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# The Reign of “King Henequen”: The Rise and Fall of Yucatán’s Export Crop from the Pre-Columbian Era through 1930

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The Reign of “King Henequen”  
The Rise and Fall of Yucatán’s Export Crop from the Pre-Columbian Era  
through 1930

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An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

Bates College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

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Lewiston, Maine, United States of America

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## Abstract

This thesis will examine the massive impact of henequen on the state of Yucatán, Mexico, specifically focusing on the time period from the mid-nineteenth century until the year 1930. Henequen is a fibrous plant that is native to the Yucatán peninsula and was a useful tool in pre-Columbian Maya civilization. The Spanish arrival in Mexico brought elites who eventually began to see the plant's potential for profit. Henequen became a major export crop of Mexico and revenue flowed into Yucatán. In less than a half-century, from the late 1800s to early 1900s, Yucatán became one of the richest states in Mexico. This thesis will discuss the original uses of the henequen plant in Mayan society and show how the industry evolved as a result of a great demand for henequen fiber in the United States, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It will then show how the henequen industry revolutionized Yucatecan society. Social classes became more defined between the millionaire elites of Mérida and the impoverished hacienda laborers who were treated like slaves. In addition, society was “modernized” with new railroads, ports, and amenities. Finally, this thesis will examine the downfall of the henequen industry and show how the policies of the Mexican Revolution and the dependence on an individual crop eventually led to disaster for the state.

## Introduction

On July 7, 2007, the New Seven Wonders of the World Committee announced that Chichén Itzá pyramid in Yucatán, Mexico, along with the Taj Mahal, the Roman Colosseum, Machu Picchu, the Great Wall of China, the statue of Christ the Redeemer, and Petra, was named one of the New Seven Wonders of the World.<sup>1</sup> The Chichén Itzá pyramid was built by the Mayans sometime between the eighth and twelfth centuries, and was a sophisticated temple of worship.<sup>2</sup> It served as an economic and political center of the Mayan civilization, and is considered one of the greatest Mayan temples.<sup>3</sup> The construction of this extraordinary sculpture, with its intricate arrangement of brick and stone, was made possible by the use of a pulley system of wood and rope. The rope was made out of a strong fiber that is contained in the leaves of the henequen plant, which is a tall *agave* that only grows in the Yucatán Peninsula. Some argue that without the use of henequen fiber to make the rope for the pulley system, it would have been impossible to construct Chichén Itzá.<sup>4</sup> This thesis will examine the enormous role of the henequen plant in the development of Yucatán from the pre-Columbian period to the early twentieth century.

The henequen plant was used in many aspects of everyday life in Mayan society, and although it neither had its own god nor was revered to the extent of corn, it was ever-present in Mayan society as it was used to make hammocks to sleep in and shoes to walk in.<sup>5</sup> With the arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth century, the harvesting of henequen fiber would turn into a

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<sup>1</sup> New Seven Wonders of the World, "The New Seven Wonders of the World," accessed February 20, 2014, <http://world.new7wonders.com/new7wonders-of-the-world-page/new7wonders-of-the-world>.

<sup>2</sup> National Geographic, "Chichén Itzá," accessed February 20, 2014, <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/world-heritage/chichen-itza>.

<sup>3</sup> New Seven Wonders of the World, "The New Seven Wonders of the World."

<sup>4</sup> José Antonio Carrillo, Tour of Hacienda Sotuta de Peón, Tecoh, Yucatán, December 22, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Camilo Otero Rejón, "Presencia inadvertida, ki," in *Henequén: Leyenda, historia y cultura* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006), 30.

massive industry that boomed during the second half of the nineteenth century. Its legacy has shaped the state of Yucatán, and even today, its presence is evident in daily life. Yucatecans have sayings such as “*te crees muy henequén*,” or “you think you are like henequen,” which is directed at people who are self-centered and do not seek the help of others. Henequen grows by itself and does not need much care, so the saying refers to people who have similar qualities.<sup>6</sup> In addition, many hammocks, placemats, and ropes are still made with the henequen fiber. Most of the gift shops in the center of Yucatán’s capital city, Mérida, sell items made with henequen. Some stores are even devoted entirely to henequen products. Even though the industry has declined, daily life in Yucatán, from the landscape to language, is still infused with henequen.

During the late-nineteenth to early twentieth century, henequen was a major industry that brought wealth and change to the state of Yucatán. In a span of less than forty years, Yucatán became Mexico’s richest state.<sup>7</sup> The story of henequen is both unique and similar to the stories of other Latin American export crops and their booms. The story of the henequen industry is the story of a goal to become a modern capitalist economy, the achievement of that goal, and the eventual development of a dependence on international demand. After Mexican independence in 1821, elites in Yucatán had looked for a way to insert themselves into the world economy. As a result of various events in the state at the time, and in the fiber market as a whole, the conditions were ideal for henequen to become a popular and successful export crop. The profits of henequen reached unprecedented heights, and many hacienda owners became millionaires.

Henequen came to shape Yucatecan society as it established an elite caste, which sought to “modernize” Yucatán by enhancing infrastructure and turning Mérida into a “modern” world city. These modernization efforts, however, were carried out at the expense of hacienda laborers,

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<sup>6</sup> María Elena Pinto Escamilla, in discussion with author, December 19, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffery Brannon and Eric N. Baklanoff, *Agrarian Reform and Public Enterprise in Mexico: The Political Economy of Yucatán* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1987), xi.

who were forced to live in slave-like conditions. In addition, society was dedicated to the production and export of henequen fiber. Diversification efforts were never successful, and Yucatán became dependent on its exports of raw fiber to the United States. Once the Mexican Revolution arrived in Yucatán in 1915, the United States began to seek fiber from other sources, and the economy of Yucatán was devastated. As quickly and as dramatically as it had rose, the decline of the industry would convert Yucatán into one of Mexico's poorest states.

### *Henequen in a Latin American Context*

In order to understand the henequen industry of Yucatán, it is important to examine henequen in a broader context. Since the sixteenth century, Latin America has been shaped by its relationship with the global economy.<sup>8</sup> The participating countries and products are often changing, and the economic histories reflect the rise and fall of different goods. Central export crops from regions in Latin America have included silver, sugar, and tobacco during the sixteenth century, bananas and rubber in the nineteenth century, and cocaine in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> During the nineteenth century, the expansion of liberal capitalism in Latin America, in which the market took priority over the state, increased the prosperity of Latin American export crops.<sup>10</sup> This new government mindset resulted in laissez-faire economic policies and an increase in free trade, which led to an increase in exports. Between 1850 and 1913, Latin American exports grew by 1000 percent and became five to eight percent of world commerce.<sup>11</sup> The Industrial Revolution during the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe and North

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<sup>8</sup> Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank, eds, *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup> Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells, eds, *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), 2.



America resulted in a major increase in demand for raw materials from Latin America.<sup>12</sup> Like many other Latin American export crops, henequen gained popularity at this time, and its success was a result of the expanding demand in the United States.

For the most part, Latin American countries focused on the export of one specific product. These products were principally exported to Great Britain, the United States, France, and Germany.<sup>13</sup> Some popular crops included sugar in Haiti and bananas in several Central and South American countries.<sup>14</sup> Many banana producing countries came to be controlled by United Fruit Company, and all the profits left the region. This gave way to poor and dependent countries often referred to as “banana republics.”<sup>15</sup> Henequen, while not controlled exclusively by foreign interests, reflects this tendency of dependence as well, since it came to depend on United States purchases of the fiber.

