

643 *Dear Donnie - Rudy is really an amazing person.
You may be entertained by this letter & then destroy.*

Mr. George S. Messersmith
44 Genova
Mexico, D. F.

Indially George
12/12/49

Letter No. 15

Dear George:

A POSTSCRIPT

AN UNEXPECTED VISIT TO LIBERIA

When I returned from my world tour three weeks ago I little thought that I would within less than one month be starting off on another long journey, taking me back to Europe and West Africa. But here I am once more using my time on the homeward journey aboard Pan American Airways Clipper "Robin Hood" to tell you a little about my entirely unexpected trip to Monrovia, the capital of Liberia.

This time it was not just wanderlust that caused me to go on such a long trip - covering over 10,000 miles in less than one week - but it was in response to a cordial and urgent invitation from President Tubman of Liberia to meet with him and his cabinet to discuss some important business matters which are of vital interest to our Mississippi Shipping Company (Delta Line). Time was of the essence in the problems involved because the proposed solutions had to be approved by the Liberian Legislature, which is about to adjourn its 1949 session.

It was suggested that I join Mr. Juan Trippe and his charming wife in New York on Sunday, November 27th, but since I was entertaining important English house guests in Pass Christian on that day I could not leave before Sunday night, but caught up with Mr. Trippe's party in Lisbon on Tuesday morning and then flew with them from there to Dakar and Monrovia, where we arrived in the early hours of Wednesday morning. To be more exact I should say we arrived at Roberts Field, which is the splendid airport our American government built during the war about fifty miles north of Monrovia and which was used to such good advantage in helping to first stop Rommel's army and later to spearhead the Mediterranean offensive. Because of the late hour we stayed at a very comfortable cottage on the field until later in the morning, and then motored down to the capital city, where we were guests at the President's delightful summer home - generally referred to as "The Bungalow."

You would not be interested in any recital of the almost continuous business activities which together with the many social functions literally kept us busy every hour of our two days stay in Liberia, but since I suspect that you are probably as uninformed about Liberia as I was until quite recently, I will try to give you a summary of my impressions of the country and its people, together with a little historical background that you need to fully understand the present problems and opportunities of this little known country.

The geography and history books in my school days referred only vaguely to Liberia in a few short paragraphs, but when just before starting on my journey I looked up more recent books I learned that the nation was founded just a little over 100 years ago - in 1847 - and that it is in a sense really American born. Early in the 19th century a relatively small number of freed American slaves emigrated under the protection of American Naval vessels to this far away country. They suffered great hardships and were repeatedly decimated by disease and by attacks from unfriendly neighboring tribes. Other groups followed from time to time and combined their efforts in making this remarkable experiment a success in spite of recurring epidemics, unlawful operations of slave traders, and the frequent lack of even the most essential food supplies. With remarkable courage and determination they survived crisis after crisis, and finally in 1847 joined forces with various tribes, declared their complete independence and formed the Republic of Liberia. The present boundaries of Liberia include approximately 45,000 square miles (about the same as Ohio) but its original territory was substantially greater. It adjoins British Sierra Leone on the west, French Ivory Coast on the east, and French Guinea in the north. Neither England nor France was at all pleased with the establishment of this sole republic in all of Africa and for various reasons laid claim to part of Liberian territory. When Daniel Webster was Secretary of State he had occasion to advise Great Britain that the United States would be very unwilling to see Liberia "deprived of its territory or improperly restrained in the exercise of its necessary rights." Nevertheless, our government did nothing to prevent the gradual encroachment of Liberia's neighbors with the result that it lost nearly fifty percent of its original territory. However, in more recent years Washington has taken a good deal more sympathetic interest in Liberia and as early as 1908 the Taft Commission stated in its official report that "unless she (Liberia) has the support of some power commensurate in strength with Great Britain and France, she will disappear speedily as an independent nation." Fortunately, she did survive as a sovereign independent country in spite of internal and external difficulties and today still is the only Republic in Africa which otherwise consists entirely of Colonies and Dominions of European powers. She declared

war and became an ally of the United States in World War II and is now a member of the United Nations. Her excellent constitution was written by an American and is patterned after our own. The Liberian flag consists of eleven white and red strips and a blue field with one star, so that it looks exactly like our flag unless it is spread out so you can count the stars.

