engendered and sustained in schools contributed to the development of a Panamanian West Indian identity. Neither the Panamanian government nor the Canal Zone delivered on their intentions to provide free, universal elementary education. West Indian parents, seeking education for children who qualified but could not be served by public schools, sent them to unregulated West Indian private schools established by enterprising West Indians with assorted levels of training. These schools varied in size, quality and price, and offered classes in English based on a system of rote learning available in the West Indies. Panamanians complained that these schools prevented West Indian descendants from learning Spanish and gaining understanding of Panamanian history and culture, but by the late 1920s municipal laws began to require Spanish in the private schools. A diversity of West Indian interests is visible through the 1920s in debates over private schools, juvenile delinquency, and Spanish language mastery. Focused attention on West Indian education in the Canal Zone “colored” schools during the 1930s and 1940s opened spaces to groom a new generation of Panamanian West Indians as educators as well as to groom the students to learn Spanish and assume their Panamanian citizenship.

Taking this evidence into account decenters the stories of American empire in the Canal Zone and of oligarchic nationalism in Panama in the early twentieth century. It reveals the competing interests of different cohorts of Panamanians and Americans and their complicity in silencing the history of West Indian immigrants in Panama. Contrary to anti-immigrant rhetoric, natural increase of West Indians in Panama did not match the tide of arrivals during the construction of the canal. Instead, diminished immigration, repatriation, continued migration, particularly in the 1950s and '60s from the Canal Zone to the United States, and eventual death of the original immigrants reduced their proportional representation in the population in the

transit zone. Finally, this evidence documents activities of leaders, the literate, the most active, prosperous, successful, and law-abiding West Indians, but leaves lost in history thousands of less visible Afro-Caribbean immigrants and descendants—the less-educated, less-motivated, unlucky, dishonorable, or simply regular people who lived out everyday lives in barrios Panama.

## CHAPTER 1

### SETTING THE STAGE: WEST INDIANS IN PANAMA, 1850s – 1910s

In 1907, an expatriate American journalist published reminiscences of his experiences as a longtime resident of Panama. While he recorded his thoughts, American engineers of the U.S. Isthmian Canal Commission (I.C.C.), having spent two years on an extensive public health campaign to clean up Colón and Panama City and vanquish mosquitoes that carried yellow fever, began implementing the massive project to complete a canal across Panama.<sup>27</sup> Newspaper editor Tracy Robinson had come to Colón, on the Caribbean coast of Panama—just a few years after American entrepreneurs had negotiated a concession from Colombia (of which Panama was a province) and completed a lucrative railroad across the isthmus in 1855—and stayed more than forty years. The memoir, stretching from the time of those early U.S. efforts, through French canal building era, to the “Big Dig,” is filled with accounts of foreign dignitaries and a “heterogeneous mob of aliens” that passed through Colón on their way across the Isthmus, as passengers on the many steamers that stopped at the port, or sojourned there. Although he found the local “Spanish Americans,” affable and polite, even after his long presence on the Isthmus, Robinson attested to the difficulty of “understand[ing] the social life of people of another race and language, [with] other ideas about customs.”<sup>28</sup>

This chapter introduces one aspect of this polyglot society as it traces the experiences of West Indians in Panama during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Robinson

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<sup>27</sup> This introductory material is taken from Tracy Robinson, *Panama: A Personal Record of Forty-six Years, 1861-1907* (New York and Panama: The Star and Herald Company, 1907), 232-243.

<sup>28</sup> Robinson, *Panama: A Personal Record of Forty-six Years*, 232.

notes, “[t]here has always been a large number of resident Jamaicans and other West Indians” in Colón.<sup>29</sup> His brief comments about them convey the clear impression that this group is well-established, contributes fresh produce and other services to the local economy, and has left its mark on the landscape by cutting back the jungle to farm small plots along the railroad line across the Isthmus. He describes West Indians as churchgoing, good-natured and loyal, though in his opinion, like the Spanish Americans, they have “other ideas about customs;” which they freely expressed.<sup>30</sup> Other writers also mention the presence of a West Indian society in Panama before Americans came to build the Canal. West Indian men and women of different social ranks had come as individual travelers and entrepreneurs. For example, West Indian men had owned and operated river boats; men and women owned hotels; and women sold food and petty merchandise; and at least one Jamaican woman nursed cholera patients along the route across the Isthmus before the railroad was built.<sup>31</sup> They led and participated in labor and political activities.<sup>32</sup> I argue that the diverse sets of West Indian islanders who arrived as migrants and remained as immigrants, or who came and went, built nascent communities which integrated their individual identities into a collective of West Indians. The ebb and flow of uncertain

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<sup>29</sup> Robinson, *Panama: A Personal Record of Forty-six Years*, 234, 232.

<sup>30</sup> Robinson, *Panama: A Personal Record of Forty-six Years*, 232, 242. Robinson quotes the judgment of an American minister that “Jamaicans and other West Indians readily attended church but “were religious without being moral,” and professes his own shock over the morality of his Jamaican housemaid, and “other women of her class,” who prize their freedom to not sleep in their employers’ house, eschew marriage as “a species of slavery,” and resent meddling by employers “with their morals.”

<sup>31</sup> Mary Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, ed. Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee (Bristol, Eng.: Falling Wall Press, 1984) , 62-105, 112.

<sup>32</sup> Aims McGuinness, *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008, 84-122, documents political developments and universal, male, franchise including for men of color, who comprised the majority in Panama, in the 1850s; Olive Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal*, (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2014), 82-83, on Pedro Prestán in 1885 (see note 31). Prestán reputedly came from the Caribbean coast of Colombia, the progeny of a Jamaican sailor.

employment provided, in important ways, the spaces for them to forge resilient cultural networks that responded to individual and group interests. They would go on to play a weightier role in both Panama's national history, and in the history of the American-controlled enclave known as the Canal Zone, than they have been accorded.

Between the 1850s and 1910s West Indians came in waves as foreign capital funded new transportation projects across Panama. A substantial number of Jamaicans worked on the railroad construction in the 1850s, and left for less deadly work in Panama City and Colón.<sup>33</sup> A far greater number of workers, especially from Martinique and Jamaica, worked on the French canal project, both in administrative and laboring positions. Each wave of arriving Caribbeans affected life on the isthmus, for example, introducing labor-conscious work actions, spurring building booms, and consuming food and housing. After each project ended, some West Indians stayed behind, farming, founding settlements, or making their way in the cities as Robinson's maid would. They sometimes learned Spanish and integrated into local Isthmian society; many retained their English language and other cultural practices.

### **The Panama Transit Zone**

Geography played a determining role in Panama's development since the European conquest, and it is central to the presence of West Indians on the isthmus in the nineteenth and centuries.<sup>34</sup> The isthmus lies at the southernmost point of Central America, and is shaped like a letter "S" lying on its side, connected at the western end to Central America and the eastern end to South America. Jamaica, 700 miles northeast, is the closest Caribbean island. With its

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<sup>33</sup> McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Percy, *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama, 1903-1947* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), xi, argues that overemphasis on geographic determinism has tended to focus on the oligarchy, the Canal, and relations with the United States and obscure other aspects of Panamanian history.

particular location and geographic characteristics, the idea of a canal between the seas developed early. The Spanish government conducted the first survey to build a canal in 1534, after the Spaniard Balboa confirmed the relatively short distance between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in 1513, but rejected the idea as too expensive.<sup>35</sup> Instead, for centuries a series of muddy tracks, known as the famed Camino Real, or Royal Road, constituted the major route across the isthmus at its narrowest point, the “transit zone.” Barely wide enough for two loaded donkeys to pass, it traversed jungle so thick that light barely penetrated. Isthmian travelers famously suffered from fevers, heat and humidity, and attacks by animals and brigands. From the early 1500s to the nineteenth-century wars of independence, gold and silver from South America traveled through the transit zone on the backs of African and Native American slaves and mules, to fund the Spanish Empire. The importance of the Camino Real tied Panama more closely to South, rather than Central, America.<sup>36</sup>

The transit zone eclipsed other areas of the Isthmus, and commerce became the focus rather than agriculture or manufacturing.<sup>37</sup> Panama experienced economic boom and bust cycles over the centuries. Great annual market fairs accompanied the annual arrival at Portobelo of the Spanish galleons from the early seventeenth century to 1739, which gave the Isthmus a

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<sup>35</sup> Balboa actually crossed the isthmus at a point considerably east of the area that later became the transit zone.

<sup>36</sup> From 1538, Panama was the seat of a royal *audiencia* of the Spanish crown, with courts of appeal for a region stretching from Nicaragua to the bottom of South America. Panama developed independently from Spanish Central America, because of the importance of the trade Panama route to Spain’s South American colonies in the Viceroyalty of Perú. It retained this difference in outlook as well from Bogotá, the remote seat Viceroyalty of New Granada, to which Panama was attached in 1713.

<sup>37</sup> Sharon Phillips-Collazos, *Labor and Politics in Panama: The Torrijos Years* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 14. Panama never produced enough food to support the population in the cities; importing food to feed the labor force became a major focus of the French and American canal operations.

cosmopolitan status.<sup>38</sup> When the fairs declined and eventually stopped as a result of Spanish administrative reforms, Panama fell into economic decline.<sup>39</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, new booms coincided with trans-isthmian projects funded by foreign capital: the American Panama Railroad project in the 1850s, the first French canal project from 1880-1889, and a revived French project from 1891-95. These construction booms responded to a revolution in transportation, and required importation of thousands of laborers to supplement the small number available in Panama.

Before the railroad boom, West Indians had been among the entrepreneurs who offered food, accommodations and transportation for travelers and their baggage by river or road in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> This traffic increased during the California Gold Rush when the Panama route cut weeks and thousands of miles off the journey from the east coast of the United States to California, compared to the overland route or sailing around South America. American capitalists obtained the right from Colombia to build a railroad that carried much of the gold mined in California to the east coast banks of the United States. The train transported passengers from ship to ship, reducing the trip across the isthmus to hours, but while American owners and shareholders realized a huge profit from the railroad, it put local people who had supported themselves by providing services along the old route, including West Indians, out of business.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Christopher Ward, *Imperial Panama: Commerce and Conflict in Isthmian America, 1550-1800* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993). Booms coincided with the annual forty-day fairs that accompanied the arrival of the Spanish fleet at Portobelo, on the Caribbean coast, with related transportation across the isthmus of gold and silver from Peru and Bolivia destined for Spain, and European products destined for South America.

<sup>39</sup> Phillips-Collazos, *Labor and Politics*, 16. In the economic depression that followed the end of the Portobelo fairs, some branches of elite families moved to the west, called the “interior” away from the transit zone, and established cattle ranches or plantations. Twentieth-century politicians Harmodio and Arnulfo Arias came from one such family.

<sup>40</sup> West Indians preceded the railroad in Panama. See Elizabeth McLean Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration; White Capital and Black Labor, 1850-1930* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1988), 89, and Mary Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures*, 62-, 119.

<sup>41</sup> Aims McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 121.

Historically a roughly constant one-third of Panama's population lived in the transit zone, concentrated in cities on the Atlantic (or Caribbean) and Pacific sides of the Isthmus with highly diverse populations. West Indian immigrants lived primarily in this zone. The cities, while cosmopolitan, comprised neighborhoods based on race and class, as well as geography. A divide had existed in Panama City, on the Pacific, since the seventeenth century, when the city was rebuilt on a defensible promontory in 1671, after Henry Morgan sacked the original a century-and-a-half after its founding. Inside the walls ("intramuros") of this new site lived *los de adentro* (insiders)—merchants and administrators descended from Europeans, who monopolized wealth, power, and amenities, and maintained their racial and cultural exclusivity through intermarriage.<sup>42</sup> Across a small creek, in the *arrabal*, the outskirts or suburb, lived the *extramuros* or *los de afuera*—indigenous, black or mixed-race "outsiders," including free descendants of the large population of African slaves who had carried goods across the isthmus, or of runaway slaves who lived in the jungle, often intermixing with indigenous peoples. This racial and social divide prevailed even during boom times, when many travelers and itinerants gave Panama City a multicultural flavor.

Colón also had a multiethnic, hierarchical character. The route selected for the Panama Railroad led to founding of a new town for the Atlantic terminus—Aspinwall, later called Colón—on the small island of Manzanillo, in 1850, supplanting Portobelo (which had itself supplanted a previous port, Nombre de Dios, in 1597) as the main Caribbean port. Colón was the receiving city for boats carrying the new wave of West Indian and other laborers that arrived via the Atlantic, to work on the Panama railroad project.

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<sup>42</sup> Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, *Sociología del arrabal de Santa Ana en Panamá (1750-1850)* (Panama City, Panama: Impresora Panamá, 1978), 11, notes the rigidity of this caste system, and the "implicit" preclusion of upward social mobility for the colored population in the city. Aims McGuinness, *Path of Empire* extends the analysis to the nineteenth-century American presence in Panama during the Gold Rush years.

Thousands died in the jungle and swamps building the railroad. Prospective workers descended on the Isthmus from across the globe despite the high death rate from the climate, jungle animals, accidents, floods, and disease. In the end, black workers from the Caribbean coast of Colombia and the British West Indies proved best able to survive, although many of them also died. At least 5,000 Caribbean laborers a year provided much of the labor.<sup>43</sup> Dire economic conditions in the Caribbean colonies in the wake of the collapse of the sugar market, and a cholera epidemic in Jamaica in the 1850s, propelled West Indian jobseekers to Panama.<sup>44</sup> Historian Elizabeth Petras notes difficult conditions in Jamaica at the time influenced which particular Jamaicans came to work on the railroad: displaced urban artisans arrived first; displaced rural workers came later.<sup>45</sup> The legendary death rate during construction of the 48-miles of track across the Isthmus, encapsulated in the saying “one worker for every tie,” could not be calculated for West Indians, because the railroad company did not keep good records.<sup>46</sup>

Many survivors, and skilled workers who had left the railroad, did not return to depressed Jamaica, but stayed on in Panama. Robert Tomes, an American visitor when the railroad began operation in 1855, described both the cosmopolitan diversity and a social hierarchy “of race and shade” in Colón:

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<sup>43</sup> Omar Jaén Suárez, *La poblacion del istmo* (Panama: Imprenta de la Nación, 1978), 451-60, claims 7,000 worked on the railroad; Conniff, *Black Labor*, 3, places the number at 5,000; Senior, 30, notes a death rate ranging from 35 to 40 percent annually, for an average annual workforce of 6,000. Gerstle Mack, *The Land Divided: A History of the Panama Canal and Other Isthmian Canal Projects* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), 156, claims the company did not record the deaths of its “dark-skinned workmen,” thus the total number of deaths is unknown.

<sup>44</sup> Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 43, notes more than 20,000 died, and perhaps as many as twice that number.

<sup>45</sup> Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration*, 68, suggests that, as the death rate and difficulty of railroad work became apparent, skilled workers were more able to leave railroad work and find work in the cities.

<sup>46</sup> Gerstle Mack, *The Land Divided*, 156, claims the company did not record the deaths of its “dark-skinned workmen,” thus the total number of deaths is unknown. The analogy to the huge number of railroad ties is implausible. Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 49, cites Tomes’ depiction of Colón’s population as devastated by malaria.

...agents, merchants, foreign consuls, hotel keepers are white; the better class of shopkeepers are mulattoes from West Indies; dispensers of cheaper food and drink are chiefly Negroes. The main body of the population is made up of laborers—coal black Negroes from Jamaica, yellow natives of mixed African and Indian blood, and sad, turbaned Hindus.<sup>47</sup>

Newspaperman Robinson also commented on their impact on the local economy and landscape.

Many West Indians began farming on small plots along the railroad. West Indian women provided scarce fresh food—“some old black auntie would have a board on an empty barrel from which to sell her scanty and often stale ‘truck’,” to supplement imported food.<sup>48</sup> Other authors also mention women selling tropical fruits to passengers along the rail route.<sup>49</sup> Robinson noted another effect of these small plots along the railroad on the landscape: farmers cleared the jungle, which had before “shut in the track, or shut out the adjacent country . . . as if the track had been laid between two parallel walls.” Now passengers could get an idea of the “lay of the land” out the train windows. Some Caribbean men married local women, learned Spanish and assimilated into the mixed Panamanian society indistinguishably, except perhaps for a British surname.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Tomes, *Panama in 1855* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1855), quoted in Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama 1850-1914* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, Institute of social and Economic Research, 1984), 113.

<sup>48</sup> Robinson, *Panama: A Personal Record of Forty-six Years*, 243. Though European and American foreigners depended on imported, canned foods, Robinson noted the colored people ate yams, yucca, plantain, rice and salt fish, and fresh fish was plentiful.

<sup>49</sup> Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 52; Eyra Marcela Reyes Rivas, *El trabajo de las mujeres durante la construcción del Canal de Panamá* (1881-1914) (Panama: Editora Sibauste, 2000), 47, includes selling food and flowers among the many tasks classified as “women’s work.” West Indian women, along with other “native” working women, performed the difficult work of washing clothes in the humid tropics. Reyes, 85, describes the details of this profession: beating clothes on rocks or boiling them, the importance of whitening, use of herbs to make clothes smell good, drying (which could be difficult in the rainy season, folding (often with children help) and transporting clothes. Rivas, 84, cites a French naval engineer who reported that laundresses often had unproportioned and misshapen bodies, either obese or skeletally thin.

<sup>50</sup> Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration*, 81.

Others retained their English or French language and cultural practices, whether in enclave settlements or in the multicultural terminal cities.<sup>51</sup>

## The French Era

After his phenomenal success building the Suez Canal, which opened in 1869, the French engineer Ferdinand De Lesseps set out to build a sea-level canal in Panama in the 1880s along the railroad route. The French *Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interocéanique* gained the concession to build a canal from Colombia, raised millions and began the project in 1880, initiating a new boom in Panama. The company brought many skilled artisans and common laborers from the French possessions of Martinique and Guadeloupe, as well as Jamaica.<sup>52</sup> Although it employed the best engineers and equipment of the day, the French canal company could not overcome a host of problems, including high death rates—especially for Europeans—from yellow fever and malaria, fiscal mismanagement, continued landslides, and uncontrolled violence owing to the continued political instability. The effort collapsed in bankruptcy in 1889—defeated by the massive scale of the operation, as well as an earthquake, violent tropical storms, including one that washed out a hard-won bridge built across the mighty Chagres River, and a fire that destroyed Colón during a political revolution in 1885.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Eyra Marcela Reyes Rivas, *El Trabajo de las Mujeres*, 46, 54, mentions the presence of Antillean women and men as petty traders, laundresses and fruit vendors along the railroad route during the French construction era; Gerstle Mack, *The Land Divided: A History of the Panama Canal and Other Isthmian Canal Projects* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), 348 claims the number of Europeans probably never exceeded 1,000 on the Isthmus during the French era.

<sup>52</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor*, 3, claims “as many as” 50,000 West Indians worked on the French project between 1880 and 1889. Omar Jaén Suárez, *La población del istmo*, 434-35, places the number of imported workers for French canal in 1884 alone at more than 17,000, mostly from the West Indies. As the population of the transit zone in 1880, before the French project, was around 35,000, the sudden influx of so many workers caused economic imbalances. The shrinkage of the labor pool from nearly 14,000 in 1888 to under 2,000 the following year, and 913 in 1890 caused untold hardship for the workers. Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 75 notes 19,000 workers in the peak year of 1884.

<sup>53</sup> Robinson, *Panama: A Personal Record of Forty-six Years*, 141-49; Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 79-84, also documents political strife and violence across the Isthmus that claimed the lives of many Jamaicans.

The bankruptcies threw thousands out of work without notice, stranded on the Isthmus in desperate circumstances, unable to pay their way home. Jamaican officials and the British minister struggled to feed starving, homeless workers.<sup>54</sup> Eventually, the Jamaican government expended a substantial, unbudgeted 100,000 pounds in emergency funds to repatriate more than 7,000 of them, leaving an estimated 6,000 behind in Panama.<sup>55</sup> Some of them founded at least one settlement of homes and farms in the plains east of the Panama City, called Pueblo Nuevo.<sup>56</sup>

After the original *Compagnie Universelle* dissolved amid scandal and bankruptcy in 1889, the French group retained the concession by forming the successor *Compagnie Nouvelle du Canal de Panama*. The New Company continued work on the canal at a nominal level, under tighter financial management, using fewer contractors.<sup>57</sup> Despite better management, it too went bankrupt in 1896, but still held the concession for the canal until 1904. The *Compagnie Nouvelle* hired some 700 of the residual group of skilled and unskilled workers primarily from Martinique and Jamaica that remained in Colón and Panama City, to administer the machinery and property left behind, while representatives looked for a buyer.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 95-97, details the Jamaican government's slow response to the crisis of the suddenly unemployed Jamaican workers stranded in Panama.

<sup>55</sup> Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 97. Some of the more than 7,000 repatriated workers were expected to repay their passage.

<sup>56</sup> Alvaro Uribe, *Ciudad fragmentada* (Panama: Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos, 1989), 34-36 on West Indian settlements outside the urban areas, in the nearby *sabanas* (coastal plain) after the French debacle.

<sup>57</sup> Velma Newton, 116-118, documents that the *Compagnie Nouvelle du Canal de Panama* used trained West Indians as artisans, office workers and work supervisors in an effort to save money in the 1890s.

<sup>58</sup> Clifford Bolt, PPGMS, PCS, "History of Manchester Unity in Central America," *Quest*, Jubilee Celebration Issue, [7], no. 5 (October 1965): 23, Box 71, Folder 17, George W. Westerman Papers, Sc MG 505, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library (hereafter, GWW Papers, NYPL, with box and folder numbers, abbreviated as Box #, F #.).

Despite the catastrophic outcome for many workers on the French canal project, West Indians immigrants affected Isthmian society in important ways. Successive waves of West Indian laborers affected class formation in Panama at least since the mid-nineteenth century. Housing these migrant workers fueled restructuring of the social and economic classes in Panama. Their presence helped produce a local bourgeoisie of urban property owners and retail merchants of goods manufactured elsewhere. This middling class provided hospitality to travelers, and accommodations in the transit zone, including for imported workers. Especially during the French period, urban landlords capitalized on the influx of foreign laborers, engineers and administrators, by constructing wooden apartment buildings to accommodate them, becoming wealthy from high rents in a tight market.<sup>59</sup> Their new wealth removed this new class somewhat from the hegemony of, and sometime placed it in opposition to, the ruling commercial oligarchy.

On the other hand, the model of labor importation for large capital infrastructure projects, such as the railroad and canal, delayed development of working-class consciousness in Panama. Worker momentum to organize or engage in spontaneous mobilization occurred among the foreign workers during each construction project, resulting in strikes and other labor disturbances, but dissipated when most foreign workers left the area or the project ended.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Luis Navas, *El movimiento obrero en Panamá (1880-1914)* (Panama: Autoridad del Canal de Panama, Biblioteca de la Nacionalidad, 1999), 24, notes this “restructuring” of the urban bourgeoisie.

<sup>60</sup> Phillips-Collazos, 52, documents five strikes for better pay by West Indian workers against the Trans-Isthmian Railroad Company between 1868 and 1895, and two strikes against the French canal company, in 1881 and 1896, for better pay, better housing, better food, and freedom to leave housing camps on Sundays. Gandásegui, h[ijo], Marco A., Alejandro Saavedra, Andrés Achong, Iván Quintero, *Las luchas obreras en Panamá (1850-1978)* (Panamá: Centro de Estudios Lationamericanos “Justo Arosemena,” 1980), 99, list the following strikes between 1850 and 1900, most fomented by foreign workers: Steamship workers (Nov., 1852), Strikes at ship works on Taboga Island (Sept., 1853), Railroad stevedores (May, 1868), Railroad workers (Feb., 1880), Cigar workers (Apr., 1880), railroad workers (Aug., 1880), French Canal workers (Feb., 1881), dock and railroad workers (Nov., 1883), French Canal workers (Apr., 1895), dock and railroad workers (July, 1895), French Canal workers (Aug., 1895).

## The American Era

As the French contract with the Colombian government was set to expire in 1904, the U.S. began negotiations to construct a lock-canal, and made an offer. Colombia held out for a higher price. Simultaneously, a small group of Liberals in Panama, including the agents of the railroad, which was still owned by the French canal company, and shipping companies, began plotting to secede from Colombia, and negotiating with the U.S. over canal rights. With assurance of support from the U.S., this cadre declared Panamanian independence from Colombia in early November of 1903. The revolution was accomplished with backing from a U.S. gunboat in the Bay of Colón, and delay of Colombian Army troops moving by train across the Isthmus to the capital, Panama City, which enabled the rebellion to succeed.

The American motivation to support Panama's secession from Colombia rested in part on the failure of the Colombian Senate to ratify the Hay-Herrán Treaty (named for U.S. Secretary of State, John M. Hay, and the Colombian chargé d'affaires in Washington, D.C., Tomás Herrán y Mosquera) signed in January 1903, and ratified by the U.S. Senate in March. The Spooner Act of 1902 had pledged \$40 million toward the U.S. purchase of the assets of the French Panama Canal Company, if the government could negotiate a treaty with Colombia that would grant the U.S. the right to build a canal across Panama. The Hay-Herrán treaty foundered because many Colombian politicians disagreed with the amount the United States agreed to pay for the concession, as well as with the annual payment from canal commerce.<sup>61</sup>

Within days of Panama's founding, a new treaty with the United States was being negotiated, by Philippe Buneau-Varilla, appointed "by cable" by Panama's new president as

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<sup>61</sup> John Major, *Prize Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903-1979* (New York; Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 27-32; Szok, *La Ultima Gaviota*, 74-75, places the Colombian rejection of the treaty in the context of internal politics in Colombia, which was approaching national elections in 1904.

Minister Plenipotentiary to Washington, in return for his financial backing of the revolution. Buneau-Varilla, a French engineer who had worked on the French canal construction project, owned substantial stock in the bankrupt *Compagnie Nouvelle du Canal*, and stood to save his investment if the company sold. Buneau-Varilla had lobbied hard for Panama to declare independence and, along with the New York attorney of the *Compagnie Nouvelle*, William Nelson Cromwell, to influence the U.S. Congress to opt for a canal in Panama instead of Nicaragua. Before he received formal instructions from the new Panama government, and just hours before the official representatives from the Panama government arrived in Washington, the ambassador signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, known as the Canal Treaty of 1904. This treaty stipulated that the American government would have control over a piece of territory extending some fifty miles from ocean to ocean, and five miles on each side of the Canal, known as the Canal Zone. It also stated the U.S. would control the territory “in perpetuity” and “as if it were sovereign” over the Canal Zone. Conflict over the legitimacy of Buneau-Varilla’s power to represent Panama, the U.S. right by this treaty to control the Canal Zone territory, and Panama’s right to national sovereignty over its territory, became a continual source of diplomatic complications during the century that followed.<sup>62</sup>

The Canal Zone bisected the new country, and bordered Colón and Panama City. The United States also bought the rights to the railroad, which ran through the Canal Zone, the only

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<sup>62</sup> Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) offers a readable overview of this diplomatic history; Szok, *La Ultima Gaviota*, offers the ideological context of Panamanian nationalism that sought to disavow the widely held belief in Latin America and elsewhere, that Panama was a creation of the United States, and claim a long history of difference and independence from Colombia. Panamanian authors, such as Ricaurte Soler, *Panamá: nación y oligarquía, 1925-1975* (Panama: Ediciones de la Revista Tareas, 1976) and Marco Gandásegui, hijo, have contested both the oligarchy and U.S. hegemony in Panama.

means of direct transportation through the jungle between these main cities of Panama.<sup>63</sup> Towns that had developed along the railroad in the Canal Zone predating the American era, and the workers and farmers and their families who lived there now fell under American jurisdiction, and found themselves in physical and cultural spaces between Panama and the United States.<sup>64</sup>

The American canal project in 1904 brought a new flood of some 200,000 West Indians among many global migrant laborers into the transit zone of Panama to work on the Panama Canal construction between 1904 and 1914. The American engineers needed even more workers than the French had, to keep the project on schedule. Most young male migrants from culturally diverse colonial Caribbean islands did not intend to stay in Panama, but came for short-term adventure, seeking individual profit from the high wages at the Panama Canal or economic survival for their families in the islands.<sup>65</sup> The American government entity in charge of building

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<sup>63</sup> With a canal concession from Panama, the U.S. also paid \$40 million for locomotives and dump cars, cranes, excavators, a dry dock and “considerable” floating equipment, 1,500 usable buildings, and good quality repair parts, tools, surveys, maps, and other materials left behind by the French, which enabled the American engineers to avoid costs and delays in starting the project. See Ralph Emmet Avery, *The greatest engineering feat in the world at Panama. Authentic and complete story of the building and operation of the great waterway--the eighth wonder of the world. With a graphic description of the Panama-Pacific international exposition*, ed. William Haskins (New York: Leslie-Judge company [1915]). <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015021023638;view=1up;seq=13>. (Public Domain within US only). 66-68.

<sup>64</sup> Some towns were evacuated and moved as their sites drowned in the rising waters of Lake Gatún, which fed the Canal; the canal administration also established new towns at crucial points along the Canal. *Schooling in the Panama Canal Zone (1904-1979)* (Phi Delta Kappa, Panama Canal Area [Panama Canal Printing Division?], 1980, 102, notes at the time the Americans took over the Canal Zone, an estimated 700 West Indian laborers who had worked for the French canal companies were among about 1,000 residents of the area. At least some of them farmed small plots. According to Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 47, a Joint Lands Commission failed to pay promised compensation to many West Indians who lived and farmed in the area of the “pueblos perdidos” (lost towns), but paid Panamanian people preferentially. Removal of people from the Zone who did not have a direct connection to the Canal at the end of the construction period, and charging modest rent for new or remodeled housing, displaced many settled West Indian into Panama.

<sup>65</sup> On the role of “Panama Money” and status conferred in home islands by working on the project, see, for example, Bonham Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985); Rhonda Frederick, “*Colón Man A-Come*”: *Mythologies of Panama Canal Migration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005); and Victor Bascara, “Panama Money: Reading the Transition to U.S. Imperialism,” in *Imagining our Americas: Toward a Transnational Frame*, ed. Sandhya Rajendra Shukla and Heidi Tinsman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 365-386. Some workers starved themselves to send more money home; many families simply received death benefits from workers who died at the Canal; often Panama money built houses for families in the islands or financed migration of other family members.

the canal, the Interoceanic Canal Commission (I.C.C.) recruited workers from some islands with contracts, to house, feed and repatriate them after 500 days. The I.C.C. moved new migrants immediately by train to construction camps located along the fifty miles of railroad between Colón and Panama City.<sup>66</sup> A great many eschewed the barracks-like conditions of labor camps and opted instead to compete for exorbitantly priced rooms in either city.<sup>67</sup> They fueled a new boom cementing the income and social status of urban landlords and retail merchants in the Republic. Thousands more workers who came without contracts, and spouses or women who traveled independently, also lived in the cities, or alternatively, squatted in makeshift huts near the camps.<sup>68</sup> The migrants encountered a new industrial work regime and a chaotic life filled with dangers, but they also might soon find a familiar cultural landscape—of churches, lodges, street vendors, musicians, destitute families, farmers, and an urban professional class—people already straddling the borders between Panamanians and Americans, who might ease their adjustment and provide solace for many sufferings.

These laborers not only did the heavy and dangerous work of construction; they also cleared jungle, drained swamps, and spread oil on standing water—contributing greatly to controlling yellow fever and malaria that had defeated the French. The end of construction in 1914 dictated a drastic reduction in the labor force. While the I.C.C. offered to repatriate

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<sup>66</sup> The first paved road across the isthmus was not completed until 1943. The railroad was the only form of transportation across the isthmus in the early twentieth century. ICC engineers laid double tracks and trains ran in both directions day and night, hauling dirt away from the excavation and workers to and from their quarters. See David McCullough, *The Path between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 547, describes the constant shifting of the tracks as excavation progressed; 160 trains a day hauled dirt from the Culebra cut alone, separate from labor and supply trains.

<sup>67</sup> Some brought their families, and some moved a great deal from job to job, sometimes changing their names to confound the I.C.C. attempt to keep tabs on them. For example, Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders*, 178.

<sup>68</sup> Joseph Bucklin Bishop, *The Canal Gateway*, (New York, C. Scribner's Sons, 1913), 305, claims only about one-fifth of the West Indians opted for the barracks. Many workers squatted “in the bush” nearby, where they could raise a bit of food, and invite their families to join them; further, they could work only when they wanted.

contracted workers, World War I era economic dislocations influenced unemployed West Indian workers, many now with families, to stay in Panama where they swelled the populations of Panama City and Colón.<sup>69</sup> Workers who kept their jobs lived with their families in the Canal Zone but experienced stringent loss of pay, as the Canal administration reduced wages across the board to what had been the entry-level pay for single male workers during the construction boom. Families struggled to live as wartime shortages and a post-war recession increased the cost of food and rent. The government of Panama established new neighborhoods to house the foreigner workers, and they crowded into other barrios living among Panamanian, Chinese and other immigrant workers.<sup>70</sup>

### **Citizenship Issues**

The concentrated and visible presence of black, English-speaking, working-class people, in the transit zone of Panama conflicted with the national aspirations of the Panamanian elite, especially when poor and unemployed workers increased the pressure on available housing and jobs in the Republic. The founding liberal oligarchy, which dominated the government through the 1920s, had envisioned Panamanian independence and the canal as a way to modernize, Hispanicize (or whiten), and enrich the country, which already had a majority mixed-race

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<sup>69</sup> Some islands imposed restrictions on returnees, for example Jamaica would permit a migrant to bring only legal spouses and legitimate children, though it was common not to marry or register children at the time. Conniff, *Black Labor*, 46-47, notes the assumption on the part of the Governor of Jamaica that the islands could not support the return of so many workers, and that they would have to stay in Panama or move elsewhere; many migrated on to other locations, especially to American owned sugar plantations in Cuba or banana enclaves in Central America. The Canal Zone Governor in 1916 appointed a Silver Rates Board, consisting of the Directors of the Engineering, Health, and other divisions, to review the needs of silver workers; by 1919 sixty percent of the men had families, and an average of three children, but their pay was calculated to meet the needs of bachelors. See Conniff, *Black Labor*, 54-57.

<sup>70</sup> For example, Curundu was founded in 1914; Calidonia became a primarily West Indian barrio. Canal workers also bought land (or squatted) and form an unincorporated settlement in the “fattening lands” northeast of Panama City in 1914—on tracts owned by wealthy families who grazed cattle and sold beef to the city and Canal Zone. See Anthony C. McLean H[amilton], *Una Cronología histórico biográfica antillano Panameña* (Río Abajo, Panama: Editora Sibauste, S.A., 2003), 244-45.

population, including a heavy strain of African-descended people. Other immigrants complemented the substantial presence of West Indians in the transit zone in the late nineteenth century, namely entrepreneurial but exclusive communities of Chinese, East Indian, and Christian Middle Easterners, who the Panamanian oligarchy perceived as usurping the role of petty traders on the Isthmus. Anti-immigrant sentiment toward these minorities became enshrined in the national fabric at independence. The first Constitution, in 1904, limited immigration of several classes of foreigners. Law 6 of 1904, issued during the first year of independence, prohibited the immigration from China and the Middle East, signaling an effort by the government to control immigration it perceived as diluting the Hispanic population and earning capacities.<sup>71</sup>

The hegemonic presence of the United States in the Canal Zone required a floating labor source. The Canal administration alternated over the years between a desire to house—and control—all its workers in the Zone, and the leverage it gained in relations with Panama, which benefitted when workers lived and consumed in the local economy. This pressure from the Canal Zone left Panama unable to deport British West Indian subjects at will. As immigrants stayed on, Panama began to target their children. Like most countries in the Western Hemisphere, Panama granted citizenship automatically to children born there (*sui generis*). But the education system in Panama could not accommodate many of the descendants, and consequently they did not learn about their native country and often spoke the English of their parents instead of Spanish. In the 1920s Panama began passing laws that restricted the return of

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<sup>71</sup> The law specified unwelcome immigrants as Chinese, “turcos” and “sirios” (both terms refer to people originating in different parts of the Ottoman Empire). Relatively small communities of these ethnic groups operated small retail businesses, sometimes in areas of the country outside the transit zone. The law permitted current residents of these categories to remain in current locations, providing they owned real estate, agricultural farms or ranches, or commercial or industrial establishments, thus non-indigents who could contribute to the development of the country.

immigrants who left the country and immigration of relatives, required teaching Spanish in West Indian private schools, delayed citizenship until age 21, and made citizenship contingent upon knowledge of Panamanian history and the ability to speak Spanish. Many children learned Spanish in their neighborhoods, and West Indians could and did participate in local politics in Colón and vote in municipal elections. These anti-immigrant measures culminated in a devastating series of legal restrictions in the 1940s that rescinded citizenship of descendants born in Panama and restricted the ability of *antillanos* to earn a living.

Policies in the Canal Zone also restricted access to American citizenship by West Indians. The U.S. Constitution did not apply to American citizens in the Canal Zone, considered to be a territory of the United States—they could not vote or have a public voice, although their children born in the Zone were American citizens.<sup>72</sup> The U.S. government predicated the fiscal viability of the Panama Canal on the use of non-U.S. citizen workers, deemed aliens, who could be paid lower wages than Americans. Children born to non-U.S. citizens in the Canal Zone—even in the same hospital as children born to Americans—nevertheless became citizens of Panama. Loyalty, long residence and employment in the Canal Zone, and education of West Indian descendants in English with an American curriculum in the Canal Zone schools did not affect the policy.

West Indians who came to work in Panama brought cultural ideas about civic loyalty and rights with them. Many appealed, as proud British subjects, to British representatives in Panama City and Colón for help in legal matters. Some petitions from workers against treatment and policies in the Canal Zone traveled through diplomatic channels from the British legation in Panama to the U.S. Secretaries of State and War and the President in Washington, exposing conditions in the Zone, and triggering discussion about appropriate responses. By the 1920s, as British influence gave way to American dominance in the region, immigrants found less support.

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<sup>72</sup> Alda Alexander Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development,” p. 28.

Caught between conflicting loyalties and state relations they faced unanticipated choices by the middle of the twentieth century.

## **Conclusion**

From the 1850s through the 1910s, migrants and immigrants from different Caribbean islands found homes and employment in Panama. In the transit zone, they worked on the series of trans-isthmian transportation projects and, for those who remained during the periods of unemployment, their established presence forged the foundation for West Indian communities. The harsh and uncertain railroad and canal building jobs, the frequent economic stress, the diasporic migration tradition, and the reliance on each other influenced the creation of a West Indian shared cultural landscape for individuals with different origins and economic status. In the early twentieth century Panama was ineffective in changing the American preference for West Indian, rather than Panamanian, labor. The government's hope that the canal construction and maintenance would spread wealth to all levels of society never materialized. Instead, the Americans employed a relatively small number of Panamanian laborers, at wages much lower than in the U.S., but higher than prevailing rates in Panama, and only a few educated Panamanians in blue- or white-collar jobs.<sup>73</sup> The powerful American presence in the Canal Zone required a floating labor pool but allowed only employees to live in the Zone after 1913; it paid lip service to official agreements to hire Panamanians, but used to advantage social and economic dynamics in Panama to foil attempts to expel West Indians from the country.<sup>74</sup> The

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<sup>73</sup> As late as 1937, a Panama Canal document identified only 45 non-U.S. citizens on the Gold Roll, of which 37 were Panamanians nationals; 5 Europeans (one each from Britain, France, Spain, and two Swiss); and 2 Colombians and one Venezuelan. "Memorandum for Chief Health Officer," October 11, 1937, Folder 2-E-11, General Record 1914-1934, Education, General Records of the Panama Canal, Record Group 185, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, (hereafter, Folder #, General Records 1914-1934, Education, General Records of the Panama Canal, RG 185, NACP).