The United States played a major role in these Latin American export economies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, during the late 1800s, the United States became the largest buyer of coffee and imported \$23 million worth of coffee from Brazil in 1899. That same year, the United States imported \$15 million worth of sugar from Cuba, \$5 million worth of henequen from Mexico, and \$1.2 million worth of bananas from Central American countries.<sup>16</sup> The goal and purpose of these industries was to satisfy the United States demand, and these industries became dependent on United States purchases. Since Latin American countries were often so focused on their export goods, they were unable to produce their own goods. The United States began exporting goods to Latin America, which enhanced

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> “Our Growing Southern Trade,” *Charlotte Observer*, December 3, 1899, accessed November 9, 2013, [infoweb.newsbank.com](http://infoweb.newsbank.com).

the level of dependence, and thwarted Latin American industrialization. Agricultural machinery, corn, cars, and coal, among other goods, were commonly exported from the United States to Latin American countries.<sup>17</sup>

The expansion of capital in Latin America led to improvements such as electricity, lighting, and sanitation systems.<sup>18</sup> Many elites sought to “modernize” their societies and looked to the United States as an example. However, these modernizations only benefited upper classes as lower classes lacked access to amenities.<sup>19</sup> As a result of the market control in many Latin American countries, lower classes became poorer and more repressed. They were subject to difficult labor and did not have access to societal improvements.<sup>20</sup> Companies often gained substantial control over Latin American societies. For example, International Harvester, which would come to form a monopolistic structure in the henequen industry, the American Sugar Refining Company in the Dominican Republic and Cuba and United Fruit Company in the Caribbean, would come to rule over society.<sup>21</sup>

While henequen does have a unique story, it fits into the broader context of Latin American export economies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At this time, Latin America was a region in which some areas, especially cities, were modernized significantly as a result of export booms. At the same time, other areas remained rural and untouched by the expansion of capitalism.<sup>22</sup> This description is applicable to the story of henequen since modernization in Yucatán was geared toward cities, and neglected rural areas and haciendas.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Topik and Wells, eds, *The Second Conquest of Latin America*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> G.M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 45.

<sup>22</sup> Topik and Wells, eds, *The Second Conquest of Latin America*, 19.

*The Impact of Mexican Liberalism and Capitalism on Henequen*

Similar to other countries in Latin America, the enactment of liberal policies in Mexico during the second half of the nineteenth century helps explain how the henequen industry was able to take hold. From 1876 to 1911, Mexico was governed by President Porfirio Díaz, known as “liberal dictator,” who was focused on “*orden y progreso*,” or “order and progress,” in Mexico.<sup>23</sup> He was determined to enter the world market and create a more modern and developed nation.<sup>24</sup> In his quest to modernize society, Díaz favored wealthy landowners and elites because he believed they could stimulate the economy in Mexico.<sup>25</sup> As a result, lower classes and laborers, which consisted mostly of indigenous peoples, were not included in Díaz’s modernization efforts.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Díaz was a great force of modernization in Mexico, and his goal to create a modern, developed economy helped henequen gain popularity as Díaz was interested in promoting henequen.<sup>27</sup> During the beginnings of the henequen industry, foreign industries were hesitant to lend money, but many, such as those in the United States, trusted Díaz, and when he took office, they were more comfortable lending.<sup>28</sup> They saw Díaz as a stable president who was interested in promoting capitalism and industry.

While power in Mexico tended to be more regional during the nineteenth century, liberal policies still reached Yucatán.<sup>29</sup> Yucatecan liberalism was focused on private property and

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<sup>23</sup> Sterling Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” in *A Land Between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico*, ed. Christopher R. Boyer (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 157.

<sup>24</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, Facultad de Arquitectura, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras* (Bogotá, Colombia: Escala, 1996), 21.

<sup>25</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 159.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>27</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence James Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883: The Roots of Dependence in a Mexican Region” Volumes 1 and 2 (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1981), 529.

<sup>29</sup> Allen Wells, *Yucatán’s Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 4.

individual rights.<sup>30</sup> In order to stimulate the economy, colonial restrictions on land ownership were reduced and land became more accessible to individuals.<sup>31</sup> Elites and society leaders wanted to make Yucatán look more like the United States as they sought to develop a modern industrial economy.<sup>32</sup> The state worked to concentrate wealth, facilitate exports, and break worker resistance.<sup>33</sup> The Yucatán government wanted to expand capitalism and they believed that a market-focused economy would allow them to do so. As a result, elites were able to take power through enterprise and politics.<sup>34</sup> The lack of a strong government presence allowed elites to gain control over society and do what was necessary to advance the henequen industry. While Yucatán was often considered relatively autonomous in regard to the rest of Mexico, the ideas of liberalism took hold in the state and elites sought to develop a modern capitalist economy. Yucatán became a model of success for Díaz, and he considered the development and economy of the state to be a great triumph.<sup>35</sup> The success of henequen was unprecedented: no other region of Mexico would ever be as involved in the world economy as Yucatán was during this period.<sup>36</sup>

### *Scholarship on the Henequen Industry*

Henequen is an important crop to study as it plays a primary role in shaping the history of the Yucatán peninsula. The story of henequen, while it is unique, becomes part of the historical context of Latin American export economies by the nineteenth century. The literature reviewed

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<sup>30</sup> Topik and Wells, eds, *The Second Conquest of Latin America*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 158.

<sup>33</sup> Allen Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen," in *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000*, eds. Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 314.

<sup>34</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 29-30.

<sup>35</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 717.

shows, through different perspectives, that henequen has indeed been responsible for the development and formation of the Yucatán state. From ports and railroads to a rigid class and labor system, it is clear that King Henequen, as it is occasionally called, possessed substantial control in Yucatán. The United States has evidently played a strong role in the story of henequen since it was the main importer of henequen fiber, and the wheat industry in the United States is what caused the majority of the demand for henequen.

Scholars have shown that Latin American export economies tend to follow a common trend in that similar government structures have often led to the focus on one specific crop. While the henequen industry was unique in that it was originally a mostly Yucatecan industry, it would later become more controlled by international interests, which shows that the story of henequen has a place in this larger context. The story of henequen in Yucatán tells an all too familiar tale of skewed dependence on the United States, unequal labor relations, a push for progress and modernization, and the role of the state in the economy. Scholars of the topic of the henequen industry support the notion that henequen created dependence on the United States and that labor relations were unevenly distributed between millionaire planters and impoverished laborers. They show that “modernization” efforts were geared mainly toward the advancement of henequen, which did not allow for diversification once henequen lost popularity with the intervention of the state government in the economy. Although henequen is not a major Latin American export crop that comes to mind, its history is an important one to study in order to understand the Yucatán state and its formation.

Dependency is a key theme in the history of Latin American export economies. Several historians place henequen in the context of a variety of similar Latin American economies which focused specifically on one crop. Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, in their book,

*Dependency and Development in Latin America*, discuss the tendency of Latin American economies to become determined by the “capitalist system.”<sup>37</sup> They show how many Latin American countries build their societies around the expansion of capitalism in Europe and North America at the expense of indigenous populations.<sup>38</sup> Cardoso and Faletto focus on two structures of dependence: one being a form of external dependence on foreign capital, and the other being internal dependence, in which a society requires the international market for food and staples.<sup>39</sup> Yucatán’s henequen industry fits into their internal dependence category as the henequen industry was developed to satisfy the United States’ demand for fiber, at the expense of Mayan laborers, and Yucatán eventually needed to import staple goods from the United States.

