(shirts, pants, and shoes) cost the equivalent of several days’ wages. Some workers found ways to boost earnings by working faster under a piece-rate system, but any savings that individuals were able to accrue could quickly disappear during periodic layoffs. Finally, most workers were no more inclined to asceticism than their North American managers; young men and women indulged in any number of “vices,” including food, drink, sex, and stylish footwear.

The Second World War and its aftermath would bring a number of economic, political, social, and technological changes to Honduras and the United States that would affect North Coast landscapes and livelihoods. Fruit company employees would play a major role in fomenting change by organizing a massive strike in 1954 that precipitated a wave of social reforms in Honduras—reforms that would be monitored closely by both banana company executives worried about dwindling profits and U.S. State Department officials preoccupied with containing communist “threats” in Latin America. Meanwhile, in the United States, World War II introduced the consuming masses to yet another seductive image of tropical exoticism.

Chapter 6

The Lives and Time of Miss Chiquita

"[T]he banana industry is no longer a gypsy industry that can move on to new land as PD [Panama disease] or other pests invade the old plantations. We must now hold the front and in order to do so are having to make tremendous investments in flood following, Sigatoka control and insect control to bring back this land and maintain it in maximum production."

L. G. Cox, Vice-President for Research, United Fruit 1954

I'm Chiquita Banana and I've come to say
Bananas have to ripen in a certain way.
When they are fleck'd with brown and have a golden hue,
Bananas taste the best, and are the best for you.

But bananas like the climate of the very, very tropical equator,
So you should never put bananas in the refrigerator.

The Chiquita Banana Song, 1944

Miss Chiquita was born on the airwaves in 1944. That year, the United Fruit Company launched a nationwide radio campaign that featured the voice of Patty Clayton singing the “Chiquita Banana Song.” The tune, set to a calypso beat, achieved hit status and found its way onto the play lists of radio disc jockeys, juke boxes, and the repertoire of the Boston Pops. Both the lyrics and the medium reflected changes taking place in U.S. consumer culture. Written by a New York City advertising agency, the jingle’s oft-quoted couplet, “But bananas like the climate of the very, very tropical equator/So you should never put bananas in the refrigerator,” conjured images of middle-class homes equipped with electric appliances such as refrigerators and radios. This vision of domestic life stood in sharp con-
trast to the scene of an urban street peddler hawking produce depicted in the 1923 pop hit "Yes, We Have No Bananas!" The post–World War II era witnessed important changes in consumption patterns in the United States, but the "poor man's luxury" remained a fixture in the appliance-filled kitchens of the increasingly suburbanized middle classes.

World War II shipping restrictions sharply reduced banana imports and lowered per capita banana consumption to 8.2 pounds in 1943, but consumption rates rebounded quickly following the end of the war, peaking in 1948 at an estimated 22 pounds per person. Over the next ten years, per capita consumption rates fell to 17–19 pounds. This trend was consistent with a general decline in fresh fruit consumption that coincided with the proliferation of processed foods. Bananas remained among the most popular fresh fruits, but with the exception of a small demand for banana puree for baby food, no major markets emerged for processed banana products as was the case with apples and oranges. The Chiquita Banana Song's lyrics, then, reflected both the banana's enduring popularity and changes in U.S. foodways that would limit the ability of the banana market to expand.

The medium through which Miss Chiquita reached her audience—the radio—further reflected changes taking places in advertising and mass media. Prior to the 1940s, United Fruit's advertising consisted primarily of informational pamphlets, billboard displays, and the company's Uni-fruitico magazine. In the 1940s, United Fruit's promotional materials began replacing text-heavy pamphlets with ephemera that featured elaborate artwork and photographic layouts. Recipe books from the period featured a cartoon banana figure with masculine features who instructed consumers on how to evaluate fruit ripeness. Following the airing of the Chiquita Banana Song, the cartoon figure appearing in the company's print advertisements shifted from the man-banana to Miss Chiquita. She cut a striking figure with her smooth, blemish-free skin, long, flowing skirt, high heels, and an oversize hat adorned with tropical fruits. United Fruit's decision to "transgender" their icon is not surprising given the immense popularity enjoyed by another woman often associated with bananas during the 1940s: Carmen Miranda.

Dubbed the "Brazilian Bombshell" by the U.S. media, the Portuguese-born Miranda took both Broadway and Hollywood by storm during World War II. The bananas that often dominated the sets of her musical numbers provided a visual association between her "hot" rhythms and a sensual—yet never quite locatable—tropical thing. Nothing conveyed this more explicitly than Busby Berkeley's 1943 Hollywood musical The Gang's

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**BAKED BANANAS IN THE PEEL**

4 firm bananas*  
1/4 teaspoon salt  
Butter, margarine, or olive oil (optional)

*Skin on some or slightly green-dipped bananas

Cut off the tips of both ends of each banana. Make a lengthwise incision in the peel, about 1 inch wide, extending from end to end. Brush exposed portion of the pulp with butter or margarine and sprinkle liberally with salt. Place into a moderate oven (375°F); 15 to 20 minutes, or until peels are dark and bananas are tender . . . easily pierced with a fork. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Four servings.

**HAM BANANA ROLLS**

With Cheese Sauce

4 thin slices boiled ham
Prepared mustard
4 or 5 bananas*
1/4 teaspoon paprika
Cheese Sauce

*Skin on some or slightly green-dipped bananas

**Cheese Sauce**

1/4 cup dry white wine
1/4 cup heavy cream
2 tablespoons flour
2 tablespoons butter or margarine
1/2 cup grated American cheese
Salt and pepper

**HOT BANANA BISCUITS**

3 ripe bananas
1/2 cup flour
1/2 cup sugar
1/2 cup butter
2 teaspoons baking powder

company's advertising campaigns of the 1950s updated well-worn themes that encouraged consumers to eat more bananas, or borrowed from in-vogue modernization discourses to call attention to United Fruit's role in bringing greater prosperity to the Americas. United Fruit's marketing strategy would undergo a transition in the early 1960s as part of a larger company makeover in response to a set of political, economic, and agro-ecological changes that left the company with historically low profits at the end of the 1950s. Not surprisingly, in the scramble to reinvent the company's image, United Fruit executives would turn to Miss Chiquita for help.

At the same time that the Chiquita banana song was filling the airwaves across the United States, Panama disease continued its silent invasion of export banana farms in Honduras. Between 1939 and 1948, the Tela Railroad Company lost more than 6,700 hectares of banana farms. The rate of abandonment accelerated over the next five years (1949–53) when the company removed more than 9,600 hectares from production. Compounding the problem of rising rates of Panama disease incidence was the diminishing amount of prime banana soils on the North Coast. In 1946, nine farms occupying some 3,200 hectares of "freshly-cleared jungle land not previously cultivated" were in "various stages of development." Although appreciable, the new farms could not make up for land that United Fruit had already abandoned and the prospect of obtaining forested lands in the future was dim. Consequently, the company increasingly turned its attention to areas considered marginal for export banana cultivation, including extensive wetlands lying between the lower portions of the Uúa and Chameleón rivers. The "land reclamation" projects used an extensive series of dykes and spillways to divert the rivers' flood waters to swamps where the silt-laden water slowed, and solid particles settled, eventually forming a layer of soil in which Gros Michel bananas could be planted.

