

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 350

### “The Land of Abundant Wildlife”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The origin of the name Panama, or Panamá in Spanish, is unclear. The word is likely the Hispanization of a word from an indigenous language, and tradition has it that the original word meant something like “abundance.” One story holds that early Spanish explorers were impressed by the number and variety of butterflies in Panama and that the name alludes to their abundance.

Another story suggests that Panama City was founded at the site of an indigenous fishing village named for the abundance of fish in its waters.

Whatever the details, it’s fair to take the name Panama as signifying an abundance of wildlife.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 350. The Land of Abundant Wildlife.

Twenty million years ago, North America and South America were separate continents. Between them, water flowed freely between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

But beneath the Earth’s surface, the Pacific Plate was sliding under the Caribbean Plate, lifting the latter and generating heat, which created volcanoes. By fifteen million years ago, the waters between the two continents were becoming shallower as a chain of volcanic islands began to rise above sea level. This slowed the flow of water between the oceans, depositing sediment, sediment which originated in erosion of rock and soil from North and South America.

Over the passage of millions of years, the gaps between the volcanic islands gradually filled in. By three million years ago, a continuous land bridge, an isthmus, now linked North America to South America.

The creation of this isthmus was the most important development in the history of our planet since the meteorite strike that killed off the dinosaurs more than sixty million years earlier. It rerouted the world’s ocean and atmospheric currents, causing climate changes around the planet.

The Atlantic Ocean became saltier, and waters warmed by the sun in the shallow Caribbean Sea now flowed north and east toward Europe, significantly moderating winter temperatures there.

North and South America each bore their own ecologies, their own wildlife. The new land bridge allowed for the flora and fauna of two continents to mingle, creating a region of remarkable biodiversity. The land of abundant wildlife.

Animals such as bears, raccoons, and llamas, native to North America, crossed over and established themselves in South America. South American animals, like the porcupine and the possum, crossed over and established themselves in North America. Later, humans migrated from Asia into North America, and then into South America.

In the year 1500, a twenty-something Spanish man named Vasco Nuñez de Balboa joined an expedition to the new world. This expedition explored the northern coast of South America and collected so much loot from the natives that Balboa's share of the booty was sufficient to buy him a farm on the island of Hispaniola. Unfortunately for him, he wasn't much of a farmer or a money manager, and by 1509 he was deeply in debt. He escaped his creditors by hiding inside a barrel aboard a departing Spanish ship.

The ship in question was bound for a small, recently established Spanish settlement on the coast of what is now Colombia called San Sebastián with supplies and reinforcements. When Balboa was discovered, the captain of the ship initially threatened to dump his stowaway on the nearest uninhabited island, but Balboa persuaded the captain that the knowledge of coastal South America he had gained on that earlier expedition would be useful, and he was allowed to join with this new expedition.

Unfortunately for the Spanish, they arrived at the site of San Sebastián to discover that the Spanish settlers had been massacred by local inhabitants, who were eagerly awaiting the opportunity to do the same to any new arrivals. Balboa, the expedition's expert on the South American coast, suggested that they turn west, across the Gulf of Uraba, and settle the land on the other side, where, Balboa assured them, the inhabitants would be less hostile.

This proved to be untrue. These people were no more enthusiastic about strangers stealing their gold and enslaving them than were the folks on the other side of the gulf. The intrepid Spanish explorers prayed to the Virgin Mary, promising her that if she granted them victory, they would name the settlement they established after her. Then they went into battle to subdue the natives. The battle was long and bloody, but the Spanish won and named their new settlement Santa María.

Santa María would be the first successful European settlement on the American mainland, located almost exactly where North America and South America meet. Honestly, the exact location of the boundary between the two continents is a matter of opinion. In our time, Santa María lies within the borders of Colombia, if that helps.

Two years later, in 1511, following some political machinations I won't trouble you with, Balboa succeeded in deposing the unpopular mayor of Santa María. (He was unpopular because he tried to set limits on the appropriation of the native peoples' gold.) A municipal council was established and Balboa himself was elected mayor and governor, which granted him absolute authority over the region the Spanish called *Veragua*, which means *true water*, a translation of an indigenous name. At the time, Veragua meant the Atlantic coasts of what are today Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama.

Under Balboa's rule, Santa María thrived. His policy toward the indigenous people was to befriend and baptize those who were willing, and make war on the rest, which brought in enough plunder to make the settlers in Santa María rich and happy. History records one notable incident in which Balboa executed forty native men by setting a pack of dogs on them and having them ripped apart, apparently because these forty were either gay or trans women, depending on how you interpret the sources.

