

'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Twelve: Managua, Nicaragua

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Back in 1946, an American songwriter named Albert Gamse, famous for the words to the anthem "Hail to the Chief!", penned the lyrics to a little ditty called "Managua, Nicaragua". Albert may have had a bit of Latin blood because he also wrote "Chantez, Chantez" (= 'Sing, Sing': ok, it's Andorran), "Miami Beach Rhumba" and the English lyrics to the classic "Amapola".

Go back another 100 years, specifically to 1838, and a newly-independent Republic of Nicaragua was born out of the short-lived Federal Republic of Central America. See if this sounds familiar. Residents of the two major cities, León and Granada, vied for prominence. To dampen this rivalry, Managua, equidistant between the two, was named the capital city in 1852. Yes, something of a blueprint for early-federated Australia.



Reproduced from Cassell's New Atlas, Fifth Edition, May 1930, Cassell & Co, London
(Extract from Plate 139, Central America).

It might be hard to believe today, but there was a time when the United States pursued a policy of international isolationism. That changed with a victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898. The famous image of soon-to-be-President Teddy Roosevelt riding at the head of his 'rough riders' up Cuba's San Juan Hill has inspired generations of Americans to see themselves as 'Defenders of Democracy' all over the globe.

It seemed only natural, then, that the newly expansionist United States would take care of building the long-anticipated shipping canal across Central America.

Initially, the plan was to blast a waterway across Nicaragua which, from an engineering perspective, had some merit, not

least because half the proposed distance was an existing lake. However, there had been two French attempts to build such a canal across the Panamanian Isthmus that joins the continents of North and South America. It was suggested to the Americans that they buy-out the bankrupted French interests. The price was \$US100,000,000.

But the Nicaraguan plan had gained momentum, causing the French to quickly drop their price by a whopping 60%, to \$US40,000,000.

That is when "diplomacy", for want of a better word, came to the fore. The native Panamanians were beginning to foment a revolt against their Colombian masters. To shore up their position, Colombia offered America a renewable lease in perpetuity for the bargain price of \$US10,000,000 to allow the Gringos to build the proposed canal across Panama.

Still hopeful of an unlikely payday, the French suggested to Washington that, if America were to "assist" the Panamanian cause, a grateful Panama would grant a perpetual concession to the States. This was an invitation that now-President and quasi-emperor Teddy Roosevelt could not ignore.

Without bothering with Congressional niceties, he announced his support for the independence movement, and signed a treaty with the Panamanians on the same terms as had been negotiated with Colombia. On 2 November 1903, Roosevelt positioned US warships to prevent Colombia's meagre forces moving against the rebels. The next day, Panama declared its independence. (If something seems wrong with this chronology, add in the fact that the US had shipped men and construction equipment to Panama even before America acquired the rights to build the canal there.)

A surprise to Roosevelt and his local lackeys was that many Panamanians objected to the canal deal, which they rightly regarded as an infringement on their newly-won sovereignty. Back home, commentators condemned Roosevelt for what they called an act of war against Colombia. The venerable *New York Times* railed against this "act of sordid conquest".

Unfazed, Roosevelt made the Republic of Panama a protectorate of the United States! Any future hostile act by Colombia, or anyone else for that matter, would be suppressed by the American military.

Just to wrap up this part of the story: In 1904 America did purchase the interests and equipment of the failed French consortium, including the Panama Railroad for \$US40,000,000 of which three-quarters related to excavations already completed, amounting to compensation to the French of about \$1 per cubic yard. In 1921, the US agreed to pay reparations

of \$US25,000,000 to Colombia, and Colombia formally recognised Panama's independence.

And, by 1914, America had its canal.

Through all this, America had maintained an interest in the affairs of Nicaragua, which had elected a President who was unimpressed with America and its high-self-serving diplomacy in the region. In 1909, to "protect American interests in the region", the US supported anti-government revolutionaries in Nicaragua. In Managua, the President resigned, but instability remained. So, three years later, America very reluctantly (yes, my tongue is firmly planted in my cheek) agreed to a governmental request to intervene.

Washington did a bit more than that. From 1912, Nicaragua was effectively under foreign occupation, administered by the United States Marine Corps! Never popular with the locals, the Americans were forced out, but only in 1933. The country's subsequent path featured terrorism, espionage, and covert operations by America's CIA, with such well-known names as President Somoza, the Sandinistas and the Contras having starring roles in decades of mass-murder, insurrection, torture on an industrial scale, and economic sabotage.

