

# EXPERIENCES IN CENTRAL AMERICA

J. W. McInnes, '27

## Raising Bananas in Porto Rico; a Brief Description of the Work in the Tropics

Editor's Note: Mr. McInnes, a graduate of the class of '27, accepted a position with the United Fruit Co. and has spent the last few months in Central America.

**T**HERE are such widely varied occupations here, all for the advancement of one thing, that one marvels at the organization—the greatest of its kind in the world. The chief business of the United Fruit Company is the production of bananas. Everyone in the organization from the laundryman to the president of the company, who started in the company as a farm timekeeper, talks bananas, eats bananas and thinks bananas. Every move is in line with either producing more bananas or producing them more economically.

My job happens to be one which takes me out in the farms and over the various divisions. The Soil Research Department, in which I am working, was organized only a few years ago for the major purpose of studying Panama Disease. This hazard has been bothering banana culture for some 16 years, but has not seriously handicapped the industry until recently. Previously there had always been more available land when the Panama disease (*Fusarium Cubense*) took a property, so no great amount of concern was occasioned.

The Soil Research department has found a very direct and accurate correlation between soil acidity and the length of time bananas may be grown on a piece of land prior to its abandonment on account of the disease.

In my short time with the company, I have been thrown into such a great number of circumstances that my experiences stand out in my mind better than what little I know or have done along soil work here. So I feel you may be more interested in these incidents than in banana culture itself.

After six weeks in Honduras, the major part of which I spent in the Tela laboratory, I went to Havana Cuba, and caught a boat for Cristobal, Panama. There I met the head

of the Research department and with him I came to Limon, Costa Rica.

My first two weeks in Coast Rica covered quite a bit of tropical life so I will reiterate some of the experiences I have had here. It was raining when we arrived at the dock. That is not at all unusual, either, for the lowlands in Coast Rica get around 125 inches of rain annually. Arrangements had been made for us to stop at the Community house, a kind of club house of the United Fruit Company's colony which faces the open sea. Here one may hear the surf beating against the rocks at all times. Some fifty yards from the club house is a swimming pool that has been arranged with a diving board and a raft anchored out some fifty feet.

After four days of office work in Limon, I took a narrow gauge railroad some thirty kilometers thence to put up at a farmhouse modern, (with the exception of electric lights) and go over some old banana plantations and tentative new plantings now in woods. Due to heavy rains the previous week, this new land work turned out to be a rather wet proposition. One has to wade in swamps, and cross unbridged ditches with water often up to the waist, following pickett lines which have been laid out previously by the engineers. Picketts are lines cut through the brush—paths just wide enough to walk through which cross the country in straight lines with no regard to elevation. Along these lines we walk, crossing hills, swamps, lowland and forest, taking soil samples at regular intervals. In the wooded sections the mosquitoes are pretty bad, though the Anopholes (malaria mosquito) is out only at night.

On our first day out one of the men dropped a soil auger while we were crossing a stream, and the water was up to his neck when he held on to a log to find it with his feet. We had two days of this brush work before Sunday and were at the Superintendent's house Sunday morning when word came that a special train would stop for us if we cared to go to San Jose to see Lindbergh.

It was not hard for us to decide to

make the trip up the mountains to the most beautiful city in Costa Rica to honor the international hero. People all over Costa Rica had been given free transportation to the republic's capitol for the event, and we arrived so late in the evening that the first, second, and third rate hotels were filled to capacity. We succeeded in getting a room in what we charistened "El Hotel Caramba" for obvious reasons. The trip up through the banana lands, the coffee plantations, to the plateau, our sight of Lindbergh at the American Legation, and our evening at the Union club, the most elite in Costa Rica, had all been so wonderful that we did not retire until 3:30 a. m. of the following morning.

We were up in time to see Lindbergh take off from Sabana field, for Panama, and caught the train back to the valley, ready to start the third week of our stay in Costa Rica.

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