

Yates man Fernando Wickham employed with Panama Canal project

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On occasion, I stumble across rather interesting photographs that grab my attention. Either the image itself is intriguing or the inscription contains a fascinating tidbit of information. While uncovering a box of photographs and albums, I discovered an image with the inscription "F. J. Wickham Lyndonville, N.Y. this man went to Panama and helped build the Panama Canal."

So who was Mr. F.J. Wickham and how did he end up in Panama?

Born to Samuel Kenyon Wickham in Yates, Jeremiah Fernando Wickham grew up in Orleans County with his brothers George and Dewitt working the family farm and attending the district schools of the area. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, both Dewitt and Jeremiah enlisted with the 8th New York Heavy Artillery. Jeremiah, however, despised his first name (his grandfather's name) and elected to enlist under his middle name. He served the duration of the war while earning the rank of corporal, his brother, Dewitt, rising to the rank of lieutenant.

After the war, the brothers had a falling out over a business decision, which proved problematic for Fernando



Fernando Wickham

when applying for his pension. Using his middle name to enlist instead of his first, he was required to provide a deposition proving who he was, which he requested of his brother, who then refused to do so; that is, until a special investigator showed up at his home to request it. Fernando returned to Yates, where he lived on the county line, working as a carpenter by trade. His military service helped earn employment with the U.S. government, working as an inspector of the shores of Lake Ontario up until the 1890s, when he was employed as a breakwater inspector in Buffalo.

The specifics regarding his employment with the Inter-

state Commerce Commission (ICC) are unknown, but in 1905, he was sent to Colón, Panama as a superintendent on the Panama Canal project. The 48-mile-wide canal, started in 1881 by the French was an expansive project taken over by the U.S. in 1904 when President Theodore Roosevelt oversaw the purchase of the Panama Railroad and French excavation equipment at a cost of \$40 million.

Upon his arrival, Wickham wrote home to describe his trip to this foreign area. The ship departed New York City on June 21, 1905, with 40 passengers on board, most traveling with the ICC. While traveling to Cuba, he recalled seeing a "nearly fifty-foot whale" and a school of porpoise that traveled with the ship for a few hundred yards. The arrival of the vessel at the Port of Colón was startling, as the conditions of the town were extremely poor.

Any available space in the town was taken up by the machinery left by the French when they abandoned the project in 1894, most of it was deteriorated and unusable. Wickham remarked, "You could not conceive the amount [of equipment] unless you could see it, and then I do not think a person could." He went on to say, "It was won-

derful the amount the French laid out here to abandon, and the small results accomplished with the outlay."

Wickham was stationed with the architectural department and charged with overseeing the repair of buildings constructed by the French during the previous two decades. It is likely that his work as a carpenter prepared him for this type of employment. Many U.S. papers published stories about the horrors of life in Panama, the terrible health conditions and poor living conditions. Wickham remarked that many men arrived with the expectation of minimal work and high pay, but arrived to find the opposite. Young men were frequently disappointed by the lack of recreational activities; the typical day consisting of work followed by sleep with no time for anything else.

He concluded his letter by writing that his health was good, but that he had already lost some weight, which he said, "I could afford to do that, for I was most too fleshy when I came away." His wife, Anna Gray Wickham, remained in Orleans County with their daughters and upon his return, the family relocated to Pasadena, Calif., where Fernando died in March 1923.