In *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen & Oil during the Export Boom*, Steven Topik and Allen Wells investigate various Latin American export products and show a connection between their histories. The “second conquest” refers to the new form of dependence in Latin America dominated by United States demand for goods instead of by Spanish colonizers.<sup>40</sup> Topik and Wells point to the formation of liberalism and capitalism in Latin American countries to show how these export economies have developed.<sup>41</sup> The Industrial Revolution in Europe and North America called for natural resources from Latin America and Topik and Wells show how this demand shaped many economies of Latin American nations.<sup>42</sup> They prove that henequen does not have an entirely unique story – it shares characteristics with the industries of coffee, oil, sugar, and bananas and thus fits into a larger context. In their work

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<sup>37</sup> Fernando Henrique and Enzo Faletto Cardoso, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, translated by Marjory Mattingly Urquidí (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), xiv.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>40</sup> Topik and Wells, eds, *The Second Conquest of Latin America*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

*From Silver to Cocaine*, Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank present the commodity chain theory to show how Latin American export crops fit into this category.<sup>43</sup> They examine the history of Latin American export crops, the birth of liberalism and free trade, and the reasons for export booms in Latin America. Although each commodity has a unique history, the general story of henequen fits squarely into their analysis of Latin American export crops because it sprung from liberal and free trade policies, and focused on the development of the industry over the state.<sup>44</sup>

Several historians examine the different impacts henequen had on the Yucatán state with respect to modernization efforts. In his chapter, “King Henequen: Order, Progress and Ecological Change in Yucatán 1850-1950,” in the book *A Land Between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico* edited by Christopher Boyer, Sterling Evans traces the history of henequen and discusses its uses from the early Mayan civilizations to the present. He examines how the Caste War (1846-1853) and certain laws directly influenced the henequen crop.<sup>45</sup> Evans also discusses the negative environmental impacts of henequen as a monocrop. Rail transportation and henequen fields caused deforestation, poisoned water sources, harmed the soil, and reduced animal habitats.<sup>46</sup> Anthony Andrews, Rafael Burgos Villanueva, and Luis Millet Cámara’s article “The Henequen Ports of Yucatán’s Gilded Age” shows modernization efforts that resulted from the henequen industry. These authors discuss the formation of ports in the Yucatán state during the peak of the henequen exports. Hacienda owners began to turn their plantations from corn and cattle to henequen.<sup>47</sup> In addition, rail systems and ports began to

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<sup>43</sup> Topik, Marichal, and Frank, eds, *From Silver to Cocaine*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 155-6.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>47</sup> Anthony Andrews, Rafael Burgos Villanueva, and Luis Millet Cámara, “The Henequen Ports of Yucatán’s Gilded Age,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16, no. 1 (March 2012): 31, <http://search.ebscohost.com>.

spread over the area as a system was needed to facilitate export.<sup>48</sup> In accordance with Andrews, Burgos Villanueva, and Millet Cámara's article, Heather McCrea in *Diseased Relations: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatán, Mexico, 1847-1924* also points to henequen in explaining the urban and industrial modernization of the Yucatán state. She discusses the benefits seen in urban areas such as railroads and new public health and sanitation systems.<sup>49</sup> McCrea also shows how henequen plantations caused the absorption of smaller towns and communities by larger cities to expand the size and production of haciendas.<sup>50</sup> With the increase in wealth and expansion of the henequen industry, elites sought to create a more modern society that would be recognized on a world stage, and that would continue to facilitate the export of henequen.

In his doctoral dissertation, *Henequén, the Caste War and the Economy of Yucatán*, Lawrence Remmers also traces the history of henequen, but discusses the negative impact of creating an economy solely focused on one product. Remmers presents the staple model theory, which is when an economy focuses on a single export and fails to develop aside from that export base. He says this theory applies to Yucatán as the state focused on henequen exports, and the economy failed to develop and prosper outside of henequen production.<sup>51</sup> The singular focus on henequen took funding from education and the development of other resources which provides insight into why the economy endured such great suffering after henequen lost its popularity.<sup>52</sup> In his chapter "Henequen" in *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom 1850-1930*, Allen Wells also provides a history of the rise and fall of the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>49</sup> Heather McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 142-3, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/laddbates/Doc?id=10492223&ppg=150>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>51</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 36-8.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 40.



henequen industry. Wells shows how henequen became prominent in the fiber market and gained success over alternatives, such as Philippine manila.<sup>53</sup> In his book, *Yucatán's Gilded Age*, Wells tells the story of henequen by examining the industry's many effects on the society of Yucatán. He focuses on the rise of henequen after the Caste War, and shows how the henequen industry led to the rise of powerful families, such as the Molinas and the Peóns.<sup>54</sup> He examines the poor labor conditions that existed on henequen plantations, and discusses the development of railroads in Yucatán.<sup>55</sup>

Piedad Peniche Rivero also focuses on the abysmal labor conditions in Yucatán. In her chapter "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero: A Transition to Capitalism in Yucatán, Mexico," in *The Lowland Maya Area: Three Millenia at the Human-Wildland Interface*, Peniche Rivero examines the new society that evolved from the henequen hacienda system. She discusses how the henequen industry was responsible for creating a slave-like labor system in which workers were subject to debt peonage and were banned from leaving their employers. Laborers were treated horribly as they were beaten and often attempted to run away.<sup>56</sup> Wells and Peniche Rivero show that the henequen industry was responsible for the great disparity between classes as hacienda owners were very wealthy and powerful while laborers were very poor, often in debt, and subject to terrible labor conditions.

Scholars have also demonstrated the great influence the United States has had on the henequen industry, and it is evident that the development of Yucatán and its expansion of capitalism have been fueled by the United States. In *Bound in Twine*, Sterling Evans examines

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<sup>53</sup> Allen Wells, "Henequen," in *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930*, ed. Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), 94.

<sup>54</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 67,78.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 153, 89.

<sup>56</sup> Piedad Peniche Rivero, "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero: A Transition to Capitalism in Yucatán, Mexico," in *The Lowland Maya Area: Three Millennia at the Human-Wildland Interface*, ed. Arturo Gómez-Pompa, Michael F. Allen, Scott L. Fedick et al. (New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 2003), 580.

the connection between the United States and the Yucatán. Evans shows how the prospering wheat industry and inventions, such as the grain reaper, were directly responsible for the increase in demand for binder twine from Yucatán.<sup>57</sup> The goal of his work is to expose the connections and dependencies between the United States, Canada, and the Yucatán, and it is clear that the United States has played a strong role in controlling the henequen industry, which resulted in dependence.<sup>58</sup> The United States, as it was the major importer of raw henequen fiber, played a major role in the decline of the henequen industry when it began purchasing fiber from other sources. Several authors, including Wells and Evans, examine the rise of the United States company International Harvester's monopoly and how it came to gain control of the henequen industry.<sup>59</sup> Gilbert M. Joseph discusses the arrival of the Mexican Revolution in Yucatán in his work *Revolution from Without*, and shows how the changes enacted by the new revolutionary governments encouraged the United States to seek fiber from alternate sources. He shows that the monoculture in Yucatán was focused on henequen, which resulted in a strong dependence on the fiber. He examines how changes in society as a result of the Revolution, including the expansion of labor rights and increased power of the state, ultimately led to the downfall of the industry.<sup>60</sup>

### *The Reign of "King Henequen"*

This thesis tells the story of Yucatán's henequen industry and its major effects on the state of Yucatán. It explores why henequen became popular and how it was able to gain such

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<sup>57</sup> Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>59</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 56, 52; Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 25.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, xiv.

success during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It examines the impacts of the henequen boom on Yucatecan society with respect to the social structure and “modernization” efforts. It concludes by describing the ultimate downfall of the henequen industry, and discussing the factors that led to the end of this immensely profitable industry. This thesis will build on Peniche Rivero’s and Wells’ discussions of the social classes in Yucatán to demonstrate how the henequen industry came to control society and created a strong disparity between the elites and laborers. It will draw on Remmers’ and Evans’ findings to show how the focus on a single export staple and the resulting dependence would lead to disaster in Yucatán as the state would be left with nowhere else to turn once henequen had lost popularity. Finally, it will build on Evans’ and Joseph’s studies of the decline of the henequen industry to demonstrate how the policies established by the arrival of the Mexican Revolution would lead to the rapid downfall of the henequen industry.

