Frederick Upham Adams, *Conquest of the Tropics*, 1914

Frederick Upham Adams was an author and inventor. This selection comes from a book he wrote about his travels through United Fruit properties in Central America taken with cooperation from the company.

*Our Neglected Tropical Neighbors*

It is a peculiar and mysterious trait of a considerable portion of the people of the United States that they know little and seem to care little about their national neighbors to the tropical south. This is a regrettable, expensive, and inexcusable fault. Our insular indifference concerning the sentiments, problems, and aspirations of the southern peoples on this continent is construed by them to imply contempt. This has engendered in most of Latin America a feeling of resentment, suspicion, and unfriendliness toward the United States. It certainly is not an asset to acquire and retain the ill-will of those who should be allied with us in ties of friendly intercourse…

The plain truth of the matter is that we have over-cultivated and over-expressed an attitude of self-sufficiency. We are so sure that the United States is the greatest country in the world that we are inclined at times to act as if it were the only country in the world. Some of us are so narrow that we find it impossible to understand why a citizen of the United States cares to live or dares to invest a dollar outside of the confines of his native country. The broad spirit of initiative and enterprise recognizes no national lines…

It has not yet dawned on our political leaders that our tropics are a great but unused asset. We are so accustomed to the careless or willful destruction of forests and other of our own natural resources that it is a matter of slight interest to us whether our tropical neighbors make a specialty of anarchy or of productive peace. We will one day learn, as financiers already have learned at their bitter cost, that each civilized nation shares in the prosperity or distress of all other nations. We of the United States pay our share of the losses in the periods of lawlessness which blight Mexico and other tropical republics. The revolution, equally with the hurricane which destroys crops in the adjacent tropics, adds to the cost of living of the dwellers in every city, village, and section in the United States. On the other hand, any enterprise or any statesmanship which increases the productivity of these tropical sections adds directly to the assets and welfare of all of the people of the United States.

The United States is and always will be the chief market for the agricultural products of these tropical nations. The United States should supply to them in return the innumerable much needed products of its factories and mills, but even the share of this trade which we now hold will be lost unless we meet this situation with intelligence and sympathy…

Every American citizen should in this connection know, consider, and profit by the history of the inception and development of the United Fruit Company. It is a story of the peaceful and honorable conquest of a portion of the American tropics, and one of which every citizen should be proud. It is a record of a monumental constructive work performed amid surroundings so difficult that the plain narrative seems more like a romance than the account of deeds actually performed…

*In Beautiful Costa Rica*

Costa Rica is an oasis of progress in that long reach of country which extends from the Rio Grande to the equator. It is the one Central American nation which has lifted itself fully out of the anarchy of mercenary revolutions and of semi-savage internal warfare and intrigue. Costa Rica is the existing proof that there is
nothing climatic or elemental in Central America which precludes its people from sharing in the benefits of advancement and governmental stability…

Costa Ricans deliberately invited the investors of the United States and of the world to “exploit” them. They opened their national doors to the foreign builders of railroads, to the delvers of mines, to the developers of agricultural wealth, and to all others who had the money and the energy to undertake creative enterprises. And when this invitation had been accepted, the roads constructed, the wastes cleared and cultivated, the strange people of Costa Rica did not deem it necessary to indulge in revolutions which would determine what faction of politicians would enjoy the multiplied official perquisites which accrued from an enhanced national revenue. They have voted their officials into and out of office, and their small regular army has been their tool and not their master—all of which seems so strange that it demands an explanation.

This explanation is a simple one. Costa Rica is a white man’s republic. Fully 80 per cent of the population of the highlands is pure Caucasian, mainly of Spanish descent, with an admixture of French, German, British, and other white races. There is a real middle class in Costa Rica. There is a real farmer class in that happy republic, but best of all there is real love of country and a patriotism which defends it against the plots and wiles of military adventurers and mercenary “generals.”

The native Indian tribes have absorbed some of the attributes of Caucasian civilization—which is the only way an Indian can acquire the first veneer of civilization. Each succeeding generation of Costa Rican Indians has sloughed off some hereditary tribal trait and substituted for it an energetic habit of the dominant white man. Thousands of them have acquired the working and saving habit, and the stern enforcement of peace has dulled and almost subdued the instinct to take the warpath at the instigation of the first ambitious revolutionist who provides guns, ammunition, and a promise of loot.

