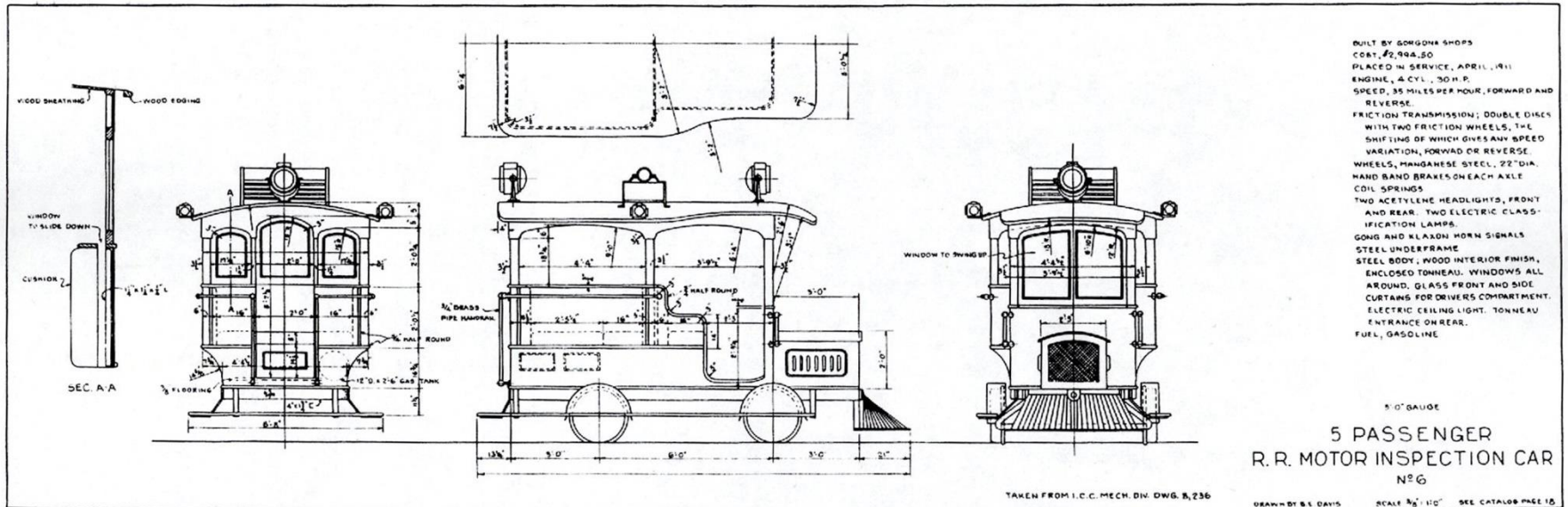


# Gasoline Motor Cars of the Panama Canal



Researched and compiled by William P. McLaughlin

# Introduction

Common labor travelled on labor cars converted from either 40' standard flat cars or from the old French 6 meter dump cars. The middle echelon American employees rode the passenger trains of the Panama Rail Road. The executives at the head-quarters at Balboa made their inspection trips using a fleet of motor cars.

Goethals had started his inspection trips each morning on the Panama Rail Road's morning passenger train. When the motor cars were built he had one reserved for his private use. This car also served as transportation for the important people who came from Washington.

The motor car became a commercial reality on the main line railroads of the United States beginning in 1905. William R. McQueen started building them for the Union Pacific Railroad where he was the Superintendent of Motive Power. By 1907 six of his cars were in operation on the Union Pacific.

The cars used by the I.C.C. were based at Balboa. They were weird and wonderful contraptions with the six cylinder gasoline engine's radiator perched on the roof. The passenger car body towered over the tiny gasoline motor housing and was styled in the best tradition of the previous century.

Because they ran on the Panama Rail Road they complied with the rule book requirements for designating a train. They had marker lamps, sockets for flags for daytime operation designating the class of train, headlights, and a compressed air horn.

Charles S. Small – *Rails to the Diggings*

# The Yellow Peril

by William P. McLaughlin, Alan P. Bentz, and Richard D. Bates, Jr.

The article by Alan Bentz about Gerald Bliss in the 1st Q 2011 *CZP* included a photo of Bliss standing on the porch of the Culebra Post Office. In the left foreground of that photo was a vehicle that has prompted comments by readers, giving rise to the decision to put together a brief story about it and others like it, even though it is not particularly philatelic in nature. The image is from a photo in the National Postal Museum, which has been cropped and expanded, and is show below.



