Manila Hemp: Abacá—The Green Gold Plant

By H. H. Boyle and Walter Robb

Since early in the 18th century when the first shipment of Manila hemp, abacá, was made to European markets, the fiber of this invaluable plant has been and at present is the principal product of the Philippines. It is true that other products have, for a time, displaced abacá in point of export value for a year or two. Notwithstanding this fact, abacá is the principal means of livelihood for at least half the population of the archipelago; and is, regrettable as the fact may be, one of the principal sources of government revenue. It is a well known fact that this product is the most accurate barometer of Philippine business. When hemp enjoys a good market all other business in the islands is certain of prosperity. Rice brings high prices, corn too; the domestic sale of tobacco manufactures increases and the import trade sails on sure waters.

But let abacá fiber meet with reverses in the markets of the world. When this occurs the Philippines commercially are in the dumps. A slump in sugar, even though prolonged, has nowhere near the effect on general business that a slump in abacá has.

The plant from which abacá is obtained is a species of Musa botanically known as *Musa textilis*. In the Philippines the plant and fiber alike are known as abacá; in the markets of the world the fiber is Manila hemp. It is indigenous to the Philippines only; this being true, the fiber is a natural commercial monopoly of the islands. About half the total annual production is consumed in the United States.

Up to the present, abacá is the premier cordage fiber of the world. When properly extracted from the plant the fiber is about fifty per cent superior in tensile strength to any other vegetable fiber known or used in the manufacture of cordage. The elasticity of abacá is also superior to any structural fiber known.

Efforts have been made by various entities and individuals to have the government lend assistance to this vital industry. The fiber grading act which went into effect in 1915 was a step forward. The new fiber board taking over administration of the grading act July 1 may help considerably to improve the industry; but it will require time for this board to obtain the wherewithal to tackle the tremendous work that is to be accomplished.

The government has been exceedingly generous to the sugar industry. More than fifty million pesos of public taxes have been invested, chiefly in one province and on one island, to promote this industry to the point where it might compete with other sugar regions of the world producing in the aggregate some fifteen million tons of this staple product. Not one centavo has been invested in the abacá industry. The fiber grading act in effect since 1915 has been self supporting and has even provided nearly P500,000 for the general funds of the government, free of all expense of collection. Abacá has never enjoyed any such assistance as sugar, coconuts and tobacco have received from the government. Yet it is the principal agricultural product of the islands and is in such condition in most of the provinces that unless prompt and efficient assistance is rendered it is likely to be damaged permanently. There are districts formerly yielding the rarest quality of fiber that have been ruined by parasitic pests since these were discovered in the plantations in 1918.

Taxes derived from the abacá industry by the insular government range perhaps between eight and thirteen million pesos a year. The merchants' sales tax alone is around P4,000,000 a year, with a like sum added to purchases of imports in the abacá

Population of Philippine Hemp Producing Provinces

Province (Census of 1918)	Population	Area in Sq. Miles	Per Sq. Mile	Bales of Hemp in Last 6 Yrs.
Albay	259,704	975	268	1,119,413
Leyte	597,950	3,005	199	1,706,926
Ambos Camarines	270,814	2,851	95	567,672
Sorsogon	178,243	729	245	688,262
Samar	379,575	5,234	72	599,613
North Mindanao—				714,958
Misamis	198,943	1,030	193	
Bukidnon	48,544	3,871	13	
Agusan	44,740	4,294	10	
Surigao	122,154	2,889	42	
Lanao	91,459	2,439	37	
South Mindanao—				1,022,551
Davao	108,222	7,486	14	
Cotabato	171,978	9,620	18	
Zamboanga	147,333	6,383	23	
Jolo (Sulu)	172,776	1,082	160	58,410
Cebu	855,065	1,867	458	52,704
Mindoro	71,931	3,926	18	65,426
Negros—				65,913
Occidental	396,636	3,125	127	
Oriental	215,750	1,779	121	
Various— Cavite, etc.				200,793
Total	4,332,017	3,421	117	6,824,333

The average yearly production of the provinces for which it is possible to obtain the population records was 1,102,924 bales, which excludes the 200,793 bales produced in various provinces, Cavite, Laguna, Tayabas, etc., not specified in the baling reports and therefore not possible to trace in the census.