One of the largest silting projects undertaken by the company in the mid-1940s was a 4,500-hectare site appropriately named El Pantano ("The Swamp"). Workers erected levees—the longest of which extended almost five miles—that were capable of holding water to a depth of twelve feet. In 1947, workers drained the land with the aid of turbine-driven pumps that both removed standing water and ensured that groundwater did not rise to unacceptable levels (not an easy task in a lowland area situated between two rivers and subject to heavy rains during the wet season). The El Pantano project and others like it demonstrated United Fruit's engineering prowess but also the rising inputs—and concomitant increase in

costs—associated with growing bananas in the Sula valley at mid-century. Of course, such projects could only be carried out by businesses with hefty amounts of capital at their disposal; in 1949, “more and more” non-company banana farms were being abandoned and/or converted to other crops on account of plant diseases.12 The soil-building projects yielded an unexpected benefit: scientists observed that soils infected with Panama disease produced “first class” fruit for a number of years after having accumulated several rainy seasons’ worth of silt. This observation inspired United Fruit’s Dr. Vining Dunlap to begin a series of experiments in 1939 aimed at reclaiming Panama disease-infected soils.13 Dunlap and his assistants temporarily transformed diseased banana farms into shallow lake beds that were filled
with water. After a period ranging from three to eighteen months, workers drained and replanted the land with disease-free rhizome materials. In 1942, Dunlap reported that his "flood-fallowing" technique was showing "some success." Five years later, the company had more than 4,000 hectares in various stages of flood following. The early success of the experiments, combined with the accelerated spread of Panama disease entering the 1950s, made "all the more urgent" the need for "extensive flood-fallowing operations." By 1953, company workers had flood-fallowed and replanted some 5,700 hectares of land in the Sula valley.

Standard Fruit Company executives also faced the dilemma of dwindling soil resources in Honduras. In 1941, the company possessed some 25,000 hectares of abandoned banana and coconut lands. By that point, Standard Fruit was in the process of shifting its production to the upper Agüacán valley where it established offices, workshops, and worker housing in Coyoles, a short distance from Olancho. Mulling over future planting projects in a 1941 memorandum, general manager A. J. Chute wrote, "There is not enough good land at Olancho for us to be justified in passing any of it up." The company began buying small and large properties in order to create contiguous blocks of land with soils suitable for banana cultivation. Between 1935 and 1945, company workers planted nearly 4,900 hectares of new banana farms in the area, while abandoning nearly 1,300 hectares following the spread of Panama disease. During the mid-1940s, long-time company employee John Miceli engaged in protracted negotiations with local landowners in order to acquire "everything plantable south of the Aguácán River." In late October 1945, Miceli wrote triumphantly that he had succeeded in his mission: "I told you I would get the lands on the south side of Agüacán River and I got them. I could have gotten through much quicker if I would have paid the price they asked and [was] authorized to pay but I wouldn't. As it is, in spite of the price they asked at first, I do not believe that all this land has cost the company more than 25 dollars per acre [361.75 per hectare]." Miceli managed to piece together a 2,200-hectare block of land on the south bank of the Agüacán that he anticipated would take care of the company's land needs for five years.

Local climatic conditions complicated Standard's efforts to expand rapidly. Because the upper Agüacán lies in a rain-shadow created by the Nombre de Dios mountains that lie to the north, the region has a pronounced dry season. Export banana farms therefore required heavy irrigation that both taxed the valley's water resources and elevated production costs. For example, in 1946, a Standard Fruit official reported that an 800-hectare block of land could not be planted due to "insufficient water"; existing farms were already taking all of the available water from the Agüacán River. Company records from that year indicate that installing and operating an overhead irrigation system represented more than forty percent of the total costs associated with creating a banana farm in the region.

In addition to diverting the flow of the Agüacán River for irrigation needs, Standard Fruit also took advantage of the region's forests. Beginning in the 1940s, the company tried to reduce wind-related losses by supporting the banana plants with varas, or wooden stakes. Logging contractors extracted hardwoods, including oak, mahogany, and guarama, from the mountains that surrounded Standard Fruit's Coyoles farms. Working in teams, fieldhands dug holes into which they placed a vara alongside plants bearing heavy bunches. A vara typically lasted four or five harvests before being replaced, provided that it was not stolen by workers for firewood. Former Standard Fruit researcher Henry Muery recalled that his company experimented with bamboo props as early as 1951, but continued to harvest varas from mountain forests and Tikis wood from marshes on the island of Utila into the 1970s. The company also
managed to wrangle land concessions from the national government, but
the capital needed to turn Panama-diseased soils into productive export
banana farms prevented the company from transforming its political in-
fluence into profits.

Political changes in Honduras and elsewhere further complicated
matters for the fruit companies. Following the defeat of fascist regimes in
World War II, authoritarian governments in Central America came under
internal and external pressures to democratize political institutions. In
1948, faced with growing opposition led by university students and radical
Liberal party factions, President Carías stepped down from power after
ruling Honduras for sixteen years, paving the way for his vice-president
and former United Fruit Company lawyer, Juan Manuel Gálvez, to assume
the presidency. The following year, university students and others openly
protested the terms of a concession sought by United Fruit, a clear sig-
nal that the fruit companies’ influence in Tegucigalpa was waning. In 1950,
President Gálvez signed legislation creating a 15-percent income tax on
the banana companies’ in-country earnings. Five years later, the national
government raised the tax rate to 30 percent. At the same time, the Hon-
duran state began promoting cattle, coffee, and cotton exports in order
to diversify the national economy and lessen its dependence on banana
exports for revenue.

The Gálvez administration also initiated labor reforms at a time when
both the U.S. State Department and the American Federation of Labor
(AFL) were pressuring Central American governments to promote the for-
amation of anti-communist trade unions. In 1950, Gálvez signed an Orga-
nization of American States (OAS) charter pledging to defend workers’ right
to associate. Two years later, the Honduran congress created the Bureau
of Labor and Social Welfare in order to implement reform measures that
included shortening the work day, restricting the use of child labor, and
creating worker compensation. Ex-fieldhand Francisco Portillo recalled
the joy with which workers greeted the eight-hour day: “I was working
in irrigation. We usually left the fields really late. Then one day, another
crew showed up to relieve us. It was two in the afternoon. We all stood
in the field shouting, “Viva Juan Manuel Gálvez!”’ According to histo-
rian Dario Buraque, that was precisely the type of reaction that the gov-
ernment hoped to elicit. Gálvez did not envision his reforms as stepping
stones leading to the formation of powerful unions, “but rather as part of
a state apparatus that would serve to mediate labor disputes.”