<sup>74</sup> Panamanian governments continually petitioned for greater access to well-paying canal jobs at all levels, which would give Panamanian citizens greater share in the benefits from the canal. Canal officials justified hiring few

Canal Zone administration relied on the landlords and retailers who depended on West Indians for their income and power to prevail against mass deportations. This stalemate between Panamanian and American interests, led to periodic racialized anti-immigrant actions initiated by factions of the government and popular groups in Panama. The Panamanian government passed restrictive laws that named several immigrant groups, but targeted the more-numerous West Indians.<sup>75</sup> Anti-immigrant campaigns or laws often materialized after downsizing of the workforce or housing (sometimes termed “depopulation”) sent unemployed West Indians out of the Canal Zone and into Panama, such as at the end of construction, and later, after a massive canal strike in 1920. Rhetoric against West Indians and calls for their deportation also intensified during political crises in Panama, such as after the renter mobilizations in 1925 and

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Panamanian nationals by claiming their unsuitability variously due to weak constitutions, laziness, lack of English, lack of necessary skills, and so forth. Scholars cite other strategic and cultural reasons, such as avoiding involvement with Panama’s Spanish language or labor politics (although Panama could not remain unaffected by the labor policies of the Canal Zone). See for example, Raymond Allan Davis, “West Indian Workers on The Panama Canal: A Split Labor Market Interpretation,” Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1981. The upper classes remained directly and indirectly dependent on the American enterprise and the annual canal indemnity from the U.S. funded much of the national budget. American citizen union workers likewise consistently strategized to replace West Indians with American workers. The Canal Zone administration consistently countered that it could not afford to pay the higher wages of Americans, but also frequently framed its objections on racial grounds. In 1936, for example, lobbyists for the AFL affiliated Metal Trades Council, a blue-collar union of white workers failed to get several measures through the U.S. Congress to take over more than 3,000 semi-skilled jobs held mostly by West Indians. The powerful and unopposed Canal Zone Governor rejected these proposals, citing “friction” that might occur if white Americans mixed with black laborers. Major, *Prize Possession*, 206-07.

<sup>75</sup> First a 1904 law named Chinese, “turcos” and North Africans as “prohibited immigrants,” establishing the precedent of “prohibited” legal status, but did not name *antillanos*. A movement against non-citizens resulted in Law 24 of 1910, which restricted foreigners to the transit zone and threatened the expulsion of anyone who employed laborers from the Canal Zone project, limiting movement and options of *antillanos* who wished to quit canal jobs and stay in the country. Law 27 of 1914 (the year construction ended) required those who held government jobs to be born in Panama or be Panamanian *por adopción* (naturalized), except for certain professional capacities. Article 27 of Law 32 of 1914 ordered expulsion of foreigners who engaged in acts contrary to the obligations of work contracts—a nod in support of Canal authority over its workers. The category of “prohibited immigrant” later expanded to include “hindus” (East Indians including those who had been imported to work in Caribbean colonies), and Law 13 of 1926 designated “Antillanos de la raza negra” (Antilleans of the black race) as prohibited immigrants, detailing the racial nature of the exclusion. Though prohibited from new immigration, resident foreigners could remain in the country, sometimes only in the interior and not the transit zone, if they owned property or had a business, or if they married a Panamanian (although in the case of West Indians, this could conflict with the eugenic rhetoric that wanted to whiten the population). Laws are published in the *Gaceta Oficial*, and are searchable online at <http://panama.justia.com/federales/>

1932. The post 1910s experiences of *antillanos*, both inside the Canal Zone and within Panama, shaped their development of a distinct identity as West Indian Panamanians.

## CHAPTER 2

### LODGES, 1880 – 1930s

On September 1, 1919, five years after the opening of the Panama Canal, canal maintenance workers staged an impressive Labor Day parade. Some 8,000 men and women, most of them immigrants from the Caribbean islands, marched peacefully in two contingents fifty miles apart, one at Panama City, at the Pacific end of the canal, and the other in Colón, at the Caribbean end. This coordinated parade surprised Canal authorities, in part because of the disciplined way in which the marchers represented themselves.<sup>76</sup>

Who were these marchers? The majority of the parading men had migrated to dig the “Big Ditch” for the American government between 1904 and 1914 or after. They, and the immigrant women who had joined them, many now with families, had stayed in Panama, despite layoffs and pay cuts after the construction period.<sup>77</sup> The Canal administration lumped them together as “West Indians,” and paid them, along with Panamanians and other common laborers from across the globe, in local Panamanian silver currency at much lower rates than American citizen supervisors, and collectively called them “silver” workers.<sup>78</sup> The workers generally saw

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<sup>76</sup> “Monster Demonstrations by the *United Brotherhood*; Surpass Any Ever Witnessed Here Before; Orderly Behaviour of Huge Body a Marked Feature,” *The Workman*, 3 September 1919, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 49, notes that three quarters of the construction workers lost jobs and the bottom pay during the construction era became the standard for those who remained employed. Migrants chose to stay, hoping for work with the Canal, because various factors had reduced employment opportunities throughout the Caribbean basin.

<sup>78</sup> Julie Greene, “Spaniards on the Silver Roll: Labor Troubles and Liminality in the Panama Canal Zone, 1904-1914,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 66, no. 66 (Fall 2004): 78-98, shows that contract workers from Spain occupied an ambiguous racial status in the Canal Zone. Spaniards had been viciously denigrated by the American media during the War of 1898. Zone officials designated them as white or “semi-white.” Southern Europeans received about twice the pay in silver that West Indians received, but their labor activism caused the ICC to favor the more docile West Indians. Greene argues that workers who migrated at the decline of the Spanish empire tended to be literate and better off than the most destitute. Appalled by poor living conditions at the canal, most Spanish workers moved on to opportunities in Cuba or South America. Some West Indian workers, too, staged collective actions, but as they adapted to the industrial labor regime, their productivity increased to about the level of the European workers.

themselves as citizens of a particular island, however, not as belonging to the more generic categories of “West Indian” or “silver worker.” Coming from diverse island subcultures, they identified themselves as Jamaicans, Barbadians, or St. Lucians; they often saw each other as strangers and competitors, and, despite proving to be good workers, some, especially common laborers, had earned a reputation for insularity, rivalry, and even disruptive behavior. Labor unrest had increased as prices rose and wages stagnated in the wake of World War I.<sup>79</sup> The Canal administration needed an unemployed, readily available excess labor pool to keep wages low, and these divisions further enabled it to exploit the workforce. But the orderly Labor Day parade of 1919 now showed them united across their differences, as workers. Moreover, visible in their persons as they marched in organized ranks, and in the slogans on large placards they carried, which demanded equality as well as equity, the Afro-Caribbean workers demonstrated a newfound racial solidarity.

The Labor Day parade, as historian Carla Burnett notes, accomplished the two goals of its organizers, to show unity among the West Indians and to demonstrate their ability to maintain order.<sup>80</sup> Careful preparation before the event contributed to its success. Organizers secured permission from authorities to hold the parade, submitted slogans for review (and censorship) by the Canal Zone police, and separated the parade into two flanges at each end of the Canal, to accommodate the expected number of marchers and perhaps to seem less intimidating to observers. They successfully drilled participants to be well-behaved at all costs. The parade’s

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<sup>79</sup> Philippe I. Bourgois, *Ethnicity at Work* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 55-56. A British representative warned of desperate economic conditions of workers and their families in the banana region of Panama six months before a three-month strike began at the end of 1918. The Panama Canal’s own labor inspector also reported similar destitution among employed workers with families who lived in Panama tenements the month before the 1920 strike. See Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 57.

<sup>80</sup> Carla Burnett, “‘Are We Slaves or Free Men?’: Labor, Race, Garveyism, and the 1920 Panama Canal Strike,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2004, p. 100.

success showed the results of a union organizing drive that had taken the workers by storm. Previous actions by maintenance employees had engaged fewer workers, and had dissipated in the face of administration promises, competing organizational interests, or corruption.<sup>81</sup> The rapid growth and united effort signaled new purposefulness of the workers.

Overcoming the diversity of Caribbean cultural identities to form a united front was a challenge for organizers. To do so they turned to established leaders and local societies within the workers' communities. A Panama chapter of the American Federation of Labor-affiliated United Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees and Railway Shop Laborers (UBMWE) a "predominantly white, class-based organization that defined workers' issues in terms of Labor versus Capital," had recently received its charter.<sup>82</sup> In March of 1919, two white American organizers had arrived in Panama from the UBMWE and spurred local leadership to engage in a whirlwind of recruitment.<sup>83</sup> Later that same year, two organizers from Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL, or simply

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<sup>81</sup> In 1916, for example, striking dredge workers had soon returned to work when the administration agreed to investigate their complaints. Although they received a pay increase two months later, the strike had been uncoordinated, and it set precedents for the administration. First, the Silver Rates Board (composed of high-ranking American department heads, convened after the 1916 strike by the Canal Zone Governor to examine wage issues) determined that wages should provide for a "reasonable" standard of living for a single worker, given the wartime rising cost of living, but not for increases for skilled or clerical workers who had attained higher pay. Second, the Governor threatened to use the Treaty-granted power to send U.S. troops into Panama, if the authorities there did not help break the strike by banning meetings and arresting leaders. Third, the administration declined Canal Zone recognition to, and began surveillance of, the Colón Federal Labor Union (CFLU), founded just prior to the 1916 strike. The CFLU planned a brief dockworkers' strike in March 1917. In both strikes, money collected from workers went missing. See Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 52-53; John Major, *Prize Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903-1979* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 88-89.

<sup>82</sup> Burnett, 53, cites a report in *The Workman* that black American silver worker Nicholas Carter had requested the UMBWE send organizers to Panama, after reading a copy of the UMBWE constitution discarded by a white American union member. She claims when workers received a charter to open a union local, they kept it secret, lest the organizers be intercepted by the administration.

<sup>83</sup> The Panama Canal and Panama Railroad functioned as one entity; some employees worked for the railroad, but they all "maintained the way" of the Railroad or Canal. For a brief period after World War I, the American Federation of Labor (A. F.L.) reached out to organize some black workers, in competitions with the Industrial Workers of the World (I. W. W.). Once government repression reduced the effectiveness of the I. W. W., the A.F.L. reverted to a segregated organization. See Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 56.

UNIA) arrived from New York to help build local chapters in Panama.<sup>84</sup> Significantly, both union and UNIA organizers recruited veterans of West Indian voluntary societies—people accustomed to a degree of group discipline, who harbored amongst themselves experienced leaders. These leaders included the most skilled and educated West Indians, some of whom had achieved clerical posts in the Canal Zone, and many of whom joined both organizations and actively promoted the union.<sup>85</sup> As many as 13,000 workers had joined twenty upstart union locals in Panama and the adjacent Canal Zone by the time the Labor Day parade gave a public face to the labor movement.<sup>86</sup> These union locals were called “lodges” in Panama, a designation that would have had special meaning for the West Indian workers, familiar with a long tradition of voluntary associations, also called lodges, in their homelands. The union would go on to call a massive strike six months later that all but closed the Canal for more than a week. The famous Canal Strike of 1920 ultimately failed to achieve its demands, but its strength resulted in severe repression. The administration quashed unions in the Canal Zone for a generation. Only a few

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<sup>84</sup> Marcus Garvey briefly edited a newspaper in Colón (1911), returned to Colón and Panama City on a speaking tour in 1921; and Anthony C. McLean H. *Una cronología histórico biográfica antillano* (Panama: Editora Sibauste, 2003), 23, claims Garvey personally established the UNIA-ACL there in 1916, although that would have predated its first appearance in New York in 1917, and firm incorporation in Panama in 1918. McLean states that there were 40 UNIA groups in Panama, but does not cite a source. Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association papers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), VII, Appendix, reports as many forty-seven chapters of the UNIA in Panama—including two in the Canal Zone, and many in the banana growing region of northwestern Panama—more than any other single country or state, except New York. Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), 372, lists 22 Divisions and 27 Chapters of the UNIA in Panama, although not when they began.

<sup>85</sup> Olive Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2014), 301; Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 55-57. The best educated, elite West Indian employees had received the highest pay as clerical workers, some on the gold roll, during the construction era. They suffered loss of pay and status in the collapse of pay scales. Clerks and messengers sometimes had access to internal administrative communications.

<sup>86</sup> *The Workman* 10 May 1919, p. 2, mentioned, and regularly advertised meetings at, four non-consecutively numbered UBMWE lodges. If lodges were assigned systematically and consecutive numbers in order, it would suggest at least 16 chapters of the United Brotherhood existed in Panama. This is not impossible, given the huge membership on the isthmus. Lodges probably existed across the isthmus in the towns along the railroad and canal. Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 56, mentions that some UBMWE leaders hailed from these towns.

union lodges remained in neighboring Panama after the strike. More importantly, though, a wide variety of other West Indian voluntary associations existed on the isthmus without an association to unionism, which could both absorb the diversity of the workers and support their newfound self-consciousness and solidarity.

This chapter analyzes how these voluntary societies, collectively called lodges, sustained the sizable population of West Indian immigrant laborers in Panama, both before, and especially after, the strike. The lodges ranged from penny clubs, to death benefit societies, friendly societies, benevolent associations, fraternal orders, religious societies, and island-based associations, among others, and linked their members to networks that supported them in good times and bad. I argue that widespread participation in these lodges was vitally important to later rapid unionization and would ultimately culminate in the watershed and nearly successful strike of 1920. When subversion and betrayal caused the strike to fail, obstruction of union activity in the Canal Zone did not end racial solidarity among West Indians. Instead they reverted to their lodges, structures that allowed them to maintain their diversity, but keep alive ideas and practices of both race- and labor-consciousness that had coalesced in the strike. These organizations continued to provide West Indians with financial and social security, as well as opportunities to foster leadership, manage their own affairs, and develop strategies to adapt to new local realities, not only in Panama, but wherever their migrations might take them. Though largely invisible to non-West Indians, these associations connected Afro-Caribbean men and women to a rich cultural repertoire that included a past of slavery and exploitation, concepts of rights and citizenship as British colonial subjects (or French citizens), and a sense of belonging to larger communities that transcended national borders. Although lodges linked the immigrants and their

descendants to a larger world, and to more intimate communities, as time passed, they also began to connect them to the Panamanian working class and to their formation as citizens of Panama.

### **The 1920 Strike**

Local West Indian leaders sustained the union organization after the Labor Day parade. During the volatile post-war fall of 1919, the Canal Zone government responded to the Labor Day show of ordered solidarity in several ways, including having the American union organizers recalled to the United States and blocking their return. Even without the foreign organizers, local leaders kept up the organizing momentum, however, and a local West Indian weekly, *The Workman*, took up the cause, with vehement editorials that exhorted workers to overcome divisions and unite. The Canal Zone government began spying on the leaders and fired several local union leaders from their canal jobs. Nevertheless, union membership grew, and leaders began banking a local strike fund to supplement the \$30,000 it had sent to union headquarters in Detroit with the departing American organizer.

Local leaders fused the resources and ideologies of both unionism and Garveyism, as historian Burnett demonstrates, to build the union so rapidly in Panama. She argues that leaders in the many newly established chapters of Marcus Garvey's UNIA had faced difficulty overcoming the parochial divisions to inspire the immigrants to follow Garvey's vision of Pan-African unity.<sup>87</sup> Uniting either as workers or on a racial basis were new concepts for the majority of the rank and file workers, and leaders of both the UMBWE and the UNIA concentrated on organization as key to their movements. Burnett suggests that if some Garveyite leaders likely joined the labor union primarily to gain recruits for their own movement, they also generally perceived that the laborers might be more likely to unite over their shared struggles as workers.

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<sup>87</sup> Burnett, 117.

UNIA leaders thus joined the unionists in crucially mobilizing a majority of canal laborers by exhorting them to see themselves as workers rather than St. Lucians or Jamaicans. They also used the ideas of Marcus Garvey to further overcome inter-group rivalries and deference to the canal authorities by framing the laborers not simply as exploited workers, but as exploited *black* workers.<sup>88</sup>

Leaders planned to join a national U.S. railroad strike set for February 1920, and presented their demands to the Governor. A survey conducted by the Silver Rates Board showed that with falling pay and rising prices, families could not make ends meet, and recommended a pay increase.<sup>89</sup> Both the workers and the Canal administration would have been aware of a strike against the United Fruit Company the previous year in the banana region of northwest Panama, and the company's use of such tactics as reliance on informants, refusal to negotiate, and eviction of workers and families from company housing.<sup>90</sup> The local union leaders demanded a seven-cent per hour pay hike, but the Governor staunchly refused to go beyond a two-and-a-half cent raise. In the U.S., union headquarters canceled its U.S. rail strike at the last minute, but local leaders opted to strike on their own at the Panama Canal.

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<sup>88</sup> Burnett, 181-83. Burnett argues that both the UMWBE and UNIA organizers deviated from the interests of their parent organizations. The UMWBE was primarily a "white class-based organization;" that only briefly organized elite black workers; Garvey was against unionism, but the show of Pan-Africanism that accompanied the racial awareness of the strike movement in Panama was good for Garvey movement, 183.

<sup>89</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 49, 57. The Governor appointed top officials from the Canal Zone to the Silver Rates Board, including the Marine Superintendent, Chief Health Officer, Assistant Engineer of Maintenance, Chief Quartermaster, Superintendent of Dredging, Panama Canal Auditor, Superintendent of the Mechanical Division, and Superintendent of the Panama Railroad Company. The Board did not include any workers or non-U.S. citizens. The Board reviewed conditions of silver workers at least until the late 1930s. Considerable time and energy went into investigations and documentation of complaints by silver workers, including from the Panama Canal West Indian Employees Association, and preparation for meetings of the Board and responses to complaints. See for example, L. L. Gilkey (Silver Inspector) to Governor Harding, August 18, 1919, 2-P-69, General Records 1914-1934, Education, General Records of the Panama Canal, 1914-1950, Record Group 185, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD (hereafter, Folder #, General Records 1914-1934, Subject, General Records of the Panama Canal, 1914-1950, RG 185, NACP), and Minutes to Silver Rates Board Meeting, November 22, 1930, 2-P-69 (8), General Records 1914-1934, Subgroup, General Records of the Panama Canal, 1914-1950, RG 185, NACP.

<sup>90</sup> Bourgois, *Ethnicity at Work*, 55-58; Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 300.

Accordingly, on Tuesday, February 24, 1920, William Stoute, the school teacher from Barbados who had assumed leadership of the local branch of the United Brotherhood, called a strike. The next day, after as many as ninety percent of the 14,000 West Indians on the canal payroll failed to report to work, the Canal Zone Governor used military force to eject nearly 400 workers and their families from Canal Zone quarters, flooding nearby Colon and Panama City with destitute refugees.<sup>91</sup> West Indians from other occupations joined the maintenance workers on strike.<sup>92</sup> The black workers also found support from the sympathetic unions in adjacent Panamanian cities, whose leaders did not join the strike, but discouraged their members from breaking it.<sup>93</sup> Fearing the dispatch of U.S. troops from the Canal Zone into his country, newly seated Panamanian President Ernesto Lefevre exhorted Panamanians to refrain from participating in any disorder in Panama's two main cities.<sup>94</sup> The massive movement lasted for eight days without violence, but ultimately collapsed. The Canal Zone government continued to use surveillance and spying to undermine the movement, and knew that strike funds had failed to arrive.<sup>95</sup> President Lefevre, alarmed by the tide of refugees which his country was unable to employ or support, finally bowed to pressure from the Canal Zone Governor to ban all meetings

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<sup>91</sup> Burnett offers the most comprehensive discussion of this strike. Hill, II: 512-13, includes a report by Mr. F.S. Ricketts, a delegate from Colón, Panama, to the UNIA 1921 Convention in New York City, that troops used "drawn bayonets" when removing families.

<sup>92</sup> Gerardo Maloney, "Panamá 1920 – cronología de una lucha," *Tareas* No. 55 (Aug. 1982-Jan. 1983): 31.

<sup>93</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 59, notes some Panamanian canal workers were among the strikers. Maloney, 36, notes Panamanian nationals were offered \$0.23 in gold per hour to replace the immigrant West Indians. (Per Greene and others, average pay during construction era was \$.10/hour in Panamanian silver.) It is unlikely but not impossible that those who replaced the strikers were members of other unions in Panama.

<sup>94</sup> Maloney, 32.

<sup>95</sup> Burnett, 190, notes the loss of documents that might explain the mystery of why the strike fund raised by the locals in Panama and sent to the U.S. headquarters, was not returned. The Canal Zone authorities secretly monitored both union and UNIA communications, and were aware of this problem.

of canal employees in the Republic of Panama.<sup>96</sup> Without funds and unable to meet and communicate with the participants, the leaders called an end to strike.

The failed strike had an immediate and devastating impact not only on strike leaders, but also on the West Indian workforce and their families. In swift reprisal, Canal Zone Governor Chester Harding outlawed union activity in the Canal Zone, deported strike leaders, blackballed strike participants, and rehired only workers who had not been replaced in the interim, at lower salaries and in undesirable jobs.<sup>97</sup> He announced the Zone would now accommodate only half the West Indian workforce, forcing the rest to spend more of their earnings crowding into expensive, inadequate tenements in nearby Panamanian cities.<sup>98</sup> An editorial in a local West Indian newspaper assessed the mood in the strike's aftermath in this way: "We have been jerked violently out of our self-induced passivity, and a new movement has been released from its moorings—the Movement out of this country—Labor's Pest Hole."<sup>99</sup> Although thousands of unemployed immigrants did leave Panama altogether, desperately looking for work, many of the newly unemployed stayed on, joining the legions of former canal workers in the terminal cities at either end of the Canal.<sup>100</sup> They faced an uncertain future redefined by the strike.

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<sup>96</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 59.

<sup>97</sup> Burnett, p. 157. Leaders ordered for deportation included men from Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad, Cuba, St Lucia, St Vincent, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, and Guadeloupe. Many continued their labor activities in other destinations, including Cuba and the U.S.

<sup>98</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 59.

<sup>99</sup> H.N. Walrond in *The Workman*, 25 October 1919, quoted in Burnett, 158.

<sup>100</sup> Many ended up in other American corporate enterprises in Central America or Cuba. For Cuba, see Jorge L. Giovanetti, "The Elusive Organization of "Identity": Race, Religion, and Empire among Caribbean Migrants in Cuba," *Small Axe* 19, Vol. 1 (March 2006), 1-27; Barry Carr, "Identity, Class, and Nation: Black Immigrant Workers, Cuban Communism, and the Sugar Insurgency, 1925-1034," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 78, No. 1 (1998): 83-116.

## West Indian Lodges

The failed labor culture, especially the strike and its immediate repressive aftermath, did not, however, erase ideas, experiences and race-consciousness of West Indians. Burnett agrees that, after the strike “West Indians continued to stick together and resist their condition in a way that was unprecedented in Panama,” and she asserts that in this way the strike represented success, for both union leaders and Garveyites. Her research stops short of illustrating how, in the face of banned union activity, West Indians maintained or demonstrated either unity or racial solidarity.

Critical spaces in which West Indians sustained the legacy of black consciousness included the many voluntary societies that persisted and new ones that arose after the strike. The organizers did not descend on people unfamiliar with social organization—they could draw on leaders and familiar practices of a long tradition of West Indian voluntary mutual-aid, fraternal, and religious societies—lodges—that had appeared in Panama before the American canal project, and had anchored the huge influx of temporary West Indian workers who came to work there. After the canal opened in 1914, lodges and new unions played an important role for the many West Indians who stayed in Panama as layoffs and pay cuts, and poor economies in the Caribbean threatened their survival.<sup>101</sup> The success of the 1920 strike relied on leaders developed within this established infrastructure of lodges and unions to forge unity out of longstanding parochial Caribbean identities.

The young Afro-Caribbean men who had packed their bags to seek work in Panama, shared cultural knowledge and traditions from a past of slavery and colonialism. For example,

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<sup>101</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 49, also critiques the failure of the Silver Rates Board to recognize in their calculus of a decent living wage that many of the still-employed workers living in Panama not only paid higher rents there, but also supported unemployed relatives (or, I would add, lodge mates).

many still rejected plantation work in the islands, generations after their newly-freed forebears had been forced into low-waged exploitive work for former owners by a government-imposed period of apprenticeship.<sup>102</sup> Released from the protections afforded by slavery—housing, basic provisions, or small plots to grow food—semi-freed people had been required to work for several years for ex-masters, on their own time for punitive wages, with severe penalties for noncompliance. Soon after, seasonal agricultural migration became a common strategy to supplement mixed economic activities necessary for survival, for most small islands did not have land enough to provide subsistence to freedmen and -women. Migrants from British colonies also shared English dialects, which gave them an advantage with American bosses in migrant destinations, including Panama. The common tendency of men and women migrants to move at will, whether to a job with better pay, or to return home, or for some personal reason, struck European and American employers as shiftlessness or instability, rather than as an effort to shape prospects in uncertain or coercive situations.<sup>103</sup> Islanders also shared traditions of communal organization, some developed from survival strategies during slavery or emancipation, and others from European fraternal and artisanal practices.

The Caribbean immigrant workers acted upon these shared histories and built institutional support to sustain their well-being in Panama. When the work and climate in Panama proved dangerous, they soon established death benefit societies, similar to ones they had known at home, pooling meager resources to provide security in case of death by accident or illness. Immigrants also founded branches of more formal fraternal orders or religious societies

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<sup>102</sup> On post-emancipation Jamaica, for example, see Abigail Barkan, *Ideology and Class Conflict in Jamaica* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 28-38

<sup>103</sup> Gerstle Mack, *The Land Divided: A History of the Panama Canal and Other Isthmian Canal Projects* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), 340; Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama 1850-1914* (Kingston: University of the West Indies, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1984), 116.

creating small communities of support and linked members to lodges in the islands or other migrant destinations.

Lodges had a long history in the British Caribbean. Earlier migrants from Europe to the colonies, British sailors and craftsmen, had carried the tradition of fraternal orders there in the eighteenth century.<sup>104</sup> Some British fraternal organizations were open to freed slaves, but as in the United States, by the late nineteenth century, parallel black fraternal orders of better-off artisans and mulatto tradesmen were well-established in Jamaica.<sup>105</sup> Some of these affiliated with British parent societies, some with U.S. black organizations, and a few operated independently, based on knowledge of standard structures and bylaws. In the color and racial hierarchies of the islands, lodge membership might promise a route to social advancement. White clergymen had also started death benefit societies and “penny clubs” among the poor, newly emancipated slave forebears of the Panama immigrants, to encourage self-sufficiency.<sup>106</sup> Thus, all economic levels of society practiced versions of voluntary association.

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<sup>104</sup> A. F. Wells and D. Wells, *Friendly Societies in the West Indies; Report on a Survey* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1953). The Wells Report was a study conducted in 1952 to determine whether established friendly societies operating in the British West Indies could be adapted to a Colony Benefit Scheme, which would itself be a model for a universal social insurance scheme then under consideration in Britain.

<sup>105</sup> Local friendly societies became common in the nineteenth century in West Indian villages, while lodges prevailed among men with business or vocational skills, or some education. The Grand Lodge of Scotland contemporary website declares “Membership is open to men of any race or religion who can fulfill this essential qualification and who are of good repute.” <http://www.grandlodgescotland.com/about-masonry>. One report notes the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts approved two charters for Sojourners (masons) lodges in the Canal Zone for white members, in 1906 and 1912, respectively, but black Sojourners did not receive a charter [unspecified whether from Scotland or Massachusetts] until the 1930s. See Cobra Lady, “The Lodges and Fraternal Orders on the Isthmus of Panama. Part II, *The Silver People Chronicle*, [http://thesilverpeoplechronicle.com/2010/08/lodges-and-fraternal-orders-on-isthmus\\_23.html#sthash.wogbCrbg.dpuf](http://thesilverpeoplechronicle.com/2010/08/lodges-and-fraternal-orders-on-isthmus_23.html#sthash.wogbCrbg.dpuf) (posted 23 August 2010).

<sup>106</sup> Wells, *Friendly Societies in the West Indies*, 10. Informal small variants of the friendly societies, known as penny clubs, box hands, or dividing or bonus societies, depending on colonial locale, focused on economic solidarity for the poor. These functioned on a common principle: at each meeting monetary contributions from each member were allotted one member by turn, with the resulting lump of cash usually being beyond the ability of the individual to accumulate on her or his own. Men and women participated widely in these societies.

Beginning early in the French canal construction era (1880-1894), Jamaican men in Panama founded branches of fraternal societies, transferring knowledge and experience to their new location in Central America. With a Charter from England, and help from members of two courts in Jamaica who came to Panama to help organize it, Jamaican residents in Colón established Court Brock No. 6725 of the Ancient Order of Foresters on August 27, 1880.<sup>107</sup> Several members of Oddfellows Kingston Lodge No. 2042, who resided in Panama also founded the Three Sister Lodge No. 2477, on May 30, 1884.<sup>108</sup> When the French canal operation failed, stranding West Indian employees in Panama, many of them opted to remain, including “managerial and entrepreneurial” men from Jamaica.<sup>109</sup> One, Charles A. Sanguinette, “accustomed to social intercourse in [his] homeland,” successfully petitioned and received permission from the Odd Fellows Jamaica District to organize the Loyal St. Charles Lodge No. 7252 October 8, 1894.<sup>110</sup> That same year, another immigrant group in Colón founded St. Joseph

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<sup>107</sup> Grand United Order of Oddfellows, *Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Session of District Grand Lodge No. 40, Jurisdiction of Panama* (September 7-8, 1931): 1, Box 71, Folder 17, George W. Westerman Papers, Sc MG 505, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library (hereafter, GWW Papers, NYPL, with box and folder numbers, abbreviated as Box #, F #). Court Brock No. 6725 took its name from, J. P. Brock, a member of Court Hinds in Jamaica, who had been invited to found a lodge in Panama. See “Cobra Lady,” *The Lodges and Fraternal Orders on the Isthmus of Panama, Part I*, notes. <http://thesilverpeoplechronicle.com/2010/08/lodges-and-fraternal-orders-on-isthmus.html#sthash.DTIqW9me.dpuf> (posted 17 August 2010). See also Registration papers for Court John Wallace No. 9111, 1914, Box 1, Folder 8, Personería Jurídica, Secretaría de Gobierno y Estado, Administración del Estado, Archivo Nacional de Panamá (ANP), hereafter, ANP, with year, box and folder, abbreviated as Box #, F #.

<sup>108</sup> Oddfellows, *Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Session* (September 7-8, 1931):1.

<sup>109</sup> Raymond Allan Davis, “West Indian Workers on the Panama Canal: A Split Labor Market Interpretation,” Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1981, set the number of West Indians remaining in Panama at 700, but does not cite a source. Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 97, claims some 6,000 workers remained behind after the first bankruptcy in 1889. The French had employed many Jamaicans as clerks and supervisors, and the majority of these immigrants would likely have been urban residents, since access to French assets would be easily accessible by train.

<sup>110</sup> Oddfellows, *Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Session*, 1; quoted material is from Clifford A Bolt, “History of the Manchester Unity in Central American, PPGMS, PCS, *Quest*, Annual Review of the Central American District, Independent Order of Odd Fellows, Manchester Unity, Friendly Society, Vol. I, No. 5, (Oct. 1965): 22, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 17. In addition to common laborers, who “imported exclusively for their labor,” left their families at home, Elizabeth McLean Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital and Black Labor, 1850-1930* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1988), 77, describes the better class of Jamaican men who

Lodge No. 17, affiliated with the U.S. African American Independent Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of the Samaritans.<sup>111</sup> Jamaican and British fraternal societies in the banana region near the border with Costa Rica, such as the Ancient Shepherds lodge founded in 1895 also predated the American canal era.<sup>112</sup> The original Foresters' Court Brock No. 6725 lodge was joined twenty years later by Court John F. Wallace No. 9111 in 1899, perhaps signaling a generational membership, or at least a persistent Jamaican population on the Isthmus. Thus, some two decades before the Americans began their construction project in 1904, some West Indians residents on the Isthmus had negotiated international bureaucratic requirements and engaged in a transplanted pattern of elite fraternal association.

Given the connections of these established fraternal orders with lodges in home islands, it is likely that, as the U.S. geared up its canal project, skilled artisans and men with some education or social standing arrived in Panama with letters of introduction from their island lodges to affiliated chapters on the Isthmus. With or without such affiliations, however, common laborers soon formed death benefit societies, to hedge against accidents associated with the dangerous pick-and-shovel labor that occupied most of them, or illnesses associated with the climate or work regime, such as malaria and pneumonia. Lodges collected and managed “entrance fees” and dues from members with the primary purpose of providing decent burial for people who died. Beyond burials, some lodges also provided small compensation against job loss or sickness and some provided survivor benefits. They had served the same purposes in the

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brought their women with them to Panama. The women did not work, but managed middle-class lives of comfort in Colón during the French era. It is likely men of this group founded lodges.

<sup>111</sup> St. Joseph Lodge No. 17, ANP, 1918, Box 11, F 6. Founded February 13, 1894, this lodge was reorganized in January 1895; the preamble submitted in 1918 notes affiliation with the “Grand Lodge of the District of Central America #7, of Panama and adjacent republics.” Male and female names are listed together.

<sup>112</sup> Hubert M. Green, “80 Years of Fraternity in Panama,” in *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Court Panama No 10026*, Ancient Order of Foresters, 1960, p. 1 GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 17.

islands and thus would have been familiar purveyors of these services as they managed the accumulation of funds for the immigrants, who had little access to banks.

The government of Panama recognized this fiduciary role; and classified the lodges as insurance agencies. It passed a law in 1904 requiring organizations that handled money to register as legal entities, and submit their bylaws.<sup>113</sup> There is no way to know how many voluntary societies failed to conform to this law, as undoubtedly many did, intentionally, through ignorance of the law, or because West Indians did not speak Spanish. Possibly residual residents from the French era interpreted the laws for the newcomers. Compliance by many lodges suggests awareness and respect for the host country's government and legal structure, as well as a strong belief in upstanding behavior by at least a minority of West Indians.

Recently available Panamanian archives tell us much about the organizations that did obey this law. Lodges filed legal documents, duly translated into Spanish, including their bylaws and minutes of their organizing meeting, the names and terms of service of elected officers, and sometimes minutes of other meetings. The ubiquitous use of formulaic structures and language, perhaps adapted to individual fraternal orders, reveals how widespread knowledge of them must have been to the West Indians. This evidence suggests that lodges served a range of purposes, including economic security and social support, and that they played a role in preservation of diversity among the immigrants, since members of an association often came from the same island, occupation or social class. For example, the Dutch Benevolent Society, the Colón Drivers' Union, or United Brotherhood of Masons all reproduced island skill-based and other

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<sup>113</sup> The law did not single out West Indians; Panamanians of different classes, as well as American, Chinese, and other groups residing in Panama also registered their organizations during the early twentieth century. This organizational tendency was a widespread, contemporary international phenomenon, and well-represented among American citizens in the Canal Zone. Panamanian societies reflected political, commercial and recreational orientations as much as mutual labor or artisanal interests.

cultural hierarchies.<sup>114</sup> Despite their commonalities, cultural differences limited the worker's broader sense of community. Even those who shared a language might see each other as aliens or rivals, and this disunity is reflected in their bylaws. During the chaotic years of canal construction, the migrants found little impetus to unite of a bigger scale, especially since many stayed only through their contract, if that long.

West Indian lodges overall reflected the great diversity among their members with regard to origin, occupation, class, race, gender and transnational consciousness. For example, aside from several organizations designated as "West Indian" or that stipulated "British [colonial]" membership, others catered to Dutch and French colonial citizens.<sup>115</sup> The Perseverance Mutual Benefit Association of Bocas [del Toro] included men and women members with French and English names, suggesting varied imperial origins.<sup>116</sup> Relatively better economic or educational levels among associations are apparent in such stated purposes as promotion of "free discussion to promote knowledge," provision of a small members-only library, and in the fine handwriting in the signatures of officers of the Young Men's Beneficial Club, or the entrance fee in gold dollars charged by the Young Men's Association.<sup>117</sup> Less legible signatures interspersed with an occasional "X" in place of a signature, or small dues in Panamanian silver indicate less educated

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<sup>114</sup> Sociedad de Beneficencia Holandesa Wilhelmina Fonds, ANP, 1908, Box 1, F 3; Unión Subsidiaria de Cocheros de Coló, ANP, 1920, Box 13, F 22; Unión de Albaniles de Panamá, ANP, 1920, Box 13, F 23.

<sup>115</sup> Sociedad de Beneficencia Holandesa Wilhelmina Fonds, ANP, 1908, Box 1, F 3., St. Lucian Welfare and United Societies, *The Panama Tribune*, 10 January 1932, p. 13; Foch Lodge of French citizens, *The Workman*, 13 September, 1919, p. 4

<sup>116</sup> Perseverance Mutual Benefit Association of Bocas, ANP, 1912, Box 5, F 3.

<sup>117</sup> Young Men's Beneficial Club, ANP, 1909, Box 2, F 10; Young Men's Association, ANP, 1911, Box 5, F 1.

or more poorly paid members. Royal King Edward No. 13 Lodge stipulated in its bylaws “Money used in this lodge is Panamanian.”<sup>118</sup>

Panamanian and U.S. archives, and West Indian newspapers on the Isthmus, reveal that when the collapse of the 1920 strike dictated new realities for these foreign workers in Panama, they engaged with new intensity in the established infrastructure of their voluntary organizations. More than fifty West Indian chapters of various orders and at least a dozen unions (some of which joined West Indian and Panamanian workers) had registered with the government of Panama between 1914 and the strike in February 1920. During the 1920s nearly fifty more lodge chapters and several benevolent societies joined the official roster. Only two organizations identified themselves as labor unions, one clearly inspired and joined by West Indians, and the second in a neighborhood of Panama City where many West Indians lived. Unlike labor organizations, however the benevolent societies that had facilitated the unprecedented growth of the United Brotherhood union, frequently escaped serious notice of the Canal Zone administration or Panamanian government. After the failed strike, lodge activity allowed men and women to maintain their diversity in relative privacy, and away from state intrusion, but sustain practices and consciousness they had manifested in the strike.

In the relative invisibility of these associations, West Indians carried on activities in a racialized setting that allowed them to take responsibility as leaders, practice organizational skills and political expression, exert social control, build financial reserves, and preserve cultural celebrations often denied them in their public lives as immigrants and workers. While the lodges sometimes became instruments of the isolationism identified by historian Trevor O’Reggio, as the site of West Indian engagement with the realities of life in Panama, lodges incubated adaptive solutions. Michael Conniff identifies the 1920s as the times when a distinctive West

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<sup>118</sup> Royal King Edward No. 13 Lodge, ANP, 1914, Box 7, F 11.

Indian subculture flourished in the transit zone.<sup>119</sup> During the twenties, Panama-born children of West Indian immigrants in Panama came of age, having experienced life differently than their parents, with receding connection to island homelands. At the same time, the Panamanian state faced generational change in leadership, and consolidation of national identity that sought to marginalize immigrants, of which the West Indians were the largest majority.<sup>120</sup> Economic prospects other than canal employment remained uncertain for them. Lodges could provide continuity for the new generation, but they also accommodated changing needs of individuals and the community. By and large, West Indians and their descendants did not relinquish their diversity, but increasingly they developed bicultural relationships with both the Americans in the Canal Zone and Panamanians. As workers settled into communities and populated a floating labor pool desired by the Americans to keep wages low, the associational tradition transplanted from their island past offered mechanisms and opportunities to sustain alternate and more inclusive visions of their value as workers and citizens than the racial and cultural binaries imposed on them by the American Canal company or the Panama government.