Fiber Board at Work

Commencing July 1 the Fiber Standardization Board and its subsidiary, the Philippine Fiber Inspection Service, superseded, under the law, the fiber division of the bureau of agriculture in the administration of the fiber grading act. Offices of the board and the inspection service are on the second floor of the Pacific Building. On June 30 the fiber division at the bureau of agriculture closed shop permanently. Under the new act the government has more adequately provided for fiber inspection.

There is likely to be ample revenue and competent personnel.

Fiber offered for export will be inspected and graded by the fiber inspection service of which W. G. Stevenson has been appointed manager. Dr. Stanton Youngberg, acting director of agriculture, is chairman and executive officer of the Fiber Standardization Board. Fiber producers are represented on the board by Mariano Garchitorena and S. F. Gaches; exporters by H. T. Fox and L. L. Spellman, respectively managers of Smith, Bell and Company and Macleod and Company; dealers by Juan Camahort, of E. Diaz y Cia.; manufacturers by Captain H. L. Heath, president of the American Chamber of Commerce and representative of a group of Pacific coast cordage mills as well as the Manila Cordage Company, manufacturing cordage in Manila.

districts. "All the traffic will bear" seems to be the government dictum. The full rate, 1½ per cent, is universally applied to sales of abacá, whereas the highest rate on sugar is 1 per cent and half of this, the planters' share, does not even pay the 1 per cent. Though the result of litigation may force payment from the planters, they will still be greatly favored to the prejudice of abacá planters. The government will have no more than 1 per cent from sugar, while it takes no less than 6 per cent from abacá.

Why not, for an industry so important to the public revenues as well as general business, establish some safeguards?

It is more than time that this be done. It might be done. An abacá institute adequately manned with competent scientific personnel is needed and has been needed for many years. Dr. Penoyer L. Sherman is engaged as a chemist in chemical research at the bureau of science for the Cordage Institute of America. He is doing an excellent work, but it doesn't cover the required field. By turning back to the industry a small fraction of the revenue it provides, there could be established an institute with plant pathologists, botanists, chemists and horticulturists who would all be constantly on the alert to eradicate diseases, improve varieties, better cultivation and generally promote the industry. In this the example of other agricultural countries could be followed with assurance of success.

Instead of producing 1,200,000 bales a year of abacá, the Philippines might well produce four million bales and profitably compete with Yucatan and Africa, each marketing fibers inferior to our abacá.

Abacá may be mechanically stripped. This much is proved and the practice should be rapidly extended to all fiber districts. Abacá may also be kept free of diseases to a great degree at least simply by cultivation. This also is proved and might be demonstrated by stations at Silang, where disease has, in seven years, wiped out the choicest fiber in the islands.

What has been done in Davao can be done in the Bicol region as well as Leyte and Samar and northern Mindanao. In Davao abacá is not grown wild. It is planted, cultivated for eight to twelve years, then rooted out and the fields replowed and planted again. It is where cultivation is neglected and abacá grows wild, the fiber extracted by tenants on shares, that the varieties and the quality of fiber decline.

Two of the most successful Davao planters were taken to Silang last year to inspect the ruined abacá fields there. "This could have been prevented by cultivation," they said. The moribund practice of utter neglect of abacá fields over so wide an area of our producing regions must in some way be broken up. Davao tenants too work on the share basis, but with greater advantage to themselves as well as the landlords. They are associated and have regulations for their mutual protection. They sell the fiber at weekly auctions, getting the highest prices, often by exporters' agents. Adulteration of parcels is prohibited. For a first offense the fine is ₱50, for a second the penalty is confiscation and for a third deportation.

The tenants are Japanese, who have devised these rigid rules of business. It is perfectly safe to do business with them, hence the abacá industry of Davao is advancing not only by the energy and ability Americans devote to it, but by the enterprise of the farmers themselves.