However, communist organizers (including writer Ramón Amaya
Amador), radical Liberal party members, and activist workers had ideas
of their own. The Comité Coordinador Obrero (Workers' Coordinating Committee, CCO) formed in 1950 with the intention of organizing Honduran mining, factory, and agricultural workers. The CCO, along with the Partido Demócrata Revolucionario Hondureño (PDRH) began publishing underground newspapers that circulated widely on the North Coast. In April 1954, Tela Railroad Company dock workers walked off the job after the company refused to pay them overtime for working on Easter Sunday (as stipulated by Gámez's reform legislation). Shortly thereafter, nurses and other employees of the company's hospital in Tela presented management with a list of demands that the two sides swiftly resolved. A few days later, dock workers, machinists, and other company employees went on strike in Puerto Cortés. When police authorities detained a pair of strike leaders, a mass protest by workers succeeded in winning their unconditional release. May Day celebrations in El Progreso and La Lima drew several thousand people who turned out to express their support for the striking dock workers. Two days later, the entire work force of the Tela Railroad Company's El Progreso division walked off the job. They were soon joined by thousands of coworkers in La Lima, Puerto Cortés, and Tela. Within a week, some 15,000 Standard Fruit Company laborers also went on strike. For the first time since 1932, a general strike paralyzed export banana production on the North Coast.

The striking United Fruit workers demanded wage increases, improved medical care, paid vacation time, housing for all workers, free schooling for employees' children, and the provision of protective work clothing, among other things. Standard Fruit's employees sought the immediate dismissal of three company administrators, a fifty percent across-the-board wage hike, paid vacations, and other benefits. A government-appointed mediator succeeded in bringing the Standard Fruit strike to a relatively swift conclusion when the company consented to both make modest wage increases and replace the three administrators named in the strikers' petition. However, some workers rejected the settlement and remained on strike until the government intervened. The Tela Railroad Company strike lasted sixty-nine days before the two sides reached an agreement following the intervention of President Gámez, the development of deep fissures among the workers' leaders, and the U.S.-supported arrest of strike organizers with ties to communist organizations and the PDRH. Workers won modest increases in wages and benefits. More importantly, the Tela Railroad Company agreed to recognize collective bargaining units. Shortly thereafter, labor leaders created the Tela Railroad Company Workers' Union (SITRATERCOSA).

Both Gámez and the U.S. State Department insinuated that the Guatemalan government under the leadership of Jacobo Arbenz helped to foment the strike, but workers received far more support from San Pedro Sula's business leaders than from communist-influenced foreign governments. In fact, the U.S.-orchestrated overthrow of the Arbenz government notwithstanding, the events of 1954 ultimately served to weaken United Fruit's power. In the United States, the Department of Justice's anti-trust division opened an inquiry into the company's marketing practices. In Honduras, the candidate of the resurgent Liberal Party, Ramón Villeda Morales won a plurality—but not a majority—of the votes in the election that followed in the aftermath of the strike. In the absence of clear majority, Julio Lozano Díaz, vice-president under Gámez, assumed dictatorial powers. Lozano Díaz's government promulgated a Charter of Labor Rights that guaranteed workers the right to collective bargaining, legalized about fifty unions, and recognized the right to strike.

Coming only seven years after the end of the sixteen-year Cariato, the legislation marked both the growing power of pro-labor Liberal party leaders and the reluctant acknowledgement on the part of some National party leaders that in the rapidly shifting geopolitical contexts of the Cold War, the United States frowned upon the repression of anti-communist labor organizations. Villeda Morales at last assumed the presidency in 1957, following the overthrow of Lozano Díaz in 1956 by Colonel Oswaldo López Arellano. The armed forces' motives for the coup were multiple, but by forcing the discredited Lozano Díaz out of office, the coup leaders created an opening for the increasingly popular Liberal party to come to power. During the presidency of Villeda Morales (1957-1963) the previously marginalized voices of workers and small-scale farmers resonated loudly, expanding the boundaries of political discourse in Honduran society and reshaping state-led development projects. In 1959, the Villeda Morales administration created the Institute of Social Security (1959) and promulgated a new national labor code (1959). Three years later, the Honduran government approved agrarian reform legislation.

Unsurprisingly, the U.S. banana companies did not stand still in the wake of the profound changes that took place between the end of World War II and the early 1960s. In Honduras, the companies reacted to the rising power of organized labor by finding ways to reduce the size of their work forces. Under the terms of the strike settlement, the company promised not to take reprisals against strike leaders, but it reserved the right to transfer and/or release workers for "general economic reasons, acts of God, and unforeseeable events." Company executives must have
prayed hard because two months after the strike concluded, severe flooding wiped out thousands of hectares of bananas in the Sula valley. The company responded by dismissing some 3,000 workers in November 1954, striking a blow to the fledgling Tela Railroad Company Workers Union.

SITRATERECO officials reported to the press that they had convinced company management to refrain from laying off an additional 7,000 employees, but a company-issued statement only acknowledged that management had agreed to keep the number of firings to the "fewest possible." A U.S. embassy official reported that rank-and-file members were upset over the inability of union leaders to prevent mass layoffs. The Tela Railroad Company made small severance payments to dismissed workers and allowed them to cultivate crops on company lands that lay fallow. In addition, the Honduran government requested relief supplies from the United States and organized an emergency public works program that provided highway-building jobs for laid-off banana workers. However, a U.S. official warned that any long-term solution to the unemployment problem would remain out of reach until the company "settles the basic question of whether operations will be built up again to normal or pre-flood levels, or will be resumed on permanently lower levels." 

An answer came two years later when the Tela Railroad Company organized a tour of its rehabilitated operations for representatives of Honduran banks, commercial establishments, industry, and the national press. Company officials explained that the spread of Panama disease, combined with market demand for "high quality" fruit, reduced the viability of recuperating "marginal lands." Consequently, the area under production would never again equal pre-1954 levels, nor would the company "maintain as many employees as in the past." This proved to be an understatement: between 1955 and 1957, the Tela Railroad Company slashed its Honduran payroll nearly in half (from about 26,000 to just over 13,000 workers) while land under active banana cultivation declined from some 16,000 hectares to 11,000 hectares between 1953 and 1959. The number of employees hired by United Fruit fell to a low of 8,800 persons in 1961.

Standard Fruit's response to the 1954 strike was equally dramatic: after expanding both its banana plantings and its workforce in the early 1950s, the company cut its payroll from 13,000 to 9,000 between 1954 and 1955. Entrying the 1960s, the company employed fewer than 5,800 persons. Standard's payroll continued to diminish through 1967, when it dipped below the 5,000 mark.

The fruit companies pursued two basic strategies for cutting jobs: contracting out labor-intensive production processes and investing in labor-saving technologies. Efforts to shift production to non-company farms actually began prior to the 1954 strike, coincident with the Gálvez administration’s labor reforms. In 1952, the Tela Railroad Company established an "associate growers' program" that provided one hundred former company employees with twenty hectares of land each in El Higuerito, an area that lay to the south of the company's La Lima headquarters. The associate growers, who assumed responsibility for managing the labor-intensive tasks of planting, weeding, and harvesting, consented to sell their bananas exclusively to the Tela Railroad Company at prices set by the latter. Under the terms of the contract, the company agreed to drain, irrigate, and road infrastructure; operate irrigation and Siganokoa control systems; and coordinate daily cultivation activities through a central office in La Lima. The company promised to transfer the property titles to individual growers upon recovering its investment.

