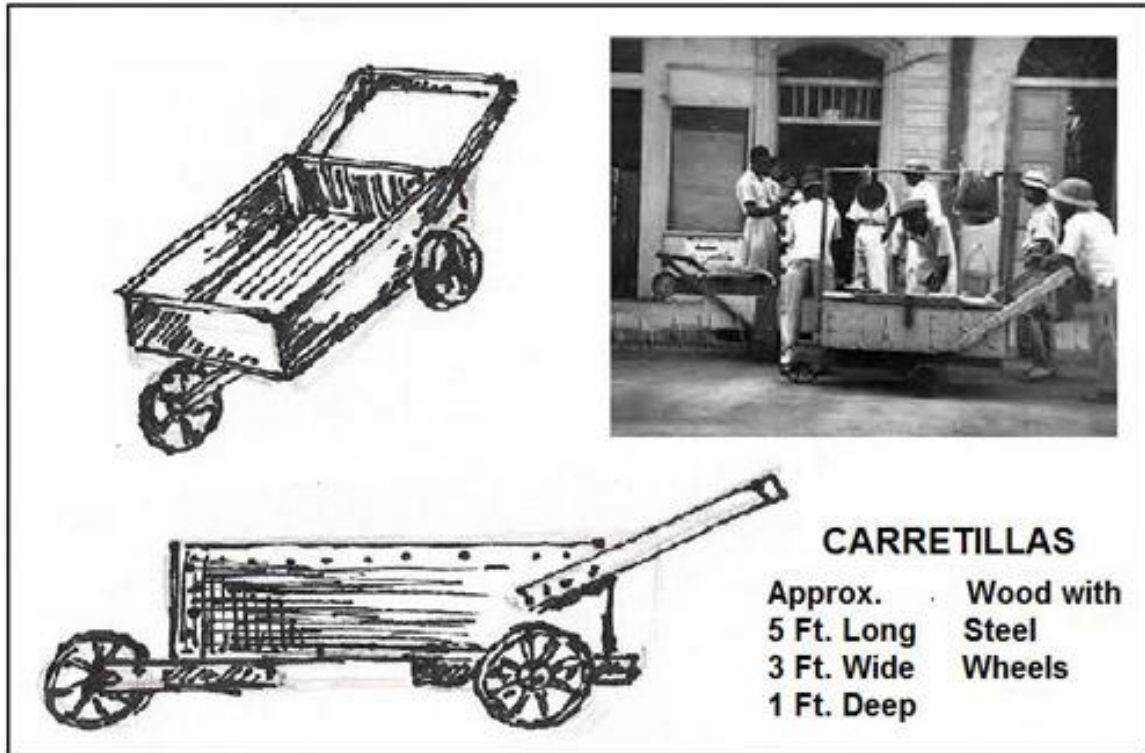


LOS CARRETILLEROS DE PANAMA

The Wagon Pushers Of Panama

By Louie Celerier



When I was growing up in Panama City, Panama, the "Carretilleros" played a very important role in commerce within the city and, I believe, throughout the nation as well. They seemed to be on all the roadways and, yet, auto traffic just drove around them without any complaints or concern. I don't believe that would be the case today.

The Carretilleros served in all capacities: They could be a roadside stand selling general goods, or local fruit and vegetables such as piba, mamones (ginups), bananas, mamei, aguacate (avocados), pipas (green coconuts for their water and soft coconut meat), yuca, otoa, ñame, etc. They would also provide service as movers of household goods, when families would change apartments within the city, movers of merchandise from one store to another and making deliveries from a store to a customer. They worked alone sometimes or as two to a carretilla sometimes. If their load was too big, they knew where to find assistants quickly.

Their carretillas (carts) were home-made contraptions consisting basically of a wooden box some 5 feet long, 3 feet wide and one foot in depth sitting on top of three steel, or cast iron wheels. A push bar extended toward the back where one or two men pushed. The looks of these contraptions depended on the abilities of the owner as a builder, his creativity and his economic situation. Most were quite basic and showed lots of wear.



By the Train Station at Plaza 5 de Mayo (left) and by the Public Market Place.



A Carretillero on Central Avenue on the left photo. I cannot identify the location on the right photo



*This Carretillero is selling birds, fruit and what appears to be a white faced monkey.
Photo sent by Bill McLaughlin.*

I remember one Carretillero in particular. At age 12 I went to work one summer at a building supply company, Mario Galindo & Cia., where my aunt's husband was a part owner. My job was

as a clerk in the front office selling supplies in small and large quantities, working 5-1/2 days and making \$10 a week. Anyway, this Carretillero was called "Pata de Loro" (Parrot Foot) because of his twisted toes. He hung around the street in front of Mario Galindo & Co. ready for any transportation job that might come up. He usually got a few jobs during the week delivering goods from the supply store to small construction sites within the city. I always felt sorry for him as he was a small man, always dressed in mostly ragged clothes and had no shoes. Yet, when a job came up, he would jump up and take off pushing that heavy cart to wherever he had to go.

I do not know if Carretilleros are still a part of the economy in Panama. If it is, I hope their income is better than in past years and their lives more enjoyable. They certainly provided a much needed service in those days.