The country's motto, which is frequently quoted, is "The love of liberty brought us here," and I must confess that I was surprised to learn that in the century old government there has never been a revolution which violently deposed any duly elected President. Economically too Liberia has much to boast about. Its budget is and has been balanced for many years; it has no internal debt and the only money it owes abroad is \$500,000 to an American company. Like other countries Liberia has passed through several difficult economic periods but always paid up and has no defaults.

About forty years ago the Liberians requested the United States Government to guarantee the independence of their government, to give Liberia counsel and advise on international affairs, to provide experts for teaching and for military training, to make scientific research of agricultural and mineral resources, and to encourage American capital to come in and develop the country's resources. Elihu Root warmly endorsed and supported these requests, but little was done to follow up these recommendations. However, since World War II the United States has shown a greater appreciation of the importance and significance of Liberia's position as a gateway to Africa both in war and in peace.

The fine deep water port facilities which we constructed during the war for the use of Naval vessels is now serving a steadily increasing number of merchant ships and Monrovia has become one of the best harbors on the West African Coast. The port's affairs are ably administered by a former American Army Officer, Donald Inskip, and his Liberian assistant, Isaac David, and although the operation is barely a year old the management may well feel proud of the fact that they have operated "in the black" almost from the time they started operations. Soon many additional ships will call there to carry away the iron ore from interior mines originally discovered by Lansdell Christie and now being developed by him in close association with the powerful Republic Iron and Steel Corporation. Gold is being produced in considerable volume and undoubtedly there are other rich mineral resources still awaiting discovery and exploitation. However, I believe it is in the agricultural field that Liberia's greatest development will come in the present generation.

The soil has great versatility and is capable of producing almost any tropical plant or tree. The most important agricultural product is Rubber and the story of the conversion by the Firestones of some 75,000 acres of jungle land into a high class rubber plantation is indeed the saga of American enterprise at its best. The local manager of the Firestone Company, Mr. Ross Wilson, who has lived in Liberia for over twenty years, showed us through the endless fields of large rubber trees, the villages where many of the 27,000 employees are housed, the buildings where the "latex" (liquid rubber) is collected, and finally guided us through the modern industrial plant where the actual rubber is produced and shipped. It was all most impressive and it is certainly the greatest pioneering enterprise I have seen carried out by American business ingenuity in any foreign land. It would be hard to exaggerate the effect which this remarkable development had on the growth and economic development of Liberia.

But there are many other crops that can and will be successfully developed in Liberia's rich soil and I believe some day the clearing and planting of large cocoa, coffee, and palm plantations will make an equally absorbing story as does the conversion of this great jungle into fine rubber plantations by Firestone. Cattle raising is also being encouraged by the government and it is only a few weeks ago that Secretary of Agriculture Cooper was in the United States and in New Orleans, from where he brought back with him a number of fine Texas cattle destined for their agricultural experiment station at Suakoko, for the purpose of improving and increasing the Liberian herds. The U. S. Economic Mission, of which Frank A. Pinder, an American negro is acting chief, is doing outstanding work in the encouragement of this and all other agricultural developments and assisting in the improvement of the quality of all Liberian products. Road improvement is going forward slowly but steadily and only the country's determination to live within its income prevents a much faster pace in the solution of its transportation problem. Liberians have become quite air-conscious and small airfields are being built in various sections preparatory to the establishment of a closely knit internal airline system for mail and passengers. Their external airmail service is already excellent and letters from the United States reach Liberia, via Pan American Airways, in three days, and connections with Europe are equally good.

The Liberian government also takes a very sympathetic attitude towards all constructive business efforts and there are few countries that encourage free enterprise more actively than Liberia. Recently a new and efficient lighting system has been developed

in Monrovia from a power plant located in the Port Area; a new cold storage and refrigerating plant has just gone into operation, which has suddenly made Monrovia very ice cream conscious with children all around the streets enjoying their cones in American fashion. A new hotel has also just been opened and several small new industrial enterprises are ready to start functioning. The Bank of Monrovia is helping to carry on the financial business of the country, but there is no bank of issue and the currency of the country is the United States Dollar. This is just one of the many things that give life in Monrovia so much of the American flavor. Some favorable Maritime registration laws have recently been put on their statute books as a result of which a number of ship owners have found it advantageous to put their fleets under the Liberian flag.

