

Planes Spanning the South Pacific Transform an Uninhabited Mid-ocean Coral Reef into a Busy Base

BY HOWELL WALKER

Foreign Editorial Staff, National Geographic Magazine

With Illustrations from Photographs by the Author

"**P**ERHAPS some day this bit of quiet lagoon will become a busy mid-Pacific haven for flying Clippers."

These prophetic words appear under a picture of Canton Island in a 17-year-old issue of the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE. The photograph helps illustrate an article about what was then a lonely, barren speck of land.

To observe an eclipse of the sun, American and British astronomers had set up camps on Canton in 1937 (page 121).^{*} In the course of their appointment with darkness they enlightened the world about the little isle, 1,909 watery miles southwest of Honolulu.

The scientists found no humans on Canton. The only living things were sea birds, turtles, hermit crabs, rats, and lizards among sparse, scrubby vegetation; a few coconut palms towered above the coral. Temperatures were high, rainfall was low, and the island lacked fresh water.

There was nothing inviting about this mid-Pacific atoll, but in a fast-developing Air Age it offered possibilities obvious to the stargazing visitors of 1937. "Canton Island," wrote a member of the American party, "promises to be an important commercial airplane base in the South Pacific."

Small Atoll Welcomes Big Aircraft

Pan American World Airways has seen to it that the promise was kept. Two years later the company established a seaplane base in the reef-circled lagoon of Canton Island. It serviced flying boats operating between the United States and Australasia.

Then, after World War II, Pan American switched to landplanes, using Canton's military airfield. Today, three airlines under different flags regularly stop at Canton's airport, and the seadrome can still be used by flying boats.

Lights along the 6,000-foot runway guided our 47-passenger Stratocruiser in to a smooth landing the night I arrived on Canton Island

to see how it had changed over the years since the eclipse expedition.

A well-appointed hotel managed by Pan American stands where astronomers once pitched their tents. I moved into one of its rooms overlooking the lagoon. A breeze in the palms near the beach sounded like gentle rain on the roof. A sea bird called in the darkness. To the drone of an electric fan I fell into wanted sleep after the long flight from Honolulu.

Island the Rim of a Dead Volcano

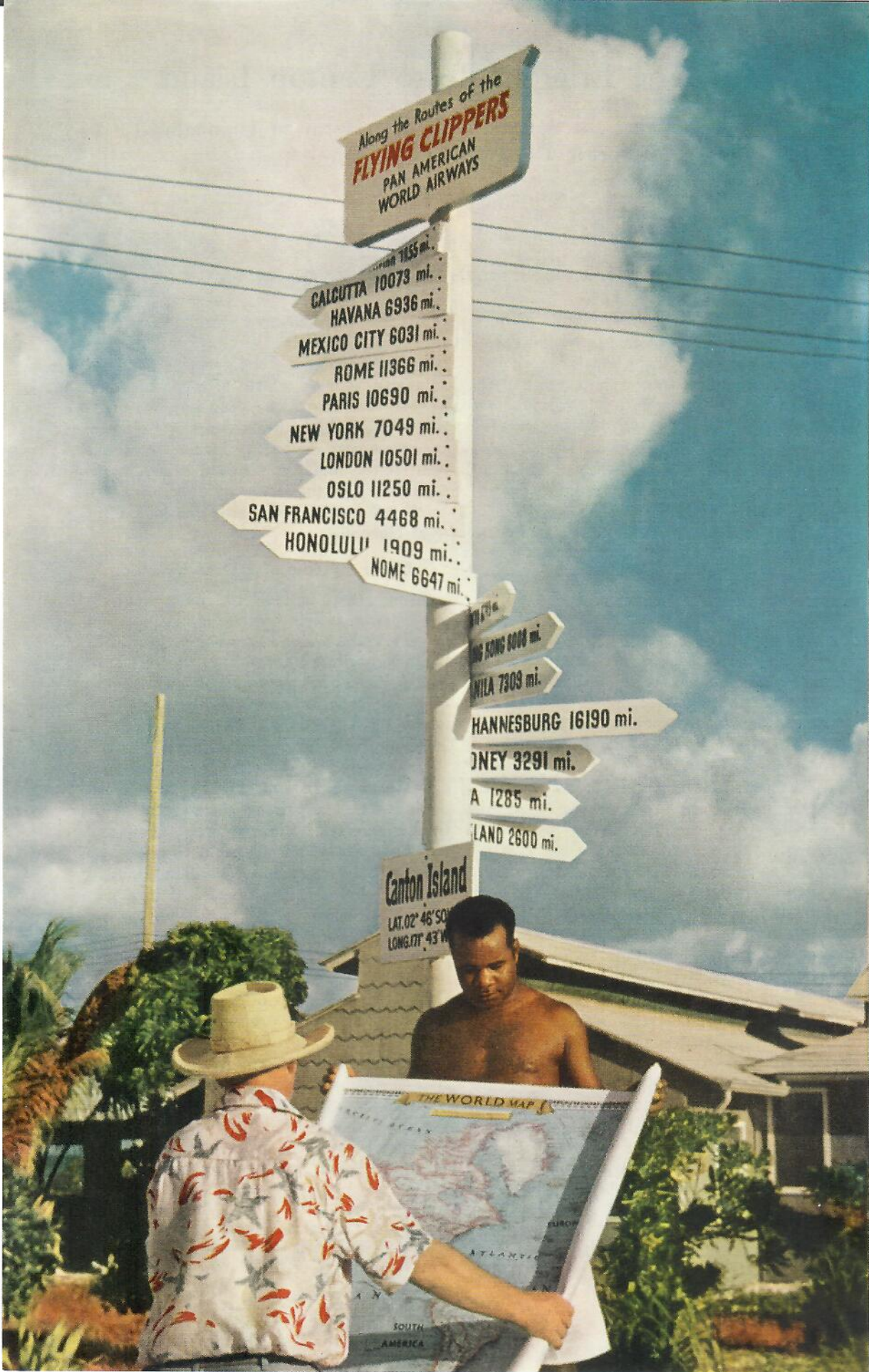
Canton, a coral atoll 198 miles south of the Equator, is built on the rim of an ancient volcanic crater about 30 miles around. Ranging in width from 100 to 700 yards, the belt of land girdles a body of turquoise water abounding in fantastic fish and fascinating coral formations. The island's highest point rises 20 unimpressive feet above sea level.