In 1513, there was an incident in which Balboa and some of his men were weighing their recently stolen gold on a scale, when one of Balboa's indigenous allies, disgusted with the Spaniards' greed, knocked the scale over and exclaimed to Balboa, "If you are so hungry for gold that you leave your [own] lands to cause strife in those of others, I shall show you a province where you can quell this hunger." He told Balboa of a kingdom to the south, allegedly filthy rich in gold, on the coast of the "other sea."

Balboa was intrigued by the "other sea," and even more so by the prospect of more gold. His native allies warned him he would need a force of one thousand to conquer this kingdom. He sent a request to Spain for soldiers, his request was denied, and so he set out for the south with 200 men and his pack of dogs. I guess you could say he was a dog person.

I should note that crossing the Isthmus of Panama is no small feat. Balboa and his expedition were fortunate enough to cross at one of the narrowest places, where it is only about 40 miles or 65 kilometers wide, but the interior of Panama is mountainous and rugged. These mountains are not part of any larger mountain range; they are the remnants of those ancient volcanoes.

On September 25, 1513, Balboa and company reached a mountaintop, from which they could see what they called the South Sea, since they had traveled south to reach it. Seven years later, Ferdinand Magellan would give it a more interesting name: the Pacific Ocean. Balboa and company became the first Europeans to lay eyes on the Pacific Ocean, at least from the east. Later, when they reached the shore, built a boat, and visited some nearby islands, they became the first Europeans to sail the Pacific Ocean.

The inhabitants of the region were indeed quite wealthy with gold, yes, but especially with pearls, which they held in abundance. Balboa and company returned to Santa María by a different route, so they could plunder some different communities on the way home. They

arrived back at Santa María with great wealth, and more important in the long run, with the news that there was a whole other ocean not so far away.

Meanwhile, that governor Balboa had deposed made his way back to Spain to complain to the Spanish King, who appointed his own governor of Veragua. The King instructed the new governor to treat Balboa with respect and consult with him on matters relating to the administration of Veragua and especially the best ways to steal more gold. For a few years, the two maintained a cordial relationship, but eventually the governor had Balboa tried and convicted of treason and beheaded. The location of his grave is unknown. He was 43 years old and fabulously wealthy, but what good is gold when you're dead at the age of 43? There's a moral in that.

In our time, the town at the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal is named Balboa. The Panamanian Navy base in Panama City is named after him. Panama's unit of currency is the balboa, and there's a beer named after him too, which shows that his name is still an honored one in that country.

Balboa discovered the single most important fact about Panama: that here is the place where the shores of the Atlantic and Pacific come closest together. Until the twentieth century, travel by sea was the easiest and cheapest way to move passengers and goods, and even in our time it's still pretty useful. Explorers would search in vain for the Northwest Passage, but it wasn't there.

If you wanted to travel between the two oceans, you had two options. You could travel around the southern tip of South America, but that's a long voyage and the weather and seas in that region are challenging. The other option was to ship your passengers and goods to the shores of Panama, then cart them by land across the isthmus and load them up in another ship. That's more complicated and expensive than a voyage entirely by sea would have been, but you take what you can get.

A few months after the decapitation of Balboa, the governor founded the city of Panama on the Pacific shore, at the site of a native fishing village. Here is where the name Panama first appears, and as I indicated at the top of the episode, it is probably the incorporation into Spanish of a native word. Panama City would become the first European settlement on the west coast of the Americas: the gateway to the Pacific. In 1524, Santa María was abandoned and Panama replaced it as the administrative center of the region.

The person who had arrested Balboa on the governor's orders was a Spanish soldier named Francisco Pizarro, who became a prominent person in Panama. Five years after Balboa's death, Pizarro embarked from Panama on his famous expedition that led to the conquest of the Inca Empire.

I won't get into that story today, but I'll pose this question: after the Incas were subdued and the Spanish looted their gold and silver, how do you think they shipped it back to Europe? Hopefully

by now the answer is obvious: by sea to Panama, then across the isthmus to the port of Chagres on the Atlantic coast via mule train, and then onto another ship and on to Spain.

Panama became the entrepôt for Pacific goods bound for Europe. More than half of the wealth Spain extracted from its New World empire passed through Panama along the way. The path connecting Panama to Chagres was known as El Camino Real, the Royal Road. Panama became the second-largest city in the Spanish Empire.