### **Lodge Structure and Function for West Indians**

Archives of lodge bylaws might suggest a dull read, but a close examination of them can tell us much about fears and expectations of lodge members, and the lively role lodges played across the diverse immigrant community.<sup>121</sup> Construction-era workers faced and feared daily

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<sup>119</sup> Conniff, 14.

<sup>120</sup> Other minorities included Chinese, North African and Middle Easterners, and East Indians.

<sup>121</sup> A sampling of lodge orders in Panama (each of which might have several lodges), includes: Galilean Fishermen, British and North American orders of Samaritans, Star of Bethlehem of North America, British and Jamaican orders of Odd Fellows, U.S.-based Oddfellows, Scottish and Liverpool Mechanics, Grand United Order of Mechanics, Ancient Free Gardeners, Ancient Foresters, Loyal Order of Shepherds, Ancient Shepherds (Ashton Unity), Druids, British and American Mosaic Templars, Order of Bethany, Knights of Pythias, Knights of St. John and St. Ann's Auxiliary, Ancient Mystic Order of Ethiopia. Racial and religious lodges included: The UNIA, Seventh Day Adventists, National Baptist Convention of North America, Independent Baptists of Jamaica, the Baptist-inspired

danger and death from accidents and illness in their work and the tropical environment; victims of explosions buried under landslide, or who died alone in the bush or in flash floods might never be accounted for.<sup>122</sup> Death benefit associations insured members for proper death rites, burials, and when possible, notification of families back home should death occur, when no other form of protection existed for common laborers. As immigrants stayed on, expectations of certain behaviors in the racial and cultural spaces of lodges nurtured community, solidarity, economic advancement, and opportunities to practice leadership. Lodges functioned as banks and insurance agencies, provided structure and purpose for members, and a sense of broad West Indian identity to counteract the discrimination and difficulties laborers experienced on the job and in the Republic.

Many society bylaws included rules regarding funeral attendance and distribution of death benefits.<sup>123</sup> Lodges tended to follow regular patterns in structure and rules. Bylaws followed a standard format, listing the organization's purpose, governance, duties of officers, procedure to join, obligations and fines, benefits and reasons for declined benefits, order and conduct of meetings, rules for debate, and so forth. The primary purpose of most lodges was pooling resources as insurance against the cost of burial, a ritual important throughout the

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Friendly Land Ship Society, and the Nazarene Christian Church. Unaffiliated interest groups include St. Lucia Benevolent Society, The Cooperative Union of Guadeloupe, The Edith Cavell Society, The Automotive Union, the Loyal Free Builders (CZ), West Indian Club of Panama, West Indian Union Club of Chorrillo, the First Panama Boys Brigade, etc.

<sup>122</sup> Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, especially Chapters 5 and 7, cites recollections of a foreboding "here-today-dead-tomorrow" sensibility felt by many workers, who learned to fear the worst when they failed to see a familiar face for a day or two.

<sup>123</sup> Guiding Star Lodge No. 14 (Independent Order of the Fishers of Galilea), ANP, 1918, Box 4, F6. The Guiding Star Bylaws stated that members would get 24-hour notice to attend member funerals. (The scribe would be paid two pesos for this notification, or be fined twice that amount for failing to carry it out.) Members were to attend funerals in formal attire and bring musical instruments if they had them. They were to remain in mourning for 30 days; rules did not specify what would indicate mourning, possibly a black armband. If a member died in default of dues, the heirs had to clear the debts for up to one month prior to the death in order to receive the death benefit.

Caribbean, or loss of work due to illness, a major concern of the low-paid workers.<sup>124</sup> Entrance fees, dues, costs and benefit plans varied, creating a hierarchy among the societies. For example, the Young Men's Association required a \$2.50 joining fee in gold currency, and \$1.50 gold monthly dues and the Rising Sun Lodge No. 19 (Independent Order of the Fishers of Galilee) charged \$7.50 in silver for joining—beyond the means of most ordinary men and women—but many others charged more modest fees \$1 or \$2 in silver to join, and \$1 silver in regular biweekly dues.<sup>125</sup> The United Brotherhood charged a relatively stiff initial fee of \$5.75 in gold, and a \$1 gold weekly sick fee, one possible reason, aside from its status as a union rather than a “friendly society,” for the initial reluctance of many silver workers to join.<sup>126</sup> The range of fees, however, made insurance available to almost any worker for even a modest investment, to address their concerns.

Although they served a social function in gathering people together for mutual aid, both societies and their members also had other expectations. The business of lodges was treated seriously, but beyond the financial functions, members found or created other opportunities in lodges that gave structure and purpose to their lives. Some exclusive fraternal orders differentiated members by ranks, which they could achieve by passing tests of knowledge and paying fees, adding an educational function. Members of the Flower of the Isthmus No. 1 lodge, for example, could progress through six grades, each designated by a color (which they probably

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<sup>124</sup> Several scholars mention the importance of death rituals, including wakes and burials. See Olive Senior, 165, describes the reaction to West Indian wakes and elaborate funerals by Panamanians and Americans who did not understand their cultural significance; however, she also notes (89) that nine nights-celebrations had been outlawed in Jamaica in 1889. An editorial argued against the noise and disruption of “Nine Nights,” *The Panama Tribune*, 7 February 1932, indicated the practice continued, probably among the lower-class tenement dwellers.

<sup>125</sup> Young Men's Association, ANP, 1912, Box 5, F 1; Rising Sun, ANP, 1918, Box 11, F 5. Royal King Edward Lodge No. 13, Box 7, 1914, F 11, stated directly “money used in this lodge is Panamanian.”

<sup>126</sup> United Brotherhood, ANP, 1919, Box 12, F 16.

wore in sashes or robes on formal occasions, if not at regular meetings), each costing \$3 (silver), except for the sixth, which cost \$6. Participation in this lodge, then, would require more resources from members, which might come with the stability of both longtime employment and membership, as they progressed through the ranks and perhaps paid additionally for vestments. These requirements might exclude people unable to afford them or perhaps unable to read, although the necessary knowledge might be acquired by rote.<sup>127</sup>

Whether or not a lodge conferred grades, members practiced leadership at many levels, either as officers or in performance of other responsibilities. Lodge governance also followed a general pattern across the different lodges, although the titles of positions could change, depending on the fraternal order.<sup>128</sup> Slates of elected officers invariably included at least a presiding officer, vice-president, secretary and treasurer, although the names of these offices varied in different orders. Such positions as sick visitors, door guards, and wardens also conferred leadership and accountability, as well as enforcing behavior and preserving the integrity of organization. Guards, variously called tylers, or in Spanish, *vigilantes*, or *mayordomos*, monitored the doors, to admit members by password, block entry of drunk persons, and remove disruptive members. Wardens or marshals arranged the room before and after a meeting.

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<sup>127</sup> Flower of the Isthmus No. 1, ANP, 1908, Box 1, F 1.

<sup>128</sup> Royal King Edward Lodge No. 13 (United Independent Order of Scottish Mechanics), ANP, 1914, Box 7, F 11, designated their officers Venerable Master, Deputy Master, Senior and Junior Deacon, Tyler, Secretary, Treasurer, Secretary and Treasurer Assistants, and “those empowered to sign resolution and other documents” sometimes designated by the term *vocal*. Odd Fellows designations included Noble Grand, Past Noble Grand and Vice Noble Grand; an Elective and a Permanent Secretary; and Noble Chaplain, Noble Treasurer and Noble Advocate (or Lawyer?). Three Sisters Lodge No. 2477 (Grand United Order of Odd Fellows) ANP, 1914, Box 7, F 2. On door guards, see Flor del Istmo (Flower of the Isthmus) No. 1, (United Independent Order of Mechanics Friendly Society), ANP, 1908, Box 1, F 1.

In addition to leadership roles, lodges enabled members to maintain a strong, alternate racial and cultural sense of autonomous participation in a polity. Within their lodge, members might shed their outside identities as low-paid workers to assume the role of a responsible authority. Deprived from voting in the Canal Zone and all but certain municipal elections in Panama, members of lodges expressed individual political preferences, unrestricted by race or citizenship, in strictly-regulated lodge elections every six months, including a non-literate voting method using black or white balls.<sup>129</sup> Leaders ran meetings following a standard format. A typical agenda for fraternal lodge included a call to order, an opening hymn, a chaplain invocation, roll call, collection of dues, reading of minutes, reports from the board, committees, treasurer, and perhaps an auditor. Some groups dispensed with hymns and invocations. Collection of fines, old and new business, and ending hymn and invocation completed the meeting. Attendance at regular biweekly meetings gave leaders and members substantial practice in running their own organizations. Some lodges paid various officers a stipend (or fined them for failing to discharge their duties).

The bylaws of the *Estrella Conductora* (Guiding Star) No. 14 lodge, one of several Panama chapters of the American Negro Independent Order of Galilean Fishermen, provide a comprehensive view of the routines of lodge business, and a basis for comparison with lodge activity after the Strike of 1920. Submitted to the Administración del Estado (state bureau of administration of Panama) in 1917, they indicated the lodge had functioned since 1911, and state aims of the society:

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<sup>129</sup> Hence the term “black-balled” to indicate a negative vote. Immigrants could vote in municipal elections in Colón, giving the majority West Indian population there some influence. For voting using black and white balls, see Gabriel’s Union No. 31, Samaritans, ANP, 1923, Box 16, F 12 and Central American District lodge of the United Independent Order of Mechanics, ANP, 1925, Box 18, F 25.

. . . to raise funds from dues, donations, subscriptions, and interest on capital for the following ends: burial of members, help to widows, help to members in case of “mental or material” illness or of incapacitation for work, and to provide temporary aid in difficult circumstances.<sup>130</sup>

These aims, particularly the term “interest on capital,” suggest not only a conservative fiscal orientation, but knowledge of the capital-labor system within which members functioned, and perhaps aspirations to advance economic standing within it. Article 12, Duties of Officers, designates three trustees to invest and manage [*personificar*, “personify,” take legal custody of] society property and funds during their elective terms.<sup>131</sup> The Bylaws assigned accountability to leaders, who risked removal after three successive absences, and to members, who must apply in writing to join the chapter, with full name, occupation, age, address, religious denomination, civil status, and the [unstated] application fee. The application process allowed lodge officers to assess the risk to the pooled resources of aspiring applicants. For example, the lodge would not admit anyone with known bad conduct. The application could also show that an applicant was literate (although illiterates might have someone else do the paperwork), and handwriting might even reveal the level of education attained. Lodges minimized risk by limiting membership by age; Flower of the Isthmus No. 1 admitted no one over 40, except as an honorary member; Court John Wallace only admitted members between the ages of 19 and 39 to its funeral fund.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Guiding Star No. 14, ANP, 1917, Box 4, F 6. A lodge founded earlier states its objectives more simply as, “to assist each other in acts of benevolence and brotherly love, and to provide a fund for the relief of sick members of the society and for the funeral expenses of members and their wives.” Court John F. Wallace No. 9111 (Ancient Order of Foresters), ANP, 1908, Box 1, F8.

<sup>131</sup> One common investment was to rent or build a lodge hall and rent it or sublet it for meetings, dances, and community events. Examples included (in Panama City): Druids Hall, 20<sup>th</sup> St and Central Avenue, Knights of Pythias Lodge Hall in Calidonia, Ancient Order of Foresters Land Hall in San Miguel, Samaritans Hall in San Miguel, and Loyal Victor Hall, San Miguel; (in Colón): Odd Fellows Hall, Court Brock Hall; (in the Canal Zone): Ancient Order of Foresters Grove Hall in La Boca.

<sup>132</sup> Flor del Istmo No. 1, (Mechanics), ANP, 1908, Box 1, F 1; Court John Wallace ANP, 1911, Box 1, F 8. Age limits on burial funds reflected an actuarial sense of longevity factors.

Distribution of benefits also denoted careful administration of lodge resources. Guiding Star lodge members in good standing, who had been well for six months, and whose illness did not result from immoral conduct, could receive sick benefits on an established schedule of payments: “ten pesos (in Panamanian silver) a week, for six weeks,” eight pesos for the next six weeks, reduced to five pesos for a third six weeks, and four pesos for a final four weeks—a total of 22 weeks. Benefits comprised a fraction of the typical silver weekly salary of \$60 (six ten-hour days at ten cents/hour), but a member would have contributed about the amount of the first payout in the previous six months, and the benefit would help pay for food. With luck, the condition would pass soon, but a more serious case or catastrophic accident might extend time off work. Except in cases of contagious disease, sick visitors from the lodge were tasked to verify the illness and that members did not supplement their benefit by taking on any other work, or leave home between dusk and dawn, which might indicate social activity.<sup>133</sup> A member must submit a request card with a doctor’s letter one week after receipt of the first benefit (or a doctor or minister’s letter if the illness occurred away from the city). Officers investigated reports that a member got benefits or help from other sources, since members often belonged to more than one society.<sup>134</sup>

Death benefits, too, depended on satisfaction of conditions. When a male or female member died, the society levied a one-peso (dollar in silver) tax on all the other members (fifty cents, if the deceased was a member’s wife or child; no mention is made of collection for the deceased husband of a female member). Release of ten pesos to finance the funeral required

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<sup>133</sup> Primitive No. 2355 (Bocas del Toro), ANP, 1914, Box 7, F 14.

<sup>134</sup> Court John F. Wallace, ANP, Box 1, F8, rule book contained a sample “Form of Declaration On the Fund” which stated, “Being ill, I claim the sick allowance of the Court.” Also included were a sample Certificate for the surgeon’s signature, and a “Form of Declaration Off the Fund,” stating, “Having recovered from my illness, I hereby declare off the fund.”

proof that a member had died from other than immoral causes. If a member died in default of dues, the heirs had to clear the debts for up to one month prior to the death in order to receive the death benefit. A Guiding Star lodge member paid-up for the previous six months also could receive a benefit at the death of his wife (40 pesos) or legitimate child (20 pesos). The legitimacy requirement might have enforced a standard of moral behavior, or aimed to restrict lodge assets.<sup>135</sup> Lodges also provided mourners for a member's funeral. The Guiding Star Lodge bylaws stated that members would get 24-hour notice to attend member funerals. (The scribe would be paid two pesos for this notification, or be fined twice that amount for failing to carry it out.) Members were to attend funerals in formal attire and bring musical instruments if they had them, then remain in mourning for thirty days. The Light of Colón No. 11 of the Samaritans included an order of procession of the band and officers who would be preceded by the car at a funeral.<sup>136</sup>

Some lodges diverged from the general pattern to provide exceptional health and social benefits, including for mental illness,<sup>137</sup> for burial not just of a member, his wife and child, but also female dependents of members,<sup>138</sup> and retirement.<sup>139</sup> The focus of the Samaritans and

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<sup>135</sup> John Biesanz and Mavis Biesanz, *The People of Panama* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1955), chapter 5, passim. In the islands, couples commonly did not marry (it had been illegal for slaves to marry), and households often included extended family members and even non-relatives. West Indians who aspired to raise their social and economic status or who were active members of Protestant churches might follow European middle class social including family mores, such as marrying and living as a nuclear family. Marriage was required to qualify for subsidized Canal Zone housing.

<sup>136</sup> Light of Colón No. 11, ANP, 1918. Box 11, F 8.

<sup>137</sup> West Indian Benevolent Society, ANP, 1914, Box 8, F 5, for proven "locura;" Pythian Pride No. 1, Knights of Pythias, ANP, 1926, Box 19, F 17, "for physical or mental illness."

<sup>138</sup> Pythian Pride (Knights of Pythias of N. America, S. America, Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia), ANP, 1926, Box 19, F 18. "Other dependent females" probably referred to unmarried partners, as many West Indians maintained stable relationships but did not marry. See John Biesanz and Mavis Biesanz, *The People of Panama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 314 ff.

<sup>139</sup> St. Barnabas No. 5 (Modern Order of Bethany), ANP, 1920, Box 13, F 2.

Daughters of Samaria lodges was temperance. They worked to achieve temperance reform, provide relief “for unfortunate and distressed family of those who pledge themselves to live sober lives, to elevate the living, comfort the widow and the fatherless,” support the ill (except from intemperance), and keep members from depending on public charity.<sup>140</sup>

Lodges both hid and reproduced gender relations of this Afro-Caribbean community, as well as responding to gendered needs. Americans and Panamanians stereotyped immigrant gender and family relations by race and class. Because West Indians did not always marry, a vestige of the legacy of slavery, both Americans and Panamanians labeled them as promiscuous and their children as illegitimate, although Panama also had a high percentage of common-law marriages among the working classes. Many married, unmarried, and widowed West Indian women and mothers worked to support their families, by cleaning, doing laundry, and caring for white American families in the Canal Zone, as well as hawking baked goods or produce from small gardens. These women participated in many lodges or women’s auxiliaries, where they held offices, paid equal dues and received equal benefits as male members. Some lodges even offered maternity benefits to women who had been members for more than ten months.<sup>141</sup> Some more formal fraternal orders promoted legal marriages and other standards directed to social uplift, reflecting Jamaican or American middle class mores, but women also had choices to join benefit societies with more affordable financial obligations, on their own or in conjugal unions. Women participated equally with men in many lodges.

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<sup>140</sup> See for example, Gabriel’s Union No. 31, Samaritans (Instituted 1908), ANP, 1923, Box 16, F 12. The pledge: “[we] do pledge ourselves as Gentlemen and Ladies that we will not use as beverages any spirituous liquors, wine or cider and to discountenance the practice of legalizing the sale thereof.”

<sup>141</sup> *Estrella de Edén* No. 9 (Ancient and Illustrious Order of the Star of Bethlehem), ANP, 1917, Box 10, F 9; Edith Cavell Society, ANP, 1924, Box 17, F 2, paid \$8 silver at the birth of a child, if the mother has been a member for more than 10 months, and had not used any sick benefits; \$4, if she had been sick during pregnancy; *Estrella de Guiana* No. 16 (UIOM, British Order), ANP, 1923, Box 16, F 22, gave monetary donation for pregnant, as well as for disabled or incurably ill, members.

Although death and sick benefits were the first purpose of the lodge, rules also set expectations for other standards of behavior and revealed the social hierarchy within the lodge. For instance, the bylaws addressed “Conduct of the Meeting and for Debate,” in Article 18. A member was to remain seated until recognized by the Venerable Master, and then must stand to speak. After first presenting concerns to the Master, one speaker at a time, discussion could ensue, but members could speak only once for no more than ten minutes. Members were to use proper address, call people by name, and avoid sarcasm. The Master could call any speech out of order. Other lodges also imposed rules intended to restrain the rivalries and divisions common among the West Indians, or to encourage standard behaviors among people from different social or educational backgrounds. One group prohibited members from calling themselves Barbadian, Jamaican, or other nationality “since everyone knows this produces disturbances in discipline.”<sup>142</sup> Another stipulated that all members be addressed as “Mr.”<sup>143</sup>

Beyond their immediate purpose of preserving order within a particular lodge these rules also allowed the West Indians some degree of self-policing on a community level, by encouraging behaviors that would benefit members in the work and social environments imposed upon them by their presence as alien, surplus labor in a foreign land. “No man, woman or child admitted if they ever committed a criminal offense or homicide, or were ever in prison,” declared one set of bylaws.<sup>144</sup> Another advised: “Don’t bring people who will not better the situation of members, or who will disrupt harmony,” and warned that members who exhibited bad behavior between meetings—drunkenness, public scandal, not visiting the sick—could be dropped; it

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<sup>142</sup> Friendly Land Ship Society, ANP, 1910, Box 1, F 10

<sup>143</sup> Young Men's Beneficial Club, ANP, 1909, Box 2, F 10; St. Peter's Lodge, ANP, 1925, ANP, Box 18, F 8.

<sup>144</sup> Friendly Land Ship Society, ANP, 1910, Box 1, F 10.

imposed an immediate fine for profanity.<sup>145</sup> Several societies fined members for not dressing well.<sup>146</sup>

Lodges further sought to control and shape the behavior of members by imposing fines and penalties for transgressions. Royal King Edward lodge No. 13 in Colón, registered in 1913, set fairly typical fines. It imposed a fifty-cent fine for an officer with the key who arrived late to open the door, an officer who arrived a half-hour late, or a member who failed to address an officer by title. Leaving a meeting without permission or failing to report a change of residence incurred a one dollar fine, in silver. Use of obscene language, or neglect of duties by the guard or watchman cost two dollars; for an officer to miss a meeting cost \$2.50. Failure pay a fine resulted in a member's suspension. A member convicted of immoral conduct or other "offense to the Order" would be expelled. Finally, bylaws defined procedures in the lodge, and provided models of forms members were to use. For example, bylaws of the Guiding Star Lodge stipulated that all records must be kept in "the box," and included applications forms for prospective members, as well as forms used to report on sick member visits, introduce traveling members to sister lodges, inform members of delinquent dues, declare paid-up dues or solvency, present formal charges of accusation or judgment against members, and to expel members.<sup>147</sup> In short, lodges attempted to impose and enforce guidelines for personal, financial and moral behavior, and inculcated fiscal responsibility of members. Despite immigrants' low incomes, lodges required solvency and paid-up dues for members to receive benefits.

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<sup>145</sup> West Indian Benevolent Society, ANP, 1914, Box 8, F 5.

<sup>146</sup> Edith Cavell Society, ANP, 1924, Box 17, F 2.

<sup>147</sup> Guiding Star No. 14, ANP, 1917, Box 4, F 6.

## Unions and Lodges

Many West Indians who became active in emerging union activities and organizations in early twentieth-century Panama drew on their lodge experiences and connections. West Indians played active roles founding many new labor unions, for example, the Colon Federal Labor Union (October 1916); the Panama City Federal Labor Union (January 1917); the West Indian Labour Union, in Guachapalí, a West Indian neighborhood in Panama City (mid-1918), and *Unión Benéfica de Obreros* (Worker Benevolent Union, October 1918). Immigrants registered the Panama chapter of the United Brotherhood in 1919, a year noted for widespread labor activity in the U.S. and Caribbean, followed by the *Unión de Automedontes de Panamá* (Automobile Drivers and Coachmen's Union of Panama); a Tailors' Guild;<sup>148</sup> the Hatmakers Association of Colón; and the Panama Electric Employees Association, which included skilled canal laborers. In 1920, just before the great strike, the *Unión Subsidiaria de Cocheros de Colón*, (the Subsidiary Union of [Railway] Coachmen of Colón) registered.<sup>149</sup> The *Unión Subsidiaria* offered members basic accident insurance: a pledge to "help members within legal power to do so in case of fine or prison; in case of injury that renders incapacitated, if sick or needing medical help; or in case of death."<sup>150</sup>

These new unions showed consciousness among workers of solidarity by profession, and a quest for self-regulation and control over conditions of work. They also showed the influence of political and economic ideas that circulated internationally during the era, including ideas promulgated by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, which caused consternation in Western

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<sup>148</sup> West Indian men and women were heavily involved in tailoring, dressmaking, and other sewing crafts.

<sup>149</sup> Perhaps a "subsidiary" of the United Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees and Railway Shop Laborers.

<sup>150</sup> *Unión Subsidiaria de Cocheros de Colón*, ANP, 1920, Box 13, F 22.

governments, and in the Canal Zone. For example, a local Catalán lodge discouraged members from “any action or talk that would interfere with individual liberty,” and the *Unión Obrera de Panamá* (Panama Workers’ Union) pledged to “work for improvement in the interest of the proletarian class.”<sup>151</sup> The West Indian Labour Union of Guachapalí, specifically reflected nationality-, race-, and labor-consciousness. Its bylaws stated, “... the struggle in all nations between oppressors and oppressed will produce disastrous result for Negro workers if they do not join together for their protection and mutual welfare.”<sup>152</sup> This race-consciousness almost certainly emanated from the presence in Panama of the several local branches of the UNIA, established in 1918. The union activity on the Isthmus reflects the effects of post-construction dislocations and discontent, as well as awareness of international worker and political movements, which undoubtedly contributed to the success of organizing efforts that eventually resulted in the strike of 1920.

Lodges also helped members laid off from the Canal Zone jobs and forced to migrate into Panama or elsewhere.<sup>153</sup> Several fraternal lodges and unions or artisanal lodges that registered with the Panama government in 1915 and the following years offered help to members who “must travel in search of work.” This provision recognized the plight of the many laid-off workers in the post-construction era, and some lodge Rule Books contained the certifying letter to be signed by officers, that a member could carry to a brother lodge in another location, which would likely assist in finding lodging and perhaps help to secure work. Travel provisions appeared in the bylaws of the Scottish Mechanics, Knights of Pythias, Druids and British Mosaic

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<sup>151</sup> *Unión Catalana Humorística*, ANP, 1911, Box 4, F 2; *Unión Obrera*, ANP, 1914, Box 7, F 4; “proletarian class” may not have reflected specific socialist or communist orientation, but suggests sympathy with such ideology.

<sup>152</sup> West Indian Labour Union of Guachapalí, ANP, 1918, Box 11 F 1.

<sup>153</sup> *Unión Benéfica de Obreros*, ANP, 1918, Box 11, F 10.

Templars, as well as a United Mechanics chapter in Bocas del Toro in the banana region of Western Panama. The *Unión Benéfica de Barberos* (Barbers' Bevevolent Union), whose members had both Latin Panamanian and West Indian names, provided "help for barbers in transit, or having to come to the capital looking for work."<sup>154</sup> The *Asociación de Choferes de Colón* (Colón Drivers' Association) stated: "members in good standing for at least twelve months who want to leave the country can receive a one-time donation of one-half of the collection."<sup>155</sup> Association members included West Indians, who as non-citizens and from a migratory background, would be those likely to leave the country.

During the unrest that culminated in the 1920 strike, the influence of lodges permeated newly-formed civic organizations. That the United Brotherhood chapters, both in the U.S. and in Panama, were designated as "lodges" is significant, for a long tradition of West Indian lodges in Panama contributed to the ability of union leaders to rapidly galvanize a strike.<sup>156</sup> A call from union leaders two weeks before the strike suggests an important role of the lodges in regulating behavior of United Brotherhood members. As labor tension was building, union leaders refused to comply with the Canal Zone governor's stalling tactic of requiring union leaders to compile more information to support one of their arguments, which the Silver Rate Board had already affirmed.<sup>157</sup> To forestall public demonstrations in the charged atmosphere, the leaders released this statement: ". . . we exhort you to exercise patience and sober judgment, and be not carried away by the impulse of the moment, but rather go, we say emphatically, and with all the intensity

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<sup>154</sup> *Unión Benéfica de Barberos*, ANP, 1918, Box 11, F 10. It is possible though not certain that "coming to the capital" meant moving to Panama City from various townships in the Canal Zone, or from Colón across the isthmus.

<sup>155</sup> *Asociación de Choferes de Colón*, ANP, 1925, Box 18, F 4.

<sup>156</sup> Burnett, 82. Both white U.S. organizers left after ten weeks, instead of the six months and year, respectively, they had expected to stay.

<sup>157</sup> Burnett, 126.

of our being, go to your respective Lodge Halls where you can better discuss the grievance question.”<sup>158</sup> Linking the union movement to West Indian lodges halls, which commonly were used by several fraternal organizations as well as for other community functions, tied it to an established pattern of meeting place, as well as a well-accepted function, of open discussion. As this chapter’s analysis indicates, most West Indian lodges adhered to rules of structure, conduct, and organizational hierarchy, set out in by-laws and recorded in meeting minutes. While lodges could perpetrate parochial differences among West Indians, the general familiarity with how lodges worked would have prepared many workers to operate in a setting where leaders could address them, where lively dialog could occur, and where reasonably democratic action could result in shared resolutions. Most importantly, lodge halls were outside employer purview. Although Burnett cites clear cases of spies and informants who reported to the Canal Zone administration on the mass meetings and lodge meetings during the build-up to the 1920 strike, generally strangers in a lodge would have been noticed, because lodges kept records of attendance and dues payments.<sup>159</sup>

In the decade after the 1920 strike new lodges proliferated on the isthmus. The diversity of origins, class, cultures, and aspirations within this community resurfaced after its brief submergence on behalf of the strike, but through widespread participation in the organizational culture of lodges, workers kept alive vestiges of both their sense of labor activism and their sense of racial pride. This racial context also reaffirmed links to a greater community of African-descended peoples in the Americas and beyond. Ethnic newspapers more publicly nurtured a sense of local community, by announcing lodge meetings, though not the business they

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<sup>158</sup> Burnett, 126.

<sup>159</sup> Burnett, 52 and *passim*, notes a spy named S. E. Muschett (code named Marshall) reported on union organizing to the Canal administration and police, and reports on his activities.

conducted, and regularly providing news and information that connected it to other African diasporic societies. After big strike, workers moderated their overt labor activism in the Canal Zone, but Panamanian archives show many lodge registrations through the 1920s and into the 1930s. Newspaper announcements of lodge meetings in the 1940s confirm continued widespread lodge activity, including programs addressing black history or celebrating “Garvey Day” or “Garvey Night.”<sup>160</sup> From these newspaper reports it is possible to detect that the lessons of activism and racial solidarity that sparked the great strike of 1920 remained embedded in community consciousness.

Prompted in part by the prohibition of union activity in the Canal Zone, lodges multiplied in Colón, Panama City and the banana region of Bocas del Toro during the 1920s. Their organizations served not only to absorb sentiments of labor solidarity, but also to buffer West Indians from discrimination in Panama. After years of anti-Asian restrictions, and on the heels of the first rent strike, a 1925 publication by Olmedo Alfaro, titled “El peligro antillano en la América Central” (“The Antillean Danger in Central America”), focused anti-immigrant sentiment directly on West Indians.<sup>161</sup> Panama passed a law in 1926 that for the first time targeted the “black race from the Antilles,” whose first language was English, designating them as “prohibited immigrants.” The immigrants persisted in Panama, among other reasons, because potential immigration to the U.S closed in 1924, and their lodges played a crucial role in their ability to withstand adversities.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> “Colon Div No 137 of UNIA Garvey’s Night...,” *The Panama Tribune*, 4 January 1948, p. 5, announced the meeting, “to which race-conscious Negroes are invited . . .”

<sup>161</sup> Olmedo Alfaro Paredes, *El peligro antillano en la América Central: la defensa de la raza* [*The Antillean Danger in Central America: Defense of the Race*], had first appeared in 1915, during a previous period of heavy West Indian exodus from the Canal Zone into Panama.

<sup>162</sup> “Treatment of West Indian Labourers in the Cuban Republic,” *The Workman* 3 October 1925, p. 1, quoted the *Barbados Advocate*, “America has prohibited immigration, and that avenue of employment, which was so largely

The dissipation of unity into a wide array of lodges supported the working class immigrants during the financially difficult 1920s and '30s, but also reduced the power of their voice evident in the big strike. "Instead of having two or three large numerically powerful and financially solvent organizations," noted journalist and civic leader George W. Westerman, "the West Indian community became over-run by countless weak and insignificant bodies which tended to duplicate efforts, confuse issues, and dissipate energies."<sup>163</sup> Lodges experienced difficulties during the Depression, when a surge in unemployment decreased membership and strained treasuries. A major concern expressed at the annual meeting of the Grand United Order of Oddfellows in 1931, for instance, was how to "raise financial standard" of the 754 members in twenty-two local men's lodges and nine female auxiliary Houses of Ruth, as well as of the District Grand Lodge, which depended on their contributions.<sup>164</sup> Elite *antillanos* like Westerman, many of whom belonged to established fraternal orders, decried insular tendencies that developed over time in the plebeian societies—repeated reinstatement of the same leaders, petty squabbles, and frivolous expenditures or mishandling of money—and pleaded for them to consolidate and adopt uniform business practices.<sup>165</sup>

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and beneficially availed of has been closed, with disastrous consequences for these colonies. Cuba alone remains. ..."

<sup>163</sup> George W. Westerman, *Fifty years of West Indian life on the Isthmus of Panama*. [S.l.: s.n., 19--?] (typescript), 494.

<sup>164</sup> Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Session of District Grand Lodge No. 40, Grand United Order of Oddfellows, Jurisdiction of Panama, 1931, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F17.

<sup>165</sup> "Proper Safeguards," *The Panama Tribune*, 17 January 1932, p. 8. An editorial, "The Burden of Fraternity," *The Panama Tribune*, 11 September 1932, p. 8, urged against hoarding uninvested funds while young people had no strong future and elders faced destitution. "Our Societies and the Depression," *The Panama Tribune*, 18 September 1932, p. 8, claimed 300 lodges in eight different orders in Panama and Colón, but these did not include societies independent of orders. See also "Our Leaders and a Platform," *The Panama Tribune*, 28 August, 1932 p. 8; "Our Societies and the Depression, cont.," *The Panama Tribune*, 25 September 1932, p. 8; "Fewer but Stronger Lodges," *The Panama Tribune*, p. 8, 11 December 193.

Few societies apparently heeded these calls, as evidenced by court proceedings and news reports.<sup>166</sup> Disunities that had been remarked by Marcus Garvey, who received a delegation of UNIA members on board the Steamship Saramacca at Cristobal in December, 1927, remained in 1946, when the worldwide leader of the American-based Negro organization, the Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World (IBPOEW) came to Panama. Garvey, who had not been permitted to land in 1927 by authorities fearful of his capacity to reignite worker unity, spoke of “many unpleasant happenings” and “misunderstanding[s]” within the UNIA organization in Panama, and warned that “. . .in all history nothing has been achieved by any people bickering among themselves. To achieve success we must unite in the common cause.”<sup>167</sup> Garvey hoped the people would be “welded together” before an anticipated, but never executed, return to Panama. Nearly twenty years later, after a whirlwind visit to the Isthmus by Grand Exalted IBPOEW Ruler Finley A. Wilson, a *Panama Tribune* editorial contrasted Mr. Wilson’s executive ability to cut through “fuss and red tape,” with the tendency of the “local brethren” to engage in “long fights of oratory and windy verbiage over the smallest and pettiest matter.”<sup>168</sup> The writer urged the many fraternities in the community to cooperate, settle their differences, solve “grave and serious” day-to-day problems, and work “for the betterment of the race,” rather than engaging in pretentious rhetoric, petty squabbles, and personal bickering.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Court absolves Society's Treasurer for fraud charge,” *The Panama Tribune*, 24 January, 1932, p. 2; “Obstacles to common understanding among West Indians,” *The Panama Tribune*, 14 February 1932,

<sup>167</sup> “S.S. Saramacca Docks . . . ,” by Cespedes Burke, *Panama Star and Herald*, 8 December 1927, in Robert A Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Improvement Association Papers VII* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 6.

<sup>168</sup> *The Panama Tribune*, 1 August 1943, p. 6.

<sup>169</sup> *The Panama Tribune*, 1 August 1943, p. 6.

The government of Panama succeeded where their own community leader failed in forcing lodges to streamline their resources. In 1938 it passed Law 60, which classified all societies that paid death benefits as insurance agencies, subject to an annual tax of 50,000 Balboas (\$50,000).<sup>170</sup> Death benefit societies, which had been organized as non-profit, benevolent organizations had accumulated an estimated total of \$1.8 million in small weekly dues from members over many years by the 1930s.<sup>171</sup> Nevertheless, individual societies rarely could hope to pay the tax. Although some weathered this latest blow and managed to survive until Deputy Alfredo Cragwell, a Panamanian of West Indian descent elected to the National Assembly, succeeded in getting an exemption for the “non-commercial and purely civic in nature” lodges, many ceased to exist by the 1940s.

## **Conclusion**

The first and continued intent of the lodges was basic social and economic security in a world that offered little of either to migrant laborers or unwelcome foreign immigrants. Lodges also functioned locally in Panama to connect disparate West Indian people for social intercourse and mutual aid, but also to networks in other transnational locations. Lodges provided stability for people caught between the cultures and physical spaces in the polyglot and cosmopolitan Panama transit zone. They supported immigrant men and women as they adapted to corporate working conditions in American enterprises, and engaged in skilled or administrative work or supported themselves as best they could in the Republic of Panama. Lodges also supported varied sorts of conjugal arrangements and family structures, and the adjustment to urban life, either in expensive tenements in Colón and Panama City, or to the more affordable but

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<sup>170</sup> <http://panama.justia.com/federales>; McLean *Una Cronología Histórico Biográfica*, 82.

<sup>171</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 70. George W. Westerman, *Fifty years of West Indian life on the Isthmus of Panama*. [S.l.: s.n., 19--?] (typescript), 33, provides a conservative estimate that the West Indian community in Panama spent between \$16 and \$18 million dollars in Panama every year, “over 22 years.”

regimented and often inadequate quarters in segregated Canal Zone towns. In the guarded privacy of lodges, under their chosen leaders, West Indian men and women could share camaraderie as well as help each other negotiate the day-to-day conditions and problems of their shared existence. The knowledge and confidence acquired through discussions and practices in their mutual societies equipped them to name and stand up against injustices and shielded them from personal disaster when their claims met repression or went unanswered. Lodge-supported activities, such as the Strike of 1920, informed later generations seeking improved conditions or acceptance in Panama. Between the political instability of the Republic and the inflexible arrangements of social relations in the Canal Zone, lodges contributed to development of a parallel society that could absorb the frustrations and insecurities of West Indian laboring people in Panama in the early twentieth century.

## CHAPTER 3

### HOUSING, 1920s – 1940s

West Indian lodges, whether voluntary societies or labor-oriented, were just one of several physical and cultural spaces through which West Indian immigrants to Panama forged new identities over time as West Indian Panamanians. Housing, and struggles over access to adequate housing, were also sites for sustaining an emerging collective of West Indian Panamanian activism and nationalism. Rent strikes in 1925 and 1932 in Panama City and Colón involved West Indian renters, albeit less visibly than other groups. The strikes provided spaces for them to assert West Indian needs and rights. And by the 1940s, as West Indian former Canal Zone workers made the transition from substandard housing in the Canal Zone to property ownership in Panama, they sustained economic and cultural links with other West Indians in the developing suburbs.

Since the early twentieth century, housing had occupied an integral position in the lives of West Indian immigrants in Panama. They faced limited choices, based on their class, race, ethnicity, and employment status. Where they lived anchored them to realities of poverty, discrimination and disfranchisement, but also opportunities for jobs, stability and possible advancement. For those temporary laborers who had come from diverse Caribbean islands to work on the construction of the Panama Canal from 1904-1914, and had stayed on with their families, the central transit zone of Panama became home. Many of these settlers continued to provide maintenance labor for the Canal, and as employees, lived in racially segregated towns in the American-controlled Canal Zone. Panama City, in the Republic of Panama, at the Pacific entrance to the Canal, and Colón at the Atlantic/Caribbean, both contiguous with and easily accessible to the Canal Zone, also housed a large reservoir of potential workers, as well as many

employees who could not be accommodated in the Canal Zone. Housing in tenements in working-class neighborhoods became a primary vehicle for immersion of the foreigners in urban landscapes of Panama City and Colón, where their presence shaped the development of class relations and nationalism in that young country. This available labor pool enabled the U.S. government entity that oversaw Canal operations to keep their wages low. On the other hand, wages spent for rent and food in Panama supported a class of urban landlords and business owners, and wove the West Indians firmly into the local economy, but left little for savings or investment.

Despite their poverty and difficult circumstances, the West Indians' collective consumption of housing inextricably wove them into the urban economy of the transit zone of central Panama. In this chapter I argue that, the urban presence and activism of West Indians in Panama in the early years of the twentieth century, shaped by Panama's national, social, and economic history, helped forge their particular racial and national identity. As a majority of the residents of Colón, and of several neighborhoods in Panama City, in all Canal Zone "silver" townships, and the Canal Zone overall, West Indians used opportunities to exploit their strength in numbers to resist their oppressive situation and attempt to improve the conditions in which they lived. They did so openly by joining unions, participating in spontaneous and organized strikes for better working and living conditions, and acting in solidarity with the Panamanian working class. Canal workers from Panama participated in a major Canal Zone strike in 1920, and Panamanian worker organizations declared solidarity with it, but the severe repression of the movement led West Indians to act more discretely as community organizers and participants in two rent strikes in Panama, in 1925 and 1932. Whether with veiled support, or open participation in No-Rent strikes or public demonstrations, their numbers situated West Indians squarely in the

first mass movements in the Republic. Although these movements fell short of achieving the rent regulation their Panamanian organizers desired, with backing from the West Indians they succeeded in driving the Panamanian government to intervene on behalf of the broad lower classes and limit the impunity of urban landlords.