On a map the atoll looks like a hollow pork chop (page 122). But from the air Canton resembles a gem. Its exquisitely colored lagoon is bordered by pearly coral. The island is a particularly welcome sight to pilots; no alternate landing ground lies within hundreds of miles of this little strip of reef in a vast expanse of ocean.

Some 280 persons form Canton's two communities—Northside and Southside. These settled sections receive their names from locations north and south of a ship channel that provides the main entrance into the lagoon from the sea. The tide rushes through this cut in the atoll's western flank like a swift river in spate. Vessels up to 400 feet long can navigate the passage to berth at a dock in the dredged harbor.

I found Northside more of a town than Southside, which is largely residential (page

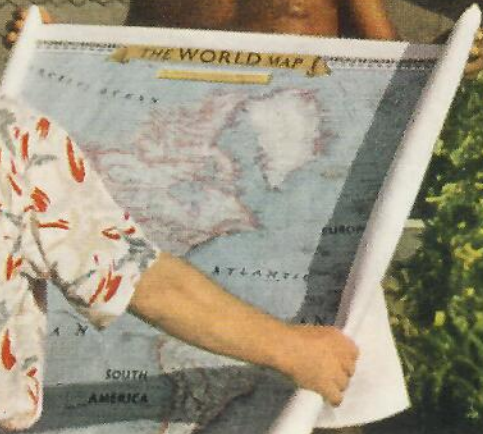
^{*} See, in the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE: "Crusoes of Canton Island," by Irvine C. Gardner, June, 1938; "Eclipse Adventures on a Desert Isle," by Capt. J. F. Hellweg, and "Nature's Most Dramatic Spectacle," by S. A. Mitchell, both for September, 1937.



Along the Routes of the
FLYING CLIPPERS
PAN AMERICAN
WORLD AIRWAYS

- 11355 mi.
- CALCUTTA 10073 mi.
- HAVANA 6936 mi.
- MEXICO CITY 6031 mi.
- ROME 11366 mi.
- PARIS 10690 mi.
- NEW YORK 7049 mi.
- LONDON 10501 mi.
- OSLO 11250 mi.
- SAN FRANCISCO 4468 mi.
- HONOLULU 1909 mi.
- NOME 6647 mi.
- HONG KONG 8008 mi.
- MANILA 7309 mi.
- HANNESBURG 16190 mi.
- DNEY 3291 mi.
- A 1285 mi.
- LAND 2600 mi.

Canton Island
LAT. 02° 46' S
LONG. 177° 43' W



120). The United States Civil Aeronautics Administration manages and occupies most of the northern area, while Pan American employees and the British Resident Administrator with his family live in the southern community.

Northside contains all airport facilities: runway, terminal building, maintenance shops, refueling equipment, navigational aids, communications station, and meteorological offices. Near the depot a village has grown up to support the units providing aircraft services.

Here I lunched with Americans, dined with Dutch, photographed Japanese and Portuguese, sipped coffee with an Englishman, visited the home of a Hawaiian, talked with Australians and New Zealanders, met Chinese and Koreans, and watched natives of the Gilbert, Ellice, and Fiji Islands fishing, servicing aircraft, or helping out as family domestics. Together they make up a happy, international population.

By an agreement in 1939 the United States and the United Kingdom assumed joint control of Canton Island for 50 years, and "thereafter until such time as it may be modified or terminated by the mutual consent of the two Governments." Air companies of both nations have equal rights to port facilities on the island.

Canton Was Once Named Mary

In the early 1800's several whaling ships independently discovered the atoll. At least three of the "discoverers" gave it a name: Swallow, Mary, and Mary Balcout.

The name that stuck came from the New Bedford whaler *Canton* which piled up on the reef in the mid-19th century.* The captain and crew of the ill-fated vessel survived a 49-day voyage in open boats from Canton to Guam. Out of respect for this feat, a U. S. Navy officer who surveyed the island in 1872 named it after the ship that foundered

on its shores. I saw a rust-encrusted part of the wreck still on the beach.

Not much happened to Canton during the next several decades. British guano diggers arrived in the '80's, but soon abandoned the costly venture. Two shipping and trading companies leased the island at different times; apart from planting coconut trees, they did nothing to develop it.

The 1937 eclipse expedition really put Canton on the map; its importance to aerial navigation in the South Pacific kept it there. With planes came civilization.

World War II Jumping-off Place

What Canton meant during World War II to the United States and its allies in the Pacific can never be overestimated. Without this steppingstone for airborne supplies on their way to far-flung fronts below the Equator, events might have taken quite another turn—for the worse.

The Japanese realized Canton's importance, but the little island's defenders discouraged an enemy landing. U. S. Army, Navy, and Air Force men held the ground. Thousands of others took off from here to fight their way, island by island, toward eventual victory in the Pacific.

At Northside I met Mr. William J. Evans. Officially, he is the United States Resident Administrator of Canton and Enderbury Islands under the Department of the Interior; Island Manager for the Civil Aeronautics Administration under the Department of Commerce; and U. S. Special Deputy Marshal on Canton and Enderbury Islands for the Department of Justice. But to almost everyone who can talk he is simply "Bill."

"Jump in my jeep, and I'll show you Northside," said Bill.

