THE INTER-AMERICAN HIGHWAY

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Since 1923, when the Fifth International Conference of American States met at Santiago, Chile, the possibility of constructing modern highway communication from the northern part of North America to the southern part of South America has been under official consideration. Such highways would permit of motor communication from the United States through Central America to the several countries of South America. A project of such vast scope, however, may not be realized for a long time; and it was in the interest of prompt and practical action that the central section of the so-called Pan-American highway—a section traversing Central America and Mexico, to be known as the Inter-American highway—has been made the object of the first definite plans.

Pursuant to action taken at various international meetings, both favoring and urging the building of this highway, the Congress of the United States by joint resolution, approved March 4, 1929, authorized the appropriation of $50,000 to enable the Secretary of State of this Government to co-operate with the several governments, members of the Pan-American Union, in reconnaissance surveys of possible routes, probable cost, economic service, and other pertinent information looking toward the building of an inter-American highway or highways.

The First Inter-American Highway Congress, which was held at Panama City, October 7-12, 1929, created an Inter-American Highway Commission and recommended co-operation in its work by the governments concerned.
The Bureau of Public Roads of the United States Department of Agriculture was requested by the Secretary of State to make the actual reconnaissance survey in Central America and to prepare a report for transmittal to the Congress. Accordingly, during three years, 1930-1933, reconnaissance was made through Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala, the line of survey totaling about 1,400 miles. A complete report of the reconnaissance survey was prepared by the Bureau of Public Roads and transmitted through the Secretary of State to the Congress, and on June 6, 1934, this report was ordered printed as Senate Document 224. Copies of this report, entitled *Proposed Inter-American Highway*, are now available from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., at 70 cents each.

Over half of the 3,500-mile route to Panama already is completed and open to all-weather travel. The completed sections are not contiguous, however. The longest stretch open to automobiles is the 1,100 miles from Laredo, Texas, to Mitla, Mexico, 365 miles south of Mexico City.

The route is surfaced with asphaltic material for 850 miles from the Rio Grande to Jonacatepec, which is about 80 miles south of Mexico City. From the end of the pavement to Huajuapan, 125 miles farther south, the road has mostly an all-weather surface, such as gravel. In dry weather, an additional 160 miles is open to Mitla. The dry-weather sections between Mexico City and Mitla are to be improved this year for all-weather use.
The 600 miles from Mitla to the Guatemalan border consist of impassable trails, except for a 150-mile section about midway between the two points. Part of this section is paved, and the rest is being paved this year. Mexico's road program indicates that about 150 miles from Mitla to Tehuantepec will be graded this year.

The five-month dry season from December to April is the most satisfactory time for automobile travel in Mexico or Central America.

Begun about 15 years ago, the completed Mexican section of the highway enables American tourists to travel by automobile to view such unusual sights as the pyramid of Quetzalcoatl used by the Aztecs for their human sacrifices; the aqueduct of Los Remedios, built by the Spaniards about 300 years ago; the floating gardens of Lake Xochimilco; and the famous snow-capped volcano, Popocatepetl, one of a chain of volcanoes that starts almost at the U.S.-Mexican border and continues to the southern end of South America.

**Anticipated Benefits**

The completed highway will offer many advantages to all the North American countries, including the United States, the Public Roads Administration points out. It will open up a section of the continent capable of producing many commodities for which the United States has been dependent on the Far East—rubber, wool, hard rice, tea, cinnamon, camphor, quinine, copra, oils, varnish gums, abaca hemp, and others.

The highway will also increase the availability of certain unique products of Central America, such as Chorcha chocolate.
of Panama, Nicaragua's pita fiber—said to be so fine it can be spun, and the Peruvian balsam of El Salvador.

The Central American countries have many thousands of acres of uncleared land that has not been developed because of inaccessibility. Guatemala, for example, may be able to produce rice superior to that of the Orient. Many parts of Central America are admirably adapted to rice production. Yet because of the difficulty of hauling from interior points, it has often been cheaper to import rice than to grow enough even for domestic use.

For the same reason, Douglas fir and Oregon pine have been sold in limited quantities in Guatemala markets for about the same price as domestic pine.

Heavy excavation on Inter-American Highway south of Tegucigalpa, Honduras. (Photo by courtesy of Public Roads Administration.)