Although great wealth flowed through Panama, the city was secure for nearly 150 years, owing to the fact that no Europeans but the Spanish had access to the Pacific coast. Then came the Anglo-Spanish War and the arrival of a force of some 1400 French and English privateers, led by a Welshman, Captain Henry Morgan. Morgan and his force attacked the Atlantic port, Chagres, and captured Fort San Lorenzo, the Spanish fort defending it. Then they marched across the isthmus to capture and sack Panama. The pirates razed the city and made off with its wealth.

Captain Morgan and his crew returned to Jamaica to discover that England and Spain had signed a treaty and ended the war a year earlier. Morgan was arrested and sent to England, but escaped prosecution by claiming he had been unaware of the treaty at the time of the raid. He was released from prison, knighted, and became Governor of Jamaica. They also named a rum after him. Is having a rum named after you a higher compliment than a beer named after you? I suppose it is.

The city of Panama was rebuilt at a new and more defensible location eight kilometers from its original site. In our time, the ruins of Panama Viejo, Old Panama, are a tourist attraction, which I regret to say I did not get a chance to see on my visit to Panama. Maybe next time.

Because Panama was crucial to trade and transport between Spain and the Pacific coast of South America, administratively the territory that today is Panama was included with northern South America in the Spanish Viceroyalty of New Granada, and not in the Viceroyalty of New Spain, as was the rest of Central America. In our time, we consider Panama to be a Central American country, but it differs some from the other Central American nations because of its unique history and its historical and cultural ties to Colombia.

When Simón Bolívar led New Granada to independence from Spain in 1821, he took no steps to include Panama, but Panamanians liberated their own country and requested inclusion in the newly independent Republic of Gran Colombia.

But despite those ties, Panama has always stood apart as something distinct from New Granada, and later Colombia, owing to the Darién Gap. This is a forbidding region of mountains, swamp, and rainforest along the border between the two countries. The Darién Gap is one of the most difficult and dangerous regions in the world. Transportation between Panama and Colombia has always been by boat, or later by airplane, never by ground. Even in our time, there are no roads

or bridges through the region, and those who attempt to traverse the Gap often are never heard from again.

Even though Panama was officially part of New Granada, and later Colombia, its isolation meant that Panama was fairly autonomous. As was the case throughout the former Spanish Empire, the Creole landed aristocracy continued to control the government and politics. Panama is a small country, so here we're talking about maybe ten families. The heirs to these families continue to exert disproportional political influence in Panama even today. Members of this elite are often referred to by the derogatory term *rabiblanco*s, which means white tails. The origin of this expression is uncertain, but you can take a good guess.

In 1827, Simón Bolívar commissioned the first study of the feasibility of building a railroad across the Isthmus of Panama, though nothing came of it. In 1846, the United States seized control of Alta California from Mexico, and gained control over the Oregon Territory by treaty with the United Kingdom, and it became of interest to the United States to establish a quick, safe, and economical route between its Atlantic and Pacific coasts. A treaty with Colombia granted the US the authority to build a railroad across the isthmus.

An American businessman named William Henry Aspinwall raised money for the project in 1848. His timing couldn't have been better, as this same year saw the beginning of the California Gold Rush. Suddenly there was a great demand to move people and goods between California and the US East Coast. Workers came from many countries to build the railroad, notably West Indians of African descent. It was difficult and dangerous work, with the constant risk of diseases such as malaria, yellow fever, and cholera. No records were kept, but it is estimated that as many as 10,000 of those who came to work on the railroad died.

The project was completed in 1855, and hailed as an engineering marvel. It ran 48 miles, or 76 kilometers, from Panama City to an Atlantic port dubbed Aspinwall, after the president of the railroad, although Panamanians chose to call it Colón, in honor of Christopher Columbus, and that's the name that stuck.

The Panama Railway Company operated the railroad line and also offered steamship passage to and from the US East and West Coasts. The company was immensely profitable, in spite of the fact that the tropical conditions required frequent maintenance of the tracks. The railroad carried more freight per mile of track than any other railroad in the world. It also charged higher fares per mile of track than any other railroad in the world.

In 1856, the so-called Watermelon Riot broke out after an American traveler on the railroad stole a watermelon from a Panamanian fruit vendor, leading to violence between Americans and Panamanians. The US government sent soldiers to secure the rail line. This was the first American military intervention in Panama; it would not be the last.