We pulled up at the Canton Island School as midmorning recess began. I talked with the two teachers while all 32 pupils played outside the 3-room building remodeled in 1952 from an old Army mess hall.

Children from 3 to 13 years old attend classes from kindergarten through the eighth grade (page 128). I saw two Gilbert Islanders and a Japanese among the youngest. Before the island had a schoolhouse, a public-spirited Canton resident held classes on her back porch.

* See "American Pathfinders in the Pacific," by William A. Nicholas, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, May, 1946.

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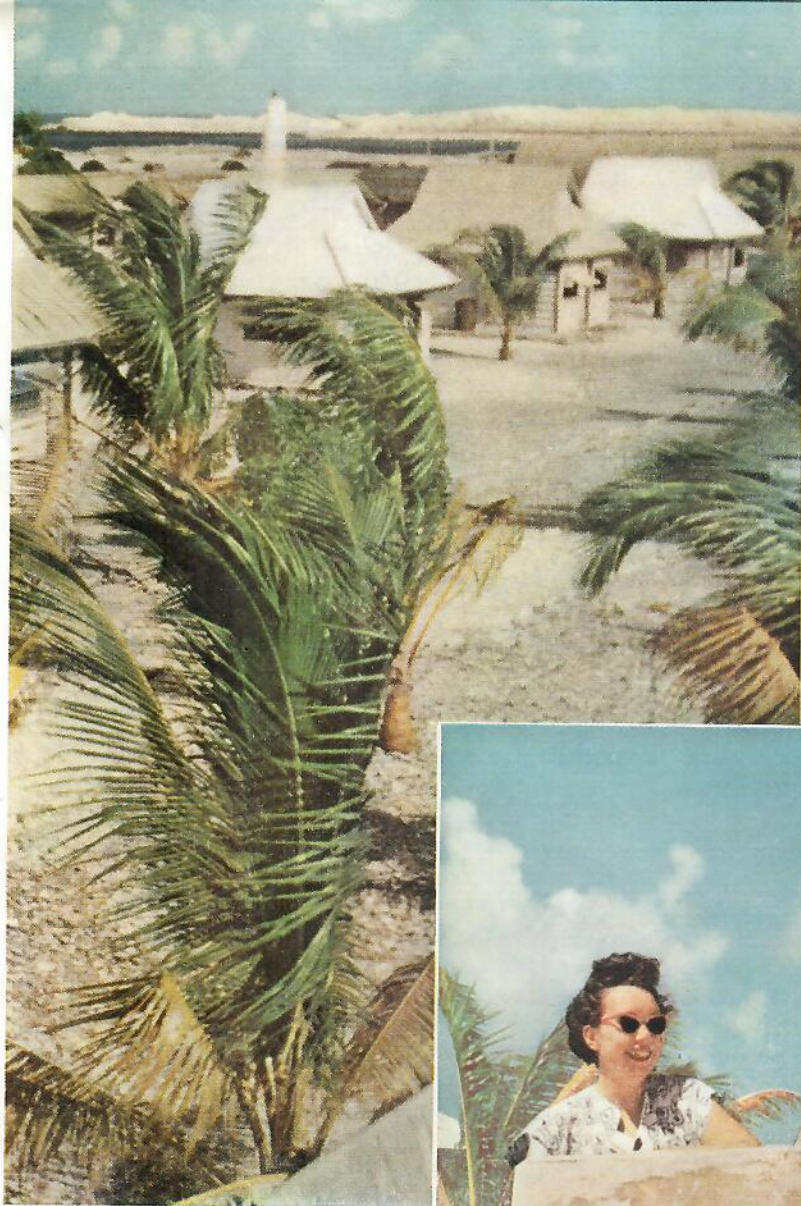
← Canton's Crossroads Sign Points to the World's Far Corners

An uninhabited coral reef 18 years ago, the island is booming today as a transocean stopover. Three airlines, Pan American, Canadian Pacific, and Qantas Empire, route passenger and cargo planes through Canton. Most of the island's 280 inhabitants provide services for aircraft and passengers. This American official and his Fijian helper scan the National Geographic Society's World Map.

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Kodachrome by Howell Walker, National Geographic Staff





↓ **Deep Scars Pock
National Geographic's
1937 Eclipse Marker**

Largely ignored since its discovery in the early 1800's, Canton Island in June, 1937, burst into the news as host to the National Geographic Society-United States Navy Eclipse Expedition. A radio network's transmitter beamed an on-the-spot description of the solar show to the United States.

This concrete marker, erected by the expedition, bears a stainless-steel U. S. flag on its face and The Society's metal seal on its sides. No one on the island knows how the flag was defaced. William J. Evans, Canton's U. S. Resident Administrator, Mrs. Evans (left), and Mrs. James E. Brundell, wife of the British Resident Administrator, stand behind the monument.

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↑ **Coral Paves the Paths
and Yards of Southside**

Canton's bleak coral barely supports the young coconut palms planted for shade by residents. *President Taylor*, a burned-out troop carrier, lies off the beach. Grounded, the 10,500-ton ship served as a clubhouse until fire ruined its interior.

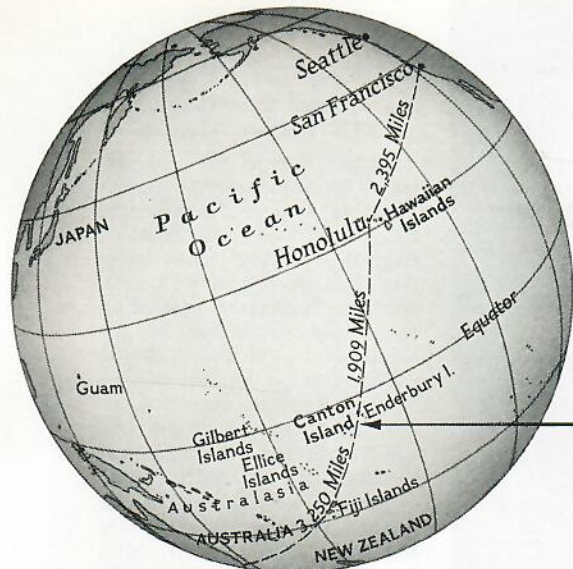
The light tower (right) stands as a memorial to Capt. E. C. Musick and the crew of the PAA Clipper *Samoan*, lost while pioneering the South Pacific air trade route.