Many Panamanians disdained the immigrant group as boisterous, English-speaking foreigners who deprived Panamanian workers of well-paid Canal jobs. Panamanian leaders attributed this contempt to cultural differences and not racial discrimination, and *antillanos* (Antilleans, as they called them) appear in Panamanian historical accounts as an undifferentiated body of foreigners (or “British citizens,” since most of them came from British colonial possessions), if at all. Yet the housing needs, desires and prospects of the West Indians shaped Panamanian social and urban history in important ways. Their numbers and their recurring poverty led them to squatter settlements in exurban areas, where their free labor contributed to the development of the urban landscape. They used their power as consumers of substandard housing to influence the first response of the Panamanian government to social needs of its people in the era of the Great Depression. The collective push by West Indians and their Panama-born descendants to acquire land in the late 1930s and 1940s to improve their economic wellbeing and legalize their presence in Panama influenced government mechanisms that made housing available to other poor Panamanians. The impact of these immigrants conflicted with the ideological aims of other sectors in Panama, and diminished over time, diluted by the natural growth of Panama’s population. Nevertheless, the concentrated number of immigrants placed them at the confluence of economic and political currents at particular historical moments to make their needs and interests a force for change in Panama.

## Living Accommodations

During the boom of American Era, tenement landlords in the Republic further subdivided their land to build additional rooming houses, described by one historian as “rigorously commercial,” to accommodate the greatest possible number of renters.<sup>172</sup> Most tenements were two- or three-story wooden buildings built around a central courtyard, each floor ringed by a common balcony. Often a second row of rooms and common balcony faced the street, and backed up against those facing the courtyard. Rooms shared walls that did not reach the ceiling—providing ventilation in the tropical climate at the expense of privacy. Each floor had a shared sink and lavatory or these were sometimes located in the courtyard and served an entire building.<sup>173</sup> Entire families often lived in one or two rooms. Tenants set up charcoal stoves on the balconies. Corrugated zinc roofs did little to reduce either heat or the noise from heavy afternoon rains during the six-month rainy season. Fire posed a constant threat.<sup>174</sup> *The Panama Tribune* described “eight by ten room, for the tenancy of large families, partitions which reach only two-

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<sup>172</sup> Samuel A. Gutiérrez, *Arquitectura panameña* (Bogotá: Escala, 1991), 247.

<sup>173</sup> One West Indian descendant recalled that her mother cleaned the common sink shared by several families each night after others had finished using it, in the 1940s and '50s, before she washed dishes for her family. See Eunice Mason, interview with author, Panama City, Panama, July 2011. Many West Indian families owned a portable wooden lattice to raise them above unsanitary bathroom floors in the communal shower. See Lilia Williams, interview with author, Panama City, Panama, August 2011; Dosita Bryan, interview with author, Panama City, Panama, August 2011.

<sup>174</sup> Because of the threat of fire, *bomberos* (firemen) played an important role in the terminal cities, and many West Indians worked in this profession alongside Panamanians, especially in Colón. See, “‘Joe’ Gordon honored for 25 yr [since 1918] on Colon Fire Dept,” *The Panama Tribune*, 14 November 1943, p. 12; the governor of Colón province attended the ceremony); “Bussy Markham worked for Bomberos,” *The Panama Tribune*, 29 July 1945, p. 12. Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2014), 83, 296, mentions a fire in Colón in 1885 (leaving ten thousand homeless); in 1915 (430 buildings, 7,500 homeless), in 1916 (19 buildings in 14 blocks), 1917 (13 buildings in 9 lots). “Second Serious Blaze,” *Panama Tribune*, 17 January 1932, p. 1, reported a fire caused by the boiler in a cleaning establishment; on p. 5 the paper noted a committee chaired by Rev. Nightengale had raised nearly \$200 from individuals, lodges, and businesses to help victims of a fire on New Year’s Eve 1931 in Panama City; only one Latin surname appeared on a list of otherwise West Indian victims. A massive fire in Colón in 1940 spurred move to new suburbs of Colón and Panama City, such as Río Abajo.

thirds of the way to the ceiling ...”<sup>175</sup> A socialist leader called them a danger to the morals and public health: “where prostitutes lived next to families with many children . . . children hear bad language and worse. . .rooms open onto indecent and foul-smelling alleyways devoid of sun and fresh air . . .infested with tuberculosis . . .places of vice and disease . . . where childhood is corrupted and the young are won to prostitution and delinquency . . .”<sup>176</sup> During the canal construction phase, West Indians had lived among and often outnumbered Panamanian workers in tenement neighborhoods; afterwards, the American policy of forbidding anyone not connected to canal work to live in the Canal Zone led directly to the construction of several more rental neighborhoods that housed excess workers in 1914 at the end of the construction period, such as Curundu and San Miguel.<sup>177</sup> Other neighborhoods where *antillanos* lived included Chorrillo, Calidonia, Guachapalí, Granillo, and Chinese-dominated Marañón. Family, neighbor, friend,

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<sup>175</sup> “Tenement Houses,” *The Panama Tribune*, 31 January 1932, p. 8. In part because the landlord class lived comfortably from these rents, Panama failed to develop much industry and relied on imported goods. This increased the cost of living for food and supplies sold in neighborhood markets and small storefronts, mostly owned by other foreigners—Chinese, East Indians and Middle Easterners—but few bourgeois Panamanians.

<sup>176</sup> Demetrio A. Porras, *Veinte años de luchas y experiencias* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Américalée, 1947), 49, quoted in María Rosa de Muñoz y Armando Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria de 1932; documentado análisis del movimiento que unió las clases populares para alcanzar sus reivindicaciones sociales* (Panamá: Editorial Portobelo, 2006), 20. Reformers framed tenement life in terms of vice and health hazards to appeal to legislators but this also demonized and racialized the poor. cursory review of arrest records in Panama in the 1920s and 1930s does not yield evidence of much professional prostitution among West Indian women, but prostitution undoubtedly there was informal prostitution among lower class women. Prostitution was illegal in the Canal Zone, and efficient policing, and collusion with Panamanian authorities generally assured that the practice stayed outside Zone boundaries, where prostitutes from many nations catered to U.S. service personnel in the Canal Zone and Zone employees, as well as to residents of Panama and passengers and crew of transiting ships. Two attempts by West Indian community leaders, to establish Panama Boys Brigade in 1923, “because policing is deficient in Chorrillo,” a heavily West Indian neighborhood, and a residential correctional school for youths aged 18-26,” to prevent truancy, loitering, activity in the public streets, and keep incorrigible youths out of streets, alleys and brothels,” testify to concerns about delinquency among upper-echelon West Indians. The correctional school plan required Spanish training and focused heavily on good citizenship practice, recognizing anti-immigrant discourses that would soon lead to laws that would prohibit immigration of *antillanos* whose language was not Spanish, and allow deportation of those who engaged in illegal or criminal behavior, after having served their sentence. See Panama Boys Brigade, 1924, Box 17, Folder 14, Personería Jurídica, Secretaría de Gobierno y Estado, Administración del Estado, Archivo Nacional de Panamá (ANP), hereafter, ANP, with year, box and folder, abbreviated as Box #, F#.

<sup>177</sup> Nearly half the West Indian lodge halls in Panama City listed in a 1919 directory were located in San Miguel and Calidonia, two heavily West Indian neighborhoods of Panama City, and in Central Panama City; only one is listed in the Canal Zone.

lodge-mates and church networks in the tenements of Panama and the Canal Zone sought to support the many unemployed, sick, or needy workers.

Material conditions in segregated housing in the Canal Zone resembled those of urban tenements in Panama in many ways. West Indians and other “silver” quarters intended for temporary needs during the construction phase continued to be used, and thus became “permanent.” Apartment buildings in the Zone were not always as closely spaced as those in Panama’s cities, but individual living quarters lacked privacy. Family apartments consisted of a kitchen with open, shuttered (not screened) windows and two other rooms, shotgun style. Family life often spilled onto a common balcony through which neighbors passed on the way to a shared toilet on each floor (or to outside latrines). One former residents of La Boca remembered latrines, wash houses and a communal kitchen behind the building in which her family lived.<sup>178</sup> Fixed concrete laundry basins located under some buildings might provide some women with a way to earn income, and a potential communal gathering place for women, but on the whole, Canal Zone colored housing was cramped, inadequate, and open to surveillance by Canal authorities, who kept careful records on the occupants and their behavior. Tenements in Panama, however old, crowded or unsanitary, fell under no such regulation.

When the current governor of the Canal Zone fired at least 400 workers and evicted their families from Zone housing during the major strike that shut down the canal in 1920, the steady post-construction flow of unemployed canal workers into Panama took a sudden jump. Over the next two years the canal operation disgorged another 7,000 workers as the post-World War I

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<sup>178</sup> Cited in “La Boca Townsite Special Edition,” *Panama Cyberspace News*, 27 March 2014. [www.panamacybernews.com](http://www.panamacybernews.com) (accessed 29 March 2014).

recession curtailed shipping traffic through the canal, which reduced its revenues.<sup>179</sup> The number of West Indians in the terminal cities grew to more than 20,000.<sup>180</sup> In Panama City they crowded into neighborhoods that themselves could not expand, owing to the physical layout of the city as well as to government policies and foreign capital investments.

Improving the lot of poor renters and immigrants was not part of the strategy of the Panamanian government to modernize Panama City. On the contrary, in 1915, the government planned a new suburb of the city, La Exposición, with a modern grid of wide streets, park blocks and plans for grand buildings in which to house a major exhibition celebrating the opening of the canal, as well as residences.<sup>181</sup> Panama's government took advantage of foreign capital to fund new city infrastructure, such as extending the sewer system and streetcar line, to develop La Exposición. The Canal provision in Treaty of 1904 that made the Canal Zone Sanitation and Health Departments responsible for improving the infrastructure of both Colón and Panama City, as part of the campaign to protect the construction crews from diseases that had undermined the French, remained active.<sup>182</sup> But while the government in effect subsidized the move of wealthy residents from the old central city to this new, modern neighborhood, the site of the new suburb confined the barrios to a tight space between the boundary of the Canal Zone and the Pacific

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<sup>179</sup> John Major, *Prize Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903-1979* (New York; Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 94.

<sup>180</sup> Major, *Prize Possession*, 94.

<sup>181</sup> Alvaro Uribe, *Ciudad fragmentada* (Panamá: Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos, 1989), xx. This exhibition was planned to be a local version of the more grandiose and triumphant 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, California.

<sup>182</sup> The ICC had aggressively built drains, water mains and sewers, paved streets and collected garbage, and conducted house-to-house inspections in the effort to control general sanitation and mosquito vectors of malaria and yellow fever.

Ocean.<sup>183</sup> Recurring government policies thus favored the middle and upper classes, while limiting the social and physical mobility of the poor and racially-mixed masses of Panama City. While the construction work did employ many West Indians, particularly skilled carpenters and electricians laid off by the Canal, the steady demand for tenement rooms crowded the barrios and fueled rent increases, while unemployment remained high, and incomes stagnant for most workers. Yet urban landlords diverted their investment toward new housing in the suburbs and did nothing to improve the existing tenements.<sup>184</sup> The laissez-faire economic and legal philosophy of Panama's ruling oligarchy asserted that property holders enjoyed unrestricted rights, and renters had no legal recourse to prevent exploitation or abuse. Labor leaders seized on the building rent crisis to organize the first mass movement in Panamanian history.

### **The Rent Strike of 1925**

In 1925, when landlords hiked tenement rents suddenly in response to a new property tax, the burden fell disproportionately on working and unemployed West Indians, who comprised a majority of renters in Colón and some barrios in Panama City. But when a newly organized socialist labor union planned the first mass protest in Panama's history, of working class renters for October, West Indians were ambivalent about participating. Veterans of the canal strike in 1920 certainly remembered the brutal consequences of their involvement, and some Panamanians pointedly blamed them for the tight housing market that held renters hostage. The deportation in September 1925 of foreign socialists who planned the protest march added to the vulnerability of West Indians as non-citizens. The housing protest went badly awry, and led to twelve days of U.S. military intervention from the Canal Zone, fueling anti-American and anti-immigrant reaction in the Republic. Panamanian historical analyses of this benchmark event in

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<sup>183</sup> Uribe, *Ciudad fragmentada*, 12-18.

<sup>184</sup> Uribe, *Ciudad fragmentada*, 13, 19-24; Gutiérrez, *panameña*, 247-48.

their national history generally fail to mention West Indian participation. Yet a few accounts, mostly by descendants of West Indians, place them at the center of the protest.<sup>185</sup>

A rent crisis began in February, 1925, when the Liberal government announced fiscal reforms with Law 29, including a new tax on urban and rural properties.<sup>186</sup> Landlords soon passed on the expected cost to tenants well in advance of the October date when the tax would take effect.<sup>187</sup> Rents suddenly jumped from 150 to 200 percent, compared to the slow but steady rise from 1921 to 1924. Socialist leaders who founded the General Workers' Union (*Sindicato General de Trabajadores* or SGT) in 1924 recognized that skill levels, language and ethnicity divided the working class, but they shared common ground as renters (*inquilinos*). Consequently, these leaders organized a *Liga de Inquilinatos y Subsistencias* (Tenancy and Subsistence League) in May 1925. The League spearheaded protests to reverse the rent increases, and rapidly gained some 6,000 "members and contributors."<sup>188</sup> It organized committees in every neighborhood to demand that landlords reduce rents, and when neither the owners nor the government responded, it rallied the renters with nightly meetings and speeches in different neighborhoods, and called for a "no-pay strike."

Working class-conscious West Indian men and women tenement dwellers almost certainly joined in the neighborhood organizations and rent boycott of this movement, although they have since fallen out of the historical record for the most part. Panamanian sociologist

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<sup>185</sup> Gerardo Maloney, "Panamá 1920 – Cronología de una lucha," *Tareas* No. 5 (Aug. 1982- Jan. 1983):26.

<sup>186</sup> Everardo Tomlinson "Las huelgas inquilinarias de 1925 y 1932," *Lotería* 213 (Oct.-Nov. 1973), Suplemento, 98. The finance minister and architect of the tax reform, Eusebio Morales, an influential leader since independence, sought to build the national treasury and reduce dependence on U.S. by taxing the nearly unfettered profits of urban landlords.

<sup>187</sup> Diógenes de la Rosa, "¡Habla el Inquilino!" (Panamá: Editorial Minerva, 1932), 3, asserts landowners adopted rent increases as a stratagem to provoke a conflict that would demonstrate the "impracticality" of the reform.

<sup>188</sup> Tomlinson, "Las huelgas inquilinarias," 99.

Gerardo Maloney, a descendant of West Indians, states the main leaders of this movement were West Indians in the barrios of San Miguel, Calidonia, Guachapalí, and El Chorrillo.<sup>189</sup> This claim suggests West Indians participated with both Panamanian workers and the leftist organizers of the *Liga* just five years after the Canal Strike of 1920. *The Workman* weighed in on “The House Rent Problem” declaring all the added costs of building materials in Panama were not enough to justify the “grievous rentals,” causing a “grave situation” that had “stirred the populace to action.”<sup>190</sup>

The government responded by deporting foreign labor leaders involved in the SGT in September.<sup>191</sup> Local leaders planned a mass rally on Saturday evening, October 10, at 8 p.m. in Santa Ana Park, often used for political gatherings. Confusion preceded the demonstration, when the mayor refused to grant permission the day before the rally, although the President had already approved it, and handbills had been posted throughout the neighborhoods.<sup>192</sup> Rather than

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<sup>189</sup> Maloney, “Panamá 1920,” 26.

<sup>190</sup> “The House Rent Problem,” *The Workman*, 22 August 1925, p. 4. An earlier editorial] “Possibilities of the Coloured People Here,” *The Workman*, 18 July 1925, p. 4, and a later one, “We Must Unite to Stand,” 12 September 1925, p. 4, reprised messages of racial unity that echoed, if somewhat less stridently, the calls to action and unity before the Canal Strike of 1920, when the paper strongly supported the union and the Garvey movements. The editorials do not support the rent movement by name, possibly because of recent anti-immigrant discourse in Panama, but perhaps it adopted a more neutral stance after the spectacular failure of the 1920 Strike.

<sup>191</sup> Iván Quintero, *El sindicato general de trabajadores* (Panamá: Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos Justo Arosemena, 1979), 8, 12-13. Spanish immigrant activist and communist José María Blázquez de Pedro, identified by one biographer as “the father of Panamanian syndicalism,” was a founding member of the *Hijos del trabajo* (Sons of Work), the group behind the organization in 1921 of the *Federación Obrera* (Worker Federation) of the Republic. The communists led a split in the *Federación* in 1924, after Samuel Gompers visited Panama and confirmed that the American Federation of Labor would only advocate for American laborers; and after the Panamanian legislature passed a law that only Panamanian citizens could represent the *Federación* at the Panamerican Labor Federation meeting in Mexico, thus excluding several European immigrant labor leaders in Panama with anarcho-syndicalist leanings. West Indians, considered foreigners, had founded labor organizations, including race-conscious chapters, espousing communist and socialist rhetoric in the late nineteen-tens, and many had participated in the Canal Zone Strike of 1920, but the government, possibly because the Canal Zone had so forcefully outlawed unionizing among West Indians, focused here on Europeans and activists from South America, avowed communists who inspired the Panamanian labor movement.

<sup>192</sup> The mayor cited an article of the Administrative Code that granted his office the approval of public gatherings, not the President.

try to call a last-minute halt to the assembly, leaders decided to proceed as planned. Despite a brief, heavy rainfall at 6 p.m., a crowd began to gather at the appointed time. Historian Everardo E. Tomlinson Hemández describes the gathering as one of spontaneity, unanimity, discipline, and the heroic spirit of struggle,” with renters holding signs with slogans and claims of the Liga that “proved the reality of the social causes that generated the movement.”<sup>193</sup>

The government met the crowd with force.<sup>194</sup> Chaos erupted as police called out by the mayor tried to turn people away. They had “clear instructions that under no circumstance to allow ‘subversive meetings’ or let any speaker to use the platform” in Santa Ana Park.<sup>195</sup> As a speaker attempted to address the gathering, Panamanian cavalry moved on the crowd and shots were fired, fatally wounding a Panamanian cabinet maker and injuring ten others, two of whom later died. The next day, Sunday, Panama held two Colombian and three Peruvian labor leaders for deportation, and arrested about fifty tenant leaders, while some 3,000 marchers attended a funeral for the man who died. The funeral crowd moved from the cemetery to a nearby park, under the eye of the cavalry, where they heard some speeches, and then proceeded toward Santa Ana Park again, where the rally had been dispersed the day before. Armed policemen again broke up the crowd. On Monday, the Liga declared a general strike that paralyzed Panama City and Colón. Shortly after noon, claiming influence from a “foreign conspiracy,” the Chiari government in Panama requested intervention from the American military in the Canal Zone to end the popular unrest, “to its eternal shame,” according to one

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<sup>193</sup> Tomlinson, “Las huelgas inquilinarias,” 99.

<sup>194</sup> Tomlinson, “Las huelgas inquilinarias,” 99. The municipality signed up a volunteer police force, “as if it were a civil war,” and appointed Julio Quijano, who happened to be a landlord, as the Chief of the first Battalion of Volunteers, to combat “intransigents.”

<sup>195</sup> “Nota Del Capitán Jefe Al Juez 5° de circuito sobre los incidentes en el Parque De Santa Ana El 10 De Octubre De 1925, 11 de octubre de 1925, in Documentos de los hechos ocurridos en octubre de 1925, *Lotería* 213 (Oct.-Nov. 1973), Suplemento.

writer.<sup>196</sup> Importantly for Panama, this episode was the first time a Panamanian government had called on U.S. intervention to maintain order against its own people, and the first time the U.S. sent troops to occupy the terminal cities, although certainly Canal authorities had used the threat of occupation if it perceived at any sign of disturbance they claimed threatened the security of the Canal.<sup>197</sup> American soldiers patrolled in both cities for eleven days.<sup>198</sup> It was significant, too, that the government sided with the propertied class against the broad popular expression of the urban populace, to abruptly end the rent movement. The suppression of this first popular movement in Panamanian history, in the words of *Liga* leader Diógenes de la Rosa, did not resolve, but only postponed, the rent problem; it signaled that the State sided with landlords, who would not be held to account.<sup>199</sup>

West Indians—many of whom had lost their jobs since the 1920 strike--comprised the majority of renters in Panama City and Colón. Their experience in union organizing and in

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<sup>196</sup> Alexander Cuevas, "El Movimiento Inquilinario de 1925," in *Panama dependencia y liberación*, ed. Ricaurte Soler (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1974), 99. Cuevas cites President Chiari's own admission in a speech on 17 October, that the report of a joint commission on reparations showed most landlords had indeed raised rents since the beginning of the year, disproving the existence of a "foreign conspiracy." Tomlinson, 99, cited Chiari as saying the landlords he had met with failed to understand the economic conditions of the county, and refused to let a commission decide whether renters' complaint were reasonable or not.

<sup>197</sup> The U.S. right to intervene, granted by the Canal Treaty of 1904 in case of any perceived threat to operation of the canal, was a sensitive and contested sovereignty issue for Panamanians. Subsequent negotiations had resulted in disarming Panama after the recent War of a Thousand Days (1899-1902), to prevent political factions from destabilizing the young country. Panama was left with a police force, but no military. The Americans used the substantial military force maintained in the Canal Zone as either a carrot or a stick to influence Panamanian authorities, such as when Zone authorities pressured the President to outlaw meetings of striking workers in 1920.

<sup>198</sup> Jorge Turner, *Raíz, historia y perspectivas del movimiento obrero panameño* (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Signos, 1982), 37, cites the thanks extended to the Canal Zone governor for the "efficient cooperation" by the Secretary of Foreign Relations, and founding president of the Panama Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Horacio Alfaro. Alexander Cuevas offers three revisionist justifications to refute the contemporary characterization of the Renters' Movement as anarchist or communist: it was limited to a single cause; it employed a strike to achieve immediate ends, rather than transformative change; and it simply sought better rent conditions for the proletariat, not a social revolution. Furthermore, the leaders of the movement themselves espoused different ideological bents, including some who were "enthusiastic sympathizers with socialist ideas." "Alcances e interpretacions del problema inquilinario a través de la historia," *Lotería* 213 (Oct.-Nov. 1973), Suplemento, p. 76.

<sup>199</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria, documentado análisis*, 14-17.

myriad West Indian church, lodge and workers associations, and the consciousness of fair social and economic treatment they had advanced in the Strike would not have faded from their memory. Scant evidence in the public record suggests positively that West Indian participated in the 1925 movement. Surnames of two Liga members who signed the announcement of the October 10 mass meeting, David Blackman and Daniel Eduardo George, are names common in the West Indian community, as was the name of one of the renters who died in the fracas that erupted, Lorenzo Brown.<sup>200</sup> The names and place of origin of John and Carolina Wallace, Jamaicans, appear on a police list of demonstrators arrested October 11, by Agent 127, suggesting they may have been considered tenant leaders, since the government targeted leaders in its arrests.<sup>201</sup> Carolina Wallace's participation also points to the presence of West Indian women in the renters' movement. Whether they mingled socially with neighbors or not, the women bore the brunt of the work and provisioning of daily households—sharing common lavatories and sinks with other West Indian and Panamanian residents, and setting up makeshift “kitchens” on public balconies of their buildings—often while working inside or outside their rented rooms to provide income for their children, with or without support from a male partner.

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<sup>200</sup> “Si Hay Mitin,” *Lotería* 213 (Oct.-Nov. 1973), Suplemento. Potentially none of the three were West Indians or descendant, however, the Latinized first names possibly indicate some level of assimilation.

<sup>201</sup> “Lista de detenidos desde el día 10 de los corrientes, hasta hoy, expedida a solicitud del Señor Juez 5o del Circuito, según su oficio 934, de esta misma fecha,” octubre 11, *Lotería* 213 (Oct.-Nov. 1973), Suplemento.

<sup>202</sup> West Indian women had formed at least one union local of their own in the prelude to the Strike of 1920. See Carla Burnett, “Are We Slaves Or Free Men?: Labor, Race, Garveyism, and the 1920 Panama Canal Strike,” PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2004. 99, notes women formed their own United Brotherhood lodge before the strike in 1920, which they named “Advance.” And they often held leadership positions in lodges and fraternal societies and had familiarity with organization and solidarity. *Mujeres que cambiaron nuestra historia* (Panamá: UNICEF: Embajada de Canadá: Instituto de la Mujer, Universidad de Panamá, 1996), 88-89, included at least one West Indian woman, Linda Smart, who participated in the first Feminist Congress, held in Panama in September of 1924.

West Indian men and women may have remained on the sidelines or been less willing to show themselves as publicly involved in the first renter movement for several reasons. Older West Indians, while technically British colonial citizens, by the 1920s received little help from the British legation with problems they experienced in Panama or the Canal Zone, and may have wished to avoid involvement.<sup>203</sup> The Panama government had already restricted West Indians to the transit zone and moved quickly to deport the foreign leaders of the Rent Movement before the October rally, a warning not lost on the immigrants. A new political movement, called *Acción Comunal* (Communal Action), founded in 1923 by young middle-class professional men, encoded their anti-West Indian and anti-American nationalist agenda in their motto “Speak in Spanish, count in Balboas,” a clearly targeting English-speaking immigrants.<sup>204</sup> Panama’s Law 76, passed 30 December 1924, defined foreigners who were unemployed or engaged in illicit activities as “undesirables;” Decree 19 of 1924 of the municipality of Colón prohibited to any non-Spanish speaker, a license for pushcarts or wheeled vehicles used to provide any service to the public, clearly targeting English-speaking West Indians, who were the majority of residents, service providers, and bus owners and drivers in Colón.<sup>205</sup> Several months prior to the Rent Movement, Law 55 of 1925 required workers traveling to Panama by third class to prove they

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<sup>203</sup> Nicole Butzke, “British West Indians in Panama: An Analysis of Linda Smart Chubb’s Memorandum in The Forgotten People,” M.A. thesis, Lakehead University, Ontario, Canada, 2008, p. 23. Linda Smart Chubb, the Panama-born daughter (and “West Indian British subject”) of a West Indian marine engineer during the French construction era, who worked for many years at the British consulates in both Colón and Panama City, noted that most British West Indians assumed their children would have British citizenship so did not follow (or know about) procedures to obtain British or Panamanian citizenship for them. Lack of formal marriage of parents also prevented passing on of British citizenship. By the 1930s this removed descendants from the protections a consulate may have provided.

<sup>204</sup> Balboa was the name of Panamanian currency. The money was made equivalent to and used interchangeably with the U.S. dollar. Many of the up and comers in *Acción Comunal* had studied abroad, but found their careers limited by the oligarchs, Europeans and North Americans in Panama, and they were denied administrative or managerial jobs in the Canal Zone.

<sup>205</sup> Text of all laws is published in the *Gazeta Oficial* of Panama, and are searchable online at <http://panama.justia.com/federales/>

were self-supporting and post a hefty bond of 150 Balboas (dollars) before they could get a visa to enter Panama. Immigrants with proof of domicile in Panama, such as longtime West Indian residents, could bring their spouses, parents, or legitimate children only after securing permission. And in 1925, the year of the first Rent Movement, Olmedo Alfaro Paredes republished *El peligro antillano en la America Central: la defensa de la raza* (*The Antillean Danger in Central America: Defense of the Race*), which had first appeared in 1915, during heavy West Indian exodus from the Canal Zone into Panama. This book expressed anxieties about racial mixing and degeneration, spouting racist and eugenic rhetoric, for example calling West Indian presence an “infestation” of “vermin.” Meanwhile, the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924 had cut off one channel for potential migration, and economically tenuous home islands increasingly restricted whom they permitted to return.<sup>206</sup> Despite the Canal Zone’s pressure on Panama to house a “floating surplus” of laborers, backed by landlords and merchants who also depended on the workers, West Indians might fear deportation if they openly joined the movement.

West Indian newspapermen offered philosophical support for the movement, but sought to reassure their readers and the government. *The Workman* deemed the situation “indeed grave,” and asserted that neither increased costs of construction, nor the new tax were enough to warrant the level of rent increases, especially since many tenements were inadequate.<sup>207</sup> Unlike the radical tone *The Workman* had adopted as the voice of the union before the 1920 Canal Strike, after the 1925 incursion by U.S. troops into Panama, the paper published an editorial that urged

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<sup>206</sup> Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 341-42, 349-50. Social, economic, and political changes in the islands, partly inspired by earlier emigrants returning from Panama, made returning there in the thirties unappealing. Low pay and high unemployment led to labor unrest throughout the Caribbean in the mid- to-late 1930s.

<sup>207</sup> “The House Rent Problem,” *The Workman*, 22 August 1925, p.4.

West Indian readers to exercise patience and follow new procedures to resolve rent disputes.<sup>208</sup>

An editorial declared there was no cause for apprehension; the Rent Claims Commission appointed to resolve rent problems had reported at its meeting on October 22 that landlords who signed the tentative agreement to stop evictions had been honoring their pledge.<sup>209</sup> The author decried “mischievous palabra” (hearsay) that circulated alleging “discrimination.” These rumors claimed that rent reduction would not apply to foreigners, because only native Panamanians had protested, and West Indians had ignored invitations from Tenants League to cooperate with it. When another paper, *The Panama Star & Herald*, published government warnings to foreigners to keep out of the movement, the *Workman* countered that, “foreigners generally and West Indians especially heeded to the letter,” *although equally affected and in many instances to a greater extent than the natives.*<sup>210</sup> The *Panama Tribune* further defended West Indians who stayed on the sidelines during the demonstrations. It interviewed a West Indian rent collector, who denied West Indians were excluded from the rent reduction or that rents had been raised in tenements where he collected. The collector showed receipts for rooms in Guachapalí for “as low as two pesos,” questioning if it were reasonable to expect a ten-percent discount on such a low amount.<sup>211</sup> The conservative tone of this editorial notwithstanding, two recent *Workman* editorials, “Possibilities of the Coloured People Here,” in July, as the rent movement was heating up, and “We Must Unite to Stand,” published the month before the disastrous October rally, reiterated themes the paper had headlined during the heady days leading up to the Canal Strike of

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<sup>208</sup> “The House Rent Question,” *The Workman*, 24 October 1925, p. 4.

<sup>209</sup> “The House Rent Question,” *The Workman*, 24 October 1925, p. 4.

<sup>210</sup> “The House Rent Question,” *The Workman*, 24 October 1925, p. 4. The emphasis is mine: the editorial confirms the prevalence of West Indians in some barrios, and likelihood of their involvement in a mass renters’ movement.

<sup>211</sup> “The House Rent Question,” *The Workman*, 24 October 1925, p. 4.

1920.<sup>212</sup> They did not directly refer to the rent movement, but the principles—of standing together, that contributions of West Indians should be valued, and that they deserved fair treatment—easily applied to the rent situation. Finally, *The Workman* reported a mayoral decree prohibiting any tenancy-related gatherings, except of groups appointed by the President, or established labor unions. The decree classified non-payment of rent as an attack on legally protected property rights and also forbade people to create or circulate “objectionable” flyers, carry red flags or sing the *Internationale*. Aliens who participated in any of these activities faced deportation.<sup>213</sup> Despite a Rent Claims Commission, landlords triumphed.

The 1930s Depression exacerbated the rent issue. As movement leader Diogenes de la Rosa noted in 1925, the rent issue had only been postponed. By 1930 only four percent of residents in Panama City (653 males and 167 females) owned houses, while ninety-six percent—including most of the middle class—(13,865 men and 5,216 women) rented. By 1932, the tenements, some 1800 properties worth about \$40.6 million, had proved to be good business for the landlords.<sup>214</sup> In fact, proprietors had overextended their holdings during a boom in the late 1920s. The buoyant U.S. stock market triggered an influx of foreign investment in Panama after 1926, which continued the building boom and spread enough prosperity in the urban economy that even many day laborers could manage to pay their inflated rents for tenement rooms.<sup>215</sup>

Landlords financed loans to build spacious apartments with modern conveniences in new

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<sup>212</sup> “Possibilities of the Coloured People Here,” *The Workman*, 18 July 1925, p. 4; “We Must Unite to Stand,” *The Workman*, 12 September 1925, p. 4.

<sup>213</sup> “Mayoral Decree,” *The Workman*, 7 November 1925, p. 1.

<sup>214</sup> Armando Muñoz Pinzón, *La huelga inquilinaria de 1932* (Panama: Editorial Universitaria, 1974), 11.

<sup>215</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 13-14. In addition to \$12 million in U.S. government loans, and in part because of them and additional foreign private investments, the National bank in Panama made available \$4 million for loans to private investors, through a system of mortgages and certificates.

suburbs that attracted the middle and upper classes, at rents the working class could not afford. The construction raised the value of the land, and stimulated more building, but proprietors did nothing to maintain existing tenements.

When the Depression hit Panama, building came to a halt. Falling imports drastically reduced government income. It laid off most of its employees, reduced the work week to five days, instituted alternate week shifts to keep more workers on the payroll and ensure they got at least half their former pay, and paid part of the salaries in government bonds.<sup>216</sup> The Depression also prevented the Canal Zone Governor's plan to raise the wages of silver workers in the late 1920s.<sup>217</sup> Instead by 1931 nearly a third of the workers, some 3,400, had lost their jobs and most moved into Panama.<sup>218</sup> Renter complaints to the Tenants' League between 1925 and 1932 indicated that rents had risen from fifty percent to seventy-five percent over the increases from 1920 to 1924 that had culminated in the first rent strike.<sup>219</sup> Despite widespread unemployment and a depressed cost of living, however, landlords had fixed costs on their outstanding loans, and they had few options besides raising rents to service their debts.<sup>220</sup>

### **The Rent Strike of 1932**

The Rent Strike that began in August, 1932, lasted two long months. It involved multiple players besides the mass of renters—government, labor and voluntary organizations, political parties, the press, and West Indian immigrants and their descendants. The Rent Strike of 1932 is

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<sup>216</sup> de la Rosa, 5; de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 25.

<sup>217</sup> Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 76.

<sup>218</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 75.

<sup>219</sup> de la Rosa, “¡Habla el Inquilino!” 4.

<sup>220</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 23. One newspaper reported a seventy-five percent unemployment rate in the working class in July 1932; in October, a movement supporter numbered 5,818 unemployed.

important in Panama history, because for the first time a mass movement succeeded in challenging the power structure. Panamanian historians María Rosa de Muñoz and Armando Muñoz Pinzón in 2006 reanalyzed the second rent strike using newspaper accounts and newly available primary sources.<sup>221</sup> Their study shows that the actions of renters, including West Indians, forced the wealthy owners to the negotiating table, and forced the government to mediate between the powerful class of landlords and the renters' representatives. The strike finally ended when the new government of Harmodio Arias decreed a reduction in rent. The rent decree imposed social regulation that benefited the general public in Panama for the first time. These momentous changes occurred through democratic procedures in Panama and thus avoided the U.S. military intervention that had ended the aborted rent strike of 1925.

Young Panama-born West Indian men, citizens by birth (*sui generis*), played a significant role in political changes that marked this new stage in Panama's history, along with their parents who formed the majority in Colón and several neighborhoods of Panama City.<sup>222</sup> The Renters' Movement of 1932 developed amid a Presidential election. A year previous, in January of 1931, members of the nationalist *Acción Comunal* party took advantage of growing economic and political discontent triggered by the Depression to carry out a Presidential coup.<sup>223</sup> Behind the scenes political maneuvering by the Supreme Court (and diplomatic maneuvering of the American minister) created the appearance of a constitutional transition of power, reducing the

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<sup>221</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*.

<sup>222</sup> Women of West Indian descent, like other women in Panama, achieved the franchise in 1942.

<sup>223</sup> "Arosemena Faced a Constant Battle," *New York Times*, 3 January 1931, p. 3; William Francis Robinson, "Panama for the Panamanians: The Populism of Arnulfo Arias Madrid," in Michael L. Conniff, ed., *Populism in Latin America*, 2nd Edition (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2012), 160.

potential for political or social instability that might result in U.S. military intervention.<sup>224</sup> They negotiated an agreement that allowed the young politician, Harmodio Arias, to serve as acting President until the First Vice President, Ricardo J. Alfaro, returned from his ambassadorship in Washington, D.C., to finish out the presidential term, which ended in September 1932.<sup>225</sup>

Harmodio Arias was one of a rising generation of politicians that aspired to displace the closed circle of oligarchs which had ruled Panama since independence and accommodated the U.S. hegemonic presence in the Canal Zone.<sup>226</sup> Though not a member of *Acción Comunal*, as a representative in the National Assembly, Harmodio used its anti-U.S. rhetoric to influence the Panamanian rejection of the 1926 revision of the Canal Treaty.<sup>227</sup> Arias had been hired by West Indian leaders in 1929 to take their case against a head tax, and his law firm worked through a West Indian agent to secure Canal Zone business.<sup>228</sup> He decided to run for President in the election scheduled for 5 June 1932. Like other Depression-era politicians in the Americas, Arias courted working-class citizens, including *antillanos*.<sup>229</sup> He needed the support of coming of age

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<sup>224</sup> Major, *Prize Possession*, 25; Robinson, "Panama for the Panamanians," 160; LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 81-82.

<sup>225</sup> The negotiated outcome replaced the sitting President with the designated First Vice President, as provided by the Constitution in case of presidential incapacity. Since the First Vice President Alfaro was then the Panamanian Ambassador to Washington, all parties agreed to allow Harmodio Arias to serve in his place until the Ambassador, returned to Panama in March.

<sup>226</sup> LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 80-81; Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 81. Harmodio Arias was the first of a new generation of young politicians from landowning families in the western "interior" of Panama, away from the Canal, who contested the commerce-oriented "founding" oligarchy. See also Peter A. Szok, *La última Gaviota: Liberalism and Nostalgia in Early Twentieth-Century Panamá* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 200), 68 n13, 72 n33. Harmodio's much-younger brother, Arnulfo Arias, became an active member of *Acción Comunal* in 1930, and a participant in the January armed coup of 1932. Arnulfo would later play a political role in Panama until the end of the twentieth century.

<sup>227</sup> Robinson, "Panama for the Panamanians," 159. Harmodio had studied engineering in Europe and built several government buildings in Panama City. He also acted as Counsel for large American Companies in Panama.

<sup>228</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 81.

<sup>229</sup> Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre of Peru, Lázaro Cárdenas of Mexico, José María Velasco Ibarra of Ecuador all emerged in the late 1920s or 1930s, and appealed to rising working classes with nationalist themes.

