

## PANAMA BEFORE WORLD WAR 2 – THE EXPERIMENTAL GARDENS AND THE CANNABIS EXPERIMENT

In the Canal Zone, about 20 km along the Canal and about midway between the Pedro Miguel Locks and Gamboa, one finds what is now the *Parque Municipal Summit*, a lovely day out on a sunny day. This began in 1921 as the Canal Zone Experimental Gardens. Its main role was to cultivate and introduce into the Zone tropical and ornamental plant species, growing plant types sourced locally and from far afield, from elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Philippines and even the East Indies. While plants such as abaca (used in the textile industry) and rubber were trialled, it had been decided that the Canal Zone would be essentially a fruit-growing region, not being considered suitable for large-scale extensive crop-growing.

The Gardens soon became a favourite recreational resource, attracting visitors in increasing numbers. Something that continues to this day.

The Gardens were suspected to have been one of the possible origins of the wild sugar cane (*Sacchurum spontaeum*) that became a problematical invasive species in disturbed areas of land during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> A very tall grass that is difficult to cut and control, once established it is hard to eliminate, and even fire burns only the tops and stimulates its roots. Hairs on the leaves can both pierce the skin and dull the blades of machetes.

Among the theories on how it had been introduced into the Canal Zone was that it had employed to prevent erosion in the Culebra Cut of the Canal, had been used in landscaping by the US Army (this was the version given to me by my Panamanian wife), or had been inadvertently introduced by means of a ship passing through the Canal.

Another theory was that wild sugar cane was introduced during the 1930s at the Experimental Gardens<sup>2</sup>, as part of a study to determine the range of natural variations of the

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<sup>1</sup> In 2021, it was said that “vast areas of central Panama are dominated by *Saccharum spontaneum*: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10530-020-02421-3.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [http://ctfs.si.edu/Public/pdfs/Craven\\_etal\\_RestEcol\\_2008.pdf](http://ctfs.si.edu/Public/pdfs/Craven_etal_RestEcol_2008.pdf)

genus *Saccharum*. The idea, it seems, would have been to develop new types of hybrid to improve the sugar cane industry.<sup>3</sup>

It was only in 2020 that a report from the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) resolved the mystery, stating that the source of the invasion had been a US Department of Agriculture sugarcane breeding program at the Experimental Gardens in the early 1940s, and genetic testing supported this theory.

Another problematical plant that was cultivated in the Gardens was cannabis, at least in the 1930s. This followed a committee being established in 1931 to obtain evidence of the effect of smoking marijuana (as the drug was commonly known as at the time) on military personnel. The committee had been asked for by the Commanding General in the Canal Zone, with the idea of using any evidence as a basis for regulations banning the cultivation, possession, or sale of the drug in the Zone.

At the time, cannabis, which grew wild in Panama, was being grown by farmers on the Pacific side of the Canal Zone, but only on a small scale, and generally for what we would now term “personal use”. However, any surplus could and would be sold to Army personnel.

It appeared that the drug was not normally smoked by Panamanians, but rather made as an infusion of the leaves and drunk – rather like one sees in parts of South America with cocoa tea, where it is used to counter the effects of altitude in Peru and Bolivia. In Panama, the drink was seen as a mild stimulant, giving one a mild feeling of well-being, and thought to be a preventive of malaria.<sup>4</sup>

The Governor of the Canal Zone nominated three Health Department officials to serve on the committee, alongside two officers of the US Army Medical Corps. The Commandant of the 15<sup>th</sup> Naval District, based in the Canal Zone, also nominated a medical officer.

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<sup>3</sup> Panama is a major grower of sugar cane, with 2.9 million tons produced in 2019.

<sup>4</sup> The Military Surgeon (Volume 73, July-December 1933), via <https://www.druglibrary.org/scaffer/library/studies/panama/panama1.htm>

It was reported at the time that no cannabis, including *charas* (aka *hashish*, and made from living cannabis plants), had been found on either military personnel nor civilian Canal Zone employees.<sup>5</sup>

The committee decided to hospitalise several known users of the drug, allow them continued use, and then withdraw it. The subjects, 34 soldiers, would be monitored and studied by a psychiatrist. To ensure that the drug used was uniform in nature and effect, it was grown at the Experimental Gardens.

The use of cannabis by Army personnel in the Canal Zone was already prohibited,<sup>6</sup> and an earlier committee had been formed by the Canal Zone Government in 1925 to investigate its use (if any), make recommendations on measures to prevent its use, and for any specific legislation that might be required. The Army had not been involved in that committee, although an officer of the Navy's Medical Corps had been an advisor. The trials involved a number of soldiers, four Army doctors and two military policemen using the drug.<sup>7</sup>

The 1925 committee had concluded that there was no evidence that cannabis grown in the Zone was a problem, and it recommended "*that no steps be taken by the Canal Zone authorities to prevent the sale or use of marihuana [sic], and that no special legislation be asked for*". As a result, the circular prohibiting the possession of cannabis was rescinded in January 1926.<sup>8</sup> December 1928 then saw the law banning the possession and use of the drug in the Republic also being repealed.<sup>9</sup>

However, the Army was not happy. It was still felt that use of the drug was habit-forming and that it tended to undermine morale. The Commanding General ordered a further year-

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<sup>5</sup> It has been said that some of the earliest reports of cannabis use by the US Army was in the Canal Zone in 1916. Indeed, in Panama, the first written mention of cannabis was then, when Canal Zone Police noticed soldiers smoking it. However, it is also said that the plant grew wild in Panama, and its use was not introduced with US soldiers during World War 1: *The African Roots of Marijuana* by Chris S Duvall (Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Between 1923 and January 1926, of 454 court martials conducted in the Canal Zone, only 18 involved the possession of cannabis.