The Inter-American highway and lateral roads that are developing from it undoubtedly will greatly increase productive capacity of Central America. Along the improved sections of the highway, the country already has shown noticeable development.

Diversification of production in Central America is essential for higher standards of living. In the past, Central Americans have had to depend mainly on coffee, bananas, and cacao for export. With the country opened up by roads, exports of the future may include increased quantities of Costa Rican and Guatemalan coffee of the highest excellence; rice; high-quality honey; citrus fruits, figs, and many other fruits; kapok, which may be superior to that of the East Indies; sisal hemp; mahogany, Spanish cedar, balsam, walnut, rosewood, and many rare woods; forest products, such as rubber,
mangrove, vanilla, sarsaparilla, and chicle; and many minerals, such as gold, silver, copper, lead, iron, mercury, and manganese.

When more nearly completed, the new route will open the way for tourists from the United States into a tropical world with a history older than their own. As the home of the Mayans, Guatemala has a wealth of material from the early civilization of these Indians. Mexico has similar historical objects from the Aztec civilization.

Mexico and the Central American countries also have evidences of the earliest Spanish colonial settlements on the American continent. In Guatemala, the highway passes over an arch bridge about 200 feet long built in 1592 by the Spaniards with slave labor. In Guatemala also the ruins of the chapel are still standing where Beatriz, the first woman executive in the New World, lost her life when the volcano Agua blew out in 1541. In Panama, vestiges still remain of the old city of Panama and of the “gold road” over which gold and silver ingots from Mexico and Peru were transported across the isthmus for shipment to Spain.

**METHODS OF FINANCING**

The Inter-American highway is being financed and built mainly by the countries through which it passes; but the United States has co-operated in almost all phases of the work, including the financing.

In the last 12 years, the U. S. Congress has appropriated $330,000 for surveys and engineering advice and assistance,
and $2,540,000 for surveys and construction work in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. With $1,500,000 of this amount appropriated to the War Department and with an Export-Import Bank loan of $2,500,000, Panama is now constructing 56 miles of reinforced-concrete pavement between the Canal Zone and Rio Hato, the site of a U. S. Army airport. The U. S. Export-Import Bank is loaning Costa Rica $4,600,000 for the construction of 150 miles of road between the Panamanian border and Cartago.

Nicaragua is paving about 125 miles of road between Nandaime and Esteli with a $1,700,000 loan from the U. S. Export-Import Bank. Nicaragua began an ambitious highway program in 1930 and made good progress until the Managua earthquake in 1931 crippled the government; road funds were diverted to relief work.

Mexico has completed a greater mileage of the Inter-American highway than any other country and has handled all financing, surveying, engineering, and construction without assistance.

**PROGRESS**

Each of the Central American countries has constructed some part of the road. Guatemala is the first to have improved its entire mileage for all-weather travel. The Guatemalan section is about 300 miles long.

Of the 205 miles through Salvador, about 115 miles are paved, another 30 miles are graded and ready for paving, and about 60 miles are passable only in dry weather. At the
crossing of the Lempa River a suspension bridge will be completed early in 1942 at a cost of a half million dollars.

The 90 miles through Honduras are passable in dry weather. Two-thirds of this mileage has a dry-weather and one-third an all-weather surface.

Nearly 290 miles of the route passes through Nicaragua. About 175 miles of the Nicaraguan section is paved or is being paved. The rest consists of impassable trails. Nicaragua is building six steel bridges from designs furnished by the Public Roads Administration.

Costa Rica has about 60 miles of pavement and about 70 miles of dry-weather road. The remainder of the 350 miles of projected highway is unimproved trails. Sixty miles of this will be as difficult to build as any part of the mountain road in Mexico.

The 365 miles from the Costa Rican-Panamanian border to the city of Panama include about 25 miles of unimproved trails, about 30 miles of dry-weather road, about 150 miles of all-weather surface, and about 160 miles of pavement. About a third of this pavement is being reconstructed this year.

Fifty miles below the city of Panama, the improved road ends in almost impenetrable jungle.

In Panama at the Canal Zone, the Inter-American highway connects with the Trans-Isthmian route between the terminal cities of the Canal, Cristobal and Balboa, and also between the two Panamanian cities of Colon and Panama. The U. S. Government is completing the Trans-Isthmian road this year. It is the first highway ever to be constructed across the Isthmus of Panama.