Panama-born West Indian voters to win.<sup>230</sup> This effort fueled a political debate in the press about the status of West Indian descendants born in Panama that had smoldered for decades. For example, *The Tribune* reprinted an editorial—significantly in the Spanish section of the *Panama American*—which responded to articles in the *Prensa Ilustrada* that suggested Arias had embraced “a few Negroes” for political advantage.<sup>231</sup> Signed by “A Criollo,” the editorial denounced the two main current political parties as “one and the same group,” blaming their “wicked government of corrupt deputies” for the passage of the 1928 restrictions on immigrants. It announced that 1,500 members of the Centro Criollo, “Panamanians though Negroes as we are,” supported *Acción Comunal* and the candidacy of Harmodio Arias. A *Panama Tribune* editorial urged “those of our people who have the trenchant power of the vote” to support Arias, and oppose “whirlpools of corruption, racial prejudices and violations of the Constitution. . .”<sup>232</sup> Opposing parties questioned the citizenship of these criollos because many of them did not speak Spanish and a registrar refused to give them ballots. Several Panama-born West Indian leaders seized the opportunity to organize politically for the first time.<sup>233</sup> When Arias won the election,

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<sup>230</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor*, 81 Immigrants were able to vote in municipal elections, and West Indians had an established presence in Colón. West Indian community leaders saw an opportunity to exploit the political opening Hamodio’s candidacy offered, and helped organize the nearly 10,000 native-born Panamanians of West Indian heritage, who called themselves “Criollos.” Several criollos born in Panama before its independence had achieved prominence in municipal affairs. Colón lawyer Pedro N. Rhodes (see also note 71, below) maintained a public presence when an official refused to give ballots to some Criollos (“Rhodes cites Law to Oust Cedulador for Refusing to grant cédulas,” *The Panama Tribune*, 24 January, 1932, p. 1), as did another lawyer of West Indian descent (“Juan Nicanor Tinker--says he is in same position as other Panamanians also born of West Indian parents,” *Panama Tribune*, 31 January 1932, p. 2. See *Mujeres que cambiaron nuestra historia*, 88-89, and Butzke, *passim*, on Linda Smart.

<sup>231</sup> “Chiarists and Panchistas flayed as Enemies of Criollos: “*The Panama Tribune*, 10 Jan 1932, p. 1.”Panchistas” supported Francisco “Pancho” Arias (no relation to Harmodio and Arnulfo Arias) and “Chiaristas” supported Roberto Chiari.

<sup>232</sup> “Political Issue,” *The Panama Tribune*, 17 January 1932, p. 8.

<sup>233</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor*, 81 notes West Indian community leaders saw an opportunity to exploit the political opening Hamodio’s candidacy offered, and helped organize the nearly 10,000 “Criollo” (as native born Panamanians of West Indian heritage called themselves) voters.

the middle-class editor of *The Panama Tribune* enthused, “Dr. Arias will find the West Indian community as ever-law-abiding, zealous of the country’s welfare, ready to contribute their full measure to its development and progress and asking in return nothing but fair treatment and ordinary human justice.”<sup>234</sup> In the new balance of power after the rent strike, however, Harmodio Arias was unable to advocate for West Indian inclusion in Panama, and appealed to the Canal Zone Governor to repatriate unemployed Canal workers, although most preferred to stay in Panama.<sup>235</sup>

As the crisis worsened, activists reconstituted the *Liga de Inquilinos*, held nightly meetings, ran a weekly newspaper, again organized in all the poor neighborhoods of Panama City, and held its first demonstration in May 1932.<sup>236</sup> The rent crisis came to a head soon after Harmodio Arias’s election on July 7, but before he took office in October. After a July 9 demonstration for rent control failed, the Liga formed a Committee for the Defense of Wage Earners and the Unemployed, with representatives from across the populous neighborhoods. The Committee presented four demands on behalf of more than 8,000 registered members: an across-the-board fifty-percent rent decrease; exemption of proven unemployed or sick workers from paying rent; rent-free rooms for volunteer firemen, and acceptance of government scrip from

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<sup>234</sup> “President Arias,” *Panama Tribune*, 2 October 1932, p. 8.

<sup>235</sup> Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 340, 349-50. One difference was fewer than ten percent of Jamaicans could vote until 1944.

<sup>236</sup> In addition to newspaper reports of the Renters’ Movement of 1932, Panama historians refer widely to two accounts: Diógenes de la Rosa’s memorandum delivered to the Panama National Assembly on 12 September, 1932, “Habla el Inquilino!” and Demetrio A. Porras, *Veinte años de luchas y experiencias* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Américalee, 1947), a memoir published by a lawyer who championed the renters, served as Deputy in the National assembly (1932-36), and founded the Socialist Party in 1933.

policemen to pay their rent.<sup>237</sup> It set a deadline of July 30 for a response from landlords, after which it would declare a No-Pay Strike. Apprehensive landlords agreed on July 11 to reduce all rents by one dollar, because they claimed they had to pay high rent to the Panama Railroad as well as a high water tax.<sup>238</sup> The Committee held out for a fifty-percent reduction. A press release on 30 July duly announced the No-Pay strike for the following day, when rents were due. Worry about public unrest during the economic crisis, which had caused the earlier coup, forced the government and landowners to respond to a broad coalition of constituents for the first time in Panama.

The rent boycott provoked a reaction from the landlords. They formed an Association of Property Owners, demanded government protection from renters they claimed threatened their lives and property, and insisted that rent reductions should be decided by individual property owners. Citing a “noticeable number” of foreign instigators, the owners offered to help the government fund deportations.<sup>239</sup> Although this accusation may also have been directed against other foreigners, deportation was a direct threat against West Indians, the majority of foreigners—and renters—in the transit zone. Owners insisted the “rent problem” was really one of jobs, and urged the government and business owners to create work for as many people as possible. On August 5, representatives from the Liga and the Owners Association finally met for

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<sup>237</sup> A large fire on New Year’s Eve of 1932 destroyed six tenement buildings and underscored the value of firemen to renters and property holders alike; an exploding boiler set off a second fire. “Second Serious Blaze of 1932,” *The Panama Tribune*, 17 January 1932. The *Tribune* praised the *bomberos* (firefighters), many of whom, especially in Colón, were of West Indians origin. Soon after, an editorial excoriated “rapacious” landlords for building new “inadequate hovels” and charging tenants “exorbitant rentals” in advance, and the government, for allowing them to do so. “Tenement Houses,” *The Panama Tribune*, 31 January 1932, p. 8.

<sup>238</sup> “Events of the Week-Local,” *The Panama Tribune*, 17 July 1932, p. 15. The U.S. government acquired the Panama Railroad concurrently with the right to build the Canal. The Railroad owned extensive property along its right of way in the terminal cities, which it rented to landlords as well as to West Indian individuals.

<sup>239</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 33-34.

the first time.<sup>240</sup> The owners proposed that they would give firemen free rooms, and accept government scrip from police, and reduce rents by \$1.50 per room, as soon as the No-Pay strike ended. But the renters' representatives rejected the decrease. It was too modest, and would regressively penalize the poorest renters; they held out for a fifty-percent rent reduction for all. The Owners' Association claimed this proposal would ruin them financially.

An August 14 editorial in *The Panama Tribune* published took owners to task.<sup>241</sup> Brushing aside the issue of whether the leaders of the movement were communists, the paper looked to the causes of the problem. General unrest arises when conditions become intolerable, it observed, and accused "statesmen, capitalists and the wealthy class" of selfishness. ". . . [T]he plain course is for the wealthy to [recognize] the true condition . . . and strive earnestly to save their less fortunate brothers." The very same day, landlords met again with tenant negotiators. When the landlords again refused a fifty-percent rent decrease, one of the renter representatives called them "bourgeois thieves," and the angry landlords left the meeting, bringing discussions to an abrupt end.<sup>242</sup>

Despite the unprecedented attempt at discussion, the walkout left the rent question unsettled. By then the strike had spread to Colón, a majority-West Indian city. At first the Workers' Union of Colón had preferred to negotiate with owners and government officials there, but when landlords broke their verbal promise not to evict non-paying renters, the Union

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<sup>240</sup> The four League representatives were all educated, and included the leader of the feminist movement, Clara González. See de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 43.

<sup>241</sup> "The Discontent of the Poor," *The Panama Tribune*, 14 August 1932, p. 8.

<sup>242</sup> "Rent Parley Ruptured As Tenant Delegate Calls, Landlords 'Thieves'," *The Panama Tribune*, 14 August 1932, p. 1.

reversed itself.<sup>243</sup> On August 10 it demanded that the Governor of the Department of Colón name a commission to meet with to resolve the rent problem, on behalf of “helpless” renters.<sup>244</sup> Some “300 or 400” marchers, turned out in Colón on August 14 for a peaceful rally, at which speakers affirmed solidarity and non-violence.<sup>245</sup> Finally, after the impasse in Panama City, President Alfaro bowed to pressure from landlords. On August 15 he suspended property rights in Panama City until the National Assembly could pass a rent law when it convened on September 1.<sup>246</sup>

President Alfaro’s decree signaled pushback from the government as well as the propertied class. The decree reinstated the \$1.50 per room rent reduction (last offered by the landlords before they ended negotiations), exempted sick and unemployed renters, permitted policemen to pay with government bonds, and limited landlord rights to eviction.<sup>247</sup> Except for the rent reduction, this decree met the *Liga*’s demands, but the President had clearly sided with the landlords on the rent issue. They, in turn, continued to blame the problem on lack of work,

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<sup>243</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 34. The Colón committee demanded a forty percent reduction in rents, a one-year suspension of eviction in cases of proven unemployment, strict adherence by landlords to public health codes, payment of rent in advance, and “courteous and humane” treatment of renters by landlords, among other demands. One member of the Workers’ Union committee, self-trained Panamanian lawyer Pedro N. Rhodes, was born in Colón to West Indian parents in 1894, before the American canal period, and became a politician and defender of the rights of West Indians in Panama. He prominently defended Criollos obstructed from voting in 1932. “Rhodes Cites Law to Oust Cedulador for Refusing to Grant Cedula,” *The Panama Tribune*, 24 January 1932. A *cédula* is a document, in this case an affidavit that identified the bearer as a citizen eligible to vote. See also the electronic resource, *The Silver People Chronicle*, <http://thesilverpeoplechronicle.com/2009/01/don-pedro-n-rhodes.html> (accessed 12-17-13).

<sup>244</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 18-19 and 36 lists landlords in the Associations of Panama City and Colón; Uribe, *Ciudad Fragmentada*, 35, maps major landholding families in the outskirts of Panama City. The names of landlords in the Association in Panama City identify most of them with landholding families, and none as West Indian or Criollo. The owners group in Colón, however, included a prominent West Indian, Ernest Bynoe, owner of *The Independent* newspaper in Colón, active in boy scouting, businessman, and landlord. Two students named Bynoe, likely male relatives, if not sons, of Ernest graduated from the National Institute in 1936.

<sup>245</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 48.

<sup>246</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 49-52.

<sup>247</sup> “Alcalde Orders Landlords and Tenants to Comply with Decree,” *The Panama Tribune*, 21 August 1932, p. 1.

refused to accept partial rent payments, and continued to evict those who could not pay—in defense against abusive renters they claimed sought free accommodations by refusing to pay.<sup>248</sup> The *Panama Tribune* noted that West Indians were “bearing the brunt” of evictions by landlords, even after they had complied with the President’s decree, and paid rent minus the \$1.50 reduction per room.<sup>249</sup> Alfaro alleged unruliness of strikers to justify his lack of support for the renters.<sup>250</sup> Then on August 17 and 18 the government imprisoned twenty-seven leaders of the Renters’ movement, and deputized 300 members of the National Reserve Association to keep order.<sup>251</sup> The next day police dispersed a demonstration by some one hundred women in the movement, and arrested their leader, a Panamanian woman.<sup>252</sup> As one historian notes, rather than treat the strike as an occasion for debate of conflicting interests, the government saw it as a “subversive movement against constitutional order and social tranquility.”<sup>253</sup> But the President also left the outcome to a more democratic process, discussion on the floor of the National Assembly.

Evidence suggests West Indians participated, and certainly *could have* participated in any of the activities of the movement—the organizing, recruitment, or “subversive” activities of

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<sup>248</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 24-26; “Landlords Refuse to Reduce, Give Tenants Notice,” *The Panama Tribune*, 28 August 1932, p. 1.

<sup>249</sup> “Landlords Refuse to Reduce, Give Tenants Notice,” *The Panama Tribune*, 28 August 1932, p. 1

<sup>250</sup> “Bans Property Rights in Panama Emergency,” *New York Times*, 16 August 1932, p. 4, reported “the decree states the action was necessary, because of the state of mind created by the rent strikes, which had caused a situation, threatening imminent danger”; de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 53, lists Alfaro’s claims: strikers interfered when renters chose to move to other locations; formed groups to interrupt evictions by encircling properties, and moving furniture back that authorities had taken out of apartments; denounced renters (especially women) who opted to pay instead of boycotting rents; and women participants confronted and insulted “honorable and peaceful” women who did not join the strike.

<sup>251</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 56.

<sup>252</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 56.

<sup>253</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 55.

resistance to eviction authorities. President Alfaro complained the handbills encouraged all renters, “whether members of the Renters’ League or not, nationals or foreigners” (a reference to *antillanos*), to participate. Handbills printed in English suggest the importance of recruiting them. Historian Michael Conniff noted that despite earlier rhetoric blaming West Indian overflow from the Canal Zone for driving up rents in the first place, the strike’s success now depended on participation by the numerous West Indian renters, and fliers in English intended to secure it. He stated, “Most West Indians stopped paying rent and many participated in marches,” but they avoided any confrontation with the law.<sup>254</sup> Some of them surely opted not to risk deportation by joining the rent strike. A *Panama Tribune* editorial confirmed the crackdown, and counseled that wherever their sympathies lay, West Indians should abide by the President’s decree until the Assembly passed a rent law. “Virtually, we are under martial law,” it said “. . . foreigners will be deported” for continuing any agitation.<sup>255</sup> The writer countered the public notion that West Indians were maintaining the strike and resisting authority, asserting that West Indians opting to pay rent had been threatened “with bodily harm.” He argued West Indians had abided peaceably by the law of the land. Indeed, no West Indians were among twenty-seven imprisoned leaders of the movement, or mentioned in local newspaper accounts, but the cautions suggest *antillano* involvement in the movement.

As decreed by the President, the renters’ fight now moved to the National Assembly, which convened on September 1. The President first addressed the Assembly stigmatizing the *Liga de Inquilinos* as an “unknown group,” not a legal entity, and “without a doubt” organized

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<sup>254</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 83.

<sup>255</sup> “The Decree Stands,” *The Panama Tribune*, 21 August 1932, p. 8. This editorial decried another editorial in the *Panama American*, by a prominent West Indian clergyman, whose exhortations gave wrong impressions, that “our people are inclined to break the law,” or that West Indians had been maintaining the strike and were defiant of authorities, which “may lead a certain section of the Panama public to believe that West Indians are being used to break the strike.”

by “communist elements;” then he denied the legitimacy of the strike.<sup>256</sup> A no-pay “strike,” he said, was not a case of work stoppage to gain better conditions, but instead it broke legal contracts and reneged on civil obligations, which carried legal consequences. But he acknowledged the social dimensions of the problem posed a threat to the stability of the country, and asked the Assembly for a quick solution that recognized the desperate economic constraints of urban renters and the intransigence of landlords, marking the first time the Panamanian government recognized an obligation to the overwhelming majority of working people.<sup>257</sup> On September 5 the Assembly appointed a committee to come up with a solution. A sympathetic deputy introduced a proposal written by labor leaders, which singled out West Indian barrios—Marañón, Guachapalí, and Chorillo—and portrayed the tenements as congested, unhygienic, decrepit hovels, infested with vice and disease.<sup>258</sup> Leaders stressed that renters had united peacefully for economic aims (unlike the recent political campaign which had divided workers along party lines). Marchers organized by the Liga and a labor union demonstrated outside the building hoping to influence the debate.<sup>259</sup>

On September 14, the committee appointed to study the rent question issued a report, declaring “the renter problem, strictly speaking, doesn’t exist in Panama and Colón,” because

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<sup>256</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 55.

<sup>257</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 100.

<sup>258</sup> de la Rosa, “¡Habla el Inquilino!” 8. The Deputy, Demetrio Porras was the son of former President Belisario Porras, and founder in 1930 of the Socialist Party. The labor leaders representing the renters included Diógenes de la Rosa (a socialist) and Domingo H. Turner (a communist), both of which played long, important roles in Panamanian labor, political, and intellectual life; other Deputies also submitted suggestions. The referenced campaign had preceded the election of Harmodio Arias, and represented an important generational shift in the political culture of Panama, as I describe below.

<sup>259</sup> The SGT had broken ranks from the Worker Federation in 1924, see note 45.

there were more rooms than renters, giving them options.<sup>260</sup> The report echoed the landlords' assessment: inability to pay rent due to lack of work.<sup>261</sup> It proposed that the State should provide free lodging until the unemployed found work, and regulate physical housing, especially construction of housing for workers. But it concluded that regulating relations between property owners and renters would violate the civil and legal codes, which protected valid contracts. Therefore it sought neither regulation nor rent reductions, although it recommended establishing a Renters' Board, and granting authority to the President to take necessary measures, to resolve rent problems.<sup>262</sup> A headline the next day in *El Panamá América* emphatically denounced the report: "Sí existe el problema inquilinario" (Yes! the Renter Problem Exists!).<sup>263</sup> The paper's editorial blasted the Commission for not addressing housing costs. It stated, "What the public wants is justice," regulation on the return on investment, and health and safety standards of rental properties; if renters were to be held to account, so should owners.<sup>264</sup> Despite these efforts—the first by Deputies in the National Assembly to advocate for the popular masses, including West Indian constituents and renters—the Assembly, many of whom were landlords, voted down the proposal on September 15.<sup>265</sup>

The rent question remained to be settled. When Harmodio Arias assumed the Presidency on October 1, it signaled a departure from the Liberal principles which had reigned in Panama since independence, and brought *Acción Comunal* to prominence. On the morning of October 9,

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<sup>260</sup> Cited in de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 66.

<sup>261</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 66.

<sup>262</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 99, 91.

<sup>263</sup> Cited in de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 68.

<sup>264</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 69.

<sup>265</sup> de Muñoz y Muñoz Pinzón, *La segunda huelga inquilinaria; documentado análisis*, 79. Demonstrators had shouted slogans against "landlord deputies."

National Assembly again voted down the proposal because it interfered with the rights of property by limiting their profit. A milling crowd of 1,000 invaded the National Theater, where the Assembly met, forcing it to adjourn. As the crowd again gathered outside the afternoon session, the police intervened and the Mayor outlawed public gatherings. At this point, *Acción Comunal* issued a statement that called on lawmakers to stop playing politics and instead attend to the “just complaints” of renters. Recalling the “massacre” on 10 October 1925, it noted that while authorities had remained in their positions, politicians had stayed in power, and owners charged the same rent, only the poor had suffered. *Acción Comunal* called on patriotism and a humanitarian spirit to support the renters’ cause. President Arias then decreed the \$1.50 rent reduction and acceptance of partial rents, ending the second rent strike. Significantly, he also said it was inevitable the State must intervene to regulate housing—it could not be left to supply and demand. The second rent strike failed to change the nature of the National Assembly, but the West Indian numerical strength in working class neighborhoods had made them crucial partners in the movement.

### **Move to Suburbs and Property Ownership**

When overt strategies of organization and strikes proved ultimately unsuccessful at improving their pay and living conditions, *antillanos* used other means at their disposal to strengthen their ambiguous position in Panama. Mass movements of West Indians into the Republic caused by Canal Zone terminations and displacements, or demonstration of collective power, such as strikes, generated anti-immigrant hysteria in some sectors of the population. Panamanian nationalism also underlay legal roadblocks that undermined some of the efforts by West Indians to provide for the communal security—not only of *antillanos* who had made the choice to stay in Panama, but also their children born there. Sons, who duly registered and

declared allegiance to their country of birth, had helped to elect a sympathetic president in 1932. Daughters attended the Normal School for women and became teachers, won medals for Panama in international sports competitions, participated in Panama's women's movement, and carried on a tradition as respected designers and dressmakers.<sup>266</sup> After decades of work in the Canal Zone, low but steady wages, subsidized housing and commissary provisions had enabled some workers to accumulate savings, which some chose to invest in property. Notarial records in the Panamanian national archives reflect an increase in land purchases in the late 1930s by buyers with non-Latin surnames likely to belong to West Indians.<sup>267</sup> The surge to buy land, and the movement to the outskirts of Panama City in the late 1930s followed relatively soon after the Depression years of high unemployment in Panama. Three factors propelled the trend: retirement from canal work with recently established retirement annuities, newly available lots in suburban settlements, and the ever-present search for economic security and advancement.

A major motivator to build a house in Panama, if one could afford it, was retirement from canal employment. By the late 1930s, many workers who had held onto Canal jobs through a combination of luck, loyalty and necessity, approached retirement age. The Panama Railroad, which administered the Canal, offered to repatriate workers who wanted to return to places of

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<sup>266</sup> McLean H. *Una cronología histórico biográfica*, 99-100, notes, for example, that Gwendolyn Grinnion Sinclair (born 1907) attended Normal School, taught in Panamanian elementary school in Colón, taught Spanish to *antillano* descendants and facilitated their entry into Panamanian schools, and after retirement ran for elective offices in Colón. Lilia Wilson won the gold medal for Panama in the high jump at the fourth Central American and Caribbean Games held in Panama City in 1938, interview with author, Panama City, Panama, August 2011. An excellent seamstress, Maizee Lennan's mother included American Generals in the anal Zone among her clients. Maizee Lennan, interview with author, Ancón, Panama, August 2011. The *Panama Tribune* ran at least one, and sometimes two, pages on sports each week, including local and international sports news on cyclists, jockeys, and boxers, featuring black athletes, and local stars, such as Lloyd LaBeach, a sprinter, who won two bronze medals in the 1948 Olympics.

<sup>267</sup> Businesses, churches, and societies, with names suggesting an association with West Indians also bought property in these suburbs, for example, *Asociación Iglesia Verdad de la Biblia de Dios* (Association of the True Church of the Bible of God), *Iglesia Independiente Bautista de Jamaica* (Jamaican Independent Baptist Church), Clay Products, Co., Loyal Victor #8137 lodge of the Independent Order of Oddfellows; and Mount Olympus Lodge # 559.

origin, but many declined. They had few ties to family and home islands, their lives in Panama felt permanent, and most had adopted Panama as their homeland. For workers who lived in the Canal Zone, retirement meant moving out of the Zone; employment was a requirement to live in there. For years the modest subsidized rent that had been deducted from the pay of West Indian and other non-US citizen workers (housing was free for Americans) distorted the actual cost of living and blinded unwary workers to the need to save from their wages for their retirement. Ever since construction days, a small but growing number of “superannuated” or incapacitated former canal workers had lived in destitution in the Panamanian cities, dependent on family, friends, churches, and voluntary societies or benefit associations for help with rent and food. “Old-timers” interviewed in the 1960s and ‘70s mentioned difficulty making ends meet.<sup>268</sup> The Panama Railroad offered a retirement annuity to some of its workers in 1928, but the U.S. government failed to grant retirement to silver workers in the Canal Zone, the largest contingent of non-citizen United States federal workers, until 1938.<sup>269</sup> Then it capped monthly retirement at one dollar per year worked, to a total of twenty-five years, although many of the workers had worked longer.<sup>270</sup> Anecdotal evidence indicates that the Canal administration sent inspectors to

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<sup>268</sup> See James Cornell interview with Eunice Mason, Panama City, 1974. Used with permission from Dr. Mason; and Clifford Hunt, Z H: McKenzie, Jules E. LeCurrieux, “Construction Days Competition,” Box 25, Panama Collection, MSS81178, Library of Congress.

<sup>269</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 67, 79, notes the Panama Railroad had “greater financial freedom” as a corporation rather than government entity subject to Congressional oversight and appropriation, and offered retirement after 1928 to men too old to work. Tight budgets during the Depression prevented relief payments, but the canal administration gave older canal workers light work so they could continue to collect pay. Congress finally approved retirement for silver workers in 1938.

<sup>270</sup> See also “Old and Unwanted,” (editorial) *Panama Tribune*, 6 August 1944, p. 8. For example, at his retirement on December 31, 2000, Cecil Haynes (1913-20012) had worked for 72 years for the Panama Canal and held the record for longest-working U.S. Federal employee worldwide. See Obituary, *Panama Cybernews*, 19 September 2012, [www.panamacybernews.com](http://www.panamacybernews.com). David Gonzalez, “Panama Journal; A Canal Celebrity Honors Unheralded Workers,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/14/world/panama-journal-a-canal-celebrity-honors-un-heralded-workers.html>, noted that only after his supervisor became aware he had worked for fifty years, Mr. Haynes “was jumped several pay grades” and promoted.

the homes of retired workers in the Republic, and threatened to reduce the monthly retirement if they discovered that retirees received income from other sources, such as from selling fruit or other produce they grew in their yards.<sup>271</sup>

The availability of newly developed lots also motivated West Indians to move away from tenements in Panama. The Depression triggered an influx to Panama City from rural areas into overcrowded tenement neighborhoods and new squatter settlements with even worse conditions. Some destitute *antillanos* themselves became squatters outside the city. City planners and developers had begun mapping land parcels for urban expansion on the coastal plains to the northwest of the city that stretched away from the Canal, including in existing West Indian settlements of Río Abajo and Pueblo Nuevo. Newly platted areas also became available in Parque Lefevre, San Francisco de a Caleta, and Juan Díaz suburbs. Young marrieds belonging to the small West Indian business and professional class in Panama and Colón began moving to these areas.<sup>272</sup> West Indian entrepreneurs opened real estate businesses.<sup>273</sup> The government also

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<sup>271</sup> Adica Moore, Interview by the author, Panama City, Panama, June 2009. Moore, a West Indian descendant who had herself worked in a silver commissary in the Canal Zone told this story. She called the inspector “Mr. Checker” which, I believed, was a generic term.). William D. Donadío, *The Thorns of the Rose* (Colon, Republic of Panama: Dovesa, 1999), Appendix, includes a copy of a letter from a canal official, “Mr. Shaker,” addressed to Donadío’s step-father regarding his reemployment, possibly the official mentioned above. Donadío, 18-20, mentions that when his Spanish step-father was reinstated after being fired, ostensibly because he spoke only Spanish (later inspection of his medical records indicated “old age” as the reason), his wage was reduced from \$45 to \$25 a month, and another \$10 was subtracted for rent in the European section of a silver township. An inspector came to value the household inventory. His mother took in laundry and his father raised goats to supplement the monthly income of \$15 to feed a family of five. Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 79, also refers to “demeaning house searches to prove their poverty.”

<sup>272</sup> Young professional had begun moving to Río Abajo in the late 1930s, and a major fire in Colón in 1940 spurred movement to suburbs outside Colón and Panama City. See “Elder Farrell dedicates home in Rio Abajo,” *The Panama Tribune*, 19 November 1944, p. 6.; “Foster-[Vernal] Sealey wedding in Rio Abajo” *The Panama Tribune*, 24 December 1944, p. 11; “Mrs. Ruth Toppin returns from course in beauty culture at Poro College in NY; announces opening of beauty culture school in Rio Abajo,” *The Panama Tribune*, 21 January 1945.

<sup>273</sup> For example, see advertisement: “Wilfred G McBarnett & Sons Real estate dealers Parque Lefevre, C.B Baptiste sub-agent in Colon,” *The Panama Tribune*, 3 March 1946. Louis Deveaux, one of the most successful West Indian businessmen in Panama, was a real estate developer. “Atlantic Build Corp holds Stockholders meeting [president, Deveaux],” *The Panama Tribune*, 11 April 1934; Lilia Wilson and Dosita Bryan, interview with author, Panama City, August 2011, stated their father sold real estate, among other business ventures.

opened new townships, such as Chilibre, near the continental divide halfway between Panama City and Colón, and accessible by road from Gamboa in the Canal Zone, where many West Indians lived and worked. Some canal men farmed garden plots for years in Chilibre, for their own consumption, and men and women could market their produce in the Zone or Panama. West Indians also acquired property in Arraiján, twelve kilometers west, across the Canal.

Investing in land could provide some economic and social security for aging *antillanos*. Anti-immigrant factions in Panama after the Depression undermined mechanisms West Indians had used to provide communal security. For example, Law 60 of 1938 classified all societies that paid death benefits as insurance agencies, subject to an annual tax of 50,000 Balboas (\$50,000).<sup>274</sup> This law threatened the existence of the many West Indian death benefit societies that had been organized as non-profit, benevolent organizations. Lodges and death benefit societies, numbering in the hundreds, had for decades offered material and moral support to unfortunate and unemployed members, but the societies suffered loss of membership and income during the Depression years, spurring suggestions that they consolidate and adopt uniform accounting practices.<sup>275</sup> By the 1930s they had accumulated an estimated total of \$1.8 million in small weekly dues from members over many years. Nevertheless, individual societies rarely could hope to pay the tax. Investing in property offered the promise of individual or group security, the possibility of rental income, and a reduced threat of deportation: laws that

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<sup>274</sup> <http://panama.justia.com/federales>; McLean *Una cronología histórico biográfica*, 82.

<sup>275</sup> “Proper Safeguards,” *The Panama Tribune*, 17 January 1932, p. 8. An editorial, “The Burden of Fraternity,” *The Panama Tribune*, 11 September 1932, p. 8, urged against hoarding uninvested funds while young people had no strong future and elders faced destitution. “Our Societies and the Depression,” *The Panama Tribune*, 18 September 1932, p. 8, claimed 300 lodges in eight different orders in Panama and Colón, but these did not include societies independent of orders. See also “Our Leaders and a Platform,” *The Panama Tribune*, p. 8, 28 August, 1932; “Our Societies and the Depression, cont.,” *The Panama Tribune*, 25 September 1932, p. 8; “Fewer but Stronger Lodges,” *The Panama Tribune*, p. 8, 11 December 193.

prohibited immigration, or the reentry of immigrants who left Panama for any reason, exempted those who had lived in Panama for at least ten years and owned property or a business. Some immigrants registered the property in the name of children born in Panama.

Tracing the property development of one large *manzana*, or city block, reveals a pattern replicated in several suburbs that absorbed an exodus from the Canal Zone and tenements of Panama City and Colón from the late 1930s to the 1950s. The data comes from a 1970 land use census. In 1970 the Catástro (cadastral land registration office) of Panama conducted a block-by-block property census for tax valuation in Panama City and Colón. Evaluators noted the history of properties from the date of original purchase, detailed any improvements on the property, and listed subsequent owners. This information makes it possible to plot the development of suburbs, and analyze how West Indians and their descendants began a transition from constrained renters to landowners and landlords. A particular area of interest is the West Indian suburb of Río Abajo, on the Río Abajo (literally Down River, or Lower River), in Las Sabanas (the coastal plain of grazing lands), some 8 kilometers northeast of Panama City, which began as a settlement of some 300 laid-off canal workers at the end of the construction period in 1914.<sup>276</sup> Additional settlers moved there from the West Indian-dominated barrios of the city, including some who experienced “rent problems” in the Rent Strike of 1925 and 1932. The República de Haití elementary school had been built there during the administration of Harmodio Arias (1932-36), and the hamlet incorporated to become a *corregimiento* (township) in 1937.<sup>277</sup> The government

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<sup>276</sup> Río Abajo is one of several settlements founded outside the city that architect and urban planner Alvaro Uribe has classed as “centripetal” urban areas. Unlike suburbs at the edge of the city that expanded into surrounding territory, outlying centripetal communities became absorbed by the city after the city extended utilities and services to them, such as electricity, water and paved roads, which then attracted development to the intermediate spaces. Uribe, *Ciudad Fragmentada*, 34 ff. The number is an estimate from McLean, *Una cronología histórico biográfica*, 244.

<sup>277</sup> McLean H. *Una cronología histórico biográfica*, 245.

widened the main road from town and platted the town into long, narrow parallel blocks, (manzanas), separated by numbered streets. (See Map 3.1. Río Abajo Corregimiento, Appendix.) Soon hundreds of West Indians and their descendants invested in these properties and moved to houses they built in the new suburb.

Manzana 22 in Río Abajo had previously been called Lot 1987, one portion of a larger “finca madre” (literally, mother property) Number 777. In 1935, Gabriel Cohen Hernández bought Lot 1897 from Angelina Jaén de M.<sup>278</sup> Lot 1897 forms an irregularly shaped rectangular holding that bulges on the long south side where it borders the Río Abajo and follows its curves. The east (narrow) end of the rectangle runs along the main road from Panama City. Cohen Hernández kept a sizable subdivision of Lot 1897 that fronted this road where it meets the river. He built a house there in 1946; a smaller temporary building and cantina operated there at some point before 1970. In the six years between 1937 and 1943 Cohen sold thirty-five of the remaining forty-one lots to West Indians or their descendants and only five to buyers with Latin surnames (there is no record of the Lot designated as No.31). (See Map 3.2. Detail of Manzana 22, Appendix.) Notarial records of land transactions show that West Indians, unlike most male or female buyers with Latin surnames, often bought property, not as individuals, but as married couples.<sup>279</sup> Legal marriage was required for access to family housing in the Canal Zone, and it was also commonly practiced among the most upwardly mobile and elite West Indians in

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<sup>278</sup> Cohen Hernández was likely a member of a substantial Jewish community in Panama. Some of their antecedents went to Holland from Spain during the reign of Charles V, later moving to Jamaica and Curacao, and then to Panama at the turn of the nineteenth century. The “de” designation indicates Angelina Jaén de M. was the wife or widow of a man whose unlisted family name began with M. Single and married or widowed women could own property in Panama; the legal system is based on Roman, not English legal tradition. Jaén is not one of the twelve families identified by Uribe, *Ciudad fragmentada*, map p.35, as having bought up the land to the northwest in the path of Panama City’s expansion. Comparing the map with a map on p. 66, it is apparent that Río Abajo developed on land that had been owned by the de la Guardia family, who must have sold it, possibly to Angelina Jaén, her paternal relative, her husband, or a prior owner.

<sup>279</sup> John Biesanz and Mavis Biesanz, *The People of Panama* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1955), chapter 5, passim. A study of Panama by American sociologists in the 1950s reported that only about a quarter of West Indians married, while less formal consensual unions were equally common.

Panama, who were also likely to attend the Anglican, Baptist or Methodist churches, which encouraged marriages. This subset might also be likely to both plan and save money to buy property, and list both partners as co-owners in legal papers. Siblings, or groups of people who sometimes shared common family names, but often did not, also co-owned property. Registering property in this way combined resources and spread the risk, as well as institutionalized the rights of succession.

The practice of purchasing land by groups suggests that West Indians transferred strategies practiced in many of their lodges and voluntary association to the purchase of property. In their voluntary societies, members pooled money, shared risks, and cooperated, at least in theory, for the common good. Although individuals alone might not have sufficient resources to invest in property, a group of relations, friends or lodge members might jointly be able to do so. Few of the lots in Manzana 22 had preexisting houses or built new ones at the time of purchase. Most lots in Manzana 22 in the 1970 property census showed a “declared improvement” of a house within three to five years after purchase, though in some cases it took nearly a decade. But in most cases construction of dwellings, sometimes designated as “House 1” and “House 2,” began within a few years, probably as funding permitted. The new owners built homes with modern indoor plumbing, private kitchens and bathrooms, and more solid construction materials than the crowded wooden tenements or Canal Zone multi-family buildings they had occupied for so many years.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Modern conveniences sometimes came with problems. “Seepage from Septic Tanks Bring Threat of Epidemic” *The Panama Tribune*, 26 June 1949, reported that overcrowding caused sewage problems in Rio Abajo, Carrasquilla, San Francisco de la Caleta, Vista Hermosa and other outlying districts. The 1970 housing census reported “aguas negras” (black waters), or seeping sewage on several lots in Manzana 22, degrading the neighborhood.

The complicated history of a group that purchased contiguous Lots 37 and 38, suggests how the group turned one property into an income-producing venture with four rental rooms on two floors, that provided for at least one widow as time passed, and for a minor child, who grew up, married, and later inherited the entire property from a woman who shared her surname.<sup>281</sup> The property census for the group-owned Lots 37 and 38 show no evidence of a house on Lot 37 in 1940, but in 1970 the term “unoccupied” suggests one may have been built at some point, and abandoned or razed. The record for Lot 38, however, registered a two-story house in 1940, with four rooms on each floor. Rents of \$22 for two of the rooms, and \$24 for two others on each floor, would have produced an income of \$184 monthly for the owners, if they did not themselves occupy any rooms. Indeed, it is evident from the property records that the new owners of lots in Río Abajo often planned to use their property to produce income, and they readily assumed the role of landlords. Tax records denote substantial improvements, such as cement floors, masonry, zinc or compound roofs, pipe outlets, and in one case a bathtub. Often the owner(s) lived on the second floor of the *casa principal* (main house) and rented additional rooms on the ground floor or in a second building on the property. Several additions to the house on Lot 36, for example, resulted in five rentable rooms on the ground floor and a large apartment and one other rentable room upstairs. In at least one case in Manzanera 22, the tax census lists a representative who managed the house (on Lot 36) and paid taxes on behalf of an absentee landlord.<sup>282</sup> One of the original members of the group that bought lots 37 and 38, listed as the

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<sup>281</sup> The census for these properties showed that members of the original group over the years recombined to buy each other out, readmit owners who left and later returned to the group, and sub-divide shares in different ways for inheritance purposes.

<sup>282</sup> Properties in Río Abajo and other suburbs funded some migration to the U.S. after World War II, much as Panama money had done for family members in the islands earlier in the century. One woman interviewee, who lived in the house in Parque Lefevre she inherited from her parents, noted the adjacent house had been abandoned by owners who emigrated to the U.S. in the 1950s or '60s and had not been able to maintain the property, which had eventually been taken over by Panamanians. The informant was unsure by what means the transfer occurred. Inez Virginia Sealy Higgins, Interview by the author, Panama City, Panama, August 2011.

rent collector in 1970, still lived in Chorrillo, a downtown tenement neighborhood, at the time of the property census.

West Indians also engaged other strategies for acquiring property and building their houses. Some owners built their own houses, in their spare time and as resources allowed. Robert Lancelot Morrison, a 36-year veteran maintenance worker who had lived in the Canal Zone “for convenience” and because it cost less, bought a plot in Panama from an American woman, “so the language was not a problem.”<sup>283</sup> He could not come up with a lump sum, but the seller let him pay \$50 down and \$10 a month for the \$800 purchase. He built his house the same way—by personal arrangements and installments. After first refusing to give him credit, the manager of a lumber yard in Panama agreed to do so for \$10 down and \$10 a month, if Morrison brought a letter of assurance from his supervisor. After he paid off credit of \$200 in regular, even early, installments, Morrison was cleared for credit as needed. Friends with electrical and plumbing jobs in the Zone helped another Canal worker build his house on weekends, compensated in some cases, “with a good supply of liquor.” Clifford Alleyne paid to have a house built on land which he also bought from an individual, and moved into it when he retired from Canal work in 1954.<sup>284</sup> Lloyd Church’s father, who had brought the family to Panama from Grenada, had bought a piece of land, which Lloyd sold to build two-bedroom house in Llano Bonito, a more rural area beyond Río Abajo, after living La Boca, Canal Zone, for fifty years.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Robert Morrison, Interview with Eunice Mason, unpublished interviews with West Indians who immigrated to Panama during the Canal construction era, conducted in the 1970s. With permission from Dr. Mason. Morrison’s parents were part of the Methodist movement in Jamaica; his lifelong Methodist activity may have influenced his thrifty and businesslike values, which he claimed many West Indians did not share.

<sup>284</sup> Clifford Alleyne, Interview with Eunice Mason, Panama City, 1974. Used with permission from Dr. Mason.

<sup>285</sup> Lloyd Church, Interview with Eunice Mason, Panama City, 1974. Used with permission from Dr. Mason.