← **Pan American's *Queen of the Skies* makes ready for take-off.**

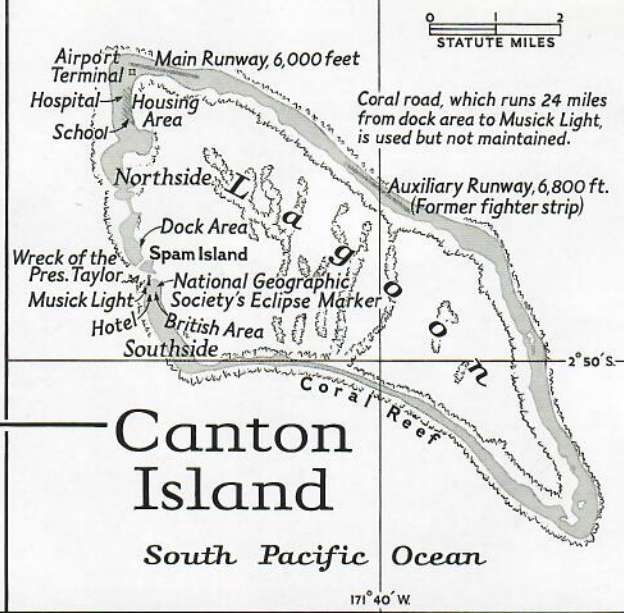
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Kodachromes by Howell Walker,
National Geographic Staff





© National Geographic Map



Canton Island: A Thin Rim of Coral Around a Huge Bowl of Water

Remote in terms of miles, Canton by air is but 17 hours from San Francisco and 26 from New York. Most planes land on the main runway. World War II's fighter strip serves as emergency runway.

Canton Island's U. S. post office is in the airport terminal. At mailing times queues form at the stamp windows like post-office lines in Seattle, Cleveland, or Chattanooga, and customers buy the same kinds of stamps they do at home. It costs no more to send a letter by air from Canton Island to New York than it does from Washington, D. C.*

British residents mail letters bearing Her Majesty's stamps at a post office in Southside, or from a branch at Northside's airport.

For a brief period Canton's school occupied a Quonset hut which now serves as the Canton Island Hospital. A husband-and-wife team operates the 4-bed affair; he's the doctor, she's the nurse.

They showed me around the rooms used for X-ray department, laboratory, surgery, office, and waiting room. Here, in February, 1953, the first American child born on Canton came into a coral world. His mother runs the island's U. S. post office.

Normally the hospital flies a flag with a red cross on a white field. On the occasion of a birth a baby blanket flutters from the staff—blue for a boy, pink for a girl.

Fire Department Starts a Blaze

Another Quonset hut houses Northside's fire department—a versatile jeep and a larger truck, both painted bright red. They had the makings of a color photograph, so I asked Bill if we could work them into a picture.

"That's easy," he said. "We'll just have

a drill; let's see the fire chief about it."

Thirty minutes later a siren sounded the alarm as an obsolete army storehouse roared up in orange-red flames and thick black smoke. Not only the two I had already seen, but several other fire-fighting vehicles raced to the scene. Men, old and young and brown and white, swarmed over the machines; they handled the hoses and themselves like professionals (page 129).

I watched two barefoot Gilbertese plow through smoldering debris to reach the central conflagration. Even if I'd worn an asbestos suit and heavy boots, I should have hesitated to follow them.

Gardening Calls for Work and Water

Such burning of wartime eyesores affords fire-fighting practice and improves Canton's landscape. But ugly reminders remain: old plane wrecks, junk piles of rusting military equipment, snapped-off wireless poles, grown-over artillery posts and ammunition storage bunkers, hundreds of useless fuel drums, abandoned buildings plundered for lumber, and even a troop transport, the *President Taylor*, rotting on the beach for the past 13 years.

Canton's clean-up campaign and modern improvements are winning out. Comfortable homes, small but neat, line Northside's lagoon front. Despite coral "soil" and lack of rain,

* See "Everyone's Servant, the Post Office," by Allan C. Fisher, Jr., NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, July, 1954.

**Frigate Bird:
Ace Aerialist
of Ocean Skies**

Among birds, the frigate, or man-of-war, carries the longest wings for the size of the body. The narrow wings of an adult span seven feet, permitting effortless gliding. Tail design allows high-speed maneuvering. During rapid flight the birds snap and fork their tail feathers like scissors.

