



Elsie Montiel

Yucatán's *Green Gold*

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Among the most noteworthy protagonists in the history of Yucatán is henequen. This agave plant native to the peninsula transformed the region's society and the economy at the end of the nineteenth century. Thanks to the sudden worldwide demand for the fiber extracted

from the henequen plant, Yucatán developed the two extremes of immense wealth and abject poverty: while some forged incalculable fortunes, putting them among the richest men in the Americas, most of the population, of Mayan ancestry, would be the object of abuse, exploitation and outright theft. The boom did not last very long, but its effect was such that henequen came to be known as "green gold."

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THE PLANT AND ITS ATTRIBUTES

Native to the Yucatán Peninsula, *Agave fourcroydes* Lemaire had been used since pre-Hispanic times. With the fiber extracted from its leaves—*soskil* as the Mayas called it—they made different kinds of textiles, and with its sap, a refreshing beverage. Its status and use did not change much during the colonial period; henequen was one of the items produced and traded throughout the peninsula. The fiber was used, among other things, for making twine, thick line used to moor ships, hammocks, bags and sacks for storing and transporting agricultural products.

Henequen has many qualities, but among the most important is its resistance to pests, disease and decay; it is adapted to survive in arid regions with very little water, and it reproduces without being cultivated. *Soskil* products could hold a larger weight for longer, and the sacks made with it preserved the products they held during transport better, making them suitable both for sailing and transporting raw materials. However, until 1861, the fiber was extracted by hand, making large-scale production for trade difficult.

A henequen agave plant takes between five and seven years to mature and after that has a useful life of about 20 years. The fiber is obtained from the sword-shaped leaves, which must be cut and cleaned of thorns before being scraped to separate the fiber. Once the threads have been extracted, they must be dried and then “combed,” beating

them against a kind of fixed rake to soften them. This operation is performed several times using finer- and finer-toothed rakes. The scraping and combing takes a very long time, so it was not until these processes were mechanized that production rapidly became massive.

THE BOOM

Large-scale production for commercialization began when José Esteban Solís, the owner of the Itzincab Hacienda imported the first steam engine into the area and adapted it to a mechanical rasper in 1861. Technological advances coincided with growing world demand for the product.

In a very short time, the northeastern part of the peninsula became one enormous henequen field. From 2,600 hectares (or 65,000 *mecates*, a local surface area measurement) sown in 1860, the numbers jumped to 16,000 hectares (400,000 *mecates*) in 1869 and 170,000 hectares and (4.25 million *mecates*) by 1910. For a few decades, Yucatán would be the world's only producer of the fiber; out of its haciendas came 90 percent of the rope and sacks consumed internationally. Henequen then began to be called sisal fiber because it was exported to Europe and the United States through the port of Sisal in Yucatán. The giant bales arrived at their destination with the seal of the port, so importers began calling it by that name.



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The Misné Hacienda has been turned into a luxurious hotel in Mérida.



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Visitors today can tour the Sotuta de Peón Hacienda to see all the stages henequen fiber production went through a century ago.

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The price skyrocketed and the owners of the henequen haciendas rapidly became immensely rich, as the spectacular mansions along Mérida’s Montejo Boulevard show. The boom had a cost, however: the demands of producing the fiber and using it to make saleable products led to the exploitation of thousands of Mayan peasants, who did the heaviest work for miserable wages and were tied to the haciendas mainly through debt. The social differences in the peninsula became an abyss.

WORKING CONDITIONS

In Yucatán, like in many other parts of New Spain, the colonial government imposed the *encomienda* system.¹ The abuses that went along with it soon led to its elimination, but by that time, there was already a relationship of domi-

nation among the Spaniards, *criollos* (people of Spanish descent born in Mexico) and the Mayan population.

At that time, the first haciendas were established in the southern part of the peninsula where the land was fertile. They produced sugar cane, corn and citrus fruit, and some raised cattle. The system was fed by the labor of the Mayan peoples in conditions of exploitation that did not change even when Mexico gained its independence.

THE REBELLION

In Yucatán, it is a truism that the Mayan peoples have often been subjected but never dominated. The bloody Caste War, which broke out in 1847 and did not formally come to an end until 1901, is proof of that. The roots of the rebellion are in the Mayan peoples’ desire to recover their lands that little by little had been taken from them and end the exploitation they were subjected to on the haciendas.² Both sides committed the bloodiest acts imaginable during the first years of the rebellion. Given the violence unleashed, both



Entrance to the Yaxcopoil Hacienda main house.

hacienda owners and many Mayas who were not participating in the hostilities fled to the northern and central part of Yucatán, where there was less danger. There, however, the land was chalky and completely infertile. The only plant that could grow in it was henequen. The relations of domination did not change; with support from those in power, the *criollos* began to grab the land, and the Mayan peasants—both the locally born and the refugees—had to adjust to even worse working conditions, but now on the henequen haciendas.

