

One of the World's Biggest Banana Plantations

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HANGUINOLA, Panama.—I am writing this in the center of one of the biggest banana plantations on earth. The hill on which I am sitting is 200 feet high and it commands a view of more than 15,000 acres of the greenest of green. The green is all made up of bananas and the fields stretch as far as I can see to the west. Beyond them is another plantation of 20,000 acres more. The two plantations belong to the big banana trust, known as the United Fruit company, and they are only a part of the mighty estate which this company owns in Central and South America and in the islands of the Caribbean sea. It has taken up about the best banana lands of these sections and it annually ships bananas by the hundreds of millions. From its farms come something like three-fourths of all the bananas we use, and it is due to its good business methods that we are able to buy this fruit much cheaper than the apples we raise in our own back yards. Bananas from Panama are sold in New York, Washington and Chicago at from 15 to 20 cents a dozen. Whereas apples of equal excellence from Oregon, New York or Virginia bring 2 cents and upward apiece.

A Sea of Bananas.
 But as to the extent of the banana business and the part that this fruit has in the American stomach, I shall write later. Let me give you a view of the great banana sea as it is spread out below me. At my right are the mountains, the upper end of the Andes, which at this point are about as high as the Blue Ridge and of much the same color. They slope down to the green and bound what, as I look, seems a vast sea of green bushes.

Now turn and look to the left. The sea of green extends for fifteen miles in that direction without a break, and it is the same at the front and the back. Almost as far as you can see there is green everywhere, except here and there where one of the high trees of the jungle was too big for cutting.

Now take your glass and look more closely at the plantations below you. The green is not solid. You can see that it is divided up into great fields or farms, each of which contains about 1,000 acres, and that there are narrow lines of railroads running through it, with wagon roads here and there. These roads were built to get out the bananas. There are 170 miles of railways on this banana plantation and they run through the farms like the veins of one's body, reaching all parts. The roads are about three feet wide. With a glass you can see the steel tracks shining out of the green. On some of the roads are cars loaded with green bunches and on the trunk line which crosses the estate are piles of bananas corded up for the trains.

How Bananas Are Handled.
 Now take a look at that train which is approaching the hill. See, it has stopped and is taking on fruit. The gang of Jamaica negroes is transferring the piles to the cars. They handle the fruit very carefully. The cars have been lined with leaves to prevent bruising the bananas as the train goes over the rails. Each bunch is lifted up into the air and passed from hand to hand to the men on the train. There is no throwing or dropping the bunches. Each is raised as tenderly as though it were a baby and is laid softly down on the car. The bunches are packed just so and the men know just how many carloads it will take for the steamer which is to carry them to the United States. I am told that 100 carloads will be shipped off today. The trains will carry them down to the port and the bananas will go from the cars on endless belts of canvas right into the steamers. They are put in cold storage, and remain there until they begin to fly out on similar carriers into the cold storage cars at New Orleans or New York. These bananas will go to New Orleans or to Mobile, from where they will fly to the chief cities of the Mississippi valley and the lands farther west. The United Fruit Company aims to supply our whole country. It has it divided into sections and there is a port for each section. I am told that the bananas from Fort Limon, Costa Rica, which lies sixty miles away up the coast, all go to New York and Boston, and that those of Jamaica are shipped largely to Europe.