Chapter One will examine the origins of the henequen industry and how conditions in Yucatán led to the rise of this export crop in order to establish the context for the development of the industry. It begins by showing how the climate of Yucatán is ideal for henequen cultivation, discussing the Maya uses for henequen and henequen’s role in pre-Columbian society, and examining the arrival of the Spanish and how the changes they imposed on Yucatecan society influenced the henequen industry. The chapter will then discuss how events following Mexican independence, such as the rise of elites who sought to enter the world economy and the devastating Caste War of 1846, increased the push for henequen production.

Chapter Two will discuss the logistics of henequen production and how the industry continued to grow. It argues that elites’ focus on the expansion of capitalism and modernization of society allowed the henequen industry to gain momentum and prosper. It also argues that

during this period, dependence on the United States was established as the United States became responsible for purchasing a majority of henequen. Chapter Two shows how liberalism and capitalism led to the expansion of industry, and later discusses how dependence evolved between the United States and Yucatán. Although the United States came to depend on Yucatecan fiber, the entirety of Yucatán's economy was based on raw fiber exports to the United States, and campaigns to diversify ultimately failed. The chapter will conclude by examining the rise of International Harvester, and show how this monopoly formed a coalition of businessmen from the United States and elites from Yucatán, who would gain complete control of the henequen industry.

Chapter Three focuses on the local impact of the henequen industry. It argues that there were two sides of "modernization" in Yucatán as a result of henequen: the elites, who gained unprecedented fortunes, and the laborers, who suffered as a result of hard labor and poverty. It begins by showing how the henequen industry brought incredible wealth and power to the elite class in Yucatán, and how they were focused on modernization and beautification. It will discuss how many of the modernization efforts in the state were focused specifically on the expansion of henequen, which did not allow for diversification. The second half of the chapter examines the plight of the laborers, who were bound to haciendas by debt and forced to endure horrific working conditions. This great inequality, it seems, was necessary for the success of the henequen industry, and while there were accusations of slavery in Yucatán, elites sought to quiet these complaints. The henequen industry was built on the backs of the laborers, and in order for elites to complete their goals of development, it was necessary to keep laborers in their slave-like position.

Chapter Four examines the downfall of the henequen industry. It argues that the changes to society brought about by the Mexican Revolution ultimately led to the decline of the industry. While revolutionaries and socialists, such as Salvador Alvarado and Felipe Carrillo Puerto, had good intentions as they sought to increase labor rights, reduce the power and control of elites, and increase the role of the state in the economy, their policies did not permit the continued success of henequen. The changes led to an increase in prices and an insecurity that led the United States to begin to pursue alternative fiber options. Without the quantity of purchases from the United States, the consequences on the economy of Yucatán would be devastating. In addition, several other events, such as increased competition and the invention of the combine, would help to accelerate the already flailing industry. This chapter will conclude by examining how dependence led to poverty and disaster for the economy of Yucatán as elites had invested everything into henequen production and were left with no other options once henequen had lost its popularity.

## Chapter One

### Henequen's Early Role in Yucatecan Society

#### From the Pre-Colombian Maya through the Caste War of 1846

#### *Introduction*

It is said that once a Mayan priest was surveying his lands in the company of his guards. In a moment of carelessness, he was struck by a spiny leaf which caused him pain, so one of his guards cut the leaf and began to beat it until a fiber from within became visible. Upon seeing the fiber, the priest with his wisdom said: 'This will be of use to us.' And from there they began to use the plant.<sup>1</sup>

The Mayan culture is rich with legends. For centuries, variations of the above story, which explains the discovery of the henequen plant, have been passed down through generations. The henequen plant has always had a strong presence in Yucatecan society and was of great use to the Mayan people in the time before Spanish colonization. While there are many variations of this legend, many agree that Zamná, a Mayan priest or prince, was passing through his lands and was hurt by a henequen leaf, at which point one of his servants beat the leaf and exposed the fiber within.<sup>2</sup> The henequen plant, something unique to the Yucatán peninsula, was of great use to the Mayan people in their everyday lives. From the day that Zamná discovered the fiber, henequen has played a major role in shaping Yucatecan society. It began as a crop to produce tools, bags, and hammocks for the Mayan people. It later evolved into a massive export crop from the late-nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century.

The structure and development of the Yucatán through the Caste War of the mid-nineteenth century allowed henequen to take a lead role in forming society. First and foremost,

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<sup>1</sup> Gibrán Israel Yeh Moo, Facebook message to author, translated by author, October 17, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Sterling Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," in *A Land Between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico*, ed. Christopher R. Boyer (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 154-5; Camilo Otero Rejón, "Presencia inadvertida, ki," in *Henequén: Leyenda, historia y cultura* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006), 28; Oswaldo Baqueiro López, "Una planta de leyenda," in *Henequén: Leyenda, historia y cultura* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006), 49-50.

the climate of Yucatán is perfect for the henequen plant to prosper. Once they realized its utility, the Maya began to incorporate this plant into various aspects of their daily lives. At the time of the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century, the Spaniards saw the many uses of henequen and eventually began to use it themselves. Around the time of Mexican Independence in 1821, henequen became even more popular and began to be exported elsewhere. During Independence and the Caste War in the mid-nineteenth century, other major industries in Yucatán's economy, such as cattle and sugar, were damaged, which allowed henequen to become even more prevalent in society. These factors and developments eventually gave elites and society leaders motive to focus on the export of this plant which led to a great export boom during the late nineteenth century.

While henequen played a major role throughout the early period of Yucatecan society, many factors that occurred during the pre-Columbian era through the Caste War of 1846 allowed henequen to eventually take the stage as the major export crop and as an incredible source of income for the Yucatán state. From its many uses in everyday Mayan life, to its uses in rigging on Spanish ships, to its early export in the nineteenth century, henequen was ever present in Yucatán's society during this period. In addition, society leaders began to realize its great economic potential and henequen slowly gained traction as a crop in the time before, during, and after the Caste War of the mid-nineteenth century. While the Maya saw henequen as a useful tool and not as a religious object, it was still important to their livelihood and remained an important crop when Yucatecan elites began to turn toward henequen as their economic savior during the first part of the nineteenth century.

This chapter will show that henequen played a major role in Yucatecan society from the pre-Columbian time to the Caste War of the mid-nineteenth century. It will examine how the

conditions of Yucatecan society during this period would cause elites and society leaders to eventually turn to henequen as a major export crop. It will discuss the beginnings of henequen industry growth during Mexican independence, and examine how the violent Caste War of the mid-1800s further stimulated the industry. In order to fully understand the henequen boom and how henequen was able to gain such success, it is necessary to examine how the henequen industry was established. After Mexican independence, elites of Yucatán were eager to modernize and participate in the world economy, which resulted in the increasing popularity of henequen as a tool to stimulate their economy. This chapter will argue that the conditions in Yucatán during this period were ideal for the rise of King Henequen, and it will examine the origins of the prosperous henequen industry in order to understand its later impact on society and its eventual downfall.

### *The Henequen Plant and Climate of the Yucatán*

The henequen plant is a short cactus-like bush that consists of around thirty to forty firm pointed leaves that stem from the stalk. Inside each leaf are many tiny, strong fibers which provide a great variety of uses. The henequen plant is a type of *agave*, which has some similarities to hemp. There are two types of *agave*: *agave fourcroydes*, which is henequen, and *agave sisilana*, which is known as sisal. The term *agave* is Greek for noble or magnificent, since the plants are often thought to have an impressive presence. Henequen, which is called “*ki*” in Maya, is the variety that is prevalent in the Yucatán.<sup>3</sup> There are two common varieties of henequen: green henequen, known by the Maya as “*yax ki*” and white henequen, known as “*sac*”

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<sup>3</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 153-4; Thomas Sanders, “Henequen: The Structure of Agrarian Frustration,” *American Field Staff Reports: North America Series* 5, no. 3 (1977): 1.