There has been no effective or lasting progress in all of the vast domain from the Rio Grande to Cape Horn which was not the result of Caucasian initiative and eventual supremacy, and the hope of the disturbed sections of Central America lies in an influx of the race which has the intelligence and the courage to fight only for peace.

The part played by the United Fruit Company in promoting the development and insuring the progress of Costa Rica is one which reflects credit both to the government and to this American enterprise. In all of the long forty-four years since Minor C. Keith obtained the permission of the Costa Rican Government to begin the construction of a railroad from the Caribbean coast to the city of San José, there has been nothing approaching friction between the enterprises then founded and the successive officials of this progressive republic.

It may not be amiss at this place to call attention to the fact that the United Fruit Company and its original constituent corporations have, for more than a generation, executed their vast activities without coming into conflict with any of the many nations in which they have operated. There never has been a time when the interests of these American corporations have so clashed with those of the various governments that official protest has been made by any party to these relations. Wars have been waged between these nations, strained relations have existed between some of them and the United States, revolutions have succeeded revolutions, our troops have been landed on these soils to protect American lives and property, but in all these years and amid all these happenings the United Fruit Company has continued its creative work without voicing complaint or having one made against it.

This is a record to be proud of when it is taken into consideration that the United Fruit Company and the Keith interests have expended in these years a sum exceeding $200,000,000 in the American tropics. There are possibilities of a number of wars and scores of official protests in the expenditure of that sum of
money, and with every dollar of it beyond the immediate jurisdiction of the laws and authority of the United States. If the Nobel Peace Prize could be awarded to a corporation, the United Fruit Company would have valid claims to recognition. It has done more to pave the way for peace and prosperity in Central America and in the Caribbean countries than all of the statesmanship and oratory which have vainly been directed to the same purpose…

To the west, north, and south of Puerto Limon are tracts of land covering 249,779 acres, or almost exactly 380 square miles, which the United Fruit Company has acquired by purchase, and it holds an additional 5,338 acres under leases. It thus operates a tract of land exceeding 390 square miles in Costa Rica, or the acreage of 1,560 farms of a quarter section each, which is the acreage of the average Western farm in the United States.

Not all of this huge tract is under cultivation, and some of it is unfitted for such purposes, but the most of it will some day be utilized for new tropical products which are bidding for Northern favor.

This is by far the largest of the banana developments conducted by the United Fruit Company, and, independent of all of the other properties owned by that company, constitutes one of the great agricultural enterprises of the world.

Within this district are 47,723 acres of growing and bearing banana plants. There is an average of 400 banana plants or trees to the acre, which means that the Costa Rica Division of the United Fruit Company contains about 19,089,200 bearing banana plants! Of course no one, not even the men who supervised the work of their planting, has any comprehensive grasp of what such figures mean. You may ride hundreds of miles through these parallel rows of trees, but instead of obtaining an idea of the magnitude of such an undertaking you glean only that there are human achievements beyond the grasp of the human imagination.

An apple orchard with 100 trees is far larger than the average, but the Costa Rican banana orchard multiplies this unit by 190,000. There are hundreds of negroes in Jamaica who derive most of their annual money income from an acre of bananas, and an army of more than 47,000 of them could eke out an existence if they could divide this Costa Rica plantation and sell its product.

It is because of such plantations and of the transportation equipment for handling their products that bananas sell for retail in the United States at all seasons of the year at from 10 to 25 cents a dozen. If human stupids who imagine that an enterprise is wrong because of its size had their way they might compel the United Fruit Company and its competitors to abandon these modern plantations to the ownership and care of lazy Indians, and these stupids would later be rewarded by being compelled to pay 5 cents for a single banana or go without.

Where these plantations now stand, and where the beautiful city of Puerto Limon now thrives there was not a sign of a human habitation forty-three years ago. There were only the swamps and the jungles reaching back to the mountains which hold on their shoulders the plateau dotted with San José, Cartago, and other historic towns. The numerous rivers which had their rise on the eastern slopes of these mountains had for the natives unknown outlets. They were aware that there was a sea far beyond the jungle, and those who climbed the mountains could see its silver line on a clear day, but nothing would tempt them below the 1,000-foot altitude where coffee cultivation ceases.

To-day Puerto Limon and the former jungles surrounding it contain a population of fully 35,000 people, nearly all of whom are engaged directly or indirectly in the banana trade. The once unknown Puerto Limon is now one of the leading ports between Vera Cruz and Colon, and it is the leading place of banana export in the world. The United Fruit Company alone sends from Limon more than 400 shiploads of
bananas a year, or fully 10,000,000 bunches of this fruit. This great industry demands in this district the services of an army of 7,000 men, who, with their families make up the bulk of the population of the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica.