At least during the American Occupation, Nicaragua had enjoyed relatively peaceful times. Managua became a prosperous city and home to numerous foreign nationals, many of whom had fled an increasingly unsettled post-war Europe that was plagued with political division and rampant inflation.



Our featured cover on this occasion is addressed to "Senor Karl Hummel" – a typically Austrian name – who might be expected to have been one of the thousands of recently-arrived émigrés. However, this Karl Hummel was an American who worked for the Central American Mission in Managua.

We can only speculate who in Australia might have been corresponding with a US citizen living in Central America. I believe, with some degree of confidence, that the sender was probably aware of Hummel's mission work. The fact the envelope was registered suggests that it may have contained a donation, probably in banknotes, to support the work of the Mission.

Certainly, the envelope and its enclosure(s) attracted some unwanted attention in the course of its travels. As can be seen, the cover has been unceremoniously ripped-open with two more-or-less horizontal tears right across the face. In all likelihood, the precious contents were extracted by the misanthrope who sought to destroy what had been a beautiful item of postal history.

This is a famous cover that first came to my attention when it

featured on the front cover of Rodney Perry's auction catalogue of 14 June 2001 [1]. Offered under 'Kangaroo Issues', the description as a "Dramatic item for a Kangaroo or KGV exhibit aside from the obvious Postal History connotations", reveals this was from the time before Rod had fully converted from being stamp-centric to cover-obsessed. It sold for \$3,220 (including 15% buyer's premium) to my long-time client and friend, Kevin Nelson from Sydney.

It next appeared at auction when I sold Kevin's four-times International Gold Medal Exhibit 'Commonwealth of Australia Postal History 1901-1941' on 27 November 2010. The description was essentially the same as in the Perry catalogue, but the emphasis had shifted dramatically with the addition of route and rate information and, importantly, both sides of the cover were illustrated in the catalogue [2]. On this occasion, it sold for \$4,600, to a relative newcomer to the field...me!

Literally only three weeks before the end of World War I, the foreign letter rate of 2½d per half-ounce had been supplemented by a war tax of ½d per article. Then from 1 October 1920, the war tax was abolished but absorbed into the new letter rate of 4d per ounce (plus 2d for each additional ounce, not relevant here), effectively a slight reduction for what was previously a double-rate letter. This rate was current for exactly three years, being reduced in real terms on 1 October 1923 to 3d per ounce (plus 1½d for each additional ounce). The additional 3d for registration was a constant from 1891 to 1949(!), making it our longest unaltered postal rate or fee [3].

Posted at Rialto Post Office in the Melbourne CBD on 28JE23 – so, late in the 4d period – it was processed on the same day at the General Post Office (situated from 1917 at the ugly red-brick Spencer Street Mail Exchange, not at the impressive 1880s stone edifice in Elizabeth Street, to which the GPO function was eventually re-transferred in 1965).

It is fortunate that the roneo'd advice label that covers virtually the whole of the reverse has been partly lifted to reveal what happened next.

There has never been a direct mail route between Australia and Nicaragua. At the time, in the 1920s, it was routine for letter mail for America and beyond to be sent first to London for on-forwarding. However, the Seattle transit backstamp of JUL/30/1923 indicates carriage to the east, across the Pacific Ocean.

It might be expected that from Seattle the on-forwarding would be again by ship south to Nicaragua. However, there is a New Orleans backstamp of AUG/4/1923 that proves carriage across the continent. Domestic air mail in the United States was well-developed by 1923 but the five-day transit time indicates that the cover was forwarded by rail.



Again, it might be expected that, from New Orleans, onward transmission would be directly to the east coast of Nicaragua. But, again, no. Instead, the mail was sent from Louisiana to Panama, specifically to and through the Canal, back to the Pacific coast of Central America.

This is where the adhesive label on the reverse of the cover is worth its weight in gold! Advice is given that the mail: 1) was forwarded, on “August 8, 1923”; 2) “per steamship HEREDIA”; and 3) explaining the damage to the cover, that “This piece of mail was included in a rifled dispatch [*sic*] of registered articles from New Orleans La”.