*ki*.”<sup>4</sup> The “*sac ki*” variety was much more common for rope making and is the version that came to be planted more frequently.<sup>5</sup> Until the nineteenth century, the extraction of fibers from the henequen leaves was done by hand.<sup>6</sup> Laborers had to scrape the leaves to extract the fiber, which was a very tedious process.<sup>7</sup> To harvest the henequen leaves, workers had to know the right time to cut the leaves in order to ensure the best fiber quality. Often there was a limited harvest window and it was important to make sure to time the harvest correctly.<sup>8</sup> The henequen plant requires very specific conditions to thrive and the Yucatán’s unique environment is suited perfectly for the growing of henequen.

According to Sterling Evans, a Yucatecan in the 1930s stated that ‘when God made Yucatán, His original purpose was to use it for hell.’<sup>9</sup> While the climate of Yucatán is quite harsh, it is ideal for the henequen plant. Throughout the entire year, the Yucatán peninsula has a very hot climate, which results in the soil drying out.<sup>10</sup> In addition, almost the entire peninsula is composed of limestone which has resulted in the natural creation of openings, depressions, and caves.<sup>11</sup> Yucatán also has a very scarce supply of natural water since almost the entire land area is made up of limestone.<sup>12</sup> There are no lakes or rivers, only “*cenotes*,” which are large sinkholes filled with fresh water.<sup>13</sup> The Yucatán consists of thousands of *cenotes*, which are the

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<sup>4</sup> Otero Rejón, “Presencia inadvertida, *ki*,” 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Piedad Peniche Rivero, “From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero: A Transition to Capitalism in Yucatán, Mexico,” in *The Lowland Maya Area: Three Millennia at the Human-Wildland Interface*, ed. Arturo Gómez-Pompa, Michael F. Allen, Scott L. Fedick et al. (New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 2003), 571.

<sup>7</sup> Allen Wells, “Henequen,” in *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930*, ed. Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), 108.

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence James Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883: The Roots of Dependence in a Mexican Region” Volumes 1 and 2 (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1981), 443.

<sup>9</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 152.

<sup>10</sup> Wells, “Henequen,” 98.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene M. Wilson, “Physical Geography of the Yucatán Peninsula,” in *Yucatán: A World Apart*, eds. Edward H. Moseley and Edward D. Terry (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Wells, “Henequen,” 98.

<sup>13</sup> Baqueiro López, “Una planta de leyenda,” 46.

main sources of fresh water.<sup>14</sup> People often tended to settle near water and built their communities close to these bodies of water.<sup>15</sup> Overall, the peninsula is not a conducive environment for many crops and the heat and lack of water makes it a challenging place to live. However, the henequen plant is one of the few that can live in such harsh conditions and the relatively small amount of rainfall is just enough for henequen to thrive.<sup>16</sup>

The Yucatán, due to its unforgiving climate, is still largely unexplored and not suitable for many crops, since the large amount of dense vegetation makes farming difficult.<sup>17</sup> Due to the limestone, it is not possible to plow or irrigate the land, which also adds a challenge to farming.<sup>18</sup> While many crops would not prosper, the environment is perfect for henequen and such a harsh climate does provide many benefits to growing henequen. For example, weeding is not necessary because there is a lack of soil and not many other plants will provide competition.<sup>19</sup> In the Yucatán, there are no bugs or other pests that will eat henequen and it is not necessary to cultivate or irrigate the land to grow henequen.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the henequen plant is resistant to rot and there is never a need to use fertilizers or pesticides when growing it.<sup>21</sup> The Yucatán's harsh climate provides the perfect conditions for the henequen plant to prosper. While it is possible to farm other crops, henequen is native to the Yucatán and provides less of a challenge due to its suitability to the climate. Since henequen is one of the few crops that is successful in Yucatán, it is logical that the pre-Columbian Maya were able to find a great variety of uses for the plant.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Allen Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 100.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, "Physical Geography of the Yucatán Peninsula," 5.

<sup>18</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 151.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>21</sup> Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 7; Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 157.

### *The Importance of Henequen in Maya Society*

Before the arrival of Columbus, the Maya of Yucatán were a very advanced people who were able to find a way to use numbers and mathematics, and they had an impressive calendar system.<sup>22</sup> In addition, they were adept in pottery, ceramics, and architecture, which can be seen in ancient Mayan cities such as Chichén Itzá and Uxmal, which consist of impressive pyramids, palaces, and other intricately constructed buildings.<sup>23</sup> Also before Columbus' arrival, the Maya were able to find great use for the henequen plant. For centuries, henequen, or "*ki*," has played a large role in their advanced society.<sup>24</sup> Although some scholars believe that henequen was only barely perceptible in Mayan society, it is evident from its many uses that it had a great presence. As Zamná had predicted, even though it was never revered at the level of cotton or corn, henequen had a great variety of uses and was indispensable to the Maya.<sup>25</sup>

Henequen was used in many aspects of everyday life in early Yucatecan Maya society, from walking, to hunting, to even sleeping. The plant was often grown outside of houses, along roads and outside of towns.<sup>26</sup> A major use for the henequen fiber in Mayan society was rope used to fasten and pull.<sup>27</sup> Laces for sandals were often also made with henequen fiber and these sandals were known as "*xanab*" in Maya.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the henequen fiber was used as material for hunting bows and traps, as roofing thatch, and as fishing nets.<sup>29</sup> In communities of Yucatán, most people became accustomed to sleeping in hammocks due to the scorching climate of the

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<sup>22</sup> Paul H. Nesbitt, "The Maya of Yucatán," in *Yucatán: A World Apart*, eds. Edward H. Moseley and Edward D. Terry (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), 55.

<sup>23</sup> Nesbitt, "The Maya of Yucatán," 57.

<sup>24</sup> Sanders, "Henequen: The Structure of Agrarian Frustration," 1.

<sup>25</sup> Otero Rejón, "Presencia inadvertida, ki," 28.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 155.

<sup>28</sup> Otero Rejón, "Presencia inadvertida, ki," 30.

<sup>29</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 155.

peninsula, and henequen was used to make these hammocks.<sup>30</sup> Many bags, known as “*chim*,” were made with henequen to transport items such as corn seed or other farming tools to cultivate “*milpas*.”<sup>31</sup> *Milpas* are fields that have been recently cleared, typically burned, in order to plant a new corn crop. The sharp spines of henequen leaves, which according to the legend were responsible for hurting Zamná, were used as needles.<sup>32</sup> The Maya also used henequen fiber in a turning mechanism to drill teeth.<sup>33</sup> In addition, prisoners of war were bound with henequen rope.<sup>34</sup> Aside from its use for tools and practical objects, henequen also could be a decoration, and the juices from the plant were used to make wine.<sup>35</sup> Therefore it can be seen that henequen had a strong presence in pre-Columbian Yucatán as the Maya used henequen in their everyday lives. They walked in shoes made with henequen, they hunted with bows made of henequen, and they slept in hammocks made of henequen, which shows that it was with them at all times.

While there is no evidence that henequen had a great presence in Mayan legend, art, and ritual, it was still often present in the background, which was similar to its role in society.<sup>36</sup> In several depictions of Mayan gods, henequen is present. For example, Ixtab, the goddess of suicides, is often represented with a rope made of henequen around her neck.<sup>37</sup> The goddess of medicine, Ixchel, is often depicted knitting and in such depictions, there is henequen rope attaching her work to her body.<sup>38</sup> In renderings of prisoners of war in the Mayan city of Chichén Itzá, henequen rope is used to bind the prisoners.<sup>39</sup> While henequen was never prominently

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Otero Rejón, “Presencia inadvertida, ki,” 30; Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 166.