The success of the Panama Railway attracted attention when suggestions of building a canal between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans began to be raised. I told the story of the construction of the Panama Canal back in episode 17, so there's no need to repeat it here. I'll just add a couple of quick points.

First, the presence of the Panama Railway made the job of building the canal much easier; it was useful to have the railroad to ship workers and equipment back and forth across the isthmus, although the finished canal flooded portions of the route, requiring the tracks to be relocated.

Second, I noted that even when Panama was part of Colombia, it enjoyed a degree of autonomy. Ties with Colombia were always tenuous, and there often talk of dissolving them. This began long before 1903. In our time, Panama celebrates an Independence Day, but this refers to independence from Spain. The holiday commemorating Panama's assertion of sovereignty from Colombia is known as Separation Day; Panamanians do not consider that they won "independence" from Colombia, but rather that Panama ended its union with Colombia.

Okay, I lied. There's one more aspect of the Panama Canal I want to talk about: the workers who dug it.

[music: Jorge and de la Ossa, "Himno Istmeño" ("Hymn of the Isthmus")]

Most of the grunt work involved in building the Panama Canal was done by workers brought to Panama from the British West Indies. These workers were Black, Protestant, and spoke English, which made them quite different from the Latino, Catholic, Spanish-speaking Panamanians. Why these people? There are three reasons.

First, they spoke English, which made it easier for their white American supervisors to communicate with them. Second was the unfortunate racist belief that people of African ancestry are physically stronger, have more endurance, and greater resistance to tropical diseases, which were a serious problem on the canal project. This kind of racist pseudo-science is entirely false, but belief in it was widespread among white Americans of the day.

Third, while Panama was a small country with a small population, the whole of the British West Indies represented a much larger pool of potential workers; also, the West Indies were experiencing a period of high unemployment at the time, due to a slump in sugar prices, which made the prospect of taking a job in Panama more attractive.

This was not the first time Black people from the Antilles were hired for construction work in Panama. The Panama Railway hired some in the 1850s. Later, the French canal project also imported Afro-Antillean workers. The American canal project did the same. The French hired the largest number of its West Indian workers from Jamaica, more than ten thousand. This is logical, since Jamaica was the most populous island in the British West Indies, as well as the nearest to Panama.

But the French canal project had been hell for the Jamaican workers: low pay, backbreaking work, death and disease everywhere. By the time the Americans began their canal project, folks in Jamaica had learned that canal projects meant misery, sickness, and death, and only a handful were willing to sign on. The recruiters had to search throughout the Antilles; they had the most success in Barbados. Of the roughly 30,000 West Indians who worked on the American canal project, 20,000, two-thirds, were Barbadians. About half of the rest were French-speaking Guadeloupeans, with the third-largest contingent from Trinidad. Thus, the population of the Panama Canal Zone was majority Black; this would be true throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

It's questionable how well these immigrant laborers understood what was to be expected of them and what they were going to be paid. There were wild rumors of wages as high as \$75 a day, a princely sum for the time. Even Henry Ford's auto workers weren't making that much. Those weren't the only rumors. There's a case of one ship full of hundreds of West Indians docked at Colón who refused to receive the mandatory smallpox vaccination that the Company required of its workers. Negotiations with the passengers revealed that someone had told these prospective workers that the upper-arm scar that the smallpox vaccination leaves was actually a secret method of marking Canal workers and that workers who bore this mark would never be permitted to leave Panama and return to their home countries. When they were told this was not true and that the vaccination was for the sake of their own health, they relented and accepted vaccination.

Some things never change.

Some workers brought their families with them; most came alone, hence the fear of being forced to remain in Panama. The Canal company employed a two-tier wage system; these were designated the "gold roll" and the "silver roll." In principle, this was done to distinguish skilled workers, the "gold roll," from unskilled workers, the "silver roll." It sounds reasonable, but in practice only white workers from the United States qualified for the gold roll. Black Antilleans were all put on the silver roll, even when they were doing the same jobs right alongside white "gold roll" workers.

Not to mention, some of the "silver roll" laborers were climbing rock piles and working with dynamite, risking life and limb. I'm not sure you can dismiss that as "unskilled" labor.