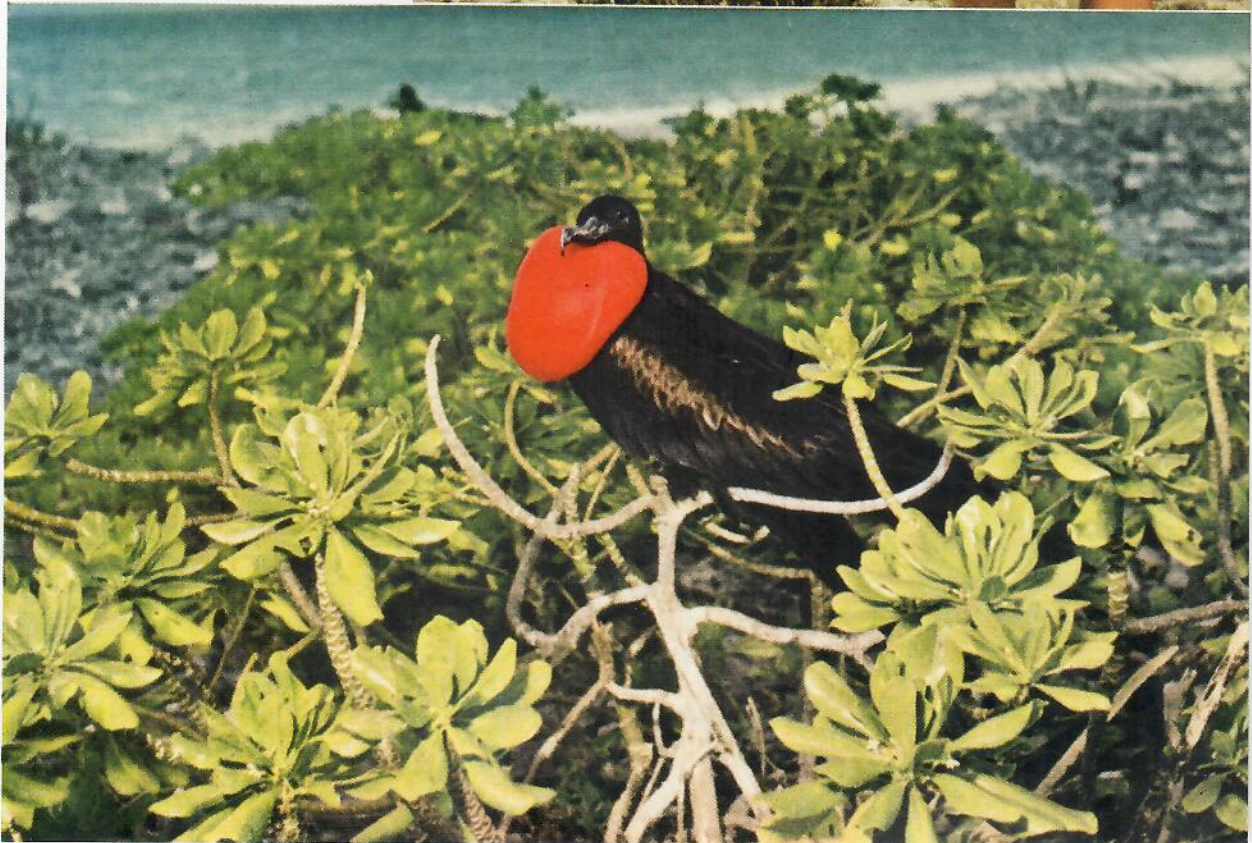
→ *Fregata minor* wears the white breast of a juvenile. Unlike many sea birds, the frigate lacks waterproof plumage. To avoid water, adults dive-bomb flying fish or snatch their prey from the crest of a wave. Often frigate birds turn marauder, attacking a booby on the wing and forcing it to drop its fish dinner, then seizing the loot before it hits the water.

↓ During courtship on Canton Island, this male frigate gaily balloons his red pouch. Fatherhood saddles him with much of the work of incubating the single egg and brooding the chick.

Polynesians have used tame frigate birds to carry messages from island to island.

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Kodachromes by Howell Walker,
National Geographic Staff, and
(below) Patricia Bailey Witherspoon

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Night Fishermen Lift a Net High Lest Nimble Mullet Leap Back to Sea

Although mullet will take the hook, most are netted. Catches of 1,000 pounds are not unusual off Canton. Spotting a school, these islanders placed their nets and splashed water to drive fish into them (page 127).

nearly every resident tries to grow something green on his sunbaked lot.

Bill Evans told me that the community had recently planted a thousand coconut trees. Among other things, he himself cultivates mint brought to Canton from Yugoslavia. Whenever I saw Bill in his yard, he was usually holding a watering can.

Canton Has Few Native Plants

One evening before dinner at a Northside home my hosts' 8-year-old son took me on a tour of the garden. The boy pointed out poinsettia, mimosa, and castor bean, Mediterranean olive trees, young coconut palms, a tobacco plant, and papaya, sea grape bushes, spider lilies, morning glories, portulaca, and *Scaevola frutescens*.

The last is one of the few plants native to the island, and there's not a great deal of it on Canton. It grows into a coarse, branching shrub with thick magnolia-like leaves, white trumpet-shaped flowers and white spongy fruit.

In the area commissary I mingled with

housewives pushing grocery baskets on wheels. Well-stocked shelves held French and Japanese mushrooms, Spanish olives, canned sukiyaki, bamboo shoots, thyme, baby food, American cigarettes, Portuguese sausage, shrimp from Georgia (U.S.A.), bread from Honolulu, frozen concentrated milk, frozen fruits and vegetables, and even tinned dog food.

I saw numerous pets on Canton. Dogs and cats seem to be everywhere; one dog has a habit of catching fish in the lagoon. A small boy proudly showed me his 10 rabbits. Parakeets are popular; I met a pair called Bill and Co. A Gilbertese family is taming a red-tailed tropic bird (*Phaethon rubricauda*), native to this island. And a maintenance engineer maintains a monkey named Mary, not a native.

Driving around Northside, I passed carpenter, auto, paint, electric, machine, and heavy equipment shops, a power plant, and a distillery. But not the kind of distillery you might imagine.

All fresh water used on Canton comes from distilling sea water or from catching rain in

storage tanks. Since the annual rainfall averages only about 20 inches, the stills work much of the time. For drinking, cooking, bathing, and laundry the island consumes some 335,000 gallons a month.

Northside and Southside each has an open-air theater. Natives like moving pictures so much they will see a feature on Southside one night, then journey to Northside the next night to see the same film. The Gilbertese especially enjoy cartoons and westerns.