The population consists of close to two million friendly peaceful people, made up of twenty-three tribes, each headed by a chief whose authority is coordinated and integrated into their truly Democratic form of government. Suffrage and property rights are limited to people of African descent which means that citizenship and land title can only be acquired by Negroes. The President and members of the Senate are elected for six years and the members of the House for four years. President Tubman is the Chief of all Chiefs and he is very highly regarded by all of his people. I found him to be a most likeable and interesting man and was impressed with the earnestness and sincerity with which he approaches all the country's problems. He does not "put on any airs" but possesses real dignity and undoubtedly works very hard and conscientiously for the interest of his people. Moreover, he has surrounded himself with high type capable men, each of whom "pulls his part of the load" and in turn trains other men to carry on the government's increasingly heavy work.

On the afternoon of the second day of our stay, Representative W. R. Tolbert gave a very elaborate party at his home in Bensonville (about thirty miles from Monrovia) for the double purpose of celebrating "Mathilda Newport" day (the equivalent of our 4th of July), and also of paying special tribute to President Tubman, who had just celebrated his 54th birthday two days before. It looked as if all the elite of Monrovia and surroundings were there and I counted over forty fine looking automobiles, all of them of American origin. There was much gaiety, excellent food and a most liberal supply of all sorts of liquid refreshments, including many magnums of French champagne. Secretary of State Gabriel, and his wife, called for us in his car to take us to the celebration. I already knew he was a very competent Secretary of State and had learned that he had quite a reputation as a musician (especially at the piano) but I did not know that he was also a regular "Barney Oldfield" at the wheel. Anyway we enjoyed the experience and he brought us back safely in time to get ready for the "State Dinner" which President Tubman gave in our honor that evening. The function was given at the Executive Mansion - Liberia's White House - for about sixty people, including the cabinet, the Supreme Court, the ranking military officials, etc., and the affair was up to the best standard of any similar functions I had the privilege to attend in much older and richer countries, and I must say that throughout my visit in Liberia I sensed among these people a spirit of confidence in their mission as a "nation" rather than any particular ambitions as a race.

In connection with our business affairs we had occasion to attend a cabinet meeting, which notwithstanding the celebration of a legal holiday, had been called for our benefit, and lasted from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. I was greatly impressed by the efficient and businesslike manner in which this session was conducted and the objectivity of the discussions that took place. It was in many respects a remarkable and enlightening experience. The members of the cabinet (11 in number) are all highly educated men, many of them graduates of American colleges who brought back with them much of the American enthusiasm and direct approach to all business and economic problems, a quality which they clearly displayed in all of their dealings with us. Incidentally, the government itself endows about one hundred scholarships each year to permit their talented young men to come to United States colleges and a few to England and French schools, so as to provide future leaders for their public life.

The three things that Liberia is still most in need of today are better interior transportation (i.e., more and better roads), better education (i.e., more native teachers), and greater sanitation (i.e., better medical facilities). All three of these are formidable problems but they are being earnestly tackled and gradually solved. I can hardly tell you more of the details of these developments within the scope of this letter, but I do want to speak briefly of the wonderful work that has been and is being done by Dr. Dick Harley, a medical missionary and the founder and director of a very fine clinic at Gantier. This work will now be supplemented by the American Foundation of Tropical Medicine which has provided a substantial operating fund for a new health and research center about to be erected and to be staffed, supervised by fourteen leading American medical schools including our own Tulane University.

All of these sort of developments do of course help to strengthen the natural ties with the United States and the Liberian people to have the kindest sort of feeling towards the United States. We called on our Ambassador - Mr. Dudley - (of negro blood)

whom we found to be a very able man who together with his attractive wife, is apparently doing much to preserve and extend the cordial feelings that presently prevail between the two countries. At the American Embassy we also met one of our State Department officials - Mr. Sims - who was there on a temporary visit collecting important information at first hand to better be able to deal with the many economic and political questions that come to him at his so-called "African Desk" at the State Department at Washington. Our talks with both of these officials were most encouraging and we found them both not only well informed on all the country's problems, but apparently anxious to help in any way they could.

I will sum my observations and impressions by telling you that I came away from Liberia convinced that she is entering an era of great development and that because of her excellent resources her enterprise and her hard working people, she really has a great future ahead of her.

In closing let me just add that we left Monrovia early Friday morning and were back in New York early Saturday morning, or less than five days after I left New York. Time and distance are being annihilated. The day of the "Jet-plane" is near at hand, which I am told will do everything twice as fast as our present best types of planes. We shall then be really able to spend our weekends in any part of the world we wish.

Cordially yours,

R. S. Hecht