Plantation Workmen Now Rubber Planters on Basilan

By J. A. Hackett

Just ten years ago the writer was the guest of Dr. James W. Strong in a little nipa shack tucked away in the primeval jungle of the Island of Basilan.

In the clearing around the shack many workers were busy putting up rows of neat little cottages, temporary sheds and storehouses. Near the edge of the clearing scores of wild pigs were unctuously rooting among the fallen trees, while here and there beautiful little deer fed upon the newly sprouted grass. Troops of chattering monkeys curiously watched the men at work, and from the tops of the giant *lauan* trees flocks of grotesque *calaos* (hornbills) raucously shouted defiance at this invasion of their domain. Many miles of virgin wilderness, totally devoid of human habitation, stretched away to the south and west. Nowhere in "brightest" Africa could one find a wilder region than this or one more primitively lovely, and, because the myriad needs of civilized man must be supplied the destruction of a great solitude had begun.

Strong had just started the development of another rubber plantation after having brought the Basilan Plantation Company's big property (the pioneer rubber plantation of the Philippines) to productivity. The new plantation was that of the American Rubber Company, financed by business men of San Francisco who were among the first to realize the great potentialities lying dormant in Mindanao.

Last week the writer, with a number of friends, again visited Latuan. The launch tied up at a commodious pier. It happened to be a Sunday morning, and as we stepped ashore we were welcomed by a distinguished gentleman in whites and helmet. It was the same Dr. Strong, a little grayer around the temples and thinner on the pate, but just as husky and virile as when we roughed it with him ten years before.

A fleet of nifty autos were in waiting and we were soon speeding over a smooth rock-surface road through the mangrove swamp where only a few years before we had wallowed to our middle fearfully dodging the ever present crocodile. Emerging from the swamp we flashed across a wide plateau and through a mass of beautiful dark green foliage almost meeting overhead. Thousands upon thousands of para rubber trees that had, as if by magic, replaced the impenetrable jungle we remembered so well.

The cars finally rolled up before a big plantation house where we were welcomed most graciously by Mrs. Strong and had the pleasure of again reviewing the little Strongs on dress parade. For be it known that these Strong persons are a most versatile pair. Not only are they the islands' outstanding pioneers in the cultivation of rubber and modern plantation management, but they are breeding a set of future planters and plantresses that will one day take a leading part in the great development of their native land. They are a stalwart bunch, and grade from young mamas to the toddler who is the boss of them all.

We spent a most interesting day riding about the plantation and viewing all phases of the rubber game. There are fifteen kilometers of well-surfaced road reaching all parts of the estate, which comprises over 1,000 hectares of land, all of which is now covered with rubber trees. James P. Mankin has been assistant manager since the beginning. He built the roads and has always had supervision over the labor.

Over 150,000 trees have reached maturity and are being tapped. These are divided into two sections of 75,000 trees each and the rubber is gathered from the sections alternately—each section being given a resting period of two months. The average yield from this young plantation is 3 pounds of dry rubber per tree per year.

Cattle Grazing Under Rubber Trees

The work of gathering the latex and preparing the crude rubber for shipment has been so systematized that the whole operation goes along like clock-work with little outward indication of the enormous labor required to bring the plantation to its present state of productivity and the painstaking care and perseverance required to train the workers in the various delicate operations of manufacture.

Nearly two hundred well-trained workers tap the trees every morning before sunrise, each one handling about 450 trees. About nine o'clock, when the wounded bark has stopped emitting latex it is gathered from the cups into buckets by the tappers and carried to central stations at the roadside where it is deposited in large 15-gallon cans resembling the milk cans used by dairies in the United States. These cans are then collected by trucks and rushed to the factory. Here the latex is strained through 50 mesh brass wire gauze into the coagulating tanks lined with white glass. A small amount of acetic acid is added to the latex to hasten coagulation, and aluminum separators are slipped into grooves in each side of the tanks at intervals of about two inches so that when coagulation is finished the wet rubber can be taken out in sheets of uniform size. These heavy sheets of coagulum are then passed through a series of rollers, the last set of which, having a grooved surface, imprints a diamond pattern upon the finished sheet, known as ribs. These ribs make drying easier and prevent the sheets from sticking together in the cases when packed. The still moist sheets of rubber are then conveyed to the smoke-house where they are hung in racks and smoked for about ten days. When thoroughly dry the sheets are packed in veneer cases, 100 kilos to the case, and the rubber is ready to be shipped to the world's marts. All of the No. 1 rubber at Latuan is made into "ribbed smoked sheet", and demands the highest market price. The scrap grades are known as "compo" crepe.

All of the planting at Latuan was done before "budded" rubber had developed into a proved success. Dr. Strong is now opening up an adjoining 1,000-hectare tract for another company. This area will be planted with proved high-yielding budded seedlings which are being carefully prepared, and unless many years of scientific experimental work prove wrong the trees of the new plantation will produce several times the amount of rubber at the same age as do the trees on this estate at present.

The American Rubber Company also operates a sawmill near the back boundary of the estate and is marketing 250,000 board feet of excellent lumber monthly. The timber comes from areas owned by homesteaders and other planters, and thus the company is not only assisting its neighbors in clearing their land for planting but is saving millions of feet of valuable lumber that would otherwise go to waste—and at a handsome profit. Last year the company made over ₱60,000 from lumber sales.

The fluctuating price of rubber has no terrors for Dr. Strong. He is confident that ash is trees

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grow older and produce more he can manufacture rubber in Mindanao at as low a cost as any planters on earth. He says that if the rubber game should ever come to a proposition of the survival of the fittest, Mindanao planters will hold high rank among the fittest.