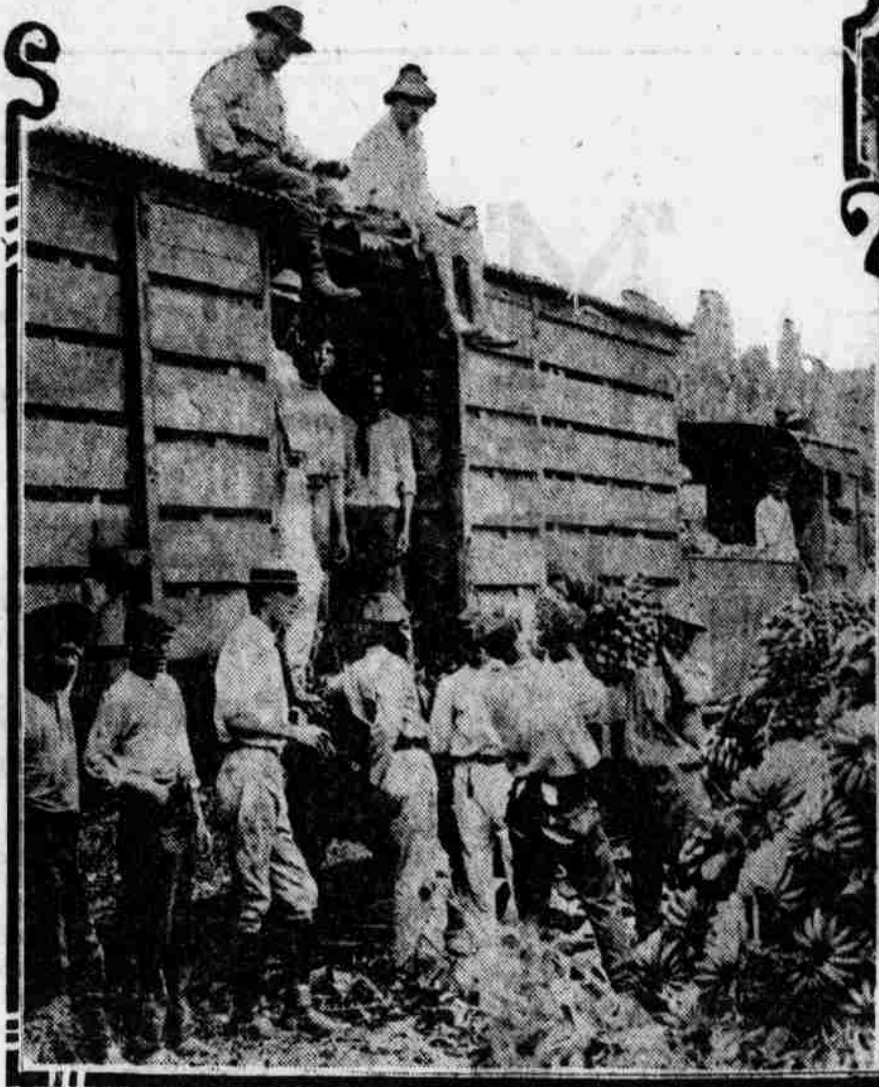
The European business is extending and the fruit company is trying to educate the people to eating bananas. They have done this in the United States and have built up an immense market. For some time they have had to send fruit to

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Loading bananas

Europe at a loss, but the business is now beginning to pay, and it will eventually be of great value.

In the Banana Plantations.
 But let us go down and take a ride through this vast banana plantation. We have special cars and can stop where we please. We pass for miles through nothing but bananas. The trees sprout from the ground and rise to the height of a two-story house. Each is composed of broad ribbon-like leaves eight or nine inches wide. The leaves sprout from the base of the plant, around which they form a short trunk and then go out in a most graceful curve, bending over so that their ends rustle and wave in the breeze.

Now we have left the cars and are walking through the fruit forest. How dark it is. The leaves are so thick and so many that they keep out the sun. On every side of us the view is the same. There are stalks and trunks of bananas as far as we can see, and we wonder what we should do if we should get lost, and whether we should not go round and round in a circle, as men have been known to act when lost in the wilderness.

How the Trees Look.
 Now take a close look at the plants. This is near Bocas del Toro, and the bananas grow nowhere more luxuriantly than here. The trees at the base are as big around as the thigh of President Taft and thirty feet from the ground. The bananas are of great size, and the bunches or stems are bigger than those of other parts of the world. Each stem is known as a hand, and the individual bananas are called fingers. In many places a bunch of eight or nine hands is a fairly good yield, but here the average is eleven or twelve, and some of the bunches have as many as seventeen hands, each containing ten or twelve fingers, as the bananas are called.

The bunches range all the way from 250 to 300 bananas, and this means the yield of one plant. The banana plant is a single stem, and the plant yields only one crop of fruit. As soon as the bunch is cut off the stem is cut down and other plants sprout up from the roots. There is no such thing as planting the banana from the seed. If bananas ever had seeds they have long since disappeared from the lack of use. All the plants now grow from suckers or sprouts, and they come up so readily that an estate will yield a continuous harvest from year to year without replanting. On some spots banana trees have reproduced their kind for fifty years, without replanting, and at the end the yield was quite as great as at first.

Cutting the Fruit.
 Now, let us stop and watch them cutting fruit. This requires skill. The bananas must not fall on the ground, as the slightest bruise will make them unfit for shipping. The cutting is done by negroes, who are skilled in the business. They use long lances with sharp steel blades, and cut half way through the stem at one stroke. This makes the bunch fall and the cutter catches it as it gently drops down. He now cuts off the rest of the stem and the bunch is handed to the men who carry it off to the cars.

I suppose it makes your mouth water to think of eating a banana fresh from the tree. Such a banana would surely cause colic. The fruit opens best by being cut green, and on all these thousand acres I cannot see a single yellow banana. It is only at the ports that I have been able to get fruit to eat. The green bananas will keep two or three weeks after cutting, and if cut at just the right time they taste better by being allowed to ripen on the way to the markets.