Most of the workers on these plantations are Jamaican negroes who are directed by white superintendents, mainly American. The tradition that it is impossible to live in the lowlands still prevails among the working classes of Costa Rica, but this will be overcome in time. The wages paid by the company average more than double that paid by the coffee planters of the highlands, and the drainage of the swamps and the rigid enforcement of scientific sanitary measures has rendered this section as safe and healthful as any part of the republic.

Most of the manual labor on a banana plantation is what may be termed “piece work,” the laborer contracting to perform certain duties on a certain tract of land. He may, for instance, contract to keep clear of weeds and dead fronds or leaves five or ten acres of bananas, or he may contract to cut and deliver to the railroad platforms the bananas grown in a similar tract.

As a rule the workman on a banana plantation selects his own time for the performance of the duties he assumes. Little or no work is done in the heat of the day. Much of it is done in the early morning hours, the men setting out from their cabins at daybreak and working until nine or ten o’clock. Others prefer to do their stint at night, especially when the splendid tropical moon gleams through the rustling banana leaves. Under this system a worker can set his own pace and earn as much as he cares to attempt, but none is assigned to work who cannot perform a reasonable minimum, the pay for which exceeds a dollar a day. There are skilled and sturdy negroes who have no difficulty in making two and three times this amount, and the task is far less arduous than that done by the average white laborer in the United States.

Their rent is nominal, and every occupant of a house or cabin has, rent-free, a garden patch on which he can raise at all times of the year the vegetables which respond to almost no attention. You may search the world over and not find a more happy and contented class than those who work in the banana plantations. The lot of the average American negro is pitiful compared with that of those who still regard Jamaica as their home, but who can win more money and greater comfort along the coast lands of Central America.

The banana plantations of the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica follow the valleys of three rivers which take their source in the mountains to the west and south. These rivers are named the Estrella, Banana, and Reventazon, the last emptying into the Caribbean a few miles north of Puerto Limon. More than 400 miles of railroad and tramways traverse these plantations and link them with the wharves at Puerto Limon. This railroad system also serves many independent growers of bananas who have contracts with the United Fruit Company. These independent growers are entitled to have their fruit collected and accepted twice a week, and in the “heavy” or rainy seasons they are entitled to four weekly cuttings and collections of their bananas. There are times, as I have explained, when this arrangement occasions heavy losses to the importer, who is compelled to accept large consignments for which there is no profitable market.

Scattered through this banana empire are a number of picturesque settlements, some of which have arrived at the dignity of towns, with churches, places of amusements, well-kept streets, electric lights and most of the accessories of advanced civilization. It seems strange to reflect that all of these towns, railroads, bridges, docks, steamships, and the bustling city of Puerto Limon itself are merely parts of a giant banana farm, and that this is only one of the farms in a series which dot the Caribbean coast from Guatemala to Santa Marta, Colombia.

Everywhere the observer sees the manifestations of a carefully designed machine calculated to yield the greatest possible result from a given application of endeavor. Here is an industrial army engaged in a
constant battle with the forces of tropical nature. There is no telling when nature may strike an unexpected and dangerous blow. I crossed one railroad bridge whose predecessors had been swept away in floods thirty-one times, but it will take a record-breaking deluge to topple the huge steel structure which now spans this part of the Rio Reventazon. Corps of skilled engineers are constantly at work repairing defects and meeting new problems. Trained physicians keep watch and guard over the health of this army and hold in check any threatened invasion of contagious disease. The wireless telegraph flashes its instructions or warnings out into all parts of the Caribbean, and keeps in close and constant communication with the Great White Fleet which bears to the north the fruits raised by the various divisions in this industrial army.

Sixty thousand trained men are working in the American tropics under the command of skilled generals of the United Fruit Company, and to what end? To the end that the most perishable of tropical luxuries shall be produced so economically and handled so carefully and swiftly that it reaches the consumers of another clime in perfect condition and is offered for sale at prices lower than those charged for home-grown fruits! There is a task which would have daunted Hercules, but it is one within the easy power of the modern industrial miracle worker. Yet to me this mastery of time and space and flood and sea has all the spell of the romantic, and the subject should command the genius and melody of a poet rather than the halting comments of a worker in prose…