New West Indian Panamanian landlords and landladies used the Panamanian courts to protect their investments. Court records show they paid off their mortgages, added heirs, transferred properties to spouses or children, dissolved contracts, released tenants from rental agreements, evicted tenants for non-payment of rent, sought legal permits to dispose of property tenants abandoned, and sued the government when its action or inaction affected their property, for example, seeking recompense when a culvert or road intruded on their lot.<sup>286</sup>

Businesses, churches, and societies, whose names suggest West Indian association, also bought property in these suburbs, for example, *Asociación Iglesia Verdad de la Biblia de Dios* (The True Church of the Bible of God Association), *Iglesia Independiente Bautista de Jamaica* (Jamaican Independent Baptist Church), Clay Products, Co., Loyal Victor #8137 lodge of the Independent Order of Oddfellows; and Mount Olympus Lodge # 559. The Edith Cavell Society, founded in 1919 in the West Indian barrio of Guachapalí, bought four lots on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, Parque Lefevre, adjacent to Río Abajo, and in 1940 built a four-apartment wooden structure. A second story with four more apartments was added, and later a separate concrete building with four apartments gave the society income from twelve apartments.<sup>287</sup>

With the passage of time, acquiring land and building a house became a physical expression of investment in permanence, as well as a way to satisfy restrictive laws that favored immigrant property owners over renters. West Indians adapted customary strategies and practices

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<sup>286</sup> In one such case, in 1947, businessman Joseph Thomas Coppin won a suit against the Panamanian government for \$345.50, to reimburse the destruction of two guanábana and one orange tree on a strip of land registered to his minor daughter. The land had been appropriated by the government to make way for construction of a highway that passed through Río Abajo on the way to Panamá Viejo, and the government had not fulfilled the legal requirements for an expropriation.

<sup>287</sup> “Brief History,” by M.E. Carter, Secretary, Program of 53<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary Luncheon of the Edith Cavell Society, Sunday, July 3, 1972. The Edith Cavell Society grew from an initial 102 members to some 1,500 in the 1940s, a solid base from which to invest in property, but lost members thereafter, due to “nonemployment, repatriation and migration.”

to acquire property and build houses, such as pooling resources and labor, using personal relationships and paying small increments over time for land and materials.

## **Conclusion**

Despite their poverty and difficult circumstances, the West Indians' collective consumption of housing inextricably wove them into the urban economy of the transit zone of central Panama. By their urban presence in Panama in the early years of the twentieth century, West Indians who lived there earned a place in Panama's national, social, and economic history. As a majority of the residents of Colón, and of several neighborhoods in Panama City, in all Canal Zone "silver" townships and the Canal Zone as a whole, West Indians used opportunities to exploit their strength in numbers to resist their oppressive situation and attempt to improve the conditions they lived in. They did so openly by joining unions or representative associations, showing solidarity with or participating in spontaneous and organized strikes for better working and living conditions, appealing to authorities, writing editorials, or more discretely by using strategies to acquire property, and becoming landlords. Whether with veiled support or open participation, their numbers situated West Indians squarely in the first mass movements in the Republic. Although these movements fell short of the regulation of rents the Panamanian organizers desired, with backing from the West Indians they succeeded in driving the Panamanian government to intervene on behalf of the broad lower classes and limit the impunity of urban landlords.

The forced move of many retirees from the Canal Zone a few years later, in the late 1930s, occurred in a climate of rising anti-immigrant sentiment encouraged by the nationalist campaigns of *Acción Comunal*, which drove new state responses. Anticipating this depopulation movement, the U.S. government at last approved a retirement pay in 1938, after many West

Indians had labored steadily for more than thirty years, although it only remunerated them for up to twenty-five years of service. The Canal Zone administration and U.S. government also worked with Panama's government to absorb the many workers the Americans had prevailed on Panama to accept since the dawn of the twentieth century. Panama accepted U.S. planning and financial assistance to start limited housing projects for working class Panamanian and *antillanos*.<sup>288</sup> Canal workers benefitted most from these programs, but West Indian business owners, entertainers, and speculators in Panama, and groups of related or unrelated individuals also joined the exodus from the city centers.

In 1938, however, when Panama announced its tax on insurance agencies, it included West Indian lodges, which managed considerable accumulated and collective savings intended to support their community social security, in this category. Immigrants and their Panamanian offspring once again demonstrated creative "ability to run [their] own affairs," by adopting multiple strategies for economic survival.<sup>289</sup> Many who had planned and saved could invest in housing, and, as landowners, protected themselves from deportation. Others registered property in their citizen-children's names. Some retirees repatriated to home islands after decades of absence, and some descendants, especially from the Canal Zone, pursued education in the U.S., or joined U.S. military forces during World War II, and settled in the U.S. afterward. But for most "oldtimers" who succeeded in buying property, their investment cemented their relationship

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<sup>288</sup> "Govt. to Build Six Tenements In San Miguel Area," *The Panama Tribune*, 29 July 1945 (each for 200 families, with independent kitchen and sanitary facilities; "Panama Government to Build over 1200 Workers Houses," *The Panama Tribune*, 19 August 1945; "Government to Erect 8 tenements in Colón," *The Panama Tribune*, 16 September 1945; "May Force Owners To Refund Excess Rental Since 1942 [Colón]," *The Panama Tribune*, 21 October 1945; "[Urbanization Bank] To Construct 47 Houses In Vista Hermosa" *The Panama Tribune*, 13 June 1948.

<sup>289</sup> Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth* (New York. London: Tavistock Publications, 1980), 111, notes Foucault redefined the success of failed 1968 uprisings: "discovery by small groups of people of an unsuspected creativity and capacity for inventing new forms of social relations, a desire and ability to run their own affairs."

to their adopted country. The needs of the immigrants who had settled in the Canal Zone and outlying communities in Panama influenced the government and banks to create housing programs and ways to finance them that responded not only to the West Indians, but later diffused to other Panamanians who had been excluded from property ownership.

Despite the exodus by some West Indians from inner-city tenements or Canal Zone quarters to better housing and often homeownership by the 1940s, many *antillanos* remained stuck in the tenements of Panama City and Colón, by economic circumstances as well as government policies and discrimination.<sup>290</sup> Likewise, Canal Zone accommodations for non-citizen employees changed little over the decades until the 1950s, despite complaints by residents and observers, such as a white American union organizer in 1919, Congressional investigators, a representative of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and academics from the U.S., as well as West Indian labor leaders, journalists and sociologists.<sup>291</sup> Calls for improvements in the West Indian and Panamanian press, and two massive rent strikes in Panama failed to spur U.S. government action. Canal Zone administrations over the years responded ambiguously to the housing problems of West Indian workforce. Annual reports of the Panama Canal West Indian Employee Association (PCWIEA) in the Canal Zone from 1924 to 1945 regularly addressed the shortcomings of “silver” housing, also to no avail.<sup>292</sup> On several occasions Governors sought

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<sup>290</sup> Allen Morton, “The Private Schools of the British West Indians in Panama,” Ph.D. diss., George Peabody College for Teachers, 1966. Morton sent questionnaires home with students, asking for information about living quarters, and families refused to respond.

<sup>291</sup> Major, *Prize Possession*, 212-215, for example, cites complaints about discrimination in the Canal Zone from the U.S. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.), the PCWIEA (in a memo addressed to Eleanor Roosevelt and copied to the Governor), and inquiries from U.S. Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, based on an accusation by Panamanian labor leader Diógenes de la Rosa at the International Labor Organization convention in Philadelphia in 1944, and from President Roosevelt in response to a complaint by a union leader, Victor Urrutia.

<sup>292</sup> Major, *Prize Possession*, 95, notes Governor Morrow denied official recognition to the PCWIEA when it was founded in Spring 1924, but its founder, Samuel Whyte, submitted a petition to the Governor anyway. In October the Canal administration rejected all seven items in the petition: an “appreciable” wage increase, a fixed ratio of gold

appropriations from Congress to improve the housing stock or build new housing in the Canal Zone, but each time the request was superseded by other priorities or events, such as World War II.<sup>293</sup> Only after a major reorganization of the canal administration in the early 1950s, did Congress finally appropriate money for the Canal government to build new concrete duplex housing suited for the tropical climate for silver workers, but this effort coincided with a major period of “depopulation,” that required many non-U.S. citizen employees to move into Panama. Landlords in Panama likewise provided as little maintenance as possible. One landmark near the Panama City railroad station, the famous Mueller Building, for example, continued to house many West Indians for nearly fifty years until its poor condition caused it to be evacuated and finally demolished in the 1970s.

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and silver job, technical training, secondary education, 24 days’ leave per year, free housing and half-price fares on the railroad, overtime after an 8-hour day. On two specific points Morrow noted that an increase in pay would “bring flood of unemployables; and West Indians “could never hope” for skilled jobs, hence needed no more than an elementary education.

<sup>293</sup> An ongoing debate about whether to gain more control by housing the entire labor force in the Canal Zone usually got tabled when Panamanian landlords protested it would ruin them; in fact loss of income from the labor force would severely cripple Panama’s economy. Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 58-59, 102, notes Governor Chester Harding’s plan to house the entire workforce in the Canal Zone (which he abandoned after the 1920 Strike), and a similar feint in 1944 by Governor Joseph Mehauffey.

## CHAPTER 4

### EDUCATION AS A PATHWAY TO ACTIVISM (1920-1940)

In 1924, Rev. David A. Osborne, West Indian rector of St. Alban's [an Anglican, West Indian] Church and principal of a colored school in the Panama Canal Zone, sent his bright sixteen-year-old son Alfred to live with an uncle in Chicago and attend high school, since Canal Zone colored schools only went through the eighth grade.<sup>294</sup> Alfred graduated second in his high school class, and went on to earn a bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago. During his eight years in the U.S., he also became an American citizen. When Alfred returned to Panama in 1932 and got a job teaching in the Canal Zone colored schools, however, his U.S. citizenship was ignored.<sup>295</sup> According to one report, Osborne's father had been promised that his son would be paid as an American citizen, but instead Canal Zone officials offered him the entry-level wage of a non-citizen, or "alien," employee and, when he protested, only granted him the top pay for non-citizens.<sup>296</sup> A dual-wage system in the Canal Zone, though ostensibly based on citizenship, was de facto configured on race: white American citizens received pay in gold-backed dollars on an American or "gold" scale, while non-white employees of any citizenship were paid a "Caribbean" wage, at about one-third the gold rate, in Panamanian silver, hence "silver" wage. The wage-race system extended to Jim Crow separations of Canal Zone townships, public, recreational facilities, and white and colored schools. Osborne's U.S. citizenship but afro-

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<sup>294</sup> The Canal Zone administration deemed no more than eighth grade education was necessary, since it was presumed colored children would supply only unskilled future labor needs for the Canal.

<sup>295</sup> Explanations for the Jim Crow social and geographic systems practiced in the Canal Zone generally link them to contemporary de facto segregation in the U.S. and European and American corporate labor practices in the circum-Caribbean region at the turn of the nineteenth century. The French canal operation paid local labor in Colombian silver currency. Americans continued this practice but paid American employees in gold dollars, to attract skilled workers and reduce turnover. During the construction era skilled workers, including non-U.S. citizens of African descent, could earn raises and be paid on the "gold scale," but the majority of non-U.S. citizen workers were men or women of color, dubbed "silver" workers. After the construction era, pay scales were collapsed and facilities segregated, such that the gold-silver divide encompassed not only pay, but citizenship, and racial divides.

<sup>296</sup> Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 94.

Caribbean heritage posed a challenge to this system. Three years after his return, the Superintendent of Education approved the well-educated Osborne to direct the La Boca Normal School to train colored teachers in the Canal Zone, a position that recognized his preparation and capabilities. Not until he threatened to quit this position in 1937 did administration officials approve his transfer to the American-citizen payroll.<sup>297</sup> Alfred Osborne's citizenship situated him at the center of a generational shift as children of canal workers came of age, and his education prepared him to lead a philosophical shift that would change the discourse about their education.

The particular experience of David and Alfred Osborne was unusual, but it was not unusual for West Indian immigrants in Panama to use education as a pathway to activism. West Indian elites, editors and educators, as well as parents, and students themselves found covert and

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<sup>297</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 94. West Indians who had been promoted to higher rank or paid in gold during the high-demand construction era had been summarily laid off demoted when the Canal downsized in 1914. Most American blacks had been eased out of the Canal Zone after the construction period in order not to "confuse" the social system of racialized citizenship. Those who remained on the gold roll, but were required to live in silver quarters and send their children to "silver" or "colored" schools. During the 1930s, the Governor repeatedly denied the petitions from two African American managers of silver clubhouses for their children to attend the school for children of American citizens, stating that, Canal Zone schools operated *on the basis of color*, and "it was impracticable" for Negro children, whatever their citizenship, to attend white schools (emphasis added by the author). See J.E. Moore and A.L. Brandon to Schley, 6 September 1936 and 11 December 1936, and J.E. Moore to Ridley, 3 April 1937 and 7 December 1938, and related administrative correspondence, 28-B-233 General Records 1935-1960, Education, General Records of the Panama Canal, Record Group 185, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD (hereafter, Folder #, General Records series, Education, General Records of the Panama Canal, RG 185, NACP). John Major, *Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903-1979* (New York; Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 208, cites communications from Moore as early as 1933, which would make his persistent requests concurrent with Alfred Osborne's request to transfer to the gold roll. The cited documents from petitioners, and those exchanged by school and administration officials as they prepared responses, do not reveal any connections between these and Osborne's cases, but officials surely would have been aware of both. They likely would have wanted to prevent setting a precedent that would "confuse" the color barriers in place. N.L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone. Mount Hope, C.Z.: The Panama Canal Press, 1930*, Table 10, p. 41, notes that 121 black people in the Canal Zone census had been born in the U.S. and its possessions, but not their ages or occupations. Although the U.S. Civil Service Commission considered "Philippinos" to have "the same status as bona fide American citizens" for employment and competitive examinations, the U. S. State Department considered citizens of the Philippine Islands to be "not full American citizens but ... merely nationals of the United States," though they were entitled to the protection of the U.S. The Canal Zone denied the request of Philippine parents to enroll their child in the schools for American citizen children. See V. E. Winquist, Board of Civil Service Examiners in the Canal Zone, memo for the "Chief Clerk," October 16, 1924, 91-A-10 General Records 1914-1934, Education, General Records of the Panama Canal, Record Group 185, NACP. On the other hand, children of European laborers who lived in European sections of silver communities sometimes were allowed to attend "gold" schools, possibly based on their color. See William D. Donadio, *The Thorns of the Rose* (Colon, Republic of Panama: Dovesa, 1999), 22.

overt ways to make their desires, needs, and opinions known. Indeed, some West Indians actively promoted knowledge about their history, culture, ethnicity, and economic situation to adults and children. West Indian teachers in both the Canal Zone and Panama created cultural spaces that at first preserved West Indian cultural heritage, educational methodology, and language. By the 1930s, proactive West Indian educators, community leaders, and parents sought to expand educational opportunities for a new generation of immigrants born on the Isthmus.

This chapter explores the way West Indians—those in the Canal Zone like the Osbornes and those in the Republic of Panama—sought educational equity through the first decades of the twentieth century. Like the simultaneous efforts in housing and by lodges and unions, the cultural spaces engendered and sustained in schools and through educational reforms contributed to the development of a Panamanian West Indian identity. This was not, of course, a smooth or unified process. The diversity of West Indian interests, I argue, is especially visible through the 1920s debates over private schools, juvenile delinquency, and Spanish language mastery. Focused attention on West Indian education in the Canal Zone “colored” schools during the 1930s and 1940s opened spaces for *antillano/a* education reformers and for a new generation of Panamanian West Indians.

West Indian leaders and educators worked to exploit changing local, regional and global politics to their advantage. Educators contributed to the development of hybrid identities of the Panama-born descendants in important ways, such as advocating learning Spanish and adopting good citizenship practices, while also cultivating transnational Negro identities. Educational opportunities paid off for the West Indian offspring in Panama who pursued them; however, state policies failed to provide universal elementary education until the mid-1940s, leaving many vulnerable to punitive or exclusionary policies.

## **Education on the Isthmus in the early twentieth century**

Three official educational systems—Panamanian, Canal Zone, and private—coexisted in Panama in the early twentieth century. The new Panamanian state, which came into being concurrently with the treaty that enabled the American canal project in 1904, failed to fulfill its commitment to free, universal, liberal education for lack of funding. Previously the Catholic Church had been the major purveyor of organized schools in Panama, an outlying province of Colombia. Elites sent their sons to the Caribbean coastal cities of Colombia, or on a more arduous journey to the capital, Bogotá, for further education. The Panamanian educational infrastructure grew slowly, primarily in the terminal cities at either end of the Canal, but it reached only a portion of the school-age children until well into the 1930s. These cities, by virtue of their proximity to the Canal Zone, absorbed many families of English-speaking West Indians who lost their jobs once the canal was built, but their schools could not accommodate all their children.

In the Canal Zone, two school systems under the same superintendent evolved in tandem: one for children of American citizens and the other for those of non-U.S. workers. To combat high turnover of American employees, the Isthmian Canal Commission (I.C.C.), appointed by Congress to oversee canal construction, adopted a policy in 1905 of providing education for their children. The I.C.C. directed the Canal Zone governor to “formulate a plan for a practical, efficient, and comprehensive system of public schools adapted to the necessities and conditions of the inhabitants of the Canal Zone.”<sup>298</sup> To ensure stability and increase its control over the much larger non-U.S. citizen, and majority West Indian, workforce, the I.C.C. encouraged men to

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<sup>298</sup> Alda Alexander Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development in Educational Policy for the Canal Zone Colored Schools, 1905-1955,” Ph.D. Diss., University of Michigan, 1974, p. 30. One condition of inhabitants was the gold-silver racial-citizenship divide, which justified a dual school system.

bring female partners and families.<sup>299</sup> I.C.C. policy called for two common schools in each municipality, suggesting the early intention of providing separate schools for U.S. citizen and non-citizen children.<sup>300</sup> By 1907, the Schools Division articulated different aims for the two systems: to provide schooling for American children that prepared them to return to U.S. schools at grade level when the employee's stint was over; and to provide children of alien workers who lived in the Zone "such schooling as they could expect to receive either in the Republic of Panama or in their native islands."<sup>301</sup> The I.C.C. limited the non-citizen schools, dubbed "silver" or "colored" schools, to the eighth grade, declining to educate children beyond its own need for unskilled labor.<sup>302</sup> The I.C.C. recruited teachers from the British Caribbean and adopted the dualistic colonial system prevalent there. Most afro-Caribbean teachers received less rigorous preparation than teachers trained in Britain, though the I.C.C. failed to note this qualitative

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<sup>299</sup> In 1905, the U.S. workforce numbered 2,705 versus the non-citizen force (not exclusively West Indian) of 14,250; by 1913 the ratios was 5,671 to 37,679; Major, *Prize Possession*, Appendix A.

<sup>300</sup> Harper, "Tracing the Course of Growth and Development," p. 29. School systems in other U.S. colonial possessions in this era also conformed to an implicitly colonial policy. See, for examples, Katherine M. Cook, "Federal Relations to Education in Outlying Parts," *The Journal of Negro Education* 7 (July 1938): 264, "responsibility for the social as well as the economic welfare of the people who live in the Zone has been assumed by the Federal Government."; Lloyd E. Blauch, "Education in the Territories and Outlying Possessions of the United States," *The Journal of Negro Education* 15, no.3 (Summer, 1946), 463, stated that the Canal Zone, unlike other U.S. territories and possessions, "has the status of a Federal Reservation."

<sup>301</sup> Quote from the *Canal Record*, 1 (October 1907), 58, cited in Harper, "Tracing the Course of Growth and Development," p. 43.

<sup>302</sup> Although Harper, "Tracing the Course of Growth and Development," p. 40, suggests that early document imply an intention to provide "universal, free education to all inhabitants of the Canal Zone," a 1943 memo addressed to the Executive Secretary of the Canal Zone reports that a meeting of the I.C.C. in December 1908 indefinitely postponed adopting a measure making education compulsory in the Zone. The policy was revisited at least until 1917, and rejected on several grounds: since all American children attended school, it would benefit mostly on non-citizen children; Congressional appropriations would not cover the increased cost of educating all children of silver employees; silver employees could not afford to send all their children to school (implying some of them needed to work); and General Goethals, the Chief Engineer of the construction and first Governor of the Canal Zone, saw no way to compel school attendance and did not wish to prohibit 14-year-old boys from working. See R. D. Moore, Chief, Record Bureau to Executive Secretary, May 13, 1943, Folder 91-M-4, General Records 1914-1934, Education, General Records of the Panama Canal, 1914-1950, RG 185, NACP.

difference in official canal records, which was further obscured through the use of the euphemisms of “non-citizen” and “silver.”<sup>303</sup>

Aside from state initiatives, both American and West Indian parents had already demonstrated a commitment to their children’s education.<sup>304</sup> Even before a school system began operating in the Zone in 1905, literate West Indian men and women and American mothers and older sisters had set up improvised schools in private homes or other available rooms in five Zone municipalities, to teach basic literacy to about 150 children.<sup>305</sup> These ad hoc municipal schools were absorbed by the organized Zone school system by early 1906. But informal, private schooling perpetuated a practice among West Indians who predated the American canal project fourth education system that complemented the official systems in both the Canal Zone and the Republic. Typically, they were taught in English and followed the British colonial education system. One early school, founded by American Methodists and known as the Seawall School, for its location in the old part of Panama City, followed an American curriculum, but taught bilingual classes in English and Spanish. Even the first small classes included West Indian students along with Panamanians.<sup>306</sup> Thus, from the early moments of the American Canal project, some West Indian parents and community members demonstrated the priority they placed on education of their children by undertaking to provide it themselves or paying for private instruction that took place in cultural spaces that resonated with their heritage. Relatively

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<sup>303</sup> African American journals in the U.S. did make this connection explicit by the 1930s and ’40s.

<sup>304</sup> Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development,” p. 33.

<sup>305</sup> Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development,” p. 32-33; Phi Delta Kappa, Isthmus of Panama Chapter, *Schooling in the Canal Zone, 1904-1979* (1980), 103-04. *Schooling in the Canal Zone* is based largely on Harper; neither source indicates whether any of these early informal schools taught West Indian and American children together.

<sup>306</sup> “Reseña Histórica del IPA, 1906-2006,” *Son tiempos, son memorias, son . . . cien años* (Panamá: Instituto Panamericano, 2006), 50-51.

few children of *antillano* migrants attended Panamanian elementary schools conducted in Spanish before the 1920s.

### **Cultural Spaces and Transitions during the 1920s**

Three key issues dominated the West Indian education discourses during the 1920s: the debate over unregulated private schools, the concerns about juvenile misbehavior, and the issue of Spanish language learning for children of immigrant parents. As a new generation of West Indians came of age in Panama City and Colón, they and their elders confronted new issues pertaining to their access to education. The variable quality of the many unregulated private West Indian schools vexed West Indians, while many Panamanians considered them a barrier to assimilation. On the other hand, crowded public schools could not accommodate all students. Panamanian nationalists actively campaigned against the English-speaking, black foreigners, and called for their deportation; some schools turned *antillano* students away for these reasons. In the crowded neighborhoods dominated by *antillanos*, unemployed juveniles increasingly engaged in gang activity and misbehavior. Their elders responded in a variety of ways, reflecting their own diverse levels of education, occupation, and longevity on the isthmus.<sup>307</sup>

The nascent school systems in both Panama and the Canal Zone flagged during the unstable years of the First World War. Wartime conditions also interrupted trade in the Caribbean area, closing off migration possibilities to many laborers. Workers who lost Canal

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<sup>307</sup> “Cuestión de Actualidad,” *Panama Star and Herald*, 11 February, 1922, called for better inspection, as provided by law, of private schools, especially in West Indian neighborhoods, after discovery of abuse of a boy by a private school teacher; “Observations and Suggestions of Atty. Thompson,” *Panama Star and Herald*, 16 January 19 23, reported the suggestions made by a West Indian lawyer in a letter to the President of Panama, including providing a reform school, and supervising the education of children of West Indian parents, “all of whom are destined, sooner or late[r] to become an important factor in the citizenry of Panama. . .”; “Panama Flag and Coat of Arms to be Placed in Schools and National Anthem Sung,” *Panama Star and Herald*, 24 June 1927, reported a new law of Colón that focused on West Indian private schools, requiring standards for teachers, limiting movement of students between schools, and requiring Spanish classes for all students, in addition to singing the national anthem; “Taking the Wrong Course,” *Panama Star and Herald*, 22 February 1929, encouraged West Indian boys to learn trades and attending the National School of Arts and Trades (Artes y Oficios).

Zone jobs moved to Panama City or Colon. Panama was hard-pressed to absorb so many displaced workers and their families. Unemployed or destitute West Indians relied on their lodges and churches for support, and shared living spaces with the still-employed to survive. Antillano children sometimes attended neighborhood schools, but some families living in Panama reported that elementary schools rejected them, usually citing lack of space.<sup>308</sup> Many West Indians experienced this rejection promulgated by poorly trained teachers or principals, who rejected *antillanos* as foreigners who spoke little Spanish, and did not share Panamanian culture.

Some teachers Canal Zone policies sometimes allowed workers who lived in the Republic to send their children to Zone schools, but schools there also often did not have room to admit them. Lack of space in public schools in either place left those parents who wanted their children to be schooled little choice but to pay for private schools in the Republic.

Elite West Indians derided the unregulated private schools in Panama City and Colón. After private-school students had performed poorly at a recent elocution contest in February 1920, H. N. Walrond, the laborite editor of the most prominent West Indian newspaper on the Isthmus, took a moment from the escalating strike to blast the “so-called” teachers of the contestants.<sup>309</sup> Conceding that some teachers were true professionals of the “better class” of West Indians in Panama, with “high literary taste,” Walrond bemoaned the poor training of men who had turned to teaching from “other lines of work.”<sup>310</sup> The poorly-trained teachers may have been

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<sup>308</sup> Marixa Lasso De Paulis, “Race and Ethnicity in the formation of Panamanian National Identity: Panamanian Discrimination against Chinese and West Indians in the Thirties,” *Revista Panameña de Política* 4 (Julio-Diciembre 2007), 71; “A Barrier in the Schools,” *The Panama Tribune*, 5 May 1935. “Refusal of Public Schools to admit Children of Alien Parents Causes Dilemma,” *The Panama Tribune*, 19 May 1935.

<sup>309</sup> “Education and the West Indians,” *The Workman*, 7 February 1920, p. 4.

<sup>310</sup> The poorly-trained teachers may have been unemployed canal workers or veterans of the British West India Regiment who saw service in Europe, but had been sent back to Panama because Jamaica could not absorb new workers.

unemployed canal workers or veterans of the British West India Regiment who saw service in Europe, who had been sent back to Panama because Jamaica refused to let them stay.<sup>311</sup> His complaint revealed class divisions among the immigrants: former artisans and soldiers-turned-teachers may have been literate, but they clearly did not meet a standard Walrond considered adequate for teachers. The editor ended his critique suggesting that high schools for colored children in the terminal cities would surely sustain themselves from tuition, and make secondary education accessible to many more than the few students whose parents could afford to send them to Jamaica or Barbados to complete their studies.<sup>312</sup> The following week the editor reported that private school teachers had taken the initiative and begun “discussions,” suggesting they develop “rules and regulations for their business-like organization.”<sup>313</sup> But no authority beyond public opinion regulated the private schools.

The Panamanian government and ruling elite eschewed the private schools, and insisted that citizenship meant cultural integration—learning Spanish and knowledge of Panamanian history and geography. Historian Peter Szok portrays Panamanian history in the 1920s as a constructed narrative that explained the American presence in the Canal Zone not as a Faustian hegemonic bargain, but a Panamanian quest for independence, innovation and modernity, which set it apart from a more conservative Colombia.<sup>314</sup> Acceptance of this notion and Panama’s past

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<sup>311</sup> On returning soldiers, see Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 68.

<sup>312</sup> The Canal Zone did not open high schools for West Indian descendants until 1946, coincidentally the year a new Panamanian constitution revoked the racial exclusion of West Indian descendants from Panamanian citizenship, but retained the requirement that they demonstrate knowledge of Spanish and Panamanian history in order to validate their citizenship by birth. By that time a substantial number of descendants who lived in the Republic attended Panamanian public secondary schools and were bilingual; some spoke only a rudimentary English dialect.

<sup>313</sup> “Editoriales,” *The Workman*, 7 February 1920, p. 4.

<sup>314</sup> Peter Szok, *La Ultima Gaviota: Liberalism and Nostalgia in Early Twentieth Century Panama* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 38-39.

and affirmation of loyalty to this nation, rather than to British or American empire, would define a Panamanian citizen. Despite lack of national schools to take their place, Panamanian rhetoric disparaged the West Indian private schools for their perpetuation of English and foreign curriculum. Church-sponsored schools emphasized cultural differences as well, as they represented several Protestant denominations, and few were Catholic.<sup>315</sup> The immigrants' ability to speak English also created tensions with mixed-race working-class Panamanians, who felt at a disadvantage in getting canal jobs, which were relatively better-paid than work in Panama.

Discourses on education, culture, class and race, however, proved to be mutable in the 1920s. Unlike the West Indian teachers engaged for Canal Zone silver schools, Dr. J.T. Barton, a Jamaican, had trained in London. Despite anti-immigrant rhetoric, he was hired by the Panama government to teach for many years at the prestigious National Institute Normal School.<sup>316</sup> He also started a private school in Panama City and tutored children of privileged Panamanians in English.<sup>317</sup> A significant amount of anti-immigrant rhetoric, and certainly legislation, came from the Panamanian elite of European stock, many of whom spoke English fluently, and who wanted gold-roll jobs reserved for whites in the Canal Zone. Panamanian diplomats and negotiators continually sought Americans promises to hire more Panamanian laborers as well as educated

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<sup>315</sup> Christ-Church-by-the-Sea (Anglican Episcopal) established an academy in 1893; Roman Catholic schools included St. Josephs', St. Vincent De Paul, and Don Bosco in Panama City; The Trinity Methodist College of Colón, the Methodist Panamanian Institute (later the Instituto Panamericano, IPA) and the Seventh Day Adventist College in Panama City (per Barton, 68-69).

<sup>316</sup> For several years after its founding in 1907, the National Institute (as did other institutions, such as the hospitals) employed many foreigners. Peter Szok, *La Ultima Gaviota*, 68-73, and passim, discusses the importance of the Instituto Nacional (National Institute) in the creation of a new national liberal imaginary. Early emphasis of the Instituto was on teacher training, and much of the early faculty came from Europe, Latin America and the U.S. Most Panamanians who succeeded them had studied and or held diplomatic posts in Europe, Latin America and the U.S., who sought to modernize the nation. As educators and government leaders during the 'teens and 1920s they reshaped Panama's history as seeking independence and progress, to refute its reputation as subordinate to the United States.

<sup>317</sup> Unpublished manuscript by G.L. Barton, p. 67, copy in possession of the author, with permission from Dr. Eunice Mason, Panama City, R.P.

middle class men, and although the Canal administration did hire some local unskilled workers, they employed very few of the elite as office workers or administrators.

Shortly after the 1920 Strike uprooted many families, an editorial in *The Workman* noted concerns among the immigrant elite about juvenile misbehavior that reflected poorly on the West Indian community. Workers' children approaching young adulthood and out of school had formed gangs in the tenement neighborhoods. An excerpt reprinted from the Grenada *West Indian* illustrated that the generational problem of delinquency was not unique to Panama, but the adjoining editorial highlighted a particular concern for local immigrants, framing their problem in Panama in terms of citizenship and community: "... [T]he youths of today who must be the future fathers of the Republic, have of late been demonstrating too vividly that juvenile delinquency is painfully on the increase," it claimed, and it was "the responsibility of the community for their social uplift."<sup>318</sup> It called for a reformatory in Panama or the Canal Zone, that would attend to the "moral disease" of minors "of the poorer class" so they would not be exposed to hardened, criminals if they were sent to jail.<sup>319</sup> The editorial cited sympathetic Canal Zone judges who tried to place young miscreants with families and appealed to parents to take responsibility for their children's actions, to avoid sending them to the Canal Zone penitentiary, or the "blunder" of sending them to jail.<sup>320</sup> In 1921 West Indian leaders active in lodge affairs sought to "benefit the youth and therefore the community," when they filed applications with Panama's government to establish a Boys League, or Boys Brigade in Panama City, citing other

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<sup>318</sup> "One of the Most Burning Questions of the Moment," *The Workman*, 10 April 1920, p. 4.

<sup>319</sup> "Juvenile Criminology and Imprisonment," *The Workman*, 13 March 1920, p. 4.

<sup>320</sup> "Juvenile Criminology and Imprisonment," *The Workman*, 13 March 1920, p. 4.

reasons, deficient [Panamanian] policing in the West Indian neighborhood of Chorrillo.<sup>321</sup> The uneven allocation of state resources may have been discriminatory against all poor residents of working-class barrios or targeted against West Indian immigrants. The poor translation, poor typing and shaky signatures of some of the elders suggested they also lacked education. In 1924 another group of upstanding religious and civic leaders of the West Indian community filed an elaborate plan to establish a residential correctional school in Panama City, to include industrial, intellectual, and physical education (it would be attached to a Boys Brigade, for physical exercise), and require inmates to learn Spanish.<sup>322</sup> The plan promised to “cooperate with all levels of government to keep [incurable] youths off the streets, alleys and out of brothels, especially boys with bad reputation and character: teaching them obedience, to produce “brave and honorable future citizens.”<sup>323</sup> The elders sought to provide a well-rounded education that included mechanical and manual arts, a missing aspect from Canal Zone schools, West Indian private schools, and most secondary schools in Panama, and they acknowledged that future citizens would have to speak Spanish.

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<sup>321</sup> *Vanguardia del Cuerpo Infantería*--the stated English name is “Panama Boys Infantry Lead,” perhaps a misspelling of League, or a mistranslation for what in another place in the document is called the “Panama Boys Brigade.” See Panama Boys Brigade, ANP, 1924, Box 17, F 14. This may have been, or been modeled on, a Boy Scout troop. Several Panama veterans of the British West Indian regiment had returned with an interest and enthusiasm for scouting. The Tribune initiated a regular “Scouting Corner” column, reporting local and international scouting news for boys and the Colored Girl Reserves. As non-U.S. citizens (and as people of color), West Indian children could not affiliate with American scout organizations. Instead they organized in Panama with Panamanian scouting organizations, and maintained ties to international scouting. Tribune editor Sidney Young and other active scout leaders attended scouting meetings in Jamaica; See “Upcoming World Jamboree in Hungary,” “British Boy Scouts Association in Panama Variety Concert,” and “Scouting Corner,” *The Panama Tribune*, 17 January 1932, pp. 13, 14. See also Conniff, *Black Labor*, p. 68; Lara Putnam, “To Study the Fragments Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Social History* 39, Number 3 (Spring 2006): 624-26.

<sup>322</sup> *Institución Escuela de Enseñanza Industrial*, ANP, 1924, Box 17, F 14. Proposed founders included lawyer and UNIA activist A. Blanchfield Thompson, Dr. Fairweather, a prominent West Indian physician born in Panama in the 1880s, Reverend Barclay, and Jamaica-born, American-trained lawyer Lloyd Carrington, who in 1932 would represent the President of Panama in the Canal Zone.

<sup>323</sup> The aims included teaching ‘*economía*’ a term which could refer to actual practices of money management, or training for employment.

Community leaders had reason to be concerned about delinquency and other behaviors that might attract negative attention to West Indians in the Republic.<sup>324</sup> A new nationalist movement in Panama founded in 1923, *Acción Comunal* adopted the motto “Speak in Spanish; count in Balboas,” which defined it as both anti-American and anti-immigrant, had swelled a tide of propaganda.<sup>325</sup> The reference to Panamanian money—Balboas—implied cultural and economic impulses for the political movement.<sup>326</sup> Panamanian laws in 1924 and 1925 became increasingly restrictive against foreigners.<sup>327</sup> In 1925 a political pamphlet, *El Peligro Antillano en la America Central: la defensa de la raza* (*The Antillean Danger in Central America: Defense of the Race*), targeted West Indians in viciously racist terms.<sup>328</sup> A new law in 1926 cited a long

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<sup>324</sup> For example, an editorial called attention to the loud wailing and carrying-on at wakes and the ritual held nine nights after a death that could prove disruptive to Panamanian and Antillean neighbors in the tenements. See “Nine Nights” and “Wakes” *The Panama Tribune* 14 Feb 1932, p. 8.

<sup>325</sup> The name translates literally to “Community Action.” Young middle-class, professional men, sons of landed families in the “interior” provinces west of the transit area, founded the group, intending to challenge the political oligarchy. Many had been sent abroad by the government of the fledgling country, for university or technical education in North America or Europe, sometimes while filling minor diplomatic posts. Returning with experience and new ideas, they felt shut out of the power structure, not only by the oligarchy itself, but by the many Americans and Europeans who held managerial and government positions. Several also believed the oligarchs had colluded with Americans over the Canal, at the expense of the country as a whole. See Szok, *La Ultima Gaviota*, 89-90; De Paulis, 63.

<sup>326</sup> The Balboa was the name of Panamanian currency, but since the Treaty of 1904, American dollars had been used as the paper currency, equivalent to one Balboa; coins (silver) were Panamanian.

<sup>327</sup> Panama’s Law 76, of 30 December 1924, defined foreigners unemployed or engaged in illicit activities as “undesirables;” a 1924 local decree in Colón, which was majority West Indian, prohibited a license wheeled vehicles used for public service provision to non-Spanish speakers (West Indians dominated positions as bus drivers); a 1925 law required workers traveling to Panama to post a bond of 150 Balboas (dollars) before they could get a visa to enter Panama.

<sup>328</sup> Written by Olmedo Alfaro Paredes, from a well-established political family in Panama and Ecuador, the booklet had first appeared in 1915, during heavy West Indian exodus from the Canal Zone into Panama. Its racist and eugenic rhetoric revealed anxieties about racial mixing and degeneration, sentiments that resonated in other nations in the Caribbean region. See Laura Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), Ch. 3.

list of offenses that could lead to deportation, ranging from arson, robbery, or homicide to habitual drinking.<sup>329</sup>

Distinct groups of West Indian Panamanians pursued diverse solutions to resolve educational issues they confronted. Some strictly maintained their English language and cultural traditions. If they lived in the Canal Zone, children were exposed to American textbooks and curriculum, while the private schools in Panama could perpetuate a British orientation. But other groups and individuals outside the Zone encouraged youths, if not themselves, to learn Spanish, as a conscious pathway to Panamanian citizenship. Still others chose to emphasize their Negro identity, through association with local UNIA initiatives. Within the cities they founded English private schools, but outside urban areas, they fell under jurisdiction of the Panamanian education authorities and Spanish elementary schools.

In late September 1925, a group of volunteers, “Latin Panamanian” graduates of the respected National Institute, with two West Indian friends, opened a night school for adults in Colón.<sup>330</sup> Subjects taught in Spanish included Spanish grammar and composition, Civics, Geography, and History, following the grammar school curriculum of the Panamanian government. The night school was free; students needed only be “punctual, studious and orderly” and bring their own pencil and notebook. It was not open to children unless they had to work during the day. The volunteer teachers included young men and a woman who were already politically active and would later more overtly support inclusion of West Indians and women in Panamanian politics.<sup>331</sup> Spanish classes also were offered “for foreigners,” and West Indian

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<sup>329</sup> Ley 10, 11 de octubre 1926, *Gaceta Oficial*, No. 48723, October 26, 1926, p. 16753, República de Panamá.

<sup>330</sup> “Night School at Colon Is an Innovation,” *The Workman*, October 1925, p. 1.

<sup>331</sup> Gil Blas Tejeira, a liberal Colón journalist, for example, and Linda Smart (later Linda Smart Chubb).

adults were among the 160 who had already attended, taught by Linda Smart, a bilingual British West Indian born in Panama, who had attended the National Institute Normal School authored the newspaper report.<sup>332</sup> The article noted “already...many youngsters are removed from the streets at nights, where, perhaps, they would have been less profitably employed.”<sup>333</sup> Within a month a new teacher was added to meet the demand by “English speaking persons desirous of learning Spanish.”<sup>334</sup> It is notable that this night school should appear in 1925, encouraging residents of the majority West Indian city to learn Spanish and Panamanian history and geography, precisely the requirements for attaining Panamanian citizenship, as nationalism intensified and *antillano* presence in the terminal cities was helping spark an urban rent crisis. Overtly, Panamanian and West Indian activists who founded the Colón night school aimed to remediate education in an age when many West Indians, especially those of the working class, might fail to finish public elementary school, as much for lack of facilities, parental means or initiative, or family unemployment, as for misbehavior. Besides these factors, however, its founders responded to other crucial needs of a community of native-born youths facing exclusion and racism.