Former Tela Railroad Company District Superintendent Camilo Rivera Girón recalled that the national press generally opposed the El Higuerito project because it provided the company with the means to "alleviate itself of its responsibilities [to the workers]." As part of an effort to sway public opinion, Rivera Girón led newspaper reporters on a tour of El Higuerito in order to demonstrate the project's merits. But, newspaper editorial boards were not the only ones with reservations about the associate grower projects. SITRATERECO officials argued that the program would depress wages. In October 1957, a group of Bordeaux sprayers and other workers from the El Higuerito farms joined SITRATERECO in order to defend themselves against what the union's newspaper termed "wide-spread and capricious firings." Four months later, SITRATERECO representative Pastor Zúñiga Ramírez complained that the company was unjustly dismissing workers in El Higuerito. Company management denied the accusation, stating that those fired were employees of associate growers. However, the El Higuerito growers contended that they only hired harvesting and weeding crews. In 1958, SITRATERECO declared that the company "directly contracted" the laborers who worked in irrigation, Siganokoa control, and fertilizer application on the associate grower farms. On paydays, the union asserted, "these workers present pay stubs created in the offices of the company to the associate grower... often, this is the only contact the grower has with the workers."

Union opposition failed to deter the company from expanding its associate grower programs. In May 1958, four former mandatarios signed leases with the Tela Railroad Company for 120-hectare lots in San Manuel, a municipality that lay to the south of the company's La Lima headquar-
The terms of the leases were very similar to those found in the El Higuerito contracts: the company agreed to install plantation infrastructure in return for exclusive rights to purchase export-quality fruit grown by the lessees. The San Manuel growers assumed responsibility for all aspects of production with the notable exception of Sigatoka control which remained in the hands of the company. In 1968, the Tela Railroad Company initiated two additional associate grower projects involving eight former high-level Honduran employees and more than 800 hectares of land in the Sula valley. That same year, Thomas Sunderland, the newly installed president of United Fruit, told shareholders that their company's "future" lay in associate producer programs. In 1961, the company spent approximately one million dollars on disease control, irrigation, and fertilizer inputs on more than one hundred associate grower farms in Honduras. That year, associate producers sold more than two million bunches of bananas to the company.

Company managers did not publicly state their long-term objectives for the associate growers program in Honduras, but in private conversations held separately with Honduran and U.S. government officials in 1966, they confirmed that they were seeking to get out of banana farming. One U.S. official reported that Honduran President Villeda Morales received the news like a "body blow." At least one member of Congress called for the immediate nationalization of company properties and railroads. No expropriations took place, but pressure from organized labor prompted Villeda Morales to order the extension of several clauses in SITRATÉRICO's contract, including those related to minimum wages, holidays, medical benefits, and housing, to "all farms in the Tela RR Company's zone and to future entities who may acquire lands of the company." This measure notwithstanding, SITRATÉRICO's leadership continued to criticize both the "poor prices" paid to associate growers for their bananas, and a clause in associate grower contracts that prohibited producers from selling fruit rejected by company inspectors to other buyers. Such measures, the union claimed, tended to drive down the wages paid to fieldworkers.

Camillo Rivera Giron became an associate grower in 1960 after working for many years for the Tela Railroad Company. Rivera Giron recalled being at the company's mercy: "The Tela's fruit inspectors would arrive and say 'this bunch is not good, that one is good'—but what were we going to do? There wasn't any other buyer." He recalled that the wages paid to workers on associate grower farms were "about half" of those paid by the company. In addition, associate growers did not provide workers with the housing and medical benefits enjoyed by the company's unionized workers. For Rivera Giron, the Tela Railroad Company's use of associate growers was a clear response to the growing power of organized labor: "When they [company management] gave the workers better wages, they had to reduce the personnel so that their profits would remain the same, right? They had to lay off people so that the fixed costs—the costs of administration and labor—would be lower and employee productivity higher."

If in retrospect Rivera Giron viewed the fruit company's cutbacks as a logical business decision, he was less sanguine about the threat of layoffs when he served as Governor of Cortés in the early 1960s. Following the Tela Railroad Company's announcement that it was suspending investments in Honduras in protest over proposed land-reform measures, Rivera Giron complained to a U.S. official that the company's actions were a crude attempt at blackmail that undermined the spirit of President John Kennedy's Alliance for Progress. Giron was not the only one upset with United Fruit; U.S. consul Robert Ashford received a "barage of complaints" from "friendly sources," who expressed "amazement" that the U.S. government could not more effectively control the actions of the fruit company. Ultimately, both land reform legislation and the associate grower program (which meshed nicely with Alliance for Progress approaches to poverty reduction) proceeded ahead. Entering the 1970s, United Fruit's associate producers cultivated around 3,100 hectares of bananas in Honduras.

Standard Fruit began laying the groundwork for an "Independent Planter Program" (IPP) in 1965. The move came one year after the San Francisco-based Castle and Cook Corporation acquired a controlling interest in the company. Castle and Cook executives favored freeing up the company's capital by finding Honduran investors to grow bananas. The IPP bore a strong resemblance to United Fruit's associate producers program: Standard Fruit planned to assist growers by securing bank loans, providing technological inputs, and serving as the exclusive market outlet. Company officials predicted that the initiative would double the company's existing acreage and create 6,000 new jobs over a two-year period. Not surprisingly, union officials opposed the IPP on the grounds that the "independent" planters would not be bound by the terms of collective bargaining agreements between the union and the company. Standard Fruit officials countered this criticism by asserting that growers would be able to pay union wages and make a profit. However, U.S. State Department officials doubted this claim, noting that existing non-company growers tended to pay about one-half the minimum wages paid by the fruit com-
panies. In order to weaken union opposition, Standard Fruit included a clause in the 1965 labor contract that established an incentive system for employees based on the total number of bunches shipped from its Honduran division regardless of whether the fruit came from a company-run farm. This apparently swayed many of Standard Fruit's employees—a majority of whom did not work in harvesting operations—who came to view the union's opposition to the IPP as preventing them from earning extra pay. After a modest beginning in 1966, the Independent Planter Program grew swiftly: in 1971, IPP farms occupied approximately 3,800 hectares. Contracting out banana production enabled the fruit companies to cut labor costs, but it did not resolve the problems posed by Panama disease. Running low on both disease-free soils and facing an uncertain political climate following the 1954 strike, Standard Fruit's management continued efforts to undertake capital-intensive flood following in favor of renewing the search for a pathogen-resistant banana to replace Gros Michel. At some point during the early 1940s, Standard imported Bout Rond plants from Puerto Rico and Giant Cavendish from Santos, Brazil, along with the IC 2, a hybrid created by British breeders at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture that resisted both Panama and Sigatoka pathogens. In 1944, Standard began small commercial shipments of the IC 2 hybrid variety. Exports peaked in 1950 (less than 0.5 million bunches) but the company discontinued IC 2 production four years later due to the variety's relatively low yields and short-fingered fruit. Standard's first planting of Giant Cavendish (a modest 40 hectares) took place in 1943. Shortly thereafter, the company began intercropping Bout Rond bananas among diseased Gros Michel plants so that as the latter went out of production, the former would serve as a replacement. General Manager Chute described both Bout Rond and Giant Cavendish as "fine, large bananas, resistant to Panama disease." However, the fruit bunches did not ripen in the same manner as Gros Michel fruit. Bout Rond and Giant Cavendish required storage temperatures between 60 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit and exposure to ethylene gas in order to ripen "properly." Chute therefore initially discouraged selling Bout Rond and Giant Cavendish bananas to dealers who would not ripen them "in the proper manner."