Six Thousand Workmen.
 Many people think that there is but little labor in raising bananas. There was never a greater mistake. When the United Fruit company took up these thousands of acres they were covered with a jungle as dense as that on the slopes of the Himalaya mountains. The ground was covered with mighty trees, some of which were 150 feet high. These trees were bound together with vines and lianas, which were matted together and formed a network of woven vegetation. There were palms of a score of varieties, and the mass of green was so dense that you could only cut your way through with a knife and an ax. All of this jungle had to be cut down and turned over. The big trees, some of which were as large around as a flour barrel, and some had even the diameter of a hoghead, were left to rot where they fell.

After the land was cleared and burned over, the plants had to be set out at 300 hills to the acre. They had to be kept clean of weeds, and this notwithstanding that nature here is so generous that if the land is left free for six months it will be all jungle again.



There are 170 miles of railroad on this banana plantation

120 inches a year, and the banana tree will not grow with its feet in the water. In some other banana plantations the land is so dry that irrigation is needed, but here the rainfall is just right. In planning the plantations, roads and railroads were built. Farmhouses and homes for the men were put up at every few miles, and blacksmith's shops, stores and offices erected.

How the Labor is Handled.
 The most of the men who work on this banana estate are Jamaica negroes, who were brought here for the purpose. They live in little shacks scattered here and there along the railroad and they go out from them to their labor. The officials and foremen are whites, and the responsible parts of the work are done by Americans sent here from the United States. These men are the best of their kind and they receive excellent wages. The negroes are paid about the same that the Jamaicans receive on the Panama canal, and their labor is about as efficient.

A great deal of work is done by the piece, and the man gets so much for clearing, so much for planting and cleaning and so much for picking the fruit. As it is now, it costs about \$30 per acre to clear the land, and the managers can tell you just how much every plant costs. They have cost sheets like those of a great factory and can tell to the tenth of a cent the outlay spent on each bunch of bananas and where every cent goes. It is only by such methods that bananas can be sold at the prices they bring in the states and still give a profit. The whole business is on the petty economies, which in the aggregate mean a saving of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Not a Whittling Business.
 As I walked through the fields and watched the great green bunches being cut by the hundreds and carried off to the cars I asked one of the foremen if there would not be big money for an American to come here and start a rival fruit trust, and whether a man with a small amount of money could not engage in the business at a profit. He replied:

"It might seem so if you did not know the facts. The truth is this is no whittling business. You have got to have a big capital, and enough to take care of all kinds of accidents. Sometimes a disease will wipe out a plantation, and again a storm blows up and we lose the whole crop. Just a few months ago we had a hurricane here which destroyed 15,000 bunches of bananas in the space of five minutes. That happens every now and then, and if the property was that of a small farmer it would mean total ruin. A big concern like this can stand it on account of the profit it receives from its other plantations. As it is now, there are many small plantations, but they sell their bananas to us. We pay them 25 cents a bunch, and at that they can do very well. Nevertheless the total product of such men about here is only 2,000 bunches a week, which is a bagatelle in comparison with the 100,000 bunches we ship during that time. As to a rival trust, that might succeed, but it needs good lands and a fleet of ships, and also good marketing facilities in the United States."

Our Big Banana Business.
 One hundred thousand bunches a week. The men utter these words as though they meant nothing. Nevertheless, they were astounding to me. Have you any idea what 100,000 bunches a week means? It means 5,000,000 bunches of bananas a year, for the banana business goes on all the year through. A single bunch contains 150 bananas, and from this place



Cutting done by negroes skilled in the business



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alone they are sending forth something like 750,000,000 per annum. We have 100,000,000 people in the United States, including Alaska and the Philippine Islands. These plantations could give every one of us seven bananas and have 50,000,000 to spare. It could give thirty-five to every family.

But this is only one of the estates of the United Fruit company. The banana trust has scores of others, and it ships from Costa Rica almost double as many bananas as from here. It ships a vast deal from Cartagena, and it is building up in Guatemala big plantations, which I hope to visit within the next few months. The business is increasing and the demand for bananas is increasing as well.

The United States is now using 60,000,000 bunches of bananas every twelve months, or about 500,000,000 fingers per annum. You can now get a good banana for a cent or two almost anywhere in our country, and the business has to be big in order to pay.

I am told that it pays well. It pays not only the capitalists who handle it, but also the countries where the bananas are grown. It is one of the chief sources of revenue of the treasures of Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras and Guatemala, and it is giving the working men of the West India Islands wages beyond what they can obtain anywhere else. Indeed, much of the development which is now going on in this part of the world comes from the banana, and the future of these countries is bright, through the increase of the consumption of bananas abroad. Their use is growing by leaps and bounds in the United States, and they are now making their way into the thickly populated countries of Europe as well.

FRANK G. CARPENTER.

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