Captain Stanford Reporting on Dewey Drydock

Seven Sites Within the Bay Are Proposed

The naval drydock Dewey brought across the Pacific in 1906 and moored at Olongapo naval station since that time will be eventually "removed to a point within Manila bay," when decision has been made in Washington upon the technical report on the problem now being prepared by Captain Homer Reed Stanford, C. E. C., U. S. N., who arrived in Manila on the navy transport Chaumont July 2 and has set about his duties. Captain Stanford is living at the Army and Navy club, where he may usually be seen during the morning up to 11 o'clock.

Where the drydock Dewey shall be permanently anchored is a matter of much importance to the shipping community. The capacity of the largest privately owned docking and slipway works in the islands is understood to be around 1500 or 2000 tons. For vessels of greater tonnage no privately owned facilities are available, and under such conditions the navy will undertake overhauling and repairing commercial ships during periods when the dock is not required for navy work. These periods seem to aggregate about six months each year. For the removal of the dock from Olongapo, a step definitely determined upon in 1922, there is a fund of $400,000.

The question of funds gives the navy far less concern than the feasibility of a site at which the dock may be placed.

Seven different sites have been variously suggested. They are Mariveles, Corregidor, north of Cavite station, south of it, Sangley point, the middle of the bay, or within the harbor. The shoreline of the bay approximates 100 miles; it is 30 miles to Mariveles, which is about half the distance to Olongapo. Shops, workmen and workmen's quarters are vital desiderata; but most vital of all is a sufficient depth of water, which cannot be less than 65 feet and really should be 70 feet.

Such depths are not found along the bay shore, nor at Cavite or Sangley point, nor within the harbor, where the fairway has a depth of about 35 feet only. With ample funds a site and channel could be dredged to the required depth, and with additional ample funds might be kept at the required depth. It may be seen how extensive and comprehensive Captain Standford's report must be, and how knotty a problem the armament treaties put up to the department in Washington. Under the treaties the dock may be removed to "a point within Manila bay" because this will be no new construction; and it must be removed because away out there at Olongapo, a station no longer kept up, it is not rendering the service it is capable of at a station sufficiently equipped and manned.

The Man Who Makes the Buttons For Manhattan Shirts

Headington, J. L., An Ohio Product

Manila has its distinctive type of business man. It is the type that cut school and college in 1898, volunteered for America's first overseas expeditionary force, shouldered a Springfield, learned the manual of arms, subsisted on execrable rations and fought guerilla campaigns in the East and West Indies in revenge for the *Maine* and for the sake of adventure. It is the type that ranked itself on conquered Spanish plazas—the old Plaza Real, now Plaza McKinley, for example—and pledged to do in civil life, in the civil service of a civil government, all that it had done with the rifle in the field.

Victory and hard campaigning and experience had prepared the young adventurous volunteers for soberer duties.

Of this type is John Labon Headington, a son of Ohio and the manager of the Philippine Button Corporation since its successful reorganization in 1922 by New York capital that directed the rebuilding and reequipment of the plant so that the output is greatly increased and it has become one of the important manufactories of Manila. It makes pearl buttons for the United States market. All is done with Philippine marine products and Filipino labor, which is taught to be skilled labor. A substantial volume of new wealth is thus added to the islands' mobilized resources every year.

Headington has made his own place in Manila's business circles. He was born in Mount Vernon, Knox County, Ohio, in 1879. He had been graduated from the Mount Vernon High School, had attended Kenyon Military Academy, and was, at nineteen, attending Kenyon College when McKinley called for volunteers in 1898. Headington's outfit went first to Porto Rico, and he later, in 1899, came to the Philippines with the United States Signal Corps. In 1900 he participated with the American forces in the international expedition to Peking and the suppression of the Boxer rebellion in China.

He returned with his outfit to Manila when the unpleasantness in China had terminated, and at the expiration of his enlistment became a disbursing clerk in the Philippine civil government under Civil Governor Wm. Howard Taft. In 1904 he was assigned to the bureau of audits as an examiner. He remained there until 1915, rising meanwhile from examiner to a district auditor in the Bicol region, to chief of a division in the Manila office, and served as acting assistant auditor for over two years. When he left the government service he was a special agent.

He had now devoted 17 years of his youth and early manhood to his country. Embarking upon his career in business life, he became associated with the Shanghai