By 1953, more than 3,200 hectares of Bout Rond were in bearing. Three years later, Standard Fruit elected to convert all of its production to Giant Cavendish because it out-yielded Bout Rond and possessed greater resistance to wind damage ("Giant Cavendish" was a misnomer; the plant was shorter than either Gros Michel or Bout Rond). The company sold its Cavendish fruit under the trade name "Golden Beauty." As had been the case in the 1920s with Lacatan bananas, the new variety met with considerable resistance from U.S. fruit distributors who complained that the thin-skinned Cavendish was highly susceptible to bruising and scarring while in transit from farm to retail market. As late as 1955, studies of banana jobbers indicated that "the quality and appearance of the fruit" was a "major determinant" of the profitability of their businesses. Gros Michel remained the banana of choice for most fruit dealers, who tended to refer to all other bananas simply as "varieties," a lack of specificity that reflected the extent to which jobbers considered Gros Michel to be without peer.

As the 1950s came to a close, Standard's non-Gros Michel exports suffered a high rate of rejection and discounting. In 1958, the company's public relations department published a statement in a Honduran newspaper claiming that U.S. wholesalers complained about the appearance, shape, and ripening characteristics of Giant Cavendish fruit. The company added, "It is widely known that when there is an abundance of Gros Michel fruit, as was the case in 1957, the price of the Giant Cavendish falls dramatically." Several months later, Standard Fruit published another statement claiming that market prices for Giant Cavendish continued to be low and that the company's Honduran division was losing money. Both statements appeared during a period of labor unrest and probably were intended to convince the Honduran public that the claims of striking workers were unreasonable. But they also reflected the continued resistance of market structures to non-Gros Michel bananas.

In 1957, Standard Fruit erected an experimental banana packing plant in Honduras. Workers de-stemmed, washed, and selected hands of bananas before packing the fruit in cardboard boxes. The idea of the experiment was to cut down on the number of times that the delicate Cavendish fruit had to be handled prior to reaching retail markets. After two years of trial marketing in urban areas in the United States, company officials announced in 1960 that they were on the verge of the greatest innovation in the history of the banana industry—precooled, plantation boxing. In fact, the idea of packing bananas in boxes was far from revolutionary; Standard Fruit had experimented with exporting boxed bananas in the early 1930s. Driven in part by the growth of self-service supermarkets, fruit jobbers in the United States began to deliver bananas to retail outlets in boxes before World War II. By the mid-1950s, jobbers cut, packed, and weighed virtually all of the bananas that they handled. Not surprisingly, Standard Fruit officials reported that retailers were "unanimous" in their approval of boxed bananas because they were well suited for self-service...
supermarkets that by 1960 accounted for about 75 percent of food sales in the United States. That year, Standard Fruit introduced consumers to boxed “Cabana” bananas.74

United Fruit continued to grow and export Gros Michel fruit through 1960, but tensions were growing between the company’s research staff and top-level management over how to resolve the Panama disease problem. In 1957 United Fruit’s top scientists gathered in Palo Alto, California to develop a long-range research agenda. The company’s research director, Dr. Jesse E. Hobson, opened the meetings by stating that “a major problem” facing the company was the rising cost of production. He noted that plant diseases were largely responsible for the trend: “Panama disease is costing millions of dollars per year. Sigatoka is costing millions more per year to control.”75 In addition, the company was annually abandoning around 2,000 hectares of land throughout its far-flung tropical operations. Flood following accounted for about 50 percent of the company’s Honduran production, an indication of the shrinking amount of disease-free soils in the Sula valley. The staff scientists and consultants assembled in Palo Alto concluded that United Fruit was “running out of land” and that the company would no longer be able “to avoid problems by moving to new land.”76 Two years later, Dr. Robert Stover, writing in the research department’s newsletter, called banana breeding “the only hopeful long-term approach to the solution of the banana disease problem.”77 On a short-term basis, some company scientists believed that the Lacatan banana, which the company was already producing in Jamaica for European markets, should be planted on abandoned farms.78

However, United Fruit’s top executives remained reluctant to replace Gros Michel as late as 1959. Jesse Hobson believed that management’s lack of interest in solving the Panama disease problem could be traced to former company president Samuel Zemurray who considered the pathogen to be a “blessing” to the company that helped to limit competition.79 However, there is little evidence to substantiate this claim and much circumstantial evidence—including the company’s long-term investments in research on Panama disease—against it. The complacency of Zemurray and other “banana men” was more likely rooted in their perceptions of U.S. markets. Thomas McCann, who began working for the company in 1953, recalled that “the old-timers swore by all they held sacred that there was just no way to replace it [Gros Michel], that anything else would be thrown out of the markets, that nothing would grow on our plantations except ‘Big Mike.’”80 But the banana trade familiar to the “old timers” had all but ceased to exist by the late 1950s. In 1952, Ecuador passed Hon-

duras as the world’s leading banana exporter. By the end of the decade, 40 percent of U.S. banana imports came from Ecuador’s Panama disease-free soils.81 The result was a glut of inexpensively produced bananas at a time when production costs were on the rise in Honduras and both per capita consumption and the average retail price of bananas in the United States were flat.82 Between 1950 and 1960, United Fruit’s earnings fell precipitously from $66 million to $2 million; share prices plummeted from $70 to $15 over the same period.