Ten years ago Latuan consisted of a little shack in a clearing in the heart of a wilderness inhabited only by jungle beasts and birds. Today it is a thriving town, the center of a population of homesteaders who have cleared, planted and brought to production more than 2,600 hectares of land adjoining the property of the American Rubber Company. The great majority of these homesteaders are Filipino employes of the company who were brought down as contract laborers from the northern islands, and who later sent for their families or married Basilan girls. The older employes are leaving the company one by one as their homesteads prosper and demand their entire attention. Their places are being filled by younger men who also stake homesteads and follow the example of their elders. In a very short time it will be impossible to find a piece of unoccupied farming land on the whole island of Basilan because of the thousands of employes and laborers who have gone there to work on the several large plantations and have remained to possess the land and make it fruitful.

Large plantations are nothing more than practical vocational and agricultural schools and will train hundreds of thousands of individuals in the art of modern farming and pay them well while they are doing it.—*Mindanao Herald.*

Farming Inherited Path-Lands: Subdivided Fields

When the Filipino peasant acquires a piece of farm land, something he is ordinarily very anxious to do, he seldom lets it go. When he dies and the land has to be divided among his children, they take these smaller parcels and hold onto them as tenaciously as he held onto the original homestead. It would perhaps be surprising to many employers of Filipinos in Manila to ascertain how many of these young men either now own some little land in the provinces or have the prospect of inheriting some; and Filipinos are, of course, predominantly the owners of private-title land in the Philippines, the Census of 1918 giving them about 95 per cent of it.

But with all their love for the land and their natural desire to possess it in fee simple, they migrate none too rapidly into the regions of free lands where they may acquire homesteads from the United States public domain. They are, many of them, indentured as peons and therefore not free to migrate; they are so poor in the chattels of this world that physically it is an impossibility for them to remove to fallow lands and forego a single crop, often as crops come in these islands; the lands inviting them have in frequent cases not been surveyed, and the title of the government determined in the courts, so that should they actually move onto these lands and put them under improvements, it might fall out in the end, as it so often has fallen out in the past, that in the final judgment of the case they would be deprived of their holdings.

How far behind the times the work of the bureau of lands is, has been recently treated in the *Journal* and will not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that only a small fraction of the work the bureau should have performed has actually been performed, and that the mere list of land applications pending demonstrates this. In many localities the bureau does not yet know what is private and what is public land, and can in no wise direct the homesteader securely as to where he should drive his picket stake.

The logical consequence of the several inhibitive influences upon migration is that in the last four years the bureau of labor reports but 3,646 farmers seeking places to settle on new lands. This is only 900, or thereabouts, each year, which cannot be deemed satisfactory.

The census indicates, on the other hand, how the old holdings are breaking up under the hammer of time. Reference may be had to some of the Ilocano provinces, which is best, since Ilocanos are going in search of new lands more than other peoples in the islands. It is observed of Abra, then, that in 1903 the average size of farms was 89.4 ares, and in 1918 only 45.1 ares. In fifteen years the originally very small farms were practically cut in two by the mere process, chiefly, of inheritance. The process was even more drastic in Ilocos Sur, slicing the farms down in that province from 185.0 ares in 1903 to 46.9 ares in 1918. In Ilocos Norte the reduction was from 62.1 ares to 32.6, and in La Union from 80.7 to 51.9.

This may be judged in one sense as an increase in peasant poverty: while there are more individual owners, each man owns less than was owned by his father; and these young men have families, too, growing up about them, to one day dividee little the father leaves.

This situation only requires the passage of a few years to make it no longer endurable, however patient the peasantry may be. The drift away from the land may already be noted in certain provinces, as in Cebu, where the average acreage is seen to have increased (though it is still notoriously inadequate, being only 81.5 ares in 1918, 62.1 ares in 1903), during a period when the population was also rapidly increasing and quite overcrowding the province. Does this mark the inception of the economic decay of the peasantry?

The figures above are all for cultivated lands, but uncultivated portions of farms indicate that the conclusions are fair. Turning to the recorded number of farms, for example, it is found that in Abra the number in 1903 was 13,655, and in 1918 it was 42,414. In Ilocos Sur corresponding figures are 21,479 and 113,077 respectively; in Ilocos Norte, 64,812 and 137,457; in La Union, 38,219 and 88,086. The number of farms worked by the owners in these four thickly populated provinces in 1903 was 101,944, and in 1918 they numbered 273,435.

That the peasantry of this region does steadily grow poorer in the property it holds dearest, farm lands,—notwithstanding the remarkable increase in the number of actual owners, shown to be mere heirs to patches of diminutive estates,—is likewise demonstrated, and surely clearly enough, in the figures on tenantry. In 1903, in these four provinces, tenants working farms numbered 36,644, and in 1918 they numbered 89,161.

The increase in population, it may be mentioned specifically, was not commensurate with any of these tell-tale figures showing all too clearly the economic failure of public administration over an extensive and industrious region of Luzon. The population of Abra, Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur and La Union in 1903 was 556,105, and in 1918 it was 669,856.

Modern Mindanao Farm: Young Rubber Foreground, Forest Background

There is, too, in this region, a steady drain-off of young men to Hawaii and the Pacific coast. They are adventurous and will strike out for themselves with half a chance to succeed. The percentage of increase in the population during the period covered was slightly above 20, while the number of farm owners (on always smaller acreages, merely their inherited portion of the *old homestead*) increased 168 per cent, and tenantry increased nearly 144 per cent.

This seems to tell the story, not a pretty one to hear.

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