

The BIG Ditch

Chapter One – by Kay Hively

Douglas Taylor was sad and excited at the same time. He had spent most of the day packing up his books and school supplies. It was June 1, 1906, the last day he would go to school in America for a whole year. All day long, he had been saying good-bye to his teachers and school chums.

Since Doug had announced that he would be moving to Panama, his teachers had talked about nothing else. The entire school had studied Panama for almost a month. In his geography class, the students drew maps showing where this exciting country was located. Doug's science teacher had lessons about the plants and wildlife in Central America.

Doug knew he would miss his friends, but he was eager to live in a new country. He had learned that Panama was mostly a tropical jungle filled with exotic plants and animals. Life there would be very different from life in Baltimore, Maryland.

When the last bell rang, Doug picked up one of the boxes filled with his school materials. His two best friends, Albert and Donald, carried two more boxes out to the street and put them in a carriage that was waiting. Then Doug shook hands with his friends and promised to write to them. As he rode off down the street, Doug waved good-bye.

Usually, Doug walked home from school, but on this day his father sent a carriage for him. The ride home took only five minutes. When the carriage stopped at Doug's house, Dr. Taylor came out to help carry the boxes and to pay the carriage driver.

Dr. Taylor was a big, handsome man. He practiced medicine in a hospital and worked in a research laboratory. Each evening at dinner, Dr. Taylor talked about his research.

Doug liked the stories his father told. He hoped that one day his father would find a cure for bad diseases.

But recently things changed for the Taylor family. A letter came from Dr. William Gorgas asking Doug's father to come to Panama. The letter said Dr. Taylor was needed to help fight malaria, a tropical disease that was killing hundreds of people in Panama.

Eleven-year-old Doug had never heard of Panama. His mother said it was a small country on a narrow strip of land between North and South America. She said many Americans were there to help build a great new canal that would connect the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean. If the canal could be built, big ships could move from one ocean to the other almost like they were crossing over land. Mrs. Taylor said people called the new canal "The Big Ditch."

At school, Doug learned much more about Panama and the canal that was being built. Doug thought about the new canal all the time, and he was eager to go to Panama. He wanted to see just how big the ditch really was.

Next Week: Chapter Two – Going to Sea

Author Kay Hively and Illustrator Billie Gofourth-Stewart are both of Neosho, Mo. Produced by the Missouri Press Foundation. Copyright 2006.



Things to Think About and Do

- Using a big map, find the country of Panama. Draw your own map of that country. Include the Panama Canal on your map and write the name of the biggest city at each end of the canal.
- Learn about Dr. William Gorgas. Write a description of malaria and its symptoms. Name three things Dr. Gorgas did to prevent malaria in Panama.
- Doug has been researching the new place he'll live. Look through the newspaper for stories on new places you'd like to live or visit. Start a scrapbook of places that interest you and add facts about the locations as you learn more through newspaper reading.