<sup>32</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Otero Rejón, “Presencia inadvertida, ki,” 26.

<sup>34</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 155.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Otero Rejón, “Presencia inadvertida, ki,” 24.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 29.

featured in such works of art, it nevertheless was present and fulfilled its practical role. In rituals where Mayans would offer blood to the gods, they would use henequen rope to draw blood from the tongue, penis, and ears of the person whose blood was being sacrificed.<sup>40</sup> Although there were never known to be rituals for henequen or depictions exclusively of henequen, it was present and useful to them even in their art and rituals.

Mayan traditions in the Yucatecan town of Huhí also showcase the importance of henequen in Mayan rituals. One ancient tradition of this town is that if a boy is born, the placenta is buried next to a henequen plant because it expected that the boy will spend his days working with henequen. The burial of the placenta near henequen symbolizes his future participation in the growing of henequen.<sup>41</sup> If a girl is born, the umbilical cord is buried near the henequen plant. The Maya believe that this will give her long, silky hair like the fibers of the henequen plant and give her internal and external beauty even if faced with difficulty in life.<sup>42</sup> In addition, henequen and its thorns are often thought to protect people from evil and disease.<sup>43</sup> Finally, henequen is used in children's games and to whip children when they misbehave.<sup>44</sup> It is evident that henequen, while not a main character in legends or a main focus of rituals, still played a prominent role in society and religion. It was often present as a useful tool, whether in depictions of gods, in certain rituals, or in ceremonies such as those in the village of Huhí.

While some may disagree, it is clear that henequen did play a major role in pre-Columbian Maya society. The continuing traditions of the Huhí village show that henequen has become engrained in Yucatecan Maya society. The fact that henequen has a popular legend to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>41</sup> Hilaria Máas Collí, "Henequén, cultura y familia," in *Henequén: Leyenda, historia y cultura* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006), 58-61.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 65.

explain the origins of its use shows that while it may not have been valued at the level of corn or cotton for the Mayan people, it was still significant in their culture. Henequen was one of the few crops that thrived in the Yucatán, and the Mayans used this to their advantage as they incorporated henequen into many aspects of their lives. Eventually, the Spanish colonists would also realize the utility of the plant and turn to henequen production in the nineteenth century to stimulate their economy.

### *The Formation of Spanish Society in Yucatán 1526-1800*

The arrival of the Spanish brought political and societal changes to the established Mayan lifestyle. Spain brought Christianity and European-style cities to the Yucatán in the sixteenth century.<sup>45</sup> The Spaniard Francisco de Montejo is famous for settling the Yucatán; originally he travelled to Yucatán in 1526 with Hernan Cortés. De Montejo was commissioned by Emperor Charles V to subdue the Yucatán, but he was unsuccessful at first due to the harsh climate of the area and Maya attacks.<sup>46</sup> Here early efforts of Mayan resistance to Spanish rule and domination can be seen. Mayan resistance is an important element in the history of the Spanish presence in Yucatán since the Maya took action against Spanish colonists on several occasions, most notably in the Caste War of 1846. Eventually, however, de Montejo's success improved and his son, also named Francisco de Montejo, took control of the Mayan city, T'Ho in 1542, which he renamed Mérida.<sup>47</sup>

Despite European colonization efforts, much of the Yucatán consisted of small villages that remained traditional, mainly autonomous, and predominantly Maya. Methods of agriculture

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<sup>45</sup> Edward H. Moseley, "From Conquest to Independence: Yucatán under Spanish Rule 1521-1821," in *Yucatán: A World Apart*, eds. Edward H. Moseley and Edward D. Terry (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), 83.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

were akin to what they had been before colonization and many Mayan villages were left untouched by Spanish colonization.<sup>48</sup> The *milpa* farming system was kept in place and in this way the Maya continued to grow corn, beans, squash, and peppers.<sup>49</sup> This pattern was not typical of other instances of Spanish colonization since the Spanish tended to take control of all aspects of society. Instead, in the Yucatán, colonization efforts were mainly focused in cities and larger towns since the Spanish had a limited ability to spread influence to isolated Mayan pueblos due to the harsh environment of Yucatán.<sup>50</sup> This created a very unique space in the Yucatán since small towns were predominantly Mayan and cities were Spanish.<sup>51</sup> In cities and larger towns, there was a joining of cultures since the Maya were forced to coexist with the Spanish. Many families reflected this fusion of cultures as few Spanish women came to the colonies, which resulted in Spanish men often marrying Mayan women.<sup>52</sup>

The Spanish brought with them many changes in farming, eventually including a new hacienda system, which would benefit the growth of the henequen industry. Upon their arrival to New Spain in the sixteenth century, colonists were given land grants by the Spanish crown, and many used their land to raise cattle.<sup>53</sup> These land grants gave rise to the *encomienda* system, in which the Maya were forced by the Spanish crown to pay a labor tribute to the colonists.<sup>54</sup> The Spanish used Mayan cities and towns as a basis to build their own settlements. In doing so, the Spanish gained buildings, laborers, and *cenotes* (water sources).<sup>55</sup> The colonists quickly realized

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>53</sup> Blanca Paredes Guerrero, "De la hacienda ganadera a la henequenera," in *Henequén: Leyenda, historia y cultura* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006), 69.

<sup>54</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Paredes Guerrero, "De la hacienda ganadera a la henequenera," 70.

that the land of the Yucatán was quite infertile and not suitable to their crops.<sup>56</sup> The limestone base, heat, and lack of fresh water made it especially challenging for their crops to grow so they tended to focus on growing corn and sugar and raising cattle. In order to reduce the challenges of farming, the Spanish used previously established Mayan settlements to build their own estates so they could have access to resources and a Maya labor force.

The *encomienda* system, which ended in 1785, gave rise to the creation of haciendas, which became instrumental in the mass production of henequen.<sup>57</sup> During the seventeenth century, Spanish settlers built the first haciendas, which augmented corn production and cattle raising in the Yucatán.<sup>58</sup> Haciendas were typically composed of a variety of different structures, including a main house, a kitchen, a warehouse, servant quarters, worker housing, stables, a church, a store, a cemetery, a pigsty, roping areas, and gardens or fields.<sup>59</sup> A hacienda turned into a form of a small labor town, where many people could live, work, and shop in one place. The development of haciendas gave Mayans the opportunity to earn some income and allowed families of laborers to live together in provided housing.<sup>60</sup> By 1800, half of Mayans in Northwest Yucatán had settled on hacienda lands. As a result, they often became dependent on hacienda owners, which will be examined further in Chapter Three.<sup>61</sup> Around this time, cattle and corn haciendas built in the Yucatán supplied the nearby cities of Valladolid, Mérida, and Campeche.<sup>62</sup>

The hacienda system established by the Spanish allowed for henequen production to take hold and prosper. Since the Spanish had not yet discovered the potential of henequen at this

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<sup>56</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 155.

<sup>57</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 20.

<sup>58</sup> Paredes Guerrero, "De la hacienda ganadera a la henequenera," 70-1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>61</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



time, corn, cattle, and sugar first became the Spaniards' principal industries. However, the farming system put in place with these haciendas allowed for the adaptation of preexisting haciendas into henequen haciendas. *Henequeneros*, or henequen hacienda owners, would use the previously established residences, workers' quarters, equipment, and labor forces for henequen production. These early cattle and corn haciendas allowed for henequen to easily take hold and use the already built infrastructure to come to prosper as an industry.