I have re-ordered the text to highlight the apparent ambiguity here. The initial impression created by the label is that the “rifling” occurred at New Orleans, and that mail was forwarded from there in damaged condition. However, if that were the case, firstly the post office staff at New Orleans would have applied their own instructional label or cachet and, secondly, the mail would hardly have been *en route* to Panama almost immediately after arriving at New Orleans.



“SS Heredia after smash-up with SS Parisian and SS Theo. Weems”. Reproduced by permission “billstuff’s booth”: <https://www.bonanza.com/listings/SS-Heredia-Antique-Photo-Collision-with-SS-Parisian-SS-Theodore-Weems/1133745128> [This image from a pre-WWII incident unrelated to the sinking by the U-Boat in 1942.]

No, the egregious assault on our subject cover occurred on the High Seas, aboard the SS *Heredia*, a rather tired coastal steamer launched in 1908. (I was unable to find any information about the incident aboard the ship but did learn that *Heredia* finally made the headlines, in 1942, when *en route* from Puerto Barrios in Guatemala to New Orleans, it was torpedoed and sunk by German U-Boat U-506 off the Louisiana coast.)

I suggest that the plain repair tape across the face of the cover was applied aboard the ship, probably by the purser. The numeral “3246” is taken from the original red registration label

affixed at Rialto. “3560” is probably the registration number assigned in America, also transcribed from the face of the cover.

An interesting element of the 1923 voyage from New Orleans is that the *Heredia* apparently passed through the Panama Canal without first landing the mail at Cristobal (now absorbed into Colon), on the Atlantic coast. Being registered, the cover would have been at least backstamped there, but that did not occur.

Instead, and probably because Balboa Heights was the administrative ‘capital’ of the Canal Zone, the mail was landed at Balboa, at the Pacific end of the canal, where it was first datestamped ‘BALBOA CZ/AUG/21/1923/REGISTERED’. It was then transferred to the chief post office at Balboa Heights where three examples of the ‘BUREAU OF POSTS/OFFICIALLY SEALED/THE PANAMA CANAL’ label (Scott Specialized Catalog #OX3, 1917) were affixed. This is also where the roneo’d label was prepared and affixed with the facsimile signature of the Director of Posts “CH Calhoun” [4] and with the ‘BALBOA HGTS CZ/AUG/21/1923/REGISTERED’ datestamp applied (note the inverted day-slug).

What is not clear is why the Canal Zone datestamps are 13 days after the *Heredia*’s departure from New Orleans. It is likely that the ship’s route was along the Central American coast, probably with stops at a number of intermediate ports in one or more of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

The final piece of the postal history story is the two largely-indistinct datestamps of 29/AGO in black and AGO/30 in violet (Agosto being the Spanish word for August), almost certainly being receipt and despatch markings at Managua, following a final sea voyage north-west along the coast of Panama and Costa Rica, to destination. The addressee, Karl Hummel, was probably well-enough known that the simple address was sufficient.

Remember the lyricist Albert Gamse, whom we met at the beginning of this piece? Let us allow him to poetically sum up the mood in this Central American paradise:

Managua, Nicaragua, what a wonderful spot: There's coffee and bananas and a temperature hot. So take a trip on a ship and go sailing away 'Cross the agua, to Managua, Nicaragua, olé!

Personally, I am very glad that my cover was not sent, as common sense might have dictated, from Seattle by sea to Nicaragua. Then, it would not have been aboard the *Heredia* when a light-fingered miscreant ripped it open, nor in the Canal Zone where it was so diligently repaired and a concise explanation of events supplied.

It would still have been to a great destination and would surely have been far more pleasing to the eye of the connoisseur. However, it would have lacked the character, and the back-story, that make it one of My Favourite Things.

References & notes

[1] Rodney A Perry Auction Galleries, Auction Number 208, 14.6.2001, Lot 237 at page 14, self-published.

[2] Prestige Philately, Auction Number 160, 27.11.2010, Lot 1101 at page 43, self-published.

[3] “Australian Commonwealth Postal Rates 1901-1966, Part 1: Letters & Postcards” by Richard Breckon, in the *Australian Philatelist* (Nov-Dec 1987) at pages 4-9, published by B&K Philatelic Publishing (Melbourne) This series remains the most important reference on the subject.

[4] The signature seems to read “CH Calhome” but I have confirmed that the fifth Director-General was Crede H Calhoun.