What was the pay differential? "Gold roll" workers were making a dollar an hour. "Silver roll" workers were paid in a range from 10 to 38 cents per hour. "Gold roll" workers also received fringe benefits including 24 sick days per year, pension benefits, furnished living quarters, free transportation, including free first-class tickets on the Panama Railway, reduced prices for passage between Panama and the United States, recreation programs, and free education for their children. "Silver roll" workers got 15 sick days per year, living space in a dilapidated barracks,



and American-style segregation in the form of separate schools, drinking fountains, rest rooms, and so on.

Teachers were recruited from the West Indies to educate Antillean children. Protestant churches, including Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and the Salvation Army sent clergy to establish churches.

Happily, after the Second World War, the segregation in the Canal Zone was gradually eliminated, and in the 1950s, the US Congress voted to grant pensions to “silver roll” Canal Zone workers.

After the canal was completed, some of these West Indian workers returned to their home islands. Some migrated to other Latin American countries, particularly Colombia. But most stayed in Panama; those who stayed experienced hostility and discrimination from other Panamanians. The Afro-Antilleans, now Afro-Panamanians, looked different from other Panamanians. And in the eternal complaint always lodged against immigrant communities, the native Panamanians grumbled that the newcomers spoke their own language instead of Spanish and failed to adopt Panamanian culture and values.

Now, one of the best ways to introduce immigrants to a new language and culture is through education, but in the interwar period, Afro-Panamanians found in many cases that the local schools simply refused to register their children, in spite of the fact that the Panamanian Constitution contained an article spelling out the right to an education for every child.

These canal workers and their families were not the only Black people in Panama. There were and are Afro-Panamanians descended from enslaved people brought to Panama during Spanish rule. (Panama abolished slavery in 1852.) Others were descendants of West Indian workers who built the railroad or worked on the French canal project. These Afro-Panamanians were assimilated. They spoke Spanish and attended Mass. Even some of them resented the newcomers, whose arrival stoked racial tensions.

The low point in race relations in Panama came in 1940, with the election of Arnulfo Arias Madrid to the Panamanian Presidency. Arias was an overt racist and admirer of Benito Mussolini, creating strong suspicions that he was a closet fascist. He spoke of the West Indian immigrants in this way: “[W]e see with horror a black cloud of English speakers occupying new neighborhoods of our main city...a large sector of our people feels the need to take measures against the degeneration of the race, or at least to hinder the entry of parasitic races as far as possible.”

He was speaking of new laws that barred the immigration of Black people into Panama, unless they spoke Spanish, and stripped the West Indian immigrants of their Panamanian citizenship, even children who had been born in Panama. They could regain their lost citizenship, but only on a case-by-case basis after application to the Panamanian government.

Happily, as in the United States and other countries, the decades following the Second World War saw a decline in racism and racial hostility. Panama has come a long way, although the country is hardly a racial utopia. In our time, Afro-Panamanians represent about 9% of the nation's population. I have Afro-Panamanian friends, and last year I had an opportunity to travel to Panama and visit the Afro-Antillean Museum in Panama City and purchased a good book on the subject, *Los inmigrantes antillanos en Panamá* by George Wésterman, an academic who was himself Afro-Panamanian. I drew from his book to prepare today's episode.

The Panama Canal is an engineering marvel. Because the Isthmus is S-shaped, the Pacific entrance to the Canal is actually east of the Atlantic entrance. In Panama City, you can watch the sun rise over the Pacific Ocean, which is a rare sight in the Western Hemisphere. Usually you have to go to Asia to see that.

The Canal builders chose not to attempt a sea-level canal, such as the Suez Canal. Instead, they dammed the Rio Chagres, Panama's largest river, to create a huge artificial lake, Lake Gatún.

Ships that pass through the canal enter locks which raise them from sea level to the surface level of the lake, which is 85 feet or 26 meters above sea level. Ships then cross the lake and enter another series of locks which lower them back to sea level. There are no pumps. They raise the water level in the locks by letting in water from Lake Gatún, and lower it by allowing water to flow out to the ocean. The Canal can afford to dump all that water because Panama receives a great deal of rain, 75 inches per year in Panama City, or 1900 millimeters.

Not to mention that Gatún Lake also provides drinking water for Colón and Panama City.

When Lake Gatún was created, Panamanians living there had to be relocated. Because it is a mountainous region, the lake turned a number of hills into islands. The largest island in Lake Gatún is called Isla Barro Colorado, which means Red Clay Island. The name derives from that of the village that used to stand there. The Canal authorities handed this island over to the Smithsonian Institution, and to this day it is the site of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, the world's premier institution for tropical studies.