To make matters worse for United Fruit, the anti-trust investigation

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**Figure 6.4.** Banana farm with Panama disease (1955). Note irregular pattern of highly infected areas. In the foreground is a model United Fruit banana labor camp. United Fruit Company Photograph Collection. Baker Library, Harvard Business School.
initiated by the U.S. Department of Justice in 1954 concluded in 1958 when company officials signed a consent decree in which they agreed to sell off the company’s Guatemalan assets.94 That same year Samuel Zemurray—the quintessential “banana man”—resigned as Chairman of United Fruit’s board of directors. Thomas Jefferson Coolidge (a direct descendant of Thomas Jefferson) succeeded Zemurray for one year before being replaced by forty-year-old George Peabody Gardner. With profits and stock values plummeting, Gardner began to “clean house,” forcing out longtime executives including CEO Kenneth Redmond and Almyr Bump, vice-president of agricultural operations.95 In 1958, Gardner hired Thomas Sunderland to be the company’s president. Sunderland, who had previously served as vice president and general counsel for Standard Oil of Indiana, was an industry outsider who had made his reputation handling antitrust litigation, not bananas. He quickly moved to reduce United Fruit’s operating costs both in the U.S. and the tropics. Noting that the annual cost ($18 million) of replacing Panama disease-infected farms throughout Latin America was more than four times greater than the estimated annual costs ($4 million) of converting to pathogen-resistant varieties, Sunderland gave the go-ahead for a conversion to Cavendish bananas.96

In 1959, United Fruit’s research division added a “Plant Breeding and Genetics” department.97 The company enlisted botanists Paul Allen and J. J. Ochse to travel to Southeast Asia in order to expand the genetic resources available for banana breeding.98 Both the United States Department of Agriculture and the State Department provided logistical support for the expeditions, the first of their kind carried out by the company since Otto Reinking’s work in the 1920s. Allen and Ochse sought out both varieties of Musa whose fruits resembled Gros Michel (i.e., seedless triploids) and those likely to possess disease resistance (including seeded diploid varieties). In other words, the botanical missions sought to collect a wider range of Musa specimens—including uncultivated varieties—than had previously been assembled. United Fruit’s new-found interest in diploid plants reflected important changes in approaches to banana breeding. Observing that seed-bearing diploids tended to possess disease resistance but seldom produced fruits whose shape, size, and color resembled export bananas, British breeders in the 1940s began to develop hybrid diploids with “improved” fruit quality. These “elite” diploid lines were then crossed with Gros Michel.99 This strategy guided banana-breeding programs in the Caribbean and Central America during the second half of the twentieth century.100

With the Southeast Asia expeditions still in the field, researchers in Honduras initiated trials of several cultivars maintained at Lackenbri, the company’s experimental garden near Tela.91 In 1962, the research staff reported that three members of the Cavendish group—Giant Cavendish, Valery, and Grand Nain—were giving “extremely high production.” United Fruit test-marketed boxed Valery bananas in the U.S. Midwest and received a favorable consumer response. An independent taste panel found both the flavor and aroma of the Valery to be “distinctly superior” to that of the Gros Michel.92 By the end of 1963, United Fruit workers had planted nearly 4,400 hectares of Valery bananas and built 29 boxing plants in Honduras.93 Two years later, virtually all of the company’s Central American farms were planted with Panama disease-resistant, Cavendish varieties.94

Ironically, banana breeders considered both Giant Cavendish and Valery varieties to be closely related to Lacatan—the cultivar that U.S. mass markets had largely rejected in the 1920s. Yet, by the 1960s, new political and agroecological contexts in Honduras, and the expansion of self-serve supermarkets in the United States enabled boxed Cavendish varieties to become a viable solution to a problem that was more than half a century old. The export banana industry’s conversion to Cavendish varieties is noteworthy because in contrast to the history of other major food crops, hybridization did not play a significant role in reshaping production processes following World War II. The varieties that replaced Gros Michel bananas were popular cultivars from South and Southeast Asia. For example, United Fruit’s Valery plant stock had been collected by Otto Reinking in the 1920s during his excursion through Saigon (Vietnam). After dramatically reducing the biological diversity of lowland tropical landscapes in Central America for seventy-five years, the export banana industry tapped into the pan-tropical diversity of Musa cultivars in order to overcome Panama disease.

The Cavendish era also gave a second life to Miss Chiquita. Under the direction of Thomas Sunderland and Executive Vice-President Jonathan Fox (another industry outsider hired by Sunderland) United Fruit launched new marketing initiatives in conjunction with the conversion to boxed bananas:

Boxing has cleared the way for developments in merchandising which have never been possible before in the banana business. We are now ready to consider changing our business from the sale of a commodity
item to the sale of a branded, identifiable item, which, if adopted, will enable us to advertise our bananas, instead of bananas generally.98

By turning an agricultural commodity into a retail product distinguishable by a brand name, United Fruit hoped to create demand for a "premium" export banana for which it could charge higher prices and recoup some of the added expenses associated with boxing.98 The company created a new executive position, Director of Quality Control, that was responsible for setting and maintaining quality standards. In 1963, United Fruit launched a multi-million dollar advertising campaign in order to promote its new product. Company officials chose “Chiquita” for the brand name after marketing surveys revealed that consumer recognition of “Miss Chiquita” remained extremely high (surpassed only by Elsie, the Borden cow, according to one trade journal).97 Workers in packing plants began placing blue and gold stickers on retail units of bananas that featured a Mirandaesque figure wearing a fruit-laden hat and the word “Chiquita.” Supermarket displays featured oversized versions of the blue and gold icon accompanied by the phrase “This seal outside means the best inside.”98 Once a mere salesgirl, Miss Chiquita was now United Fruit’s top banana.

Meanwhile, popular culture in the United States continued to appropriate the banana as an icon for sex and humor. In 1967, national media outlets reported that “hippies” were smoking dried and shredded banana peel fibers. The smoke, dubbed “mellow yellow,” reputedly produced hallucinogenic effects similar to LSD. One U.S. congressperson proposed a banana-labeling act in order to halt what he described, tongue-in-cheek, as “an invasion of the fruit stand by a generation of thrill seekers.”99 In fact, the recipe for smoking banana peels started as a satire in the Berkeley Barb and was later picked up by other counter-culture periodicals, including the Village Voice.100 Subsequently, the story gave new meanings to British pop singer Donovan’s hit tune “Mellow Yellow.” However, the humor was lost on straight-faced United Fruit Company officials who, along with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, conducted laboratory experiments to discredit the notion that burning fruit peels could produce hallucinogenic effects. Counterculture movements of the 1960s also revived the banana as a phallic symbol, most notably in the Andy Warhol–designed jacket for the rock album classic, The Velvet Underground and Nico, released by Verve Records in 1967. The cover featured a yellow banana that peeled off to reveal an orange-pink colored fruit that was highly suggestive of a penis. Significantly, during a period when scholars, university students, and liberal politicians in the United States increasingly criticized their government’s foreign policies in Latin America and elsewhere, the banana continued to be appropriated to tease, mock, and arouse in contexts far removed from the places where bananas grew.

United Fruit’s advertising campaigns during the 1960s appropriated both turn-of-the-century images of the tropics and elements of contem-
temporary U.S. pop culture, including rock music and bikinis. In 1969, the company sponsored a search in Latin America for two women to be “Señorita Chiquita USA” and “Señorita Chiquita Europe.” The winners, Ximena Iragorri of Colombia and Ana María González of Guatemala, were young, petite, and had prior experiences in television and fashion modeling. United Fruit promotional material noted that the two women would “attract lots of attention with their mod banana-looking outfits,” that included a “short, flippy little petal dress;” a “floating chiffon dress;” a “banana-kini;” and a “sleek jumpsuit.”