THE LINK BETWEEN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC POWER

In the mid-nineteenth century, the peninsula's hacienda-owning oligarchy controlled not only the economy, but also local politics. Landowners and local notables distributed and rotated among themselves local and state political posts, which they then used to legally justify their acts of expropriation and appropriation. With the local justice system also

on the landowners' side, ordinary citizens had little chance of defending their individual rights. The precarious living conditions outside the haciendas reduced the Mayas' autonomy and many ended up working on the haciendas. The most common form of subjugation was through debt: the Mayas were paid much less than what they needed to live. This situation was solved by becoming indebted to the boss, who harbored no expectations of being paid, because he benefited from it, as the worker became permanently tied to his hacienda. With the support of even clearly unconstitutional state laws, the hacienda owners managed to get the labor they needed to survive in the new conditions of the world market. It is said that in some towns, more than 50 percent of the inhabitants resided permanently on the haciendas.³ Thus, by the end of the century, the hacienda owners were in more than favorable conditions to respond to the world demand for their product.

LIFE ON THE HACIENDAS

By 1904, 1,000 haciendas in Yucatán were producing and processing henequen fiber. Though small, compared to the haciendas in Northern Mexico, they were as large as 13,000 hectares. Henequen plantations covered 60 percent of all the land in the state. Among the surprising things about the whole period was that the great fortunes henequen produced were based on using only 5-percent of each agave leaf, since that is all the fiber is. So, to fill one bale, 10,000 leaves had to be scraped.



The engine room and the mechanical reaper room of Yaxcopoil, one of the biggest henequen haciendas in the early twentieth century.



Even before the boom, hacienda owners were dubbed “the Divine Caste” given their wealth and power. For most of the time the economic bonanza lasted, henequen haciendas functioned like autonomous states: they had their own churches, cemeteries, hospitals and they all smelted their own coins. In their “hacienda stores,” the workers were paid in local money and had to buy what they needed to feed themselves and live, plus paying their rent. They did not have the right to leave, and, since they were paid in coins that were worthless outside, they had no money to move around outside the hacienda anyway.

It is said that the hacienda owners did not live on their lands because the processing of the fiber produced a very disagreeable smell. Whether this is the reason or not, the fact is that most of them lived in lavish, European-style mansions in the city of Mérida. A drive down the city’s Montejo Boulevard reveals in seconds the significance of the wealth some fortunate members of the Divine Caste accumulated.

AN ABRUPT COLLAPSE

The exporting boom was very short-lived. By 1916, production and demand began to stagnate. The invention of plastic and synthetic fibers was one of the main causes. But the cul-

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The drying area, Yaxcopoil Hacienda.

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tivation of the same plant in other places like Brazil and Tanzania broke the monopoly of henequen production. Also, the Mexican Revolution came —albeit belatedly, in 1915— to Yucatán, and with it the debt system was abolished, the debts cancelled and the minimum wage established.

Production progressively slowed until, by 1950, many of the haciendas were completely abandoned. Today, the former maker of fortunes is used to make handbags and other crafts, although now the remaining 95 percent of the plant is also put to other industrial and medicinal uses. Yucatán’s lands are no longer painted green with the plants, but here and there abandoned or reconstructed buildings of many henequen haciendas remain, just like the great Mayan cities, to testify to that almost fleeting moment of splendor created by what was once called “green gold.” **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ The kings of Spain granted the conquistadors lands to exploit and indigenous people to work them. In exchange, the proud owners committed themselves to “caring for” the natives and spreading the Catholic Gospel.
- ² Even after Mexico became independent from Spain, the exploitation of and land theft from the Mayas on the peninsula did not come to an end. By abolishing all forms of corporate property, the Reform Laws themselves were used to facilitate the privatization and progressive transfer of the indigenous communities’ communal lands, formerly the property of villages and towns. The law demanded that communal property be divided up among the heads of families, but that fostered abuses of the isolated individuals with little recourse for defending themselves from the powerful and the authorities —even though they had not elected them— who applied the law against them.
- ³ Environmental factors also placed an important role in this demographic concentration. Temperatures of 90 degrees Fahrenheit from March to September hindered the peasants’ mobility. Pests and drought made agriculture unstable —between 1881 and 1886, locusts did away with a large part of corn production. This increased the henequen plantation-owners’ negotiating capacity. The population had little choice: they could either die of hunger or move to the haciendas.