I had the privilege of visiting the Institute while I was in Panama. The entire island has been left in its natural state, apart from a cluster of buildings where researchers live and work. I took a walking tour of the island along with a group of visitors. Everyone in the group apart from me was under thirty, and they were all graduate students in tropical research, or their significant others, and they were absolutely in awe of the Institute. They came to see it because the work of the Institute comes up time and time again in their own research and studies; a tropical researcher's Mecca, if you will.

We took a hiking tour of the island. I saw tropical trees from the enormous dipteryx to smaller palms and Panama trees and the strangler figs that were doing their best to kill all of them. I saw

couatis and howler monkeys, and I learned that you do not pester army ants on the march, if you know what is good for you.

I know I've strayed quite a bit from the podcast narrative here, but I hope you enjoyed listening. Since we're talking about the Second World War and are almost up to the attack on Pearl Harbor, I'll take this opportunity to remind you that the United States took an interest in Panama and the Canal partly for reasons of national defense; in particular, to facilitate moving ships of the United States Navy from one ocean to the other.

The value of the Panama Canal to the US military was never more evident than it was in the weeks following Pearl Harbor. With the American Pacific Fleet essentially neutralized and the Japanese running amok across Asia, the East Indies, and the Pacific islands, it was vital for the US to get more warships into the Pacific as soon as possible, and naturally the Panama Canal was crucial to that redeployment. Even the very largest ships in the Atlantic Fleet were able to use the Panama Canal, although to get the aircraft carriers through, they had to take down some lamp posts to make room.

The significance of the Canal was not lost on America's enemies. Both the German and Japanese militaries drew up plans to attack the canal. In both cases, the plans involved carrying bombers into the region by submarine, perhaps piecemeal, and then bombing the locks. Neither country ever took their respective operations beyond the planning stage. It would have been tricky to pull off, but a devastating blow had it succeeded.

We'll have to stop there for today. This is a special Christmas episode, which is my gift to you, to thank you for being a listener. I wish each of you a pleasant holiday season, and all the best in 2024.

This is the 350<sup>th</sup> episode of the podcast, which makes it a suitable moment for me to pause and reflect. Some of you have emailed to tease me about my long-ago prediction that the podcast would be done in 300 episodes. Obviously, I was way off, and I gave up making predictions after that, but I'll make one today. I think we are at or near the half-way point in the story of the twentieth century, and Pearl Harbor makes a good place as any to draw the line.

I realize we are not halfway through the century chronologically, but I still expect the period from 1950-2000 will not take nearly so many episodes as the first half because, spoiler, the Second World War is the last world war, and I'm quite pleased to be able to say that. I began this podcast in September 2015, so I've been at it for eight years now. I'm getting older, but my health is good, and as long as it stays that way, I intend to carry on.

And I hope you'll join me next time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we conclude the story of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Climb Mount Niitaka, part one, next time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people began to talk about the concept of a railroad line that would run the length of the Americas, from the farthest north to the tip of South America.

That idea never got past the discussion phase, but in 1923, with the automobile becoming the dominant mode of land transportation, the nations participating in the Conference of American States, which met that year in Santiago, Chile, began discussion on building a north-south highway through the Americas, a project which came to be known in English as the Pan-American Highway.

By that time, there were already paved roads on which one could cross the United States north to south, and Mexico had built a highway from Laredo, Texas to Mexico City, so that was a good beginning. In 1937, fourteen nations signed the Convention on the Pan-American Highway.

Shortly after the United States entered the Second World War, the US Congress voted funds for the construction of the Alaska Highway, linking the US to Alaska via a road through British Columbia and Yukon. In the short-term, it was intended to aid in the defense of Alaska from Japan.

Mexico built a highway from Mexico City to the Guatemala border, and from there, the highway continues through all the Central American states, where it is known as the Inter-American Highway, and there are highways designated the Inter-American Highway running through South America from Colombia through Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Argentina, with spurs into Venezuela, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil. So in our time, the highway is complete. The *Guinness Book of Records* labels it the world's longest motorable road.

But one notable exception is the Darién Gap in Panama and Colombia, where there are no roads, though people have occasionally managed to ride across on jeeps or motorcycles. Consideration has been given to building a highway through the Gap, but these proposals raise serious objections regarding the impact of such a highway on the indigenous people and the environment.

Today, it appears unlikely the Gap will ever be crossed by road. One alternative possibility would be to create a ferry between Panama and Colombia, but no one has yet been able to make such a ferry economically viable.

[music: Closing War Theme]