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<sup>332</sup> Linda Smart was a British citizen born in Panama, whose father, a Jamaican, had worked as an engineer for the French canal project; she attended the Normal School, rather than the National Institute, and taught in Panamanian elementary schools. Another friend with a West Indian surname, Benjamin Waterman, also volunteered. She also worked for the British legations in Colón and Panama City into the 1940s, and in 1942 wrote a section of a report for the British Colonial Office, "The British West Indians and British Representation on the Isthmus of Panama" in *The Forgotten People: A Report on the Condition of British West Indians on the Isthmus of Panama*. A delegate from Colón Province, she was elected president of the First Feminist Convention in Panama, held 20-21 September 1924. She joined the *Liga Patriótica Femenina* (Patriotic Women's League) at its founding in 1945. See Nicole Butzke, "British West Indians in Panama: An Analysis of Linda Smart Chubb's Memorandum in The Forgotten People" (MA Thesis, Lakeside University, 2008), passim; 6/3/34, p.11. See also "Atlantic side: Linda Smart Chubb principal speaker, Trinity Church Women's League," *Panama Tribune* 3 June 1934, p. 11.

<sup>333</sup> "Night School at Colon Is a New Innovation," *The Workman*, 10 October 1925, p. 8.

<sup>334</sup> "Night School at Colón," *The Workman*, 21 November 1925, p. 8.

Other educational efforts revealed the diversity of interests among West Indians in Panama at the same time. In the early 1920s, a West Indian Baptist minister led a group of former canal employees in establishing an agricultural settlement, accessible only by boat across Lake Gatún, called New Providence. This settlement in 1925 reported problems when a new teacher arrived to teach in the Spanish school established there by the Panamanian government.<sup>335</sup> Previously two teachers had taught Spanish school on alternate days, leaving students free to attend the English community school on other days. With a third teacher, Spanish school would be held daily, and a Panama government inspector had forbidden English classes until 3:30 to 7 p.m., when students were tired. Only when the Spanish teachers took during the brief vacation could students focus on English, but in the end students were completing Spanish elementary school, and becoming bilingual.

In September, 1925, *The Workman* reported that a convention of local chapters of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) resolved to establish elementary and high schools and a trade school, to be managed by a Board of Education, as well as other ambitious projects, and would soon begin selling shares to fund them. A young bilingual woman, Miss I. Earnest, translated the resolution for the Spanish-speaking legal advisor, a Dr. Guill.<sup>336</sup> Subsequently the UNIA founded the Colón Continuation and Model Schools in 1925. Claris Richards served as a "well-liked" but "very strict" principal for three years, during which she founded the Progressive Beavers Club and "promoted various entertainments" that reflected well on the UNIA organization. It is unclear from newspaper reports whether Spanish was taught at

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<sup>335</sup> "New Providence Notes," *The Workman*, 1 August 1925, p. 4.

<sup>336</sup> "UNIA Convention Ends With A Project," *The Workman*, 12 September 1925.

the schools. She quit in 1930, to marry the accountant for the UNIA-run Colón Bakeries Corporation, but returned, as Mrs. Claris Arthur, in 1932.<sup>337</sup>

By definition the UNIA, whether it conducted its schools in English or Spanish, emphasized Negro identity and encouraged Negro-ownership and business development, and UNIA chapters included men and women equally, unlike some of the fraternal organizations. During the early 1920s West Indians in Panama started more than a dozen UNIA chapters.<sup>338</sup> Many did not survive the worldwide depression. Nevertheless, UNIA chapters during the heyday, and the few that remained after, connected their members to others in the Afro-centered movement throughout the Caribbean islands, Caribbean coast of Central America, to a large West Indian diasporic community in Harlem, where the UNIA was headquartered, and other parts of the U.S., Canada and Britain. Scholarship has suggested that local chapters in many places adapted the principles of the organization to local needs, but the organization played an important role in Panama because it provided another layer in the layered identities of Caribbean people who lived there.<sup>339</sup> Whether temporary residents, employees of the U.S. government in the Canal Zone, banana workers in western Panama, tenement residents, native born or immigrant, many West Indians, who faced racial and cultural discrimination in Panama bolstered

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<sup>337</sup> "Mrs. Arthur Resumes Old Position," *The Panama Tribune*, 31 January 1932, p. 11. See *The Panama Tribune*, 24 July 1932, p. 4 reference to the new bakery in Colón.

<sup>338</sup> Robert A. Hill, ed, *Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) VII, Appendix X, lists 39 chapters in Panama, including in Bocas del Toro (the banana region in the northwest near the Costa Rica border), the Canal Zone, Panama City and Colón. Vol. 6:267 includes a letter from 2,000 "loyal members" of the UNIA in Bocas del Toro, to the Attorney General in New York, dated 13 November 1925, asking for the release of Marcus Garvey from prison.

<sup>339</sup> For work that focuses on Garveyism in Central America, see Ronald Harpelle, "Cross Currents in the Western Caribbean: Marcus Garvey and the UNIA in Central America," *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (Jan. - Jun., 2003), 35-73; Frederick Douglass Opie, "Garveyism and Labor Organization On The Caribbean Coast Of Guatemala, 1920-1921," *The Journal of African American History* 94, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 153-171; Anne Macpherson, "Colonial Matriarchs: Garveyism, Maternalism, and Belize's Black Cross Nurses, 1920-1952," *Gender and History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 507-27. See also "Garveyism and the Universal Negro Association in the Hispanic Caribbean," ed. Jorge L. Giovannetti and Reinaldo Roman, special issue *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (Jan.-Jun, 2003).

difficult lives with Garvey-inspired sense of racial awareness and pride, and connection to others in the migration diaspora, and globally to people of color.

It was during this turbulent era that Rev. D.A. Osborne sent his son away to high school in Chicago, just four years after the Strike of 1920 and amid brewing questions about the future of West Indian descendants in Panama. Alfred had been born in the British colony of Antigua and had come to Panama at the age of six, and therefore was not a Panamanian citizen by birth. Whether his taking American citizenship seemed preferable to becoming Panamanian, or seemed a safeguard in an era of uncertainty, or was an intentional strategy to challenge the status quo in the Canal Zone, or was by his own initiative or at the insistence of his father or uncle, it was a deliberate choice meant to increase his options. It also increased his visibility in the Canal Zone. Certainly his father, who had worked in the Canal Zone since 1906, was well aware of the constraints his son would work under as an “alien” person of color in the Zone and a foreigner in the Republic of Panama. Economic insecurities of the Depression discouraged employees from threatening their jobs with overt opposition to Canal Zone policies. That Alfred’s father had sought a promise from Canal Zone authorities that his son’s American education and citizenship would be respected suggests not only that he had learned to play the compliant role expected of black employees in the Canal Zone, but also that he sought strategic ways to assure the best advantage for his son, and potentially other West Indian descendants. Alfred would use his education to influence changes in the colored schools that affected countless students in the next decades.

### **1930s –Wresting Opportunities from Hard Times**

Alfred Osborne returned to the Canal Zone at an inauspicious time. The worldwide Depression descended on Panama by 1931, affecting educational budgets in both Panama and the

Canal Zone. Nevertheless, the era saw improvements especially in the Canal Zone, where Jamaican and West Indian-descended teachers participated in educational reforms that increasingly focused on a future in Panama. This effort evolved from proposals made by consultants from Columbia University, who completed a survey of the Canal Zone schools. The survey team documented shortcomings of Canal Zone colored schools, and subsequent improvements—teacher training, curricular changes, and increased opportunities for students—in the following decade.

In 1930, two years before Alfred Osborne’s return, the Panama Canal administration engaged a team of evaluators from the Columbia University Teachers’ College in New York, to evaluate U.S. government schools in the Canal Zone, to ensure the adequate preparation to attend U.S. colleges of the 1,938 children aged 6-17, of American citizens working for the Panama Canal.<sup>340</sup> On nearly every measure, the American schools, called “white” in the Canal Zone and in the team’s report, did as well as, and in some areas better than, schools in the U.S.<sup>341</sup> Led by N. L. Engelhardt, the team also assessed the colored, or “silver” schools, run by the U.S. government, which served three times as many students, some 6,292 boys and girls, the children of “alien” canal maintenance workers. The experts deemed the colored schools to be deficient in almost every category: teachers were inadequately trained and poorly paid, the academic curriculum offered little vocational or technical training to prepare students for work life (who could only expect unskilled work for the Canal), and school buildings, converted from other uses, with poor lighting and ventilation, were “fire traps.”<sup>342</sup> These views echoed complaints that had

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<sup>340</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 76

<sup>341</sup> N. L. Engelhardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, passim.

<sup>342</sup> N. L. Engelhardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, 70-71, 168-171.

been voiced for years by the West Indian press in Panama and by an organization representing the skilled and unskilled canal workers, employees of the federal government.<sup>343</sup> The report applauded its finding that more sixteen-year-old students in the Canal Zone completed their high school careers than in the U.S., failing to emphasize that this feat was achieved by American students, since the colored schools only went to the eighth grade.<sup>344</sup> Furthermore, the census showed that some 1,580 colored students, nearly 30 percent of the total eligible to attend Canal Zone colored schools, could not enroll for lack of space. It was therefore with professionally muted surprise that the Report found some “most encouraging” successes in the silver schools, despite many obstacles.<sup>345</sup>

Indeed, scores for student achievement, as determined by the latest educational testing methods available in the United States, showed the second grade West Indian children reached or exceeded reading norms not only the Canal Zone white schools, but for white children in the United States, whose culture, experiences and traditions differed greatly from their own.<sup>346</sup> They outdid white students in every grade in spelling and handwriting, and surpassed the norms in arithmetic in grades 3 and 4. Most grades fell behind on the New Stone Reasoning Test in Arithmetic, but only by half a year. The two grades tested on health knowledge likewise fell only slightly below the standard. The experts noted, however, that as they progressed to higher grades more students scored below the norms. The evaluators implicitly framed these testing

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<sup>343</sup> “Education and the West Indians,” *The Workman*, 7 February 1920 petitioned for local high schools for West Indian descendants. The PCWIEA annual reports from 1925-1945 typically had a section on education, petitioning for increased teacher pay, better textbooks, vocational education, and high schools for their children.

<sup>344</sup> N. L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, Table 7, “Distribution of the White and Colored Census Population by Age Groups and by Sex . . .,” p. 33-34, and Table 8, “Distribution of the White and Colored Census . . . who have been in school since September 1929,” p. 34-35.

<sup>345</sup> N. L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, 101.

<sup>346</sup> N. L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, 101. For information on all test results, see pp. 101-106.

discrepancies, which accumulated in the higher grades, as racially-based, and conflated West Indian descendants with black Americans on a racial basis. “Colored pupils in the Canal Zone,” the report stated, “can scarcely be expected to reach” [the norms of white students in the U.S.], since “colored children as a group [in the U.S.] are markedly below white children in achievement in practically all of the school subjects.”<sup>347</sup> The experts recommended increased pay and sick leave for colored teachers and especially more training, but depreciated techniques the colored teachers had developed to achieve such a record of success. Colored schools did not offer kindergarten, and long waiting lists to enter first grade meant classes included pupils of different ages. The wide range of scores and therefore of ability, at each grade level meant that advanced students must be taught with those at a much lower levels, the mean of their test scores in a class reached the norm. A guideline that teachers not be assigned a different grade every year but instead specialize in one grade, did not acknowledge that teaching different grade levels prepared instructors to handle students of different ages and several skill levels in one class. Classes of 45 or more students and double sessions meant teachers had to resort to various methods, such as group work and peer instruction, to help student learning. The American educators noted that their West Indian counterparts had colluded to adapt the system in unintended ways to meet special needs of some students. For example, they often held students back as they got older. This practice might extend the time in school for pupils who entered school late or dropped out for a time. It could also reduce the time particular students might spend unproductively before they could get work—age 18 in Panama and age 21 in the Canal Zone.

The Englehardt Report obliquely critiqued the effects of entrenched system of segregation in Canal Zone through its recommendations, illustrating that such policies were not

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<sup>347</sup> N. L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, 101.

as monolithically supported in the U.S. as manifested in the Canal Zone. It recommended enrolling all eligible children aged 6-18, adding kindergartens, and reducing illiteracy among adults as well as children, and it identified a great need for vocational education. The purely academic curriculum in the colored schools, modeled on the white schools, was intended to prepare for clerical or professional jobs, but not “for the sort of work [colored students] might expect,” or “to enable colored people to cope more successfully with their economic problems.”<sup>348</sup> The evaluators also weighed in on the “alien” status of West Indians and their descendants in 1930. “The word [“alien”] does not apply completely,” stated the Report.<sup>349</sup> Though about forty percent of the colored population originated from the West Indies, a greater combined number had been born in the Canal Zone (a quarter) and in Panama (a third). “These figures would seem to account for the desire of the colored population to remain as residents of the Canal Zone, and indicate to some extent the responsibility of the United States Government toward them.” It concluded, “. . . [those] born in the Canal Zone . . . and Panama have a valid claim to be residents of the Canal Zone.” The Panama Canal West Indian Employees Association (PCWIEA) also often made the claim that by virtue of their great contributions in building the Canal, and their continued and loyal presence in the Canal Zone, the West Indians were, or ought to be, “de facto” Americans.<sup>350</sup> Although the Schools Division implemented a few of the Report’s recommendations, West Indians were never granted U.S. citizenship as a consequence

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<sup>348</sup> N. L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, 42.

<sup>349</sup> N. L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, 41.

<sup>350</sup> Panama Canal West Indian Employee Association, *Annual Reports*, 1932, 1939..

of birth or residence in the Zone; West Indian origin or descended employees remained the largest non-citizen group of federal workers in U.S. territories.<sup>351</sup>

Concerns about inadequately-prepared and unproductive or unemployable children denoted apprehensions about colored youths in the Canal Zone similar to those in the Republic. Limiting education to the eighth grade, while also maintaining a policy of not hiring colored children until they reached the age of employment in the Canal Zone, left a large number of young people idle and without supervised diversion.<sup>352</sup> Illiteracy persisted in the school-aged population due to the lack of kindergarten and inability of the colored schools to accommodate students, which caused students to enter late or not at all, and diminished special help for lagging students.<sup>353</sup> The Englehardt Report noted it was “unwise” to deny colored youth aged 16-21 “either the privilege of being employed or the privilege of being educated,” and recommended increased vocational training, which academic programs did not provide.<sup>354</sup> *Tribune* editorials echoed these concerns for all youths on the Isthmus, noting insufficient education and preparation for employment for the rising generation, and advocated parental responsibility for

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<sup>351</sup> U.S. citizenship would have entailed paying the American wage, an “economic impossibility,” according to Canal Zone labor rationale; the Administration used the same rationale in its persistent refusal to open unskilled jobs to the unionized American workers.

<sup>352</sup> N. L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, 42, states the age of employment in the Canal Zone as 21, that in the Republic as 18. Englehardt, 167, states “It is virtually impossible for the colored children in the Canal Zone to secure work before they are 18 years of age.” Furthermore, “... idleness will contribute to the formation of habits of indolence and shiftlessness which are not conducive to good conduct and right lives.”

<sup>353</sup> N. L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, Table 9, Distribution of the White and Colored Population . . .who cannot read or write . . ., Englehardt, p. 40; Chart 27, p. 161, shows 10 percent illiteracy, based on the 1930 school census. “No enlightened nation should tolerate [such a situation] for any length of time,” in the opinion of the experts expressed on page 160.

<sup>354</sup> N. L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, 42.

their children's futures.<sup>355</sup> The PCWIEA also argued that an industrial and agricultural training school would channel "surplus energy" of the many youths graduating from the eighth grade, but that these programs should teach practical, job-related skills."<sup>356</sup>

The Canal Zone Schools Division hired an American, Lawrence Johnson, as director of vocational education for the colored schools, to implement Englehardt recommendations.<sup>357</sup> He faced constraints of funding as the Depression deepened, and official disapproval: Panama scholar Michael Conniff described Johnson's supervisor, Schools Superintendent Ben Williams, as "a crusty white supremacist from Georgia," who "believed taxpayer money should not be used to train non-citizens who would compete with Americans for jobs."<sup>358</sup> Nevertheless, Johnson began slowly, introducing gender-specific classes in homemaking, cooking and sewing for girls, and woodworking and gardening for boys. Within two years gardening had expanded to all the schools, and produce from it made the program self-sustaining.<sup>359</sup> But while the Schools Division and Canal Administration touted the success of the garden program, some West Indians roundly critiqued it.<sup>360</sup> Yes, the students learned certain work skills and discipline, but few had access to land, or money to invest in farming; furthermore, there were relatively few jobs in agriculture in Panama. Of 172 employed graduates surveyed in 1934-35, for instance, only four worked in agriculture-related jobs, one of which was shelling peanuts. The program also used

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<sup>355</sup> "The Future of Our Children," *Panama Tribune*, 3 July 1932, p. 8. The writer decried the lack of prospects for West Indian children, and suggested limiting family size; "Provision for the Future of Our Children," *Panama Tribune* 17 July 1932, p. 8, emphasized the responsibility of parents in providing for their children's futures.

<sup>356</sup> Panama Canal West Indian Employee Association, *Annual Report*, 1934.

<sup>357</sup> Harper, "Tracing the Course of Growth and Development," 106.

<sup>358</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 94.

<sup>359</sup> Harper, "Tracing the Course of Growth and Development," 103.

<sup>360</sup> Panama Canal West Indian Employee Association, *Annual Report*, 1934.

“minimum necessary equipment,” which consisted of hand-held, not mechanized, tools, a restriction stipulated by an agreement with white worker unions that silver workers would not be trained to use mechanized tools and compete for jobs that used them.<sup>361</sup> A 1936 treaty between the U.S. and Panama also contained wording that the U.S. would show preference in Canal hiring to Panamanian citizens over foreigners, a word that denoted West Indian immigrants, but could permit hiring of their descendants born in Panama; in any case the Canal did not comply with the policy, and hired few Panamanians in gold positions.<sup>362</sup> Some West Indians wanted promising students to have all the academic education they could get in their limited eight years of schooling; others eschewed manual labor or the idea that colored students should be required to perform physical labor—“dig”—or that their labor was used to raise money to fund their program, unlike students at the white schools.<sup>363</sup> The elders voiced their preference for industrial preparation useful for urban employment. The PCWIEA asserted that training should be “scientific,” useful for earning a living, and of the same quality available to white students. “This is unquestionably one of the duties of the State as recognized by our civilization for the past few

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<sup>361</sup> Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development,” 106-113, passim; Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 94. PCWIEA, *Annual Report*, 1937, p. 14-16.

<sup>362</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 88.

<sup>363</sup> Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development,” 133, cites the “Report to the Governor of the Panama Canal on Alleged Discrimination in Treatment of Citizens of the Republic of Panama and Alien Employees of the Panama Canal and Panama Railroad Company,” by [Retired Brigadier General] Frank J. McSherry, October 1947, p. 127, stating that the Metal Trades Council, the union of American skilled workers in the Canal Zone, had negotiated years before to forbid silver workers from using power tools, which the MTC deemed a threat to their jobs. Harper, 105-6, notes that when woodshop training was added, students also built tables, workbenches and other furniture for the schools, all with hand tools. Since emancipation days, former slaves and their descendants in the West Indies resisted abusive attempts of landowners to extract free labor and encroach on their time with field labor. Freed people appreciated farming their own plots, but not all islands had enough land. A middling class owned small stores or other businesses, or became skilled artisans; elites eschewed working with their hands.

hundred years,” it declared, “. . . it is unwholesome for the State to actually develop two distinct standards of culture within its borders.”<sup>364</sup>

State relationships to the offspring of West Indian immigrants increasingly preoccupied different groups on the Isthmus as the descendants came of age and needed to earn a living. Many West Indians chose to stay in Panama, where they or their children were born, over repatriation, because they no longer felt connected to the islands, or saw little opportunity there. Although Panamanian nationalists denounced the several immigrant groups in Panama, and the Canal Zone administration steadfastly maintained its labor policies, West Indian descendants had begun to see themselves as citizens of Panama. Whether Alfred Osborne had followed the plight of his *antillano* contemporaries in the Republic, whose inability to speak Spanish and lack of education caused the some Panamanians to contest their citizenship, Osborne brought training in two important areas to the Zone: Spanish and progressive theories of education. His undergraduate degree in Spanish literature had formally imbued him with the language of Panama, which his Canal Zone education had lacked.<sup>365</sup> He applied his educational training to develop a student-centered curriculum for the entering class La Boca Normal School. By the late 1930s, when the first class graduated from La Boca Normal, Osborne advocated that West Indian descendants in the Canal Zone master Spanish, accept Panamanian citizenship, and be offered more practical training for better jobs in the Zone or Panama.

The establishment in 1935 of the La Boca Normal School to increase local training for colored teachers was a singularly important vocational effort with far-reaching effects. Only the top forty, including twelve women, of 353 applicants were selected to receive four years of school beyond the eighth grade, including high school, pedagogical training and practice

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<sup>364</sup> PCWIEA, Annual Reports, 1934, p. 12, cited in Harper, p. 111.

<sup>365</sup> Spanish classes were introduced to grades 7 and 8 in 1936.

teaching.<sup>366</sup> As sole instructor, Alfred Osborne embraced this opening created by a confluence of factors. The Englehardt Report had endorsed training local teachers, at the same time as the Canal sought a cost-effective alternative to recruiting and training teachers from the West Indies; since most of the children in the colored schools in 1935 were native to the isthmus, there was no longer a reason to provide them with an education they could expect in the islands. The shift away from the British system reinforced the transfer of power in the region from the British to the American sphere of influence. Implementing some of the recommendations of the Englehardt study also offered the Canal administration a way to appease West Indian workers, short of satisfying their greater demands for high schools or at least technical and vocational schools to follow the eighth grade.<sup>367</sup> As the only faculty member of the Normal School, Osborne developed a program with an eye on the recommendations of the Englehardt survey (as had his supervisor, Lawrence Johnson), while he creatively involved the students in a form of co-teaching.<sup>368</sup> Osborne passed on to his elite students the philosophy of holistic education and techniques he brought from his master's degree summer school coursework at Columbia University, and built a sense of solidarity by involving them in curriculum development and self- and group-education. Only the top eight students received immediate offers of temporary employment in the colored schools when they graduated, but whether intentionally or not, the program had educated a cohort of able students that subsequently became an influential force in the West Indian community not only as teachers, but union organizers, business owners, and

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<sup>366</sup> Harper, "Tracing the Course of Growth and Development," 98-99. There was a good pool of applicants as well as competition for the prestigious job as a teacher.

<sup>367</sup> See Major, *Prize Possession*, 205, 207. In 1930 an elite group of West Indian employees had been forced to give up a pay increase in order to remain on the gold roll and the administration resisted pressure from the NAACP in the U.S. to hire American blacks.

<sup>368</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor*, 94.

civic leaders, who would more directly challenge the Canal administration to provide equal opportunities for colored workers and their families, in education, housing and employment.<sup>369</sup>

In addition to training teachers, Alfred Osborne also had a major influence on curriculum development in the colored schools. In 1936 Johnson, now an Assistant Superintendent, asked Osborne to chair a curriculum committee to develop aims and objectives for the colored schools, after a similar plan was adopted for the white schools. The plan for American children focused on development of the individual “to the full extent of his mental and physical capacities,” but it did not reflect the realities or needs of colored-school students.<sup>370</sup> Over the course of two years, Osborne and two other descendants, who had grown up with the constraints and social environment in the Canal Zone and Panama, thoughtfully crafted a curriculum guide, *General Objectives of the Canal Zone Colored Schools*.<sup>371</sup> The plan is remarkable on several levels. First, it followed the format and objectives of the white schools, increasing the plan’s chances of acceptance by the authorities. It established similar categories to the original, but phrased desired student behaviors as “adjustments” individual students would be encouraged to make, to attain “rich, stable, and many-sided personalities,” recognizing that descendants already lived in a culturally fluid situation, and that flexibility would enable them to integrate as citizens in Panama.<sup>372</sup> Second, the goals recognized the limitations of funding, lack of official attention and

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<sup>369</sup> “Open Forum” *The Panama Tribune* 4 July 1943, A Letter to the Editor from “interested Parent” noted that of the forty students from Silver schools given four-year course at La Boca Normal School, most were working in other fields not teaching, leaving schools as bereft as before.

<sup>370</sup> Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development,” 120.

<sup>371</sup> His partners were Leonor Jump, who would succeed Osborne as Principal of the second Normal School class, 1941-1944, and Peter S. Martin, a member of the first class, who would graduate in 1939, per <http://www.afropanavision.com/criollos-generation.html> (Accessed 8/30/12) Leonor Jump earned a B.A. in Pharmacy at the National University of Panama and graduated from the Normal School for Girls in Panama; she took summer courses at Columbia University in 1935. She exemplified the bilingual, educated individual Alfred Osborne promoted for all West Indian descendants. <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00017315/00001/10j?search=yearbooks>.

<sup>372</sup> Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development,” 102, 124; Conniff, 95.

approval, and complex problems of this group, yet offered a wide-ranging set of ideas, strategies and methods to combat these restraints. It was designed to open students as widely as possible to the world around them—in contrast to the rote learning under the teachers trained in the West Indies—but meet the crucial needs of their actual life situations. For example, developing attitudes of cooperation, respect and responsibility as members of a family, school and community, was a social adjustment that would build group solidarity and identity and contribute to the public good, a sense the committee felt was lacking among West Indians in the Zone. Responding to recommendations that educators improve literacy and attitudes toward education among the families of laborers, the plan specified that teachers would influence students to bring this training into their homes, and deliver health and hygiene information, including about personal responsibility designed to reduce teen pregnancies and illegitimacy.<sup>373</sup> Finally, this team firmly grounded the plan in the permanency and local realities of West Indian descendants in Panama, and focused on local applications. The plan marked the first time West Indian descendants not only contributed, but established control over, the goals for the education and development of their children. It served to energize teaching, and complete a shift of focus from a West Indies past to a Panama future, but more importantly, the aims would harness the colored schools to legitimizing and increasing the options of the bulk of the rising generation, whose citizenship was in jeopardy.

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<sup>373</sup> Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development,” 120-21. The N. L. Englehardt, *Report of the Survey of the Schools of the Panama Canal Zone*, 162, had recommended in 1930 a program to end illiteracy, and teach “home nursing, care of children, hygiene, sanitation, and economic problems arising out of the increase in population.” West Indians viewed legitimacy of children differently, in part based on their class. Marriages differed in style, partly based on the history of slavery and migration. John Biesanz and Mavis Biesanz, *The People of Panama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 314-16. Butzke, p. 23, notes Linda Smart Chubb’s observation that many West Indian parents failed to register their children at the British legation, which later would make them ineligible for repatriation to the island of the parents’ citizenship.

A section on civic adjustments sought to resolve competing claims on students' loyalties by building multiple levels of civic pride. The educators insisted they owed loyalty to the Canal Zone Governor, because they lived, studied and hoped to work in the Zone. As Panamanian citizens by birth, however, students should also respect and study the geography, history and culture of their native country. Beyond parochial concerns, the teachers also sought to instill a broader sense of world awareness. Whether families of the workers maintained ties to the islands or elsewhere, weekly headlines of the *Panama Tribune* broadcast the transnational connections of West Indians in Panama to the islands, other locations in Central America, the U.S., Britain, and Canada. They also reported global news of people of color, and the events in Europe that pointed to a coming World War. New state policies throughout the Caribbean and Central American curtailed temporary migrations in the '30s, such as Osborne's to Chicago, but newspaper editors had an important role in building on ideas of Marcus Garvey and other intellectual currents to develop a new level of black internationalism.<sup>374</sup> Working-class migrants and immigrant communities of West Indian origin throughout the region were also linked through cultural developments, particularly religious and music movements, and sports.<sup>375</sup>

The *General Objectives* called for youths to make economic adjustments by studying and comparing the local economic systems in the Canal Zone and Panama, and the international commerce associated with the Canal. They would get training in employable vocations and learn to perform at a high standard despite poor pay or benefits. Adjustment to the "natural environment" focused on local needs and practical aspects of the lived environment, such as

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<sup>374</sup> Putnam, *Radical Moves*, Chapter 4, "The Transnational Black Press and Questions of the Collective, 1920s-1930s."

<sup>375</sup> *The Workman* and *The Panama Tribune* regularly reported on local West Indian sports events, as well as on sports news from the Caribbean and black athletes in the U.S. and Britain. See also Putnam, *Radical Moves*, Chapter 2 on working class religious activities, and Chapter 5, on musical influences in the transnational Caribbean arena.

homemaking in an American-influenced culture of the Zone, or using local resources of Panama. It also sought to replace folk notions and superstition with basic elements of Western health concepts.<sup>376</sup> Finally, recreational adjustments encouraged positive use of leisure time as youths passed into adulthood, with intellectual pursuits outside the job arena, such as reading or elocution, but also music and sports, all of which were popular with adults in the Zone and Panama.<sup>377</sup>

Beneath the organized structure and lofty words, the goals inherently critiqued the deficits of the current educational program as well as perceived shortcomings of the West Indian laboring people and their families. Osborne and the committee set out a combination of social engineering and educational philosophy that, if followed, would uplift and extend a new sense of community, through their offspring, to the mass of immigrant workers, not only the conscientious parents of elite students. The committee recognized that the most secure future for most of their students at that time lay in Panama, not a return to islands or further migration to the U.S. or other destinations. To that end, Osborne insisted that the youth learn proper Spanish and set aims that would give them the knowledge required to fulfill their citizenship and make a living there. An aim that stressed decorous, if not obsequious, behavior and spiritual qualities of patience, fairness, hard work, and perseverance, encouraged social skills that would equally help students deal with American supervisors and hold onto the unskilled jobs available to them in the Canal Zone, and necessary to economic survival. At the same time, increasing world awareness and creating “citizens of the world” would prepare good citizens whatever their circumstances

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<sup>376</sup> Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development,” 123.

<sup>377</sup> Harper, “Tracing the Course of Growth and Development,” 123-24. Several prominent West Indian men played in bands as young adults. See, for example, the wartime announcement that Arthur Edward Gaskin, “outstanding drummer of nightclub fame” had joined the Merchant Marine. *Panama Tribune*, 26 November 1944, p. 8. Putnam, *Radical Moves*, 159-63, 173-76, and passim, notes that Colón was an established stop international for musical acts, along with Harlem, New Orleans and Kingston.

and wherever they lived. As citizens of the world, they could preserve and build pride in their Antillean heritage. Yet the influence of American educational ideals that informed both the Englehardt evaluation and Alfred Osborne, of exposing students to the widest possible range of experiences in the arts, sciences and social sciences in order to shape individual personalities can also be seen in the *General Objectives*. Like the goals for white students, these sought to develop the individual to the “full extent of his mental and physical capacities,” with the knowledge that wholesome development of West Indian descendants meant understanding and honoring their “many-sided personalities,” and enabling participation as fully as possible in a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic society.<sup>378</sup>

### **1940s—Disruptions and Openings**

World War II and Panamanian nationalism blunted the drive for educational reform and expansion in the Canal Zone in the 1940s, but ultimately provided the impetus to add a ninth grade to the colored schools. The appeals from the West Indian community and

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<sup>378</sup> Panamanians West Indian also found expanded educational opportunities in the Republic in the 1930s. Reports of boys and girls leaving to complete high school in the islands declined, a trend that was likely influenced by the worldwide Depression, and at the same time, reports increased of attendance at Panamanian elementary schools and of receiving secondary school diplomas in the Republic. Descendants attended the National Institute, Panama’s most prestigious secondary school, the elite Catholic LaSalle high school, and the Pan-American Institute (Instituto Panamericano, or IPA). For example, as the Panamanian academic year came to a close in February 1934, the *Tribune* advertised the many achievements of “native-born girls and boys” attending the bilingual Pan-American Institute in Panama City. Beginning in 1930, students with identifiable West Indian surnames received certificates in Primary Teaching, Business, Pharmacy, Literature, and Science from the National Institute. Enterprising young bicultural men and women also extended their education with vocational training in Panama and abroad and opened businesses that catered to West Indians, in the terminal cities, or out of their apartments in the Canal Zone. One Panamanian educator at the National Institute publicly spoke about the academic excellence, mastery of Spanish, and decorum of West Indian descendants he taught, and even questioned the unearned privilege of “native” [Panamanian] students. Such a witness may have been intended to counteract public discourse against immigrants and calls to forcibly repatriate West Indians, which surfaced during the Depression, the 1932 election, and an ensuing boycott on paying rents. Advertisements and reports about programs to learn Spanish, some sponsored by the Panama government, also appeared regularly in the *Tribune* in the mid-1930s. During an era when anti-immigrant discourse in Panama targeted the persistence of English and “foreign” cultural practices of the “clannish” West Indians, these academic successes showed that some West Indians, especially the more affluent, were becoming functional in Spanish and productive members of Isthmian society throughout the 1930s. Students such as Lucille Ogle had “success in local English schools and the Spanish public school” prior to leaving the Isthmus in 1930 to live with a relative in New York City, where she graduated from Julio Richmond High School.

recommendations from American educators for vocational schools and high schools did not succeed before World War II. They only resulted in the addition of beginning Spanish classes to the seventh and eighth grade curricula. (In contrast, Canal Zone members of American craft unions who wanted jobs held by West Indians, persistently lobbied the U.S. Congress, which appropriated funding for a Junior College for Americans, but not for the colored-school reforms.) During the late 1930s, the coming war increased the strategic role of the Canal, and in 1939 the U.S. made plans to build a third set of locks, which would allow more traffic and bigger ships to transit. This effort would require some 10,000 more workers, which the U.S. claimed it would need to import. The increase in jobs and wartime activity, however, muted calls by West Indian school reformers.

Meanwhile, in Panama, nationalistic political action also affected the educational environment. Arnulfo Arias, the *Acción Comunal* candidate, swept into office in 1940, with disastrous results for *antillanos* in the Republic.<sup>379</sup> His administration broke with legal procedure to call a plebiscite that voted to revoke Panama's original 1904 Constitution. Over the objections of Panamanian diplomats and intellectuals, the government passed a new Constitution in early 1941, which codified restrictions on immigrants based on race, color and language. The constitution specifically designated West Indians as unwelcome immigrants. Another new law retroactively denied citizenship to children "of the black Antillean race," born in Panama since 1928, "whose first language is not Spanish." This designation rendered as many as 50,000 West Indian descendants in the Republic as non-citizens and stateless, although there was no

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<sup>379</sup> For a summary of Arnulfo Arias's remarkable political career, William Francis Robinson, "Panama for the Panamanians: The Populism of Arnulfo Arias Madrid," in Michael L. Conniff, ed. *Populism in Latin America*, 2nd Edition (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2012), 184-200. See also William Francis Robinson, "The Arias Madrid Brothers: Nationalist Politics in Panama," Ph.D. Dissertation, Auburn University, 1999.

immediate enforcement.<sup>380</sup> Also devastating was a Nationalization of Commerce law that declared illegal retail businesses owned by “unwelcome immigrants,” and restricted the immigrants to menial jobs. Many West Indians had opened auto repair, bicycle, dressmaking, tailoring, haberdashery or cobbler shops, and similar small retail businesses, like barbershops and beauty salons or food stands; others had professional medical, dental; law; journalism and photography practices. A young group of *antillanos* formed an association, the National Civil League, and joined veteran West Indian leaders, British diplomats to protest the commerce law. A group of Panamanians who took the case to court successfully delayed implementation, so that relatively few West Indians lost businesses or property.<sup>381</sup> In October, 1941, more conservative politicians overthrew Arnulfo Arias, but the Constitution of 1941 remained in effect until 1946, causing grave insecurity among West Indians and leaving unresolved the public acrimony against them instigated by a non-inclusive undercurrent of Panamanian nationalism.<sup>382</sup> These political events turned attention away from expanding educational opportunities for West Indian youth.

Expanded wartime activity in the Canal Zone absorbed some West Indians from Panama, but also created the impetus finally to add a ninth grade to the colored schools. Before he was

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<sup>380</sup> Butzke, p. 23. Because West Indians often formed consensual unions without marriage, many of their children were illegitimate or had not been registered with the British legation in order to acquire their parents’ citizenship; consequently the British could do little for them; see also Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 98-99. One West Indian woman recalled her son from high school studies in Jamaica during “Arnulfo time,” fearing he might be barred from returning to the land of his birth. He later finished second in his medical school class in Panama, got a Master’s Degree in Public Health at Johns Hopkins University and had a long career, working at the Social Security hospital in Panama, then the Canal Zone Health Department. Maizie Lennan, Interview with author, Ancón, Panama, August 2011.

<sup>381</sup> Many West Indian families who owned homes felt threatened by Arnulfo’s rhetoric; some sold their property, or more commonly, put the property or businesses in their children’s names. Maizie Lennan, Interview with author, Ancón, Panama, August 2011.

<sup>382</sup> Robinson, “Panama for the Panamanians: The Populism of Arnulfo Arias Madrid,” 160. The U.S. refused to intervene when the police force of Panama engineered a coup.

deposed, President Arnulfo Arias reluctantly reversed his anti-immigrant stance and agreed to let the Canal Zone import more Jamaicans to work on the new locks project, but only if they were restricted to the Zone, repatriated when their contracts ended, and if the U.S. recruited also workers from Panama and Central America, particularly El Salvador.<sup>383</sup> The number of silver Canal employees, doubled from a stable 9,000 during the mid-1930s, to 18,000 in 1940, and tripled to 28,000 by 1942.<sup>384</sup> Besides Canal employees, personnel also swelled numbers at military bases in the Canal Zone. The large, temporary increase in Canal Zone residents led to a relative shortage of retail and other service workers. This need for more workers provided the economic impetus to justify adding a ninth grade to the colored schools to train students for certain service jobs.

With the Normal School underway, Assistant Superintendent Lawrence Johnson had proposed in 1936 that adding a ninth grade would expand the general industrial arts training in the colored junior high schools with a year of intensive vocational preparation for employment.<sup>385</sup> The Governor rejected the proposal. Again in 1940, the governor discouraged agitation by white Canal Zone gold workers to take over silver jobs by keeping silver wages and benefits unattractively low, including little provision for schools.<sup>386</sup> Indeed, when a ninth grade was approved in 1941, to prepare students for specific wartime high-demand job openings, such

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<sup>383</sup> Workers from Jamaica finished out their contracts after the third locks project was cancelled in 1942, and were repatriated, although a number of Jamaicans stayed on and opened small businesses until they were kicked out of Panama, amid farewell celebrations. "Lively Party for Departing Jamaicans," *Panama Tribune*, 23 January 1944; "Jamaicans Bid Farewell," *Panama Tribune*, 13 February 1944, p. 8.

<sup>384</sup> Major, *Prize Possession*, Appendix A.

<sup>385</sup> Johnson, "The Upward Expansion of the Canal Zone Schools," 40.

<sup>386</sup> Panama Canal West Indian Employee Association, Annual Report, 1940, p. 23, cited in Harper, 136.

as clubhouse waitresses and carpenters' helpers, it was accomplished without additional funds.<sup>387</sup> To cover the cost of a ninth grade, the Executive Secretary of the Panama Canal recommended that the colored schools admit children to first grade at age seven and organize supervised morning play for six-year-olds, a practice employed in Jamaica and forty-three U.S. states. The intense wartime demand motivated the administration to lower the employment age to sixteen, the age most students left the ninth grade. The Canal Zone tried and failed to control worker job-hopping for better pay in the wartime bonanza, which created additional demand for students trained in specific short courses to replace them.