### *Henequen's Early Presence in Spanish Society and the Beginnings of an Industry*

1720-1820

When the Spanish came to the Yucatán in the sixteenth century, they observed many uses of henequen, but did not yet see its potential for mass production.<sup>63</sup> They looked to the Maya to learn how to grow henequen and eventually began to use it with more frequency in the eighteenth century when it was used as rigging for their ships.<sup>64</sup> They saw henequen as a strong fiber that would be useful for them in their maritime endeavors. It is said that they began to use henequen for rigging in 1720. There is a story from this time which says that a violent storm broke all of the hemp cables on a Spanish ship. The desperate crew needed to use the ship and therefore looked to henequen. Once they saw its potential for use on their ships, they began to utilize it more often on the ships that travelled to and from Spain.<sup>65</sup> For the Spanish, henequen was cheaper to produce, stronger, and lighter than hemp, an alternative for maritime rigging, and it was more resistant to rot. This resulted in a new Spanish policy in the 1720s to use henequen rope for ships in tropical waters because it was less apt to deteriorate.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 155.

<sup>64</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 37-8.

<sup>65</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 170.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

During the late eighteenth century, henequen production began to increase due to a new demand for products and new policies of the Spanish government. Under the “*comercio libre*,” or “free trade,” policy enacted during the 1770s, goods could be shipped to markets outside of New Spain, which allowed for an increased economic potential for henequen.<sup>67</sup> With the enactment of *comercio libre*, colonists began to see that henequen could be used to strengthen commerce. In other areas of Mexico, as well as in other parts of the world, people began to use henequen in some of the ways the Maya had, for example, as rope, bags, nets, hammocks, gunnysacks, and string.<sup>68</sup> These goods found a place in both domestic and foreign markets. One popular importer of henequen items in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was Havana, Cuba.<sup>69</sup> While henequen began to become an important export crop during the mid- to late eighteenth century, the Maya still produced enough henequen to fulfill foreign and domestic demand for the fiber.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, at this point, it was not yet necessary to produce henequen on a larger scale or on haciendas. Nevertheless, during the latter half of the eighteenth century, exports of henequen tripled as demand for cordage and rigging increased.<sup>71</sup> Although it was far from a major export crop, the seeds of the henequen industry had begun to be planted during this time period, which allowed it to expand substantially during the following century.

At the start of the nineteenth century, there was a major focus on commercial growth and progress in the Yucatán. Benito Pérez, the governor of Yucatán from 1800 to 1811, put great emphasis on the expansion of commercialism and trade. This focus allowed the opening of the

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<sup>67</sup> Mark A. Burkholder and Suzanne Hiles, “An Empire Beyond Compare,” in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, eds. Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 141-2.

<sup>68</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 172; Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 155.

<sup>69</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 172.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>71</sup> Mark A. Burkholder and Suzanne Hiles, “An Empire Beyond Compare,” 141-2.

Sisal port on the Northwestern coast of Yucatán in 1810.<sup>72</sup> Records show that the first henequen was shipped from Sisal in 1813.<sup>73</sup> Sisal later became a major export port for henequen fiber and the founding of Sisal provided the Yucatán with a more accessible port for henequen exports. The early nineteenth century provided a basis for Yucatán to enter the world economy as it now had a convenient port that could be used for exports. This allowed for the possibility of the increased export of henequen fiber in the decades to come. One year after the first henequen was shipped from Sisal, a local official, Policarpo Antonio de Echánove, submitted proposals to expand henequen production to help improve the economy of Yucatán. De Echánove saw the economic potential of the plant, but was ignored at the time as Spanish officials believed the Maya population could produce what henequen was necessary to fulfill domestic and foreign demand.<sup>74</sup> Although de Echánove's proposals would later be valued, at the time many did not see the potential of henequen. Nevertheless, the early nineteenth century did provide a basis for increased production of henequen and the expansion of the industry.

#### *The Continued Growth of the Henequen Industry during the Independence Era 1821-1840*

Before Mexico gained its independence in 1821, many roots of the henequen industry had already been planted. For the most part, Yucatán was isolated from, and neglected by, Spanish authority, so independence did not have a great impact on the area in regards to economic and social changes in society.<sup>75</sup> Yucatán was also unaffected by hostility during the Independence War of 1810-1821 due to its geographic location.<sup>76</sup> Also before independence, Spanish protectionist policies had harmed earnings in Mexico and the absence of such policies after

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<sup>72</sup> Moseley, "From Conquest to Independence: Yucatán under Spanish Rule 1521-1821," 107.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>74</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 172-3.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 128.

independence gave elites motive to expand economically in Yucatán.<sup>77</sup> Although liberal policies were put into place by the new Mexican government, there was still great inequality in society as elites still remained in control of society and imposed their own policies.<sup>78</sup> In Yucatán, liberalism meant that less property restrictions were in place and land was more accessible to individuals, which also gave entrepreneurs incentive to find economic uses for the land.<sup>79</sup> Private property would allow for the spread of industry and capitalism as elites built their industrial haciendas, which would give Yucatán the opportunity to enter the world economy.

Yucatán had always been somewhat independent due to its isolated location from the central government. After the Independence War, this continued because the central government was not as adamant about enacting its policies in the Yucatán, which gave Yucatán the appearance of a relatively autonomous province of New Spain.<sup>80</sup> When Agustín de Iturbide declared Mexican independence, Yucatán agreed to join Mexico only under the conditions that it could trade with whomever it desired and it could collect its own tariffs.<sup>81</sup> This showcases that the Yucatán has always possessed some level of autonomy and often tended to see itself as a separate entity from the rest of Mexico. After independence, Yucatán had the first provincial assembly with delegates in all of New Spain.<sup>82</sup> It is evident that citizens of Yucatán had a distinct mindset and a spirit of independence and determination, which can be also be seen in the continuing development of the henequen industry. Yucatecan leaders and entrepreneurs looked for new opportunities after independence due to a changing and exciting economic and social climate. The new independence-generation of elites had a desire for progress and a spirit of

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<sup>77</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 21.

<sup>78</sup> Moseley, "From Conquest to Independence: Yucatán under Spanish Rule 1521-1821," 113.

<sup>79</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 23.

<sup>80</sup> Moseley, "From Conquest to Independence: Yucatán under Spanish Rule 1521-1821," 110.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 111; Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 38.

<sup>82</sup> Moseley, "From Conquest to Independence: Yucatán under Spanish Rule 1521-1821," 109.

enterprise. They were hard to satisfy and were constantly in search of new ways to expand and improve society.<sup>83</sup> At a time when industry was flourishing in other parts of the world, Yucatecan elites wanted to modernize their society and become a part of the world economy. They wanted to move away from *milpa*-based subsistence farming and enter the export industry. An advantage they had was that many elites were very wealthy and had control of most economic affairs in the state, and therefore foreign capital was not needed.<sup>84</sup> This was a distinct characteristic of Yucatán because in many other Latin American societies, foreign investors were responsible for supporting entire economies. Therefore, it was easier for elites to build the henequen industry since they initially did not have to rely on foreign capital.

Several other factors that occurred around the time of independence also helped stimulate the growth of the henequen industry. During the fight for independence, the cattle industry was harmed. Cuba had previously been a major importer of Mexican cattle, but once Mexico officially declared its independence from Spain in 1824, Argentina took over Cuban markets.<sup>85</sup> Not only did Spain halt trade with Mexico, but Argentina also had a comparative advantage for cattle, which meant it offered better prices and quality than Yucatán.<sup>86</sup> As a result, Yucatán's cattle industry suffered a great deal and this allowed room for other industries to gain ground. Aside from the lack of the Cuban markets, the cattle industry in Mexico also experienced water shortages and a lack of grazing pastures. Because the Spanish brought cattle with them to Yucatán, they were not native to the area and it was challenging to raise them. In addition, cattle were susceptible to insects and ticks as well as the occasional tiger attack.<sup>87</sup> The sudden decline

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<sup>83</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 26.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>85</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 21; Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 168.