With signs that warn "15 Miles Per Hour" and "Slow School Zone," and a local radio station of "The Hermit Crab Network," Northside tries earnestly to be a small town. It lacks, however, a bank and a church. Cashing of checks has its problems.

Still, one rarely handles money on Canton. I seldom carried any except to buy stamps, razor blades, or cigarettes. There's no tipping, no purchasing of bus, boat, or theater tickets, no charge for local telephone calls. In short, cash is strange stuff.

Pennies Unknown to Island Child

On one unusual occasion a resident was counting a few dollar bills and some small change. Her young daughter looked on, fascinated.

"Mummy, can I have one of the brown kind?" the child asked, pointing to a penny.

Absence of a church on Canton once almost prevented a happy marriage. The groom-to-be arranged for his fiancée and a minister to fly from Honolulu to Canton on the same CAA plane. The wedding day had been fixed, and friends planned pre-nuptial parties. She arrived all right, but the minister had lost his place on the plane.

Frantically, Canton began to search for a local person authorized to perform the ceremony. The Pan American station manager, who is also designated by the Department of Justice as Canton's U. S. Commissioner, could



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National Geographic Photographer B. Anthony Stewart

Mullet Arrive in Honolulu Via the "Fish Fly"

Fast transport makes possible Canton Island's fishing industry. These mullet were flown from Canton in 7½ hours.

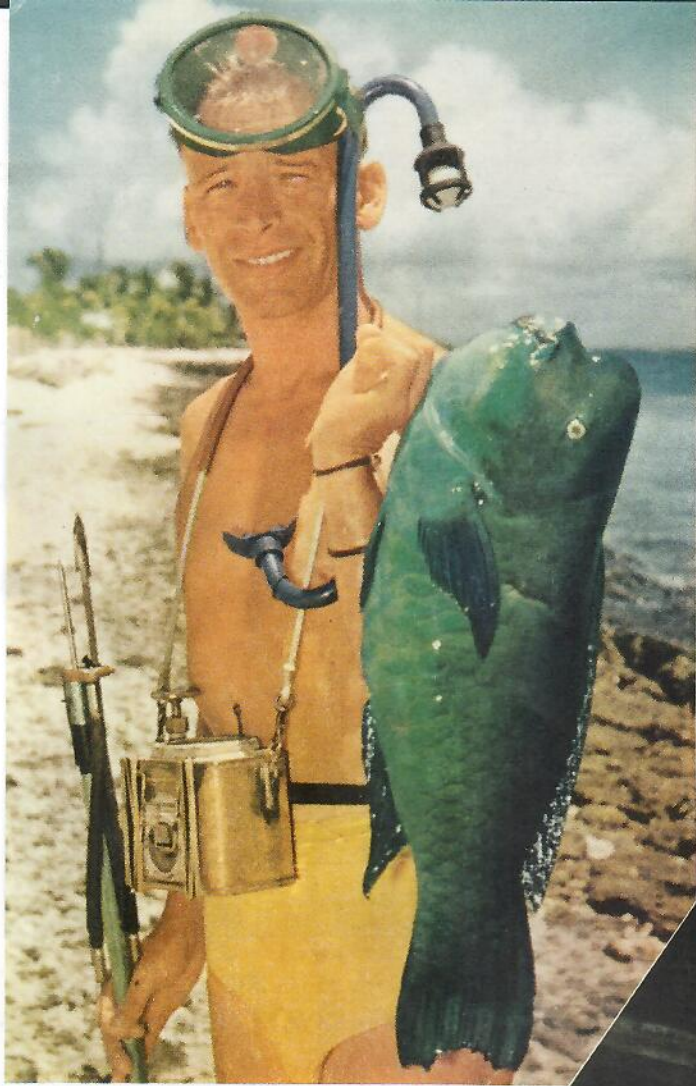
not legally officiate. Not even Bill Evans as deputy marshal had enough power.

Someone suggested the British Resident Administrator. Yes, he could marry them, but only after the banns had been published for three weeks; and they would have to send to New Zealand for the proper papers. That seemed the sole solution.

Then Providence sailed in. A ship appeared on the horizon. She arrived at Canton with a work party to salvage scrap iron from the wrecked transport on the beach. Her captain married the couple on board.

But what about that beached transport? Early in 1942 the 10,500-ton *President Taylor* was ferrying hundreds of United States troops to Pacific battlefronts. Japanese submarines surprised her off Canton. Attempting to bring the *Taylor* into safer waters, crewmen ran her aground. Heavy swells forced her farther ashore, where she was finally abandoned.

Servicemen stationed on the island found the ship's furniture handy for their crude living quarters among the coral. Blue porcelain bathroom fixtures graced hastily built shacks.



← An Undersea Hunter Emerges
with His Prey, a Parrotfish

Diving into Canton Island's lagoon, the author explored a "flowery jungle of coral creation." Through it swam fish "striped like tigers, spotted like leopards, black as jet, yellow as butter."

Accompanying the author, Jim Beudeker wore a glass-fronted face mask and breathing snorkel. He used the S-shaped tube for cruising on the surface with face in water. When he submerged, a float like a ping-pong ball sealed off the tube's air intake. A homemade waterproof case shielded his camera.

A speargun powered with a rubber band impaled the parrotfish, a wary creature armored with coarse scales. The diver speared it by swimming close and penetrating between the scales. The parrotfish is prized in the Pacific for the delicate flavor of its flesh. A bump on the forehead marks this specimen as mature.

Kodachrome by Howell Walker, National Geographic Staff

A Fijian Dancer Celebrates →
the Crowning of His Queen

For the 1953 Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, Fijian residents of Canton Island staged a *meke*, or gesture dance. This spear shaker wears a skirt of coconut palm fronds and a paper *salusalu* around his neck. Talcum powder whitens his hair; his headband and spear wrappings are made of paper.