<sup>7</sup> *Cannabis: a History* by Martin Booth (Random House, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3109/10826088209053010?journalCode=isum19>

<sup>9</sup> It is reported that in the 1930s cannabis was known locally as *canyac*, *canyack* or *kan-yac*.

long study, and this reported in June 1929. This concluded that use of the drug was not widespread and that any effect on military efficiency and discipline were not great. It said that there appeared no reason to revive the former penalties for possession and use.

Nevertheless, in January 1930, the Commanding General reiterated to all his commanding officers that while possession and use of the drug was not in itself a military offence, no man could use the effects of the use of the drug as a defence against charges of any wrongful act or for being incapacitated. He followed this in December with an order stating that the *smoking* of the drug impairs efficiency and was forbidden, and that any soldier smoking or using it *in any way* would be brought to trial for each and every offence.

It was said at the time that smoking of cannabis was “particularly prevalent” at Fort Clayton and Fort Davis. This belief would be aired in a criminal libel trial in 1935 (see below).

The committee established in 1931 reported in October 1932, with recommendations that included continuing the existing military regulations banning the introduction, sale, possession, or use of cannabis. However, it also said that it made no recommendation for any new legislation regarding the sale or use of the drug in the Canal Zone more generally.

Following this, in 1933, the US Army Medical Corps published a report “*Marijuana Smoking in Panama*”.<sup>10</sup> Produced for the Commanding General in Panama, it found that cannabis was “*not habit forming in the same way as opiates and cocaine*” and that military delinquencies due to its use were “*negligible in number*” compared to alcohol. In this, it concurred with the 1925 report.<sup>11</sup>

Something of a scandal arose in 1935, when Nelson Rounsevelle, the editor of the bilingual *Panama American* newspaper, was found guilty in October of criminal libel at a federal District Court in the Canal Zone. He had linked several suicides at Fort Clayton to officers driving their men hard during the day and then ignoring the smoking of marijuana at night

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/library/studies/panama/panama1.htm>

<sup>11</sup> *The Great Book of Hemp: The Complete Guide to the Environmental, Commercial, and Medicinal Uses of the World's Most Extraordinary Plant* by Rowan Robinson (Inner Traditions/Bear & Co, 1996).

(supposedly to relieve fatigue, boredom, and isolation). Indicted on five counts, he was only convicted on one.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, Rounseville's attorney said he would call for a Congressional investigation, if necessary, into the conditions at Army posts in the Canal Zone. However, nothing appears to have come of this threat.

I have found no indication in a report on health issues in the Army's Panama Canal Department during World War 2 that indicates that cannabis was a particular problem, at least from the perspective of the health authorities.<sup>13</sup> Alcohol and venereal diseases, at least affecting the activity of US Army and Navy personnel in the Republic, were far greater problems for the Canal Zone and US forces' authorities.

In 1963, a report from the UN, a review of the majority of scientific papers published on cannabis over the previous 25 years<sup>14</sup>, cited the investigations undertaken in the Canal Zone between the wars. It commented that –

*"In the Army Panama Canal Zone investigation there had apparently been complaints by unit commanders about delinquency or unsoldierly conduct on the part of some users, but the medical commission, after a year's study, thought that these qualities could be adequately accounted for by the fact that "a large proportion of the delinquents are morons or psychopaths " independently of their taking the drug".<sup>15</sup>*

It also noted that the investigations has concluded that –

*"there is no evidence that marihuana as grown here [i.e. in the Canal Zone] is a habit-forming drug in the sense in which the term is applied to alcohol, opium, cocaine, etc [and that] no recommendations for further legislative action to prevent the sale or use of marihuana are deemed advisable".<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Relating to allegations against Colonel James V Heidt, commander of the Fort. Also named in another count had been the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department, Major General Harold B Fiske. The District Attorney had decided against proceeding with three of the charges, brought by other officials in the Canal Zone. See also: <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/jvheidt.htm>

<sup>13</sup> *Prevention of Disease in the United States Army during World War II: the Panama Canal Department, 1 January 1940 to 1 October 1945 (Volume 1)* via the US National Library of Medicine.

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/bulletin/bulletin\\_1963-01-01\\_1\\_page004.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/bulletin/bulletin_1963-01-01_1_page004.html)

<sup>15</sup> *Marihuana smoking in Panama* by JF Siler et al (*The Military Surgeon*, 1933).

<sup>16</sup> *Marihuana smoking in Panama* by JF Siler et al (*The Military Surgeon*, 1933).

The Canal Zone investigation yielded no report of a psychosis arising over a 1-year period from what might be estimated to be 500 users.

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