Company publicity thus portrayed Iragorri and González as sexy Latin singles. However, both the cosmopolitan backgrounds of the two women (the trilingual Iragorri had attended a French school in The Hague while González learned English in a California high school) and the contest prizes — college scholarships — suggested that both women possessed skills and aspirations that belied the Miss Chiquita image.

Three years later, Miss Chiquita returned to the airwaves in a television commercial featuring Barbara Carrera, a New York–based model and performer who sang a “driving Latin Rock” arrangement of the Chiquita Banana Song:

I'm Chiquita Banana and I'm back to say
I am the top banana.
Chiquita's top banana in the world today.
There's only one —
You'll know me when you see me.

The revised lyrics reflected changes in marketing strategies since the 1940s: advice about storing (generic) bananas was replaced by a message that not all bananas were the same: Chiquita fruit was superior to the competition. An article in the company magazine described Carrera as a “vivacious new Miss Chiquita” whose roots were “definitely Latin.” Conjuring up the ghost of Carmen Miranda, the company quoted the Nicaraguan-born Carrera as saying “If they hadn’t chosen me, I would have lost faith in the beezezness. I was raised on bananas.”

As late as the 1970s then, fruit company advertising continued to get mileage out of worn stereotypes of Latin American women. In fact, United Brands’ 1972 annual report stated that new advertising campaigns would stress the “nostalgia” of the Chiquita Brand image during an era when anti-Vietnam war protestors, feminists, civil rights activists, and environmentalists appeared to threaten the social order.

But consumer longings for bygone days could not single-handedly sell Chiquita bananas. At the heart of the campaign was an effort to inculcate consumers with the idea that not all bananas were the same. The Chiquita and Cabana brand names tried to re-define what consumers considered to be a quality banana by emphasizing features such as bunch symmetry, the fullness of individual bananas, and blemish-free peels that ripened uniformly. In order to bear the Chiquita label in 1970, a banana had to be a minimum of eight inches long and free of a long list of “defects” primarily related to the visual appearance of the fruit. Standard Fruit also based its quality ratings on the number of “outward defects” and the “fresh appearance” of the peel. Achieving and maintaining these new quality standards required new production techniques and new forms of labor. The most important innovation was the on-farm boxing of fruit.

The empacadoras, or packing plant, became the key component of the industry’s “post-harvest” operations designed to ensure greater quality control. Former Standard Fruit employee Henry Muery noted that the empacadoras virtually eliminated “in-farm defects,” and enabled the fruit companies to export “essentially blemish-free” fruit. Boxing bananas was a multi-step process. At one end of the plant, workers armed with sharp knives removed the hands of freshly harvested bananas from their stems and placed them in tanks filled with water. The bath served the dual purpose of cleaning the peels and cooling the temperature of the fruit prior to boxing. A gentle current carried the fruit to the other end of the long, rectangular tanks where another group of workers sorted the premium grade fruit (e.g., “Chiquitas”) from both the second grade bananas (known as “specials”) and the rejects. Export grades were then treated with chemicals to prevent fungal rots before being weighed, stickered, and packed into boxes.

The empacadoras provided novel employment opportunities for Central American women. Although women had found employment in the offices, hospitals, and schools of the fruit companies, the work of growing and shipping bananas remained a masculine domain in Central America prior to the creation of packing plants. In Honduras, United Fruit began using women in packing operations no later than 1962. Women entered Standard Fruit’s empacadoras no later than 1967. Both companies initially hire women for packing plants in small cohorts. These first hires often had family connections that helped them to secure a position. For example, Esperanza Rivera Nájera was offered a packing plant job by her husband’s supervisor in 1968. She recalled that “if you weren’t related to an employee, you were not able to get a job.” Other women secured posi-
tions in packing plants through fathers and stepfathers. This was nothing new; male field hands historically landed jobs by exploiting personal contacts. In fact, kin networks may have become even more important by the late 1960s, when the companies were reducing the size of their unionized work forces.

Women worked selecting, weighing, sticker ing, and packing bananas. The work pace in empacadoras followed a rhythm set by harvesting operations: the larger the corte, the longer and more frenetic the shifts for packers. Days could be particularly strenuous for women like Esperanza, who had three children when she began working in the empacadora at the age of twenty-three:

We got up at 4:00 in the morning and ate breakfast on the way to work, because sometimes there wasn’t time to eat at work. The day was stressful. We started at 6:30 and we didn’t finish working until 6:30 in the evening. Twelve-hour shifts. We had one half-hour break at 11 in the morning and that was it.

When a woman leaves her family to work it’s a struggle because one has obligations to her children and also to her job. Sometimes I got up at 3:00 in the morning to wash clothes.

Other women who began working in packing plants in the mid-1960s recalled a similar routine of rising early and working long days (up to 16 hours) with few breaks. Long shifts in the empacadora were punctuated by days when the plants operated at less than full capacity or shut down completely in the absence of harvesting activities. For women like Olivia Zaldivar, periodic lulls in packing activity provided an opportunity to catch up on domestic work: “The days that the empacadora did not operate were spent washing clothes.”

Olivia worked for six months in a Tela Railroad Company packing plant in 1964 during which time she met a man with whom she had a child who died in infancy. Two years later, Olivia had a second child with another man, but when the father refused to provide any financial or emotional support, she returned to the empacadora, “motivated” by the need to take care of her child. Olivia’s status as a madre soltera, or single mother, was a common one for women in the boxing plants. Indeed, some women suggested that single mothers formed a majority of the female employees. According to Olivia, the empacadoras not only attracted single mothers, they also helped to create them: “There are women who are married when they start working, but you know that when a woman works she frees her-

self. When she is not working [outside the home] a woman is dependent on her husband. But if she is working, how can the man say no?” Olivia described herself as a “libertine” in her youth, a characterization that may have been shaped by her conversion later in life to evangelicalism. In retrospect, she viewed the breakup of couples with children as undesirable since the kids “are the ones that suffer the most.”

Juana Meléndez was another madre soltera—in this case a young widow who worked long days in order to raise her children. Juana never remarried. She described herself as a “Tom-boy” during her childhood, a characterization confirmed by a long-time male friend who recalled that Juana had dressed “like a boy,” played with boys, and tended to cattle. Juana’s physical and mental strength served her well in the packing plant where she simultaneously annoyed and won the respect of both her fellow workers and supervisors for her fast work pace and quick tongue. She recalled an occasion when she led an impromptu work stoppage in order to protest the supervisors’ failure to maintain sufficient water in the washing tanks (a situation that increased the likelihood of bruising to the fruit). She subsequently became a union steward, but she “complained so much” about working conditions that she soon found herself back among the rank-and-file. Juana’s strong will may have been exceptional, but her memories resonated with those of other women packers whose stories mingled images of maternal sacrifices and personal autonomy.