With the implementation of the normal school and ninth grade, teachers in the colored schools organized to push for more change. They actively sought support for their demands by appealing to parents. Many older West Indians and the mass of the laborers in the Canal Zone had accepted the inadequate schooling as offered, or even with indifference stemming from poverty, discrimination, lack of education, or deference to American bosses. Others had been content to let the PCWIEA, or more-educated members of the community, speak on their behalf. Now the teachers themselves conducted a series of public presentations to inform parents about new or proposed school programs, and convince them that their children deserved a higher level of education.

Others in the community supported this effort. A young West Indian Panamanian journalist, George W. Westerman, collected and published these lectures in pamphlet form in 1942.<sup>388</sup> Samuel Whyte of the PCWIEA, who had lobbied for high schools for years, and other West Indian representatives, sought an opportunity to press for a colored high school with

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<sup>387</sup> Lawrence Johnson, "The Upward Expansion of the Canal Zone Schools," 50.

<sup>388</sup> George W. Westerman, *A Plea for Higher Education of Negroes on the Canal Zone* (Panama, 1942).

Eleanor Roosevelt, when she visited the Isthmus in late March of 1944. The *Panama Tribune* preceded the visit with an eloquent editorial:

. . . I know that Mrs. Roosevelt is not visiting the isthmus because of our group. The possibilities are that she may never have heard of the colored West Indians who have been serving her government so faithfully and ably for over a generation at one of its most vital and important centers. . . But we take this opportunity to honor her. . . [for] the words she has spoken so often and so fearlessly in behalf of people like us: her pleas for decency and fair-play for all. . . her interest in Tuskegee and in equal educational facilities for the colored people of the United States. We give her this tribute from the obscure and humble because she has been willing to meet on even terms and bespeak a squaredeal [sic] and equal opportunities for the citizens of her nation without regard to the color of their skin, their race or creed.<sup>389</sup>

Officials in charge of Mrs. Roosevelt's visit failed to include Whyte in her busy itinerary. Undeterred, the PCWIEA also sent a copy of their petition to Governor Mehaffey. In response, the Governor committed to fixing up silver elementary schools and double available housing units, as measures to remove West Indian youths from subversive elements in Panama, but he refused to build a high school. Meanwhile, The Commissioners, a local organization of African Americans in Panama, announced a competition for a \$1,400 scholarship to attend "an institution of higher education" in the United States, for a graduate of a "recognized secondary school or its

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<sup>389</sup> "To Mrs. Roosevelt," *The Panama Tribune*, 12 March 1944, p. 8. A report of Mrs. Roosevelt's press conference on 23 March noted she answered questions about war issues, but not Negro education in the Canal Zone. Oscar Craigwell, "Mrs. Roosevelt Praises spirit of Soldiers And Contribution of Colored People to War," *The Panama Tribune*, 26 March 1944, p. 1,

equivalent.<sup>390</sup> The stated purpose of the award was “to contribute to the improvement of educational standards in colored communities.” The successful applicant had to pass a comprehensive academic examination, and commit to spend at least the first two years of the award in a “class-A Negro college” and maintain a “B” average. The selection committee included the Executive Secretary of the Panama Canal, the Minister of Education in the Republic of Panama, and the Superintendent of Canal Zone Schools. The *Tribune* urged the public to attend a fundraiser, formal dance at Club Tropical, to raise money for the scholarship, and a year later announced the winner, Jaime Smith of the Red Tank community.<sup>391</sup>

Several other colored students on the Isthmus also met high educational standards. The *Tribune* reported on students leaving Panama to attend Harvard, Wilberforce University, a historically black university in Ohio, Xavier University in New Orleans, the University of Minnesota, and Montreal University. Other students traveled to the U.S. for certificates in technical and vocational training, at the Electrical Institute of Hinsdale, Illinois, for radio-servicing in Washington, D.C.; and Al Quintyne and Huntley Wallace, opened a studio in Colón after studying photography in New York for five months.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> “\$1.400 [sic] Scholarship Award to Isthmian Youth by Local Colored Americans,” *The Panama Tribune*, 19 March 1944, p. 4.

<sup>391</sup> “Worthy of Support,” *The Panama Tribune*, 24 October 1943, p. 6; “Jaime Smith of Red Tank winner of Commissioner’s Scholarship and Latin-American scholarship by University of Minnesota,” *The Panama Tribune*, 8 October 1944, p. 1, 10.

<sup>392</sup> “Red Tank: Panamanian student to Harvard,” *The Panama Tribune*, 24 September 1944, p. 10; “Atlantic student to attend Wilberforce University,” *The Panama Tribune*, 24 September 1944, p. 11; “Basil Lewis ... will enroll in Xavier University,” *The Panama Tribune*, 1 October 1944, p. 10; “Jaime Smith ... Commissioner’s Scholarship and Latin-American scholarship by University of Minnesota,” *The Panama Tribune*, 8 October 1944, p. 1, 10; “Colon Youth Enters Montreal University,” *The Panama Tribune*, 15 October 1944, p. 4; “4 Roving Knights from Panama,” *The Panama Tribune*, 15 August 1943, p. 6; “Gets diploma from Electrical Institute of Hinsdale,” *The Panama Tribune*, 13 August 1944, p. 4; “Gets Diploma as Radiotrician,” *The Panama Tribune*, 19 November 1944, p. 6.

## Conclusion

As in other aspects of their experience in Panama, *Antillean* immigrants, West Indians who contributed labor “to construct the modern world” at the Panama Canal, developed techniques to meet their desires for education for their children in the face of racial and cultural discrimination. Divided by class and culture when they arrived in Panama, some migrants early sought schooling and day care for their young, through small, private efforts of individual teachers and mothers. The mass of low-paid workers indifferently accepted free education in the Canal Zone, provided by West Indian teachers contracted to perpetuate the British style of colonial education, taught in English. These teachers adapted to the complexities of segregated life in the Canal Zone, to large, multi-aged classes in inadequate schools, as well as to comings and goings of students whose families moved into and out of the Zone. They also subverted the limitations of the colored school system in the Canal Zone by detaining students to maximize their time in school and minimize idleness and unemployment, and by finding ways to expand vocational education, such as by starting clubs or cultural activities or mentoring students to develop skills and comportment that would earn a living.

West Indian immigrants used family and other networks to improve educational opportunities. When not all workers could be housed in the Canal Zone, when either Zone or Panama’s public schools could not accommodate all of their children, better-off parents sent their children away to be educated under the care of extended family members; in Panama they supported a thriving industry of small, unregulated English private schools in the British colonial tradition. In Panama and the Canal Zone, families, and extended or fictitious families, such as

lodge members, took in children of friends, relatives, and church or lodge members from other Canal Zone townships or from Panama to enable them to further their education.<sup>393</sup>

West Indian parents, teachers, newspapers and organizations persistently petitioned for high schools or vocational and technical programs and expressed community objections to programs they felt relegated their children to low-paid work. A quasi-labor organization, the PCWIEA, though disparaged by historians as submissive and ineffective, nevertheless routinely made complaints and suggestions about education for the children of silver employees central to its Annual Reports to the Governor of the Canal Zone from 1924 to 1946, when it was subsumed by the Canal Zone Workers Union.<sup>394</sup>

Members of the *antillano* elite, and other activists, also organized to counteract some of the problems brought about by lack of education and job opportunities for the descendants. They planned and sought to fund schools for wayward youth and residential centers for indigent families, and they developed scout troops and other formative activities for boys and girls. American blacks also raised funds for scholarships to send *antillano* youths to the U.S. for education.

As the immigrants stayed on in Panama, and especially when Panamanian nationalists objected to their use of English, individuals and groups worked to help young men and women legitimize their citizenship in Panama, teaching Spanish and required subject matter. Teachers in

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<sup>393</sup> Lilia Wilson interview with author, Panama City, Panama, 2011; Maiziee Lennan, Interview with author, Ancón, Panama, August 2011. The 1947 Report of the Chief Quartermaster, which tracked all residents of Canal Zone quarters and enumerated any that deviated from the rules, of thirty-one people in the Balboa District reported to be living in a household of which they were “no relation,” several were students from the Atlantic community who boarded with families while attending La Boca school, which offered higher grades than schools in Cristobal. See 1947 housing census compilation, submitted to Chief Quartermaster February 14, 1948, File 11-E-5 (part 7), Feb 1, 1948-Jan 30, 1951, Box 606, RG 185, NARA, pg. 1.

<sup>394</sup> “West Indian Employees Association was formed in 1924” by S. H. Whyte, President, *Star & Herald* Panama Canal Silver Jubilee Edition, section 4, August 15, 1939.

the Canal Zone crafted a statement of goals and aims that stated and sometimes hid, ways teachers could build racial and national pride as they also taught skills and techniques of perseverance instead of submission that would enable their charges to survive in a hostile world. At the same time, they claimed their ethnic and cultural heritage through religion and music, and racial awareness through organizations such as the UNIA, transnational networks and news reports. West Indian newspapers also critiqued educational efforts and reported on successes as they sought to uplift a diverse working class, and connect an educated elite to international cultural and intellectual currents.

Although activists met with little overt success in expanding the education provided in the Canal Zone until the 1940s, their persistence in voicing disappointments, complaints, hopes and expectations for the education of West Indian descendants elicited a record of responses that eventually forced the Canal Zone government to change. The shift to an American educational philosophy, aided by sympathetic American educators, enabled a new generation of educated West Indian leaders to leverage international attention and end longstanding discriminatory practices in both the Canal Zone and Panama.

## CONCLUSIONS

Most West Indian immigrant laborers and their families in early twentieth-century Panama led precarious lives. The hope of returning home with quick “Panama money” eluded those caught at the end of the construction era without savings. The drastic reduction in the labor force at the Canal mired thousands in urban poverty in a foreign land. Only a quarter of the workers kept their jobs, at reduced pay that had been calculated to support a single man without a family, and a lucky few kept positions that paid above the minimum rate. Post-World War I economic and social instability in the islands and a banana blight in Central America further reduced their options for moving to other work, especially for many men with families to support. Nation-building concerns of Panamanians periodically racially and culturally targeted West Indians, framing them as usurpers of canal jobs, and unassimilable. Beleaguered *antillanos* turned to their traditional institutions for material, social and spiritual sustenance, and also occasionally found support from unexpected allies in Panama and the Canal Zone.

The survival of the newly unemployed in working-class tenement districts of Panama City and Colón was sustained by the community institutions—lodges, churches, and schools—the migrants had known in their homelands, found established on the Isthmus, and further increased to meet new needs. Within these cultural spaces they joined together to support the less fortunate of their community. They shared rented rooms, ran soup kitchens, helped each other find and hold jobs in Panama, the Canal Zone, and elsewhere in the region, learned to adjust to modern work regimes and urban life, sought to improve their own education and the education of their children, and fought to improve their lives.

The immigrants occupied physical spaces that placed them in Panama and the Canal Zone, among American supervisors and Panamanians of all classes, in mixed neighborhoods of

Panama or segregated ones in the Zone. To many Panamanians, the West Indians' English language and participation in secret lodge rituals and Protestant churches seemingly prevented their full inclusion into Panamanian society and culture, but their daily lives in the polyglot and multicultural cities of Colón and Panama, where they outnumbered other groups, encouraged the development over time of hybrid cultures and adaptability. Thus many people who had come to Panama from already diverse backgrounds adjusted their lives to operate fluidly in different cultural settings particular to Panama, depending on individual living and working situations. They remained diverse and developed new commonalities on the Isthmus.

West Indians had veiled and open support from other quarters as well. Americans preferred West Indians as canal maintenance workers, and needed a surplus of them to keep wages low. When Panamanians agitated to deport *antillanos*, the Canal administration, sometimes backed by the U.S. Congress and the President, used its clout to assure this labor supply. Panamanian landlords and merchants also lobbied to prevent the loss of their West Indian consumer base. In both Panama and the Canal Zone, individual administrators, professionals, religious leaders, educators, journalists and politicians supported West Indians with public or private acts.

While the low pay of most immigrants restricted their economic and social mobility, a vibrant local and race-conscious West Indian press kept them informed and in touch with global movements as well as the active social and cultural life West Indians maintained in the Canal Zone, Panama City and Colón. Panama's centrality to West Indian circuits of kinship and culture also contributed to a broader sense of citizenship, or of multiple citizenships, than was imagined by the Panamanian nation builders or American bureaucrats in the Canal Zone. This broad view of citizenship conflicted with the views of Panamanian nationalists, who saw West Indians as

having divided loyalties, rather than devotion only to Panama. My research shows how the immigrants developed and redefined their identities within these shifting national and world conditions, as they adapted to new political and economic realities. The physical, social and cultural spaces—lodges, housing and education—which had fostered this early to mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century process continued to do so through the emergence of a heightened Panamanian nationalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. A few vignettes from this later era serve to conclude this study, and illustrate the persistent impact of West Indians in Panama and the Canal Zone.

### **Lodges**

Milestone celebrations of West Indian lodges in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century offer a thumbnail sketch of the challenges their members had faced during nearly a century of combined operation in Panama, including anti-immigrant, and specifically anti-West Indian campaigns in the 1920s - 1940s era. In the program printed for its fiftieth anniversary in 1974, Mount Olympus Lodge, No. 559, of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order Elks of the World, expressed disappointment that four attempts, in 1937, 1946, 1956 and 1958, to build an “Elk Home” had been interrupted by “circumstances.”<sup>395</sup> Court Brock No. 6725, Ancient Order of Foresters, the oldest lodge in Panama had suffered city-wide fires in Colón in 1893, 1915 and 1940 during its long tenure. The 1940 fire also destroyed the lodge hall “together with all its furnishings and records,” built in 1908 by 25 members by St. Charles Lodge No. 7252, Independent Order of Odd-Fellows, Manchester Unity.<sup>396</sup> The brief histories in event programs did not identify several

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<sup>395</sup> “Brief History of Mount Olympus Lodge No. 559,” Bodas de Oro [Golden Weddings], 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Mount Olympus Lodge, 558, M.B.P.O.E del Mundo, 1924-1974. Box 71, Folder 15, George W. Westerman Papers, Sc MG 505, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library (hereafter, GWW Papers, NYPL, with box and folder numbers, abbreviated as Box #, F#.). An influential Catholic priest prevented the first construction, on land the lodge bought “too near” his church, in 1938.

<sup>396</sup> “Brief History and Sketch of St. Charles Lodge,” Souvenir Program of Jubilee Celebration, St. Charles Lodge 7252, October 8, 1944, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 17. The lodge decided not to rebuild, and disposed of the property.

“circumstances” in Panama that dealt devastating blows to the West Indian community and their institutions—legal measures in the late 1930s and early 1940s that heavily taxed their lodges, rescinded citizenship of their children, undermined their businesses and restricted them to menial occupations. Although there is little evidence of strict enforcement of these restrictions, they stimulated new interest in repatriation for those who had the means, or emigration from Panama, principally to the U.S.

The lodge anniversary festivities revealed the shifting loyalties and identities of members over time. For example, the Mount Olympus Program included Spanish in its title, signaling a move away from its English-language origins.<sup>397</sup> The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of Court Panama No. 10026, Ancient Order of Foresters, in Panama City in 1984, began with a toast to the Republic of Panama and its President, followed by traditional toasts to the Queen of England and the Order of Foresters.<sup>398</sup> Eyrie Temple in Colón, an offshoot of Eureka Temple No. 309 (the women’s auxiliary to Mount Olympus), opened its 39<sup>th</sup> anniversary memorial with the American Negro National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”<sup>399</sup> Members ensconced these indications of new, perhaps defensive, allegiances to Panama and transnational racial solidarity in conservative rituals and traditional orders of business.

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<sup>397</sup> “Brief History of Olympus Lodge No. 559,” Bodas de Oro, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 15.

<sup>398</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on A White Canal*, 61, notes that by 1921, after the failed Canal strike, West Indians realized they could not count on British support, but many still considered themselves British citizens, and they often appealed to the British minister for legal assistance. See also Nicole Butzke, “British West Indian in Panama: An Analysis of Linda Smart Chubb’s Memorandum in the Forgotten People,” M.A. thesis, Lakehead University, Ontario, Can, 2008, Ch. 4.

<sup>399</sup> Eyrie Temple No. 450, I.B.P.O.E of W., Program, 39<sup>th</sup> anniversary March 27, 1927 – March 27, 1966, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 17, Box 71, Folder 15. The I.B.P.O.E of W. was founded by African Americans who had been excluded from the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks because of their race. The “of the World” moniker suggests a sense of racial unity; more to this point is the full name of the African American branch of the Pythian organization, founded in 1869: Knights of Pythias of North and South America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

Lodges worried about keeping members, attracting new ones and preventing delinquency in younger generations that faced lack of employment. A leader of St. Charles No. 7252 stressed the importance of greater cooperation between the aged and young members in 1944, and Mount Olympus Lodge No. 559 expressed pride that its Junior Herd had produced a new generation of officers.<sup>400</sup> The Edith Cavell Society organized a juvenile branch in 1939 with 61 members, and operated a juvenile branch in every silver township in the Canal Zone from 1945 to 1961, but as families were dislodged from the Zone, these branches were closed.<sup>401</sup> Declining membership reduced financial resources for charity, benefits and rituals. The annual report of Silver Employees Death Benefit Association in the Canal Zone reported a negligible increase in membership in 1947, lamenting that young employees “have not taken kindly to the association, and can find no justification regarding this means of economic protection which has proved its value to hundreds for the past fifteen years.”<sup>402</sup> A 1954 fundraising letter from Lodge Thistle No. 1013 mentioned that as additions of new members had “not kept pace with lapses,” the lodge was unable to replace old, worn regalia.<sup>403</sup> Many lodges noted, as did Court Panama, that members had migrated to the U.S.A., some had retired and repatriated to their homelands, and many had passed on, reducing a once thriving membership to just 22.<sup>404</sup> The Edith Cavell Society declined from 1,500 in 1950, “due to non-employment, repatriation, and many migrating

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<sup>400</sup> “Brief History of Olympus Lodge No. 559,” GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 15.

<sup>401</sup> “Juvenile Report,” Program, 53<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary Luncheon, Edith Cavell Society, Sojourners Society Hall, July 23, 1972, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 14.

<sup>402</sup> 1947 Annual Report, Silver Employees Death Benefit Association, p. 2, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 49, F 2.

<sup>403</sup> Cyril S. Lawrence, Secretary, Lodge Thistle No 1013 letter to George W. Westerman, Masons, Grand Lodge of Scotland, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 2.

<sup>404</sup> “A Brief History of Court Panama No. 10,026, A.O.F.,” Program, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Court Panama No. 10,026, Ancient Order of Foresters, 1984, p. 3, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 12.

to foreign fields in search of more lucrative employment, together with sickness and deaths. . .

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Yet, West Indian lodges had left a mark on Panama. They had offered the only sickness and death insurance available to people of modest means, made substantial contributions to charitable, religious and educational institutions of West Indians and Panamanians, and introduced lodge culture to working class Panamanians.

For those lodges that persisted through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, changes marked the increased inclusion of West Indians into Panamanian culture. Founded in 1916, the still active Gran Logia de Panamá, affiliated with the Interamerican Masonic Confederation, had always attracted elite Panamanians, and all members of the Loyal King David Lodge No. 11, founded in 1927, bore Latin Panamanian names, and followed a Spanish rule book. By 1931, a new household of Ruth (Oddfellows) operated in Panama City, “its membership comprising Spanish inmates.”<sup>406</sup> The trend toward use of Spanish reflected changing identities of members and strategies to attract new members. One descendant noted in 1960 that lodges were “developing programs of integration into the political life of Panama, and many have invested in Panamanian industries;” another observed in 1999 that Court Brock had survived 119 years because its members adjusted to social changes, becoming bilingual and expanding its membership.<sup>407</sup> Lodges may still provide social and cultural programs, and perhaps a modest safety net, but even with long-

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<sup>405</sup> “Brief History,” Program, 53<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary Luncheon, Edith Cavell Society, Sojourners Society Hall, July 23, 1972, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 14.

<sup>406</sup> José Oller Navarro, “El cincuentenario de la Gran Logia de Panama,” *El Panamá América*, 18 March 1976, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 11; “Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Session of District Grand Lodge No. 40, Grand United Order of Oddfellows, Jurisdiction of Panama, 1931, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F17.

<sup>407</sup> Hubert M. Green, “80 Years of Fraternity in Panama,” 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Court Panama No. 10,026, Ancient Order of Foresters, 1984, p. 1, GWW Papers, NYPL, Box 71, F 12; Anthony C. McLean H., *Una cronología histórico biográfica antillano* (Panama: Editorial Sibauste, 2003), 198.

delayed pension plan from the Canal Zone, they did not lift West Indian workers far from poverty in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Housing**

By 1970 the suburbs that absorbed retiring employees and subsequent “depopulation” of the Canal Zone had matured into densely populated neighborhoods. West Indians had driven the developments that brought schools, utilities, road and frequent bus service, as Panama City expanded to include and move beyond them. The 1970 housing survey of Manzana 1897 in Río Abajo showed that many *antillanos* had built on and improved their lots, but time had devalued some investments. The survey listed some properties in grave disrepair (lot 22). Houses on lots 17, 22, 29, and 37 had been demolished. Lot 40 was declared empty—neighbors did not know the owner or builder of an abandoned construction. Lots 25 and 26 had long been affected by septic tank problems. Lots 11, 26, and 39 were in charge of caretakers or rent collectors. Like the lodges, neighborhoods had seen persistent residents and been affected by disasters, emigration, and out-mobility by a younger generation. For some West Indian Panamanians, becoming landlords improved the lot of their families, but many wider opportunities could only be found outside Panama.

These patterns persisted, as illustrated by a case in 2011. A bicultural Panamanian woman of West Indian descent, a national track star in Panama in her youth, lived on the ground floor of the house built by her deceased father in Parque Lefebvre, across a major avenue from Río Abajo.<sup>408</sup> The house, and its history, offer evidence of the robust establishment of the West Indian enclave, its continuation as a source of economic uplift, as well as its limitations. Several trees and bushes her father had planted in the small area behind the house still bore fruit. Extra rooms upstairs continued to bring in rental income. An adjacent building had been remodeled

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<sup>408</sup> Inez Virginia Sealy Higgins, Interview with author, Parque Lefebvre, Panama, August 2011.

from a modest West Indian style with shutters and verandas, to reflect more modern, glass and metal Panamanian architecture, by a Latin Panamanian neighbor in the previous few years. The original owners, whom the woman did not know, had emigrated to the United States in the 1960s. For a few years someone, perhaps a relative, had looked after the house. Eventually, it had seemingly been abandoned. Life may have improved for the original West Indian owners, but they seemed unable to transfer their accumulations back to Panama. The informant was not sure how the property had changed to the hands of the current owner—whether through legal sale or by other means. The informal economy that shaped the West Indian community in Panama may have played a role.

### **Education**

West Indian Panamanians who worked in educational spaces, such as Alfred Osborne and Lawrence Johnson, did so under political constraints that shaped their efforts. When Osborne and Johnson began long-sought reforms to improve education in Canal Zone colored schools, a series of devastating laws in Panama heightened discrimination against West Indians and their children who did not speak Spanish.

In response, Osborne and other young Panama-born, bilingual West Indian journalists, educators and civic leaders formed the Isthmian Negro Youth Congress (INYC) in 1942, to counteract delinquency and idleness by engaging youths in the Canal Zone who had graduated from the colored junior high schools but remained unemployed. Until the end of World War II, they provided role models and involved youths in a variety of activities that helped educate them as well as train them in practical leadership—organizing events; planning and executing campaigns for educational and cultural resources, such as scholarships, expanded access to silver clubhouses for West Indian youths living in Panama, and Spanish classes; and researching,

writing and publishing a quarterly *Bulletin*, directed by George Westerman, an influential journalist committed to West Indian integration to Panama.<sup>409</sup> Westerman promoted awareness of the students' African heritage, in part to bolster their black identities and counteract the discrimination they faced in the Canal Zone and Panama. The articles, poems and essays they produced focused on Negro history, and they sponsored a Negro History Week in Canal Zone schools.<sup>410</sup> Later, as the Chair of the Intercultural Committee, Westerman oversaw the production of concerts that featured local talent as well as well-known professional black performers from North America and the Caribbean, for which the youths prepared publicity and ushered in formal attire.<sup>411</sup> The *Panama Tribune* published the endeavors of the INYC, including a convention that united the different local branches of the organization. Several of the youths involved, as did the students selected to attend the La Boca Normal School, became leaders in labor, education, music and other endeavors in Panama.<sup>412</sup> The race-conscious activism of the INYC ended in 1946, as two occupational high schools were scheduled to open in the Canal Zone, but greater changes loomed for West Indian education and a new constitution in Panama in

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<sup>409</sup> Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 97; "400 Youths at INYC," *The Panama Tribune*, 4 July, 1943 p. 1, "Executive Bd of INYC," *The Panama Tribune*, 18 July, 1943; the PCWIEA applauded the success of the INYC and its program of "Progress through Education," *The Panama Tribune*, 8 August 1943 p. 7.

<sup>410</sup> Janica Quinter, et al., "Biographical Note," Finding Aid, GWW Papers, NYPL.  
[http://archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/pdf\\_finding\\_aid/westerman2.pdf](http://archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/pdf_finding_aid/westerman2.pdf)

<sup>411</sup> Katherine Anne Zien, "Claiming the Canal: Performances of Race and Nation in Panama, 1904-1999," PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2012, analyzes how Westerman used these musical performances, and a later series of concerts he created as an impresario, as a platform to educate West Indian audiences in black heritage and classical music, and at the same time to open spaces for mingling black and white Panamanians, Americans, and West Indians, for example, at a reception at the American embassy (which West Indians seldom visited) for one of the famous black performers.

<sup>412</sup> "INYC to bring musicians," *The Panama Tribune*, 23 January 1944, p. 2; "INYC concert announcement," *The Panama Tribune*, 2 April 1944, p. 5; "INYC installation," *The Panama Tribune*, 13 August, 1944, p. 13; "INYC Urge Early Booking for Anton [Sports Carnival]," *The Panama Tribune*, 3 December 1944, p. 5; Reports on Isthmian Youth Conference, *The Panama Tribune*, 10 Sept 1944, p. 10-11; Portia White, Canadian contralto, INYC (Full-page ad), *The Panama Tribune*, 13 January 1946, "Westerman: Negro History Week (INYC)," *The Panama Tribune*, 17 February 1946, p. 9.

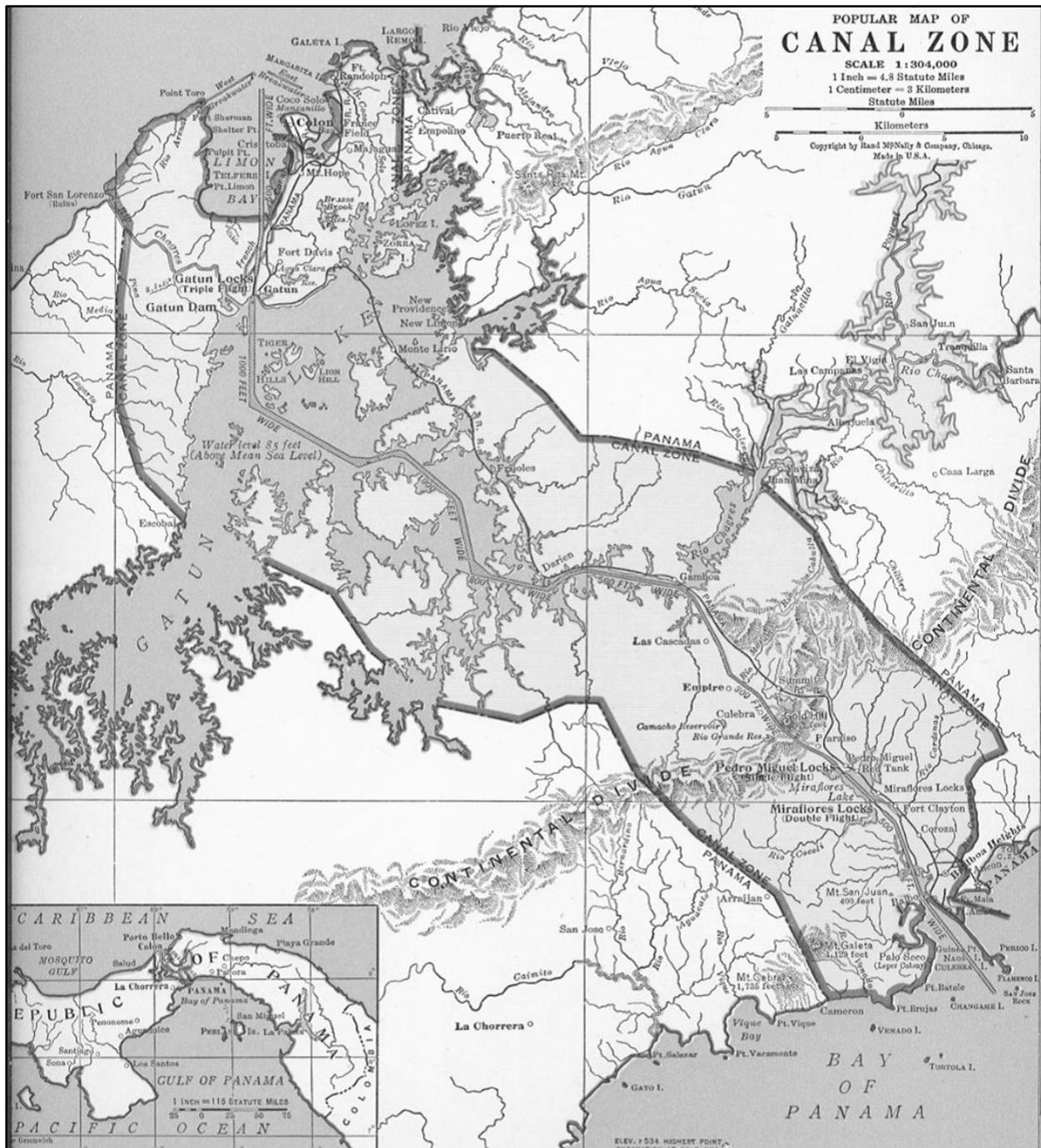
1946 reinstated citizenship for children of foreigners, although it reiterated the requirement to speak Spanish and demonstrate knowledge of Panamanian history and culture. In the Canal Zone, the INYC had stimulated interests and groomed at least 400 Panamanian West Indian future citizens.

World War II changed the dynamics for West Indians in Panama. A round of post-war downsizing ensued in the Canal Zone, reducing the number of students in the colored schools and funneling more into Panama. During the War, in 1943, some activist educators left the Colored Teachers Association to found the Canal Zone Workers Union, which signaled a new phase of political action. They overhauled the Panama Canal West Indian Employees Association after the retirement and repatriation to Jamaica of its founding president, Samuel Whyte, and Cold War fears of communism created yet new conditions for West Indian-descended people in Panama.

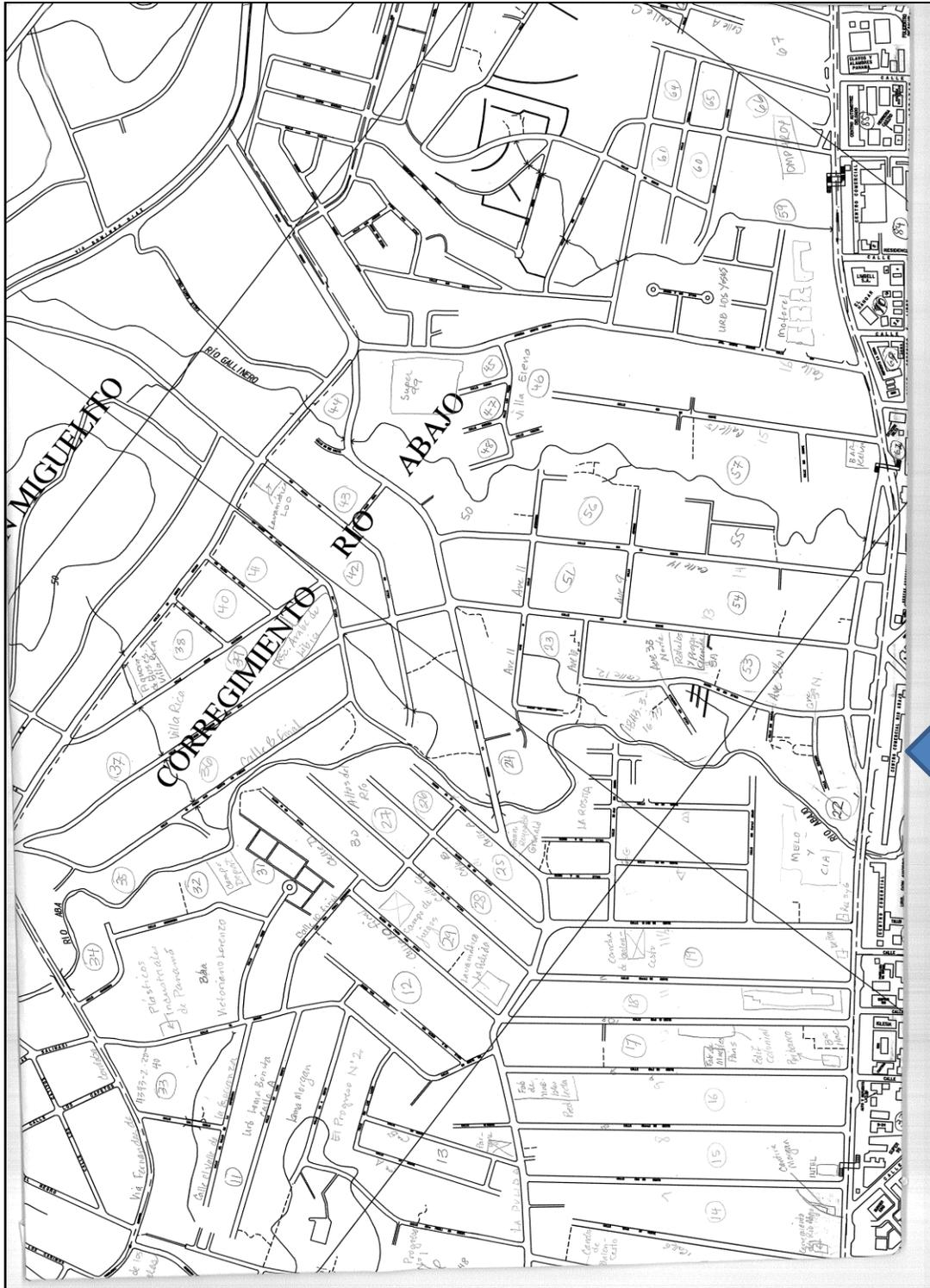
Lodges, suburban housing enclaves, and educational reforms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century together reflected and fostered West Indian Panamanian identities and persistence. The same cultural spaces continued to be important in the later decades of the century, but distinctive political and legal constraints would reshape their uses. The case studies offered in this dissertation suggest ways that interest and participation in lodges, housing and education on the Isthmus shaped the lives and livelihoods of West Indians, and in turn how their institutions and responses to living and working conditions shaped Panama's development. Cultural spaces engendered and sustained racial solidarity, economic opportunities, and educational reforms that contributed to the development of a Panamanian West Indian identity. It was far from a smooth or unified process. Nonetheless, the Afro-Caribbean immigrants who stayed in the Isthmus after

the Canal building era, found room to maneuver. Whether they joined lodges, asserted class interests, supported fellow West Indians, became landlords, and/or sought educational reforms, they did so within social structures that withstood political and cultural opposition. The processes of assimilation and identity formation for a 20<sup>th</sup>-century diasporic community are not unique. What the West Indian Panamanian case offers is a close examination of the particular physical and cultural spaces within which those migrant workers sustained themselves. It invites further investigation into the less familiar stories of what happened after the completion of the “Big Ditch.”

## APPENDIX



**Map 1. Map of the Canal Zone in Relation to the Republic of Panama**  
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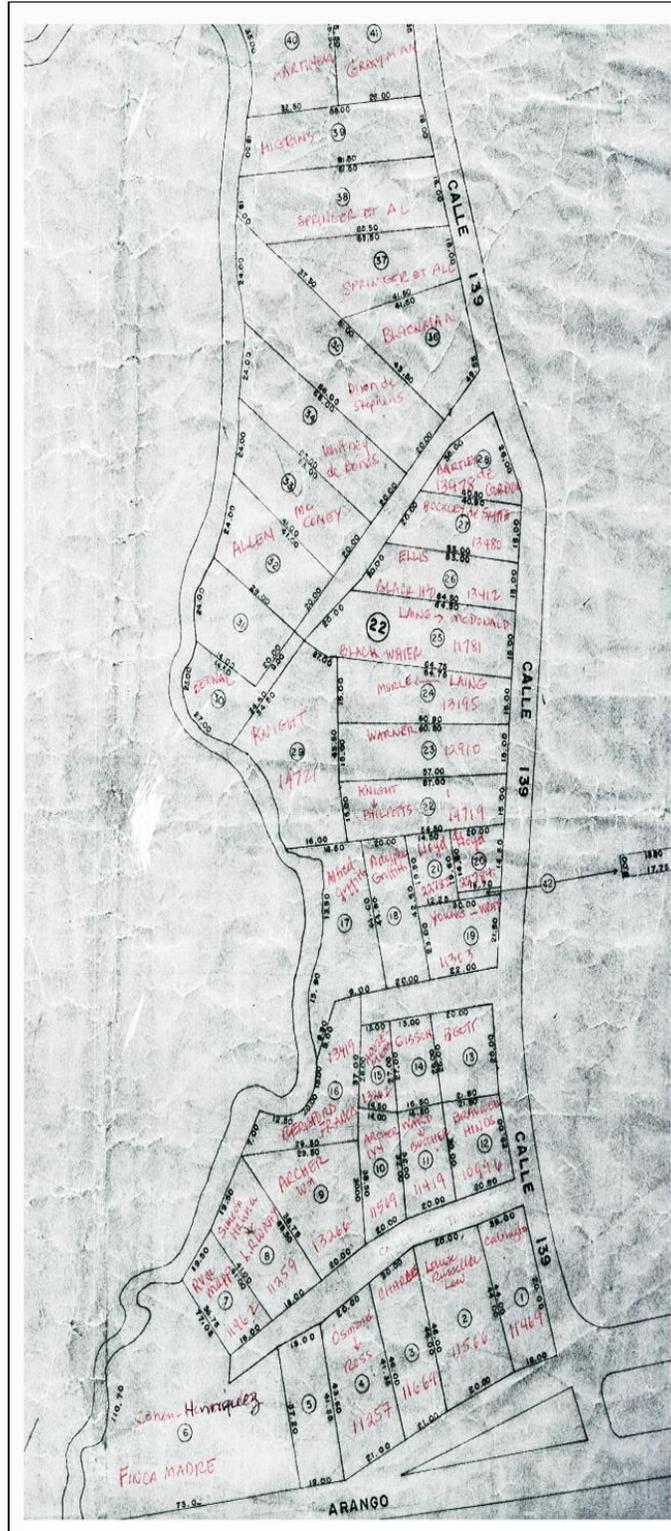


**Map 3.1. Río Abajo Corregimiento (Township).**

Numbered Streets at lower right, bordered by the Río Abajo.

Arrow indicates Manzana 1897.

Source: Sección Cartográfica de la Dirección de Estadística y Censos,  
 Contraloría General de La República, 2000



**Map 3.2. Detail of Manzana 22, showing lot numbers and owners ca. 1940.**  
 Source: Autoridad Nacional de Administración de Tierras, Panamá.

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