Canton Island's sparse flora denies to the dancer the brilliantly colored leaves and flowers that distinguish the ceremonial costume of the fertile Fiji Islands.

Most of the Pacific peoples on Canton are British subjects from the Gilbert, Ellice, and Fiji Islands. The United States and the United Kingdom administer the island jointly under a 1939 agreement. Planes of both nations have equal right to port facilities.

© National Geographic Society

Kodachrome by L. K. Budge



Shiny sugar bowls and gleaming silverware looked out of place on rough mess-hall tables.

After the war civilian residents used the *President Taylor* as a sort of clubhouse. They held fish fries and broiled steaks on her decks. Apparently one party failed to put out its fire, and the ship burned for days. Now a flame-gutted, rusting hulk, the *Taylor* grows smaller as time and salvage crews whittle away at her.

Since 1942 the *President Taylor* has been Canton's only prominent landmark. From almost any point on the atoll one can see her bulky silhouette (page 120). At a distance the ship appears to be steaming right into the lagoon.

"We'll miss the *Taylor* when she's gone," I heard more than one island inhabitant say wistfully.

Once I boarded the wreck to watch the salvage crew at work with cutting torches. The captain who had conducted the recent wedding ceremony showed me all over his workshop—the entire eerie vessel.

Fishermen "Airmail" Catch to Hawaii

Salvage of the *Taylor* is one of the few activities on Canton that is not connected with the airways. Even the local commercial fishing companies depend upon aircraft to deliver an average 20,000 pounds of chilled fish a month to Honolulu markets. Pan American planes normally handle two shipments a week at a special commodity rate. Time lapse from netting off Canton's reefs to serving on Hawaiian tables seldom exceeds 24 hours (page 125).

With Gilbertese fishermen I went out several mornings to see how they work their nets. Most often they use the "surround" method. Two men carry a long net in a straight line through waist-deep water toward a likely place for a school of fish. The fishermen try to keep their net between the fish and open water.

Half a dozen Gilbertese wait on the beach. At a given signal they rush for the net, shouting, splashing, and generally endeavoring to drive the fish ahead of them. Meanwhile the men on each end of the net form a horseshoe with it. Then they bring the ends together. By now the "drivers" have reached the scene; they help fold the net into a circle around the fish. The catch comes ashore in large baskets.

One such operation I watched yielded about

100 pounds of bonefish; another netted some 70 pounds of surgeonfish, still another, mullet (page 124). Occasionally the nets yield crevalle, sting ray, and balloonfish.

Not all the fishing is done with nets. To hook mullet, the Gilbertese take poles and a plentiful supply of hermit crabs to the dock in the lagoon harbor. They choose a time when the tide is racing in through the ship channel close by. The crabs are pounded to pulp and tossed into the water.

I watched the fishermen lure hundreds of mullet up to the dock. As far away as we could see, the fish kept crowding in to feed on the crab. All seemed to be about 16 inches long. They came in such thick packs that a pebble dropped anywhere among them would certainly have struck one.

Time to start fishing; men reached for poles and let down lines with barbless hooks. I prepared to photograph mass action.

Suddenly scores of mullet broke water in a body, making a loud whoosh! When the surface calmed, there wasn't a mullet in sight. Some large, hungry fish had frightened them nearly out of their fins.

So ended my first lesson in mullet fishing. The fishermen headed home, resigned to the incident. A few glanced back at me as if to say, "Better luck another day." Even with such bad breaks, the Gilbertese catch enough by net and hook to ship two tons or more of mullet to Honolulu each month.

Ferry Links Northside, Southside

The restless ship channel separates Northside from Southside. Between the areas a 40-foot Diesel-powered ferry carries passengers and goods back and forth from sunrise to midnight. If you miss the last trip, you can drive 24 miles around the island on an indifferent road.

Slightly less than half of Canton's population lives on the Southside in family houses, bachelor quarters, and at the island's one hotel; Fijians and Gilbert and Ellice islanders employed by the British government have their own village inside the British area.

Since the principal business—servicing aircraft—belongs to Northside, much commuting takes place. You might call Southside a residential suburb of Northside, but each has the necessary workshops and plants for electric power and water distillation to call itself a separate community.

Although I tried to divide my stay fairly





↑ Volunteer Firemen Douse a Practice Blaze

Wartime eyesores—abandoned buildings and wrecked airplanes—give Canton's fire fighters ample material for drills.

The island's fire chief ignited this neglected storehouse to demonstrate the skill of Northside's force. Two Gilbertese plowed barefoot through hot corrugated iron to get at blazing timbers.

← Students of assorted ages and nationalities bend over books in Canton's 3-room schoolhouse. Two teachers instruct 30-odd pupils from 3 to 13 years, including Gilbertese and young United States citizens of Chinese, Korean, Hawaiian, Samoan, and Caucasian racial strains. Classes range from kindergarten through the eighth grade. Warm climate makes bare feet stylish the year round.

Here the teacher sits beneath windows built high to shut out glare from coral and the sight of a distracting blue lagoon.

Before the schoolhouse was completed in 1952, a volunteer teacher held classes on her back porch.

Upper left: Canton's Girl Scouts carry flags of the United Kingdom, the United States, and their own Troop 1.

© National Geographic Society

Kodachromes by Howell Walker,
National Geographic Staff

between the two, I found more advantages around Southside. It has the recreational edge. Here grow more trees to shade the glaring coral; the lagoon with its submarine wonders seems nearer, more inviting; the natives' love of music and color brightens the already brilliant setting; and sea birds colonize the vicinity.

Ornithologists Alfred M. Bailey and Robert Niedrach of the Denver museum listed a total of 28 bird species and subspecies at Canton Island in 1952. These include three shearwaters, a petrel, the red-tailed tropic bird, three kinds of boobies, two species of frigate birds, terns, curlew, golden plover, and wandering tattler. Turnstones, or sea dotterels, inhabit the island the year round, and some migratory ducks come here to rest.