Fig. 1. Motor car No. 6 at Culebra Post Office in 1912.

People traveled on the Panama Rail Road in at least three different ways. Common labor traveled on labor cars converted from either 40' standard flat cars or from the old French 6 meter dump cars. The middle echelon American employees rode the passenger trains of the Panama Rail Road. The executives at the headquarters at Balboa made their inspection trips using a fleet of motor cars. These were gasoline-powered motor cars housed in the garage at Balboa, shown in Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2.** When the new administrative building was built at Balboa Heights a home for the motor cars was built at Balboa. Because they were called motor cars their home was called a garage. It was located just west of the Balboa Heights station. The motormen were known as chauffers. PCC 1574

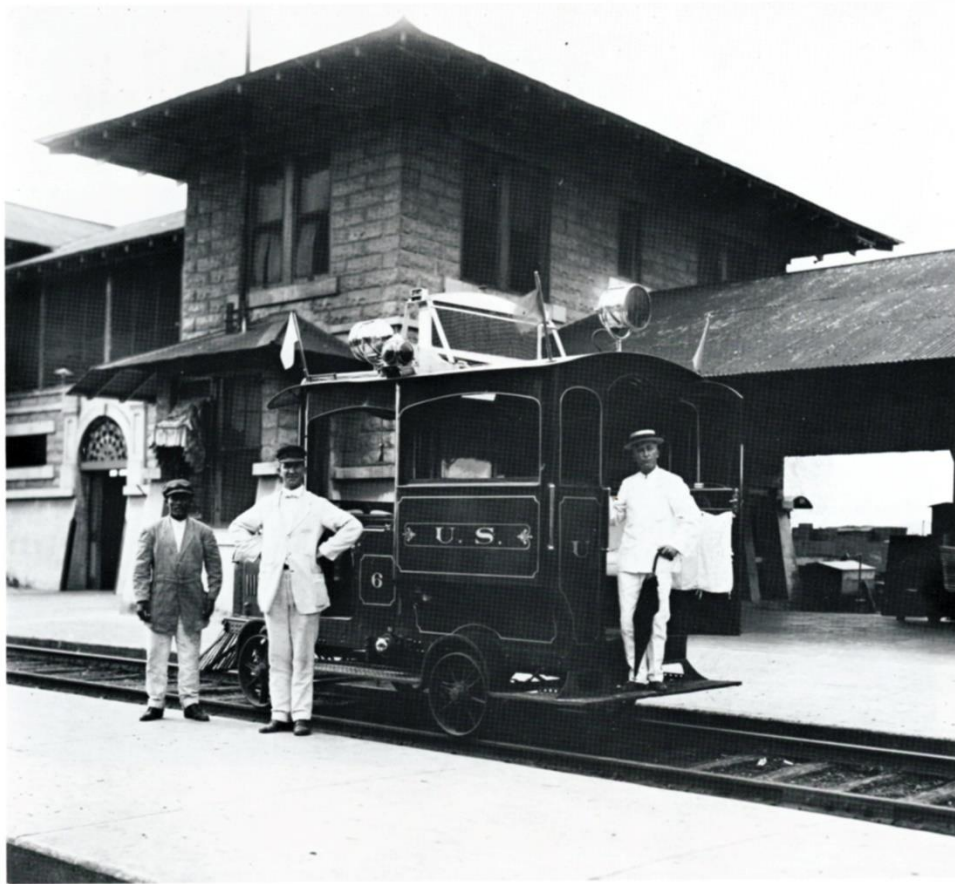


Fig. 3.

Motor car No. 6, the smallest of those built by the Canal Shops, is pictured at the new Gatun station. PCC 2094

It was called a garage because they were motor cars, and was located just west of the Balboa Heights station. The motormen were known as chauffeurs.

These were weird and wonderful contraptions with the six cylinder gasoline engine's radiator perched on the roof. The passenger car body towered over the tiny gasoline motor housing and was styled in the best tradition of the previous century.

Because they ran on the Panama Rail Road they complied with the rule book requirements for designating a train. They had marker lamps, sockets for flags for daytime operation designating the class of train, headlights, and a compressed air horn. The motor car depicted in

Figs. 1 and 3 is No. 6, the smallest of those built by the Canal Shops.

