

Dorã Pacifica had designed – now strung from balconies and lampposts in Alajuela's tiny streets and town square in the breeze of an immaculately clear Costa Rican day – showed the nation's problem: at the banner's centre was a broad horizontal stripe in red, for the sun that warmed the mesa on which nearly all Costa Ricans lived. The white bands around it were for the mid-afternoon clouds that brought the rain to irrigate its rich volcanic soil. The blue stripes at the outer edges represented Costa Rica's Pacific and Atlantic coasts.

The Pacific was fine: it had a port. From there, Costa Rica's coffee went out to the world. The trouble was that both the coffee and any wealthy Costa Ricans bound for the east coast of the United States and Europe had to sail around the perilous Cape Horn. The journey, if completed, took months. The only alternative was the railroad across Panama, built by the US for the gold rush in the 1850s and its ranshackle carriages still full of the roughnecks that followed in its path.

In 1502, on his fourth voyage, Columbus had landed on the Atlantic coast and called it 'Costa Rica', the 'rich coast'. It was an act of wishful thinking. He had to report back to his patrons at home, to whom he had oversold the goods on offer; 'lands of vanity and delusion' they were calling them. Columbus left Costa Rica for the most miserable stage of his voyages yet, his fleet tramping the coast in northerly storms looking for what he imagined might be a sea passage through to China. He turned for home racked with arthritis and with his ships being eaten by seaworms.

Costa Rica's large Atlantic province of Limón remained mostly uninhabited but that, as Castro assured his audience, would soon change. Twelve thousand people had packed into

Alajuela, one in twelve of the nation's population, and they listened as he mapped out the future. Fifty years on from independence from Spain, the swamp and desolation of Limón would succumb to the force of progress.

The task had been assigned to the finest in the business. This was Henry 'Don Enrique' Meiggs, the great American railway builder, presently resident in Peru. The contracts had been signed and the pledges made: the railway would be finished in three years. At which point, and by the grace of God and General Guardia, Costa Ricans would be led down from their mountain to the sea.

After the cheers, the archbishop gave the Te Deum. Guardia descended from the podium to turn the project's first clod of earth with a silver shovel, specially cast. It started to rain, a little earlier than normal. After siesta the crowds took to the streets again with itinerant bands of acrobats and musicians. The parties, and a ball for the VIPs, went on until five the following morning.

Those placed in charge of the works had not yet arrived. Henry Keith, thirty-two, and his younger brother by nine years, Minor, were still at sea. They had taken a steamer south from New York and at Panama would cross the Central American isthmus on the railway built for the gold rush. On the Pacific side they took a ship north to Costa Rica and arrived on the mesa three weeks after the official opening of the works on the railway, 'at the trot of their horses'.

Through them, 'Don Enrique' Meiggs, their uncle, conveyed his regrets. He wouldn't have time to construct Costa Rica's railway since he was otherwise engaged. He was building Peru's line from Lima up into the Andes, a bigger and far trickier project. His nephews, however, came with all the necessary