Angry Parent Dive-bombs the Author

Not far from Southside a friend and I visited a breeding ground of the gray-backed terns. They form immense colonies, noisily active day and night.

As we walked toward their territory, they screamed with indignation and rose in a ragged cloud. It was as if someone had burst open a hundred pillows to watch the feathers fly. In jerky flight the birds made jagged passes at our heads, cursing us as only terns can do. We had to step mincingly to keep from crushing bantam-size eggs casually laid on the gray coral with which they blend perfectly.

A few fuzzy chicks scampered for cover under ground-creeping vines. When we caught two for picture purposes the adults raged, shrieking around us like mad things. Quite understandably, one irate parent dive-bombed the back of my head.

A mile or so beyond the terns we came to a booby colony. The gannetlike birds spend hours sitting among scaevola branches, looking blank or quietly thinking over their problems. They are powerful flyers. In mating season they take no chances with humans; they take off.

We moved on to the frigate bird, or man-of-war bird (page 123). I particularly wanted to make a color photograph of a male with his throat pouch inflated like a big red balloon. But it wasn't the breeding season; deflation was in style. We did, however, see a bird in flight with his sac blown up. In my excitement at the spectacle I shouted, "There goes one with an inflated bosom!"

Canton Island's birds once "went on the

air." Boobies and frigate birds squawked into a microphone held by radio announcer George Hicks, who accompanied the 1937 eclipse expedition; the birds' voices were carried into United States homes over a National Broadcasting Company network.

Far more colorful and numerous than Canton's birds are the fish in its lagoon. In 1939 Dr. Leonard P. Schultz of the Smithsonian Institution catalogued 221 species in the watery world of Canton Island and its neighbors. And what a world! To dive into it wearing a glass face mask is to forget almost absolutely your own earth.

You can sail the lagoon in a swift outrigger (opposite), flash over it on aquaplane or water skis, land on it with a flying boat, or simply marvel at its delicate, almost artificial color. But nothing can surpass the thrill of venturing below the surface.

Two enthusiasts of undersea life invited me to accompany them one brilliant morning. Into a dinghy we piled spear guns, swim fins, face masks, and cameras snug in homemade watertight cases. We headed for a section of the lagoon rich in coral formations attractive to fish as well as to us (page 126).

Riot of Color in a Watery World

Slipping gently from the boat into the clear water, I moved as if in a dream through a flowery jungle of coral creation. Sometimes I skimmed mountains reaching nearly to the surface; then abruptly I looked down into obscure depths of mysterious valleys. Sunlight filtering through ripples above me played softly on remarkable living structures—lavender, orange, green, brown, yellow, blue, reddish, pinkish, or indescribable.

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A Canton Sailor Jumps to Windward → to Keep a Canoe on Its Feet

Gilbert Islanders made this outrigger canoe in the traditional way. Importing materials, they cut the planks by hand and sewed them together with coconut fibers. No nail, screw, or glue went into the craft. Calking and paint sealed it watertight.

The canoe's hull on the leeward side is flattened to reduce side motion; outrigger acts as a windward balance. Canton Island's outrigger enthusiasts claim speeds up to 30 miles an hour for their craft, making them among the world's fleetest sailboats.

When this skipper comes about, he carries the steering oar to the opposite end of the canoe and swings the sail around. The bow then becomes the stern, and the boat races merrily off "backward."

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Canton's Children Live in a Vacation Climate and Atmosphere

Sun-drenched beaches are open the year round. As in a holiday resort, the population comes and goes. Most residents arrive under contract and return home after two or three years.

If I failed to observe all the coral types, blame the myriad fish, tiny to huge, in every conceivable and inconceivable color combination. Striped like tigers, spotted like leopards, black as jet, yellow as butter, jade green, lapis lazuli, scarlet, russet, or of a silvery transparency, these creatures eclipsed the other wonders of their stunning sphere. I saw long fish, short fish, round fish, flat fish; fish fat as pigs or thin as sticks; giant eels; and massive clams ready to slam their purple jaws.

"Want to look at a shark?" asked one of my companions when I surfaced for air.

That was the last thing I cared to see, but I half-heartedly submerged just long enough to watch six feet of gray horror slink past. I surprised myself at how quickly and easily I sprang back into the boat. Only the incredible beauty of that incredible world below could entice me into the water again. I had succumbed to undersea fever.

Now let anyone suggest a submarine excursion in Canton's lagoon and I'll go at the drop of a face mask. For me, one such adventure is worth the journey to this distant island.

Distant? Mile-wise, yes; but not in time. Nowadays you can leave New York City on Wednesday and land at Canton Island Thursday.

Planes Keep Canton Alive

Aircraft brought this once-empty isle into full focus. The remote reef proved itself an indispensable steppingstone on the way to war in the South Pacific. Although a small atoll, it's big enough to handle today's largest passenger planes. They keep Canton alive; and Canton keeps them flying regularly between North America and the far antipodes.

All of which reminds me that tonight I'll board a Clipper on Canton Island for an appointment early tomorrow in Australia.

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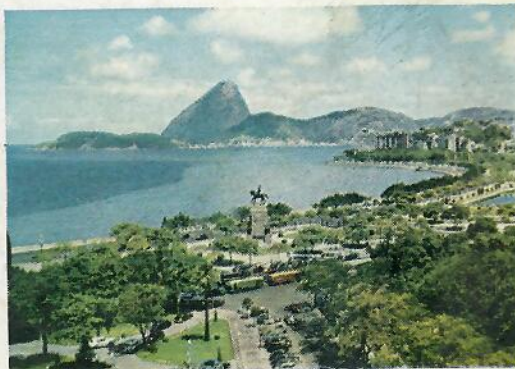
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