But motor car No. 6 was hardly the most famous of these motor cars. That distinction is reserved for car No. 1 (which was originally designated No. 4) .



Fig. 4. The “Yellow Peril” from an image of a PPC [1]

Car No. 1 was used by Colonel Goethals, Chief Engineer, who regularly oversaw the work at the various construction sites by traveling in the motor car known as the “Yellow Peril.” This activity is described beautifully by Farnam Bishop. [2]

Every morning in the week, [Col. Goethals] goes out on the line, not as his French predecessor did, in a private car drawn by a locomotive, but a swift automobile mounted on flanged wheels, that looks like a taxicab disguised as a switch-engine. This motor-car is painted in the regulation light yellow of the Panama Railroad passenger-coaches, and you can scare a shirker out of a wet-season’s growth by yelling, “Here comes the Yellow Peril!” But when the Yellow Peril – also known as the “Brain Wagon” – does come by, as likely as not it is empty; for the Colonel often drops off to take a closer look at a steam shovel, or a group of compressed-air drills, or a new drainage-ditch, or anything else that has attracted his attention. Presently he will come past, perched on top of a loaded dirt train, or walking at a good swinging pace over rough railroad ties and slippery fragments splintered rock.

Colonel Goethals is shown standing next to the “Yellow Peril” with dignitaries in 1913 in Fig. 5.



Fig. 5

This photograph was taken during 1913 of the Secretary of War and Mrs. Lindley Garrison. Colonel Goethals, in white, is standing between Mrs. Garrison and the Secretary. The motorman, Samuel Greer, is on the left. This car No. 4 became No. 1 and was finally rebuilt with an additional axle and wheels salvaged from old French dump cars. 'Sic transit gloria'. While it was Goethal's private conveyance it was painted in the standard P.R.R. Yellow. PCC 1540

**ISTHMIAN CANAL COMMISSION**  
**OFFICE OF THE CHIEF QUARTERMASTER**  
**CULEBRA, CANAL ZONE**

---

**NOVEMBER 1, 1913**

---

**CATALOGUE OF EQUIPMENT**

PURCHASED FOR USE ON

**THE PANAMA CANAL**

**AND**

**THE PANAMA RAILROAD**

**BETWEEN JULY 1, 1904, AND JANUARY 1, 1913**

---

**NOTE: THIS CATALOGUE DOES NOT INCLUDE SHOP MACHINES, FOUNDRY EQUIPMENT, AIR COMPRESSORS, MISCELLANEOUS BOILERS, STATIONARY ENGINES, MOTORS, AND GENERATORS, MUCH OF WHICH EQUIPMENT WILL BE RETAINED IN THE SERVICE OF THE PANAMA CANAL.**





288-G<sup>1</sup>- Panama Canal Motor Car #1, Culebra, C.Z. 1913

Motorman Samuel Greer, sitting in the driver's seat, was Goethals right hand man.





The rail motors had all of the equipment to qualify as a train under the standard book of rules. A six cylinder gasoline engine drove the rear axle. This car was built by the Stover Motor Car Company of Freeport, Illinois during 1908. PCC 1538



Motor car No. 6 is at the summit of the 1907 diversion of the original P.R.R. behind Contractor's Hill during 1911. PCC 1539



This photo of No. 7 was taken on the old rail line near Ahorca Lagarto. The large tree was named the Stephens' Tree in honor of one of the founders of the Panama Railroad, John L. Stephens. The tree is still there under water. It can be seen when the Gatun Lake gets low during droughts. It is a Quipu Tree, and grows very tall.



Goethals and his friend Samuel Greer – Contractor's Hill



This is one of the best photos I have ever found and is in the Northwestern University Libraries' Repository and Digital Curation department collection, Evanston, Illinois. You can see the back of Goethals and Samuel Greer's heads. This is a priceless unstaged capture in time.



This has been a fun project and enjoyed researching these fine little rail motor cars. I started this adventure when I was asked where did these motorcars go? My immediate answer was that they were all scrapped like all of unwanted equipment, and that is still my answer today. These cars were very well built and maintained and it would have been wrong to scrap them. I found this photo on a website and is supposed to be the remains of a motorcar, but nothing firm. This looks like remains of a motor car, in a mangrove swamp, which could be the Diablo swamp that many things were dumped into over the years.