Regardless of their marital status, women who worked in the empacadoras depended upon other women to assist with child-care. In Olivia Zaldivar’s case, she relied upon her mother to watch her son on days that she worked as a fruit packer. Other women, including ones with spouses such as Esperanza, hired muchachas (girls or young women) to care for their children and attend to household chores. Having to pay for child care cut into women’s net earnings, but the ability to employ domestic help also reflected the benefits of having a steady—and in some cases dual—income. Esperanza relished the opportunity to earn wages so that she could “buy things for her house,” and pay for her children’s education. Olivia Zaldivar described packing plant work as muy sacrificada but added in the same breath that “everyone” wanted to work for the company because it was relatively steady employment. Women entering the packing plants in the 1960s benefited from the existence of unions, labor law reforms, and collective bargaining contracts that were the legacy of the 1954 strike. They earned hourly wages and received medical and retirement benefits. However, “steady employment” did not mean a fixed work schedule since the volume of fruit harvested fluctuated due to the vagaries of weather and
mass markets. Furthermore, the number of women who managed to get full-time jobs in the packing plants during the 1960s was small and initially limited to individuals with a spouse or male family member employed by one of the companies.

The opportunity to work in a packing plant exacted both physical and emotional costs. Women uniformly described their days in the empacadoras as exhausting. They performed repetitive tasks at a high rate of speed for anywhere from ten to fourteen hours. Breaks were limited to a half-hour lunch break around 11 and a second break in the late afternoon or occasions when packing operations extended into the late evening. The work environment could also be debilitating. Fruit selectors constantly had to dip their hands into the water tanks in the process of grading the bananas. Some women considered this to be the least desirable job in the empacadora. Pepe Puerta, a former packing plant supervisor for Standard Fruit, recalled that “they [the women] used to say that the dampness affected them.” He also believed that some workers developed tumors as a result of their exposure to the chemicals used in the empacadoras to prevent crown rot (a fungus) from developing while the bananas were in transit. From the fruit companies’ perspective, severe cases of crown rot rendered the bananas “commercially unacceptable.” United Fruit initially used a Dithane dip to prevent crown rot. Around 1965, the companies began adding chloride to the water tanks in order to control the fungus. Three years later, the industry switched to a systemic fungicide (Thiabendazole) following its approval for use on bananas by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Workers applied Thiabendazole with the aid of a sprayer that showered the fruit just prior to boxing.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there is no evidence that either the fruit companies or union officials provided packing plant workers with safety instructions and/or protective apparel such as gloves or masks. Esperanza recalled that she worked ten years in the empacadora “without protecting myself, always wet, with my arms exposed to the sprays [fungicides].” Other women confirmed the absence of protective clothing. An illustrated instructional manual for United Fruit’s packing plant workers makes no mention of protective clothing and depicts a bare-handed worker dipping fruit into a solution of “disinfectant” (presumably dithane) strongly suggesting that the women and men who labored in packing plants during the 1960s and early 1970s received frequent exposure to more than just dampness.

Although some workers in the packing plants, including the ex-supervisor Pepe Puerta, expressed concerns about chronic exposure to cancer-causing chemicals, long-time packing plant workers suffered from other ailments including arthritis and skin problems. In addition, Esperanza recalled that when she began working in the late 1960s, bathroom facilities were crude and inconveniently located, and the water available for drinking tasted like “pure salt.” The 1974 collective bargaining agreement signed by Standard Fruit and the workers union SUTRASFCO included clauses requiring the company to install toilet facilities, drinking water, electric fans, and wall clocks in all of its empacadoras. The company also agreed to provide places for workers to eat lunch and a room for women to change their clothes. The extent to which the company complied with these clauses is unknown, but the terms of the contract suggest both that a significant number of packing plants lacked basic amenities as late as 1974, and that union officials and company executives sought to address at least some women employees’ concerns.

Because only men filled supervisory roles in the empacadoras, women were potentially vulnerable to sexual harassment. However, former workers indicated that cases of blatant abuse were rare. On the other hand, women’s memories point toward a more subtle tension created by the tendency for women in the empacadoras to be viewed simultaneously as possessing stereotypical feminine qualities (e.g., delicate hands) and potentially threatening levels of autonomy—the madre soltera. The limited number of women’s testimonies presented here point to the existence of a fine line between “liberated” and “libertine,” and “outspoken” and “troublemaker.” Finally, if women viewed their packing plant jobs as the best way to ensure a secure future for their families, they also regretted spending entire days away from their young children who would often be fast asleep by the time they returned home.

By the mid-1960s, United Fruit officials declared the Chiquita marketing campaign a success. The company enjoyed record sales’ volumes and rising profit margins. Miss Chiquita had helped to save the day for the company’s new management who watched profits rise from $1.7 million to $25 million between 1963 and 1966. The successful financial turnaround led to a dramatic takeover attempt by Wall Street trader Eli M. Black that culminated in the merger of United Fruit and Black’s AMK corporation in 1969. The following year, the new company changed its name to United Brands. After nearly seventy years, the tight relationship between United Fruit and Gros Michel bananas was irrevocably severed.

The rebirth of Miss Chiquita, therefore, provided an aura of continuity to a period of political, economic, environmental, and social
transformations in both Central America and the United States. Banana workers in Honduras helped to bring about some of these changes by forming labor unions and pressing for land reform. But organized labor was not the only force that compelled the fruit companies to alter their production processes; the inexorable spread of Panama disease drove up production costs and rates of soil abandonment at a time when the fruit companies’ extensive landholdings in the Caribbean and Latin America were under severe public scrutiny and threats of expropriation. The industry’s solution to the problem—boxed Cavendish bananas—created unexpected opportunities for women as wage laborers in packing plants. Ironically, the nostalgic return of Miss Chiquita coincided with changing roles for women in the tropics.

Chapter 7

La Química

The direction of research in the labs follows the philosophy that the banana, the soils, and the various enemies of the banana, are a three-dimensional biological system in which factors affecting any one variable can be expected to affect all other variables.

Norwood C. Thorton, 1959

I had to take a friend of mine who had been applying Nemagon to the emergency room, and there were quite a few cases like that. If you happened to be passing through the farm you immediately noticed the smell in the air... there were dead fish in the rivers and creeks, a lot of dead fish.

Neché Martínez, 1995

One day in the early 1950s, United Fruit Company research assistant Jorge Romero was supervising a work crew applying an agrochemical through the irrigation system. As the sun climbed in the tropical sky, the smell of the rapidly vaporizing chemical penetrated the protective masks worn by the workers, forcing them to complete their tasks quickly in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the fumes. When a crew member named Benito removed his mask, Jorge pleaded with him to put it back on before approaching the irrigation equipment. But Benito refused, declaring “yo indio salvadoreño bruto” (“I’m a tough indio from El Salvador”). Just watch.” Romero described what happened next: “Benito didn’t take more than five steps toward the sprinkler when plop! He fell to the ground with blood running from his nose, ears, and eyes. We pulled him out of there and rushed him to the hospital.” Jorge, who spent more than thirty years in the Tela Railroad Company’s research department, used the anecdote to illustrate what could happen when a worker adopted a “superman men-