<sup>86</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 168.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 167.

of the cattle industry was yet another factor that allowed henequen to become more prominent in the market. Although its presence was not significant at this time, henequen plants slowly crept onto cattle haciendas as owners began to look for new sources of income.

The United States also came into play for the first time during the independence era. The United States Navy began to use henequen for cordage on their ships during the 1820s, and this resulted in demand for the fiber from the Yucatán.<sup>88</sup> At this time, the Yucatán was the sole producer of the world's henequen. If a country had a specific demand for henequen fiber, it had to come directly from the Yucatán peninsula. With *comercio libre*, the opening of the Sisal port, and an increase in foreign demand, henequen found new world markets. With more liberal land and trade policies in effect, elites in Yucatán were focused on creating a capitalistic society to enter the world economy and create a greater flow of income to the state. Before the 1820s, all henequen exported outside of Mexico had gone to Cuba, but during this time period, the United States, Belize, and England also began to import henequen.<sup>89</sup> The United States would later become a major importer of henequen and become responsible for purchasing almost all of the henequen shipped out of Mexico, so opening trade with the United States was a crucial event in the history of the henequen industry. The independence era, while it did not cause massive expansion in henequen production, did result in some important moments that helped stimulate the growth of the industry. Both the decline of cattle production and the beginning of foreign exports, especially to the United States, increased the popularity and production of henequen and helped it grow into a stronger market.

After independence, henequen continued to rise in popularity and began to make a real impact on Yucatecan society. Since elites and societal leaders were looking for a way to

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<sup>88</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 155.

<sup>89</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 183

strengthen the economy, they looked again to de Echánove's proposals and used them as a basis for a new program of promoting henequen production.<sup>90</sup> A major breakthrough in the development of the henequen industry was the 1828 "*Ley agrícola*," which was a state law that required every citizen of Yucatán to raise no less than ten henequen plants each year.<sup>91</sup> This law shows the first strong effort on the part of the government to stimulate the growth of the henequen industry. It is evident that at this point, leaders were beginning to see the great potential of henequen and saw it as a crop that was worth investing in. They were dedicated to progress and industrialization and believed that even Mayan farmers should contribute to their blossoming capitalistic society. Around this same time, community lands began to be transformed into henequen fields, which also shows the development of a capitalistic Yucatecan society at the expense of Mayan communities.<sup>92</sup> Leaders were starting to focus on the mass production of henequen instead of the preservation of communal lands and traditional farming.

During the 1830s, *hacendados*, or hacienda owners, began to diversify their crops to include henequen. The *Compañía para el Cultivo y Beneficio del Henequén* was formed in Yucatán in 1830 to promote and increase the henequen industry in Yucatán.<sup>93</sup> Also in 1830, due to the new push for henequen production, Chacsinkín, a hacienda located five miles south of the city of Mérida, was the first to diversify its crop to include henequen plants. While it was not transformed into an exclusively henequen hacienda, about 21,000 henequen plants were planted in Chacsinkín in 1830.<sup>94</sup> Hacienda owners were motivated to include henequen in their haciendas because it provided an opportunity to increase income due to the increasing demand.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>91</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 155.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 38.

<sup>94</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 155.

<sup>95</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 174.

By 1838, about 880 haciendas had diversified their crops to include henequen.<sup>96</sup> This shows that henequen was finally beginning to take its place as a strong force in the economy of Yucatán.

Even though it had been a useful crop since the pre-Columbian Mayan society, it was not until the early to mid-nineteenth century that people of Yucatán really began to see the potential to profit from henequen. In 1839, the United States imported a significant amount of henequen fiber for the first time as ship builders saw henequen as the best material for riggings and cables on clipper ships.<sup>97</sup> Henequen was beginning to increase its presence in the United States market, which would later prove to be immensely profitable for the industry. The Yucatán government saw the importance of expanding capitalism and entering the world economy after independence. Henequen seemed to have great potential for economic greatness as other crops, such as sugar, were unable to firmly establish themselves in the world economy.

### *The Yucatecan Sugar Industry and its Decline*

To understand the entire story of how henequen came to take the spotlight in the Yucatán during the mid-nineteenth century, it is important to understand the history of the sugar industry in Yucatán to examine the parallels and to see how the sugar crop gave way to the more successful henequen crop. Sugar was a powerful industry in Yucatán and possessed a greater market share than henequen even up through the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>98</sup> While henequen flourished in the Northwestern region of the Yucatán peninsula, sugar took hold in the interior of Yucatán. The development of the sugar industry followed many of the same trends as that of the henequen industry; however, sugar was not a unique crop to Yucatán and Yucatecan sugar never

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<sup>96</sup> Maureen Ransom Carty, "Prologó," in *Henequén: Leyenda, historia y cultura* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006), 17.

<sup>97</sup> G.M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 23.

<sup>98</sup> Moseley, "From Conquest to Independence: Yucatán under Spanish Rule 1521-1821," 114.



found a niche in the world economy. The lack of great potential for growth for the sugar crop helped allow henequen to take hold, especially after the decline of sugar during the years of the Caste War.

Unlike henequen, which was native to the Yucatán, the Spanish introduced sugar to the Yucatán when they arrived in the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>99</sup> During the early to mid-1700s, sugar production moved to the interior of Yucatán because the land there was more fertile and suitable for growing sugar.<sup>100</sup> Although the corn and cattle industries helped bring capitalism to Yucatán, it was not until the establishment of the sugar industry that market-oriented production began to take hold.<sup>101</sup> Before sugar, people in Yucatán were mostly subsistence farmers, but when the sugar industry was expanding, many began to move away from their previous lifestyles to work in harvesting sugar.<sup>102</sup> Partly as a result of the sugar industry, by 1810, Yucatán had about 27 percent of the haciendas in Mexico.<sup>103</sup> It is evident that there were drastic changes happening in the Yucatecan economy and this clear transformation into a more capitalistic economy helped set the stage for the henequen crop to later take control of this new economic atmosphere.

Similar to henequen, the Yucatecan government also promoted the sugar industry. The new push for capitalism as well as new liberal policies gave rise to new opportunities for Yucatecans. To help promote the sugar industry, the government encouraged settlement in the interior of the Yucatán so that more people would turn to sugar production. In 1825, the government passed the *Ley de colonización*, which opened lands in the interior to settlement. The goal of this law was to promote individual land ownership and stimulate the sugar industry. Purchasers of land had to find a plot of land and prove to the government that the land was not an

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<sup>99</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 94.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 151.

*ejido*, or a communal Maya tract of land.<sup>104</sup> The government then sold the land to the purchaser at a highly reduced price and in this way thousands of acres were sold to private owners in Central Yucatán.<sup>105</sup> Like henequen, the government saw sugar as a viable source of income and therefore saw a benefit to promoting sugar production. Sugar at this time was more successful than henequen and movement of Yucatecan citizens to the interior of the peninsula was substantial.

Although interior lands were more fertile for sugar production, the mass movement and development of sugar in the interior later would prove devastating to the industry. During the 1820s and 1830s when the henequen economy was just forming and growing, sugar gained substantial popularity due to high prices of sugar cane in the market. By 1845, it had become the primary export crop of the Yucatán peninsula.<sup>106</sup> The movement to the interior during this time was great: between 1794 and 1846, most Yucatecan towns that saw substantial increases in population were in the interior. For example, 75 percent of the Yucatecan towns that tripled in population over this time period were located in the interior.<sup>107</sup> In addition, twenty-seven out of the twenty-nine towns founded in Yucatán between 1821 and 1846 were located in the interior.<sup>108</sup> At this time, while the government did promote henequen production as well, inexpensive lands offered in the interior were appealing to elites and many seized the opportunity to produce sugar.

While sugar did become very popular, there were some impediments to the expansion of the industry, which henequen did not face. The United States received its sugar supply from Louisiana at this time and was therefore not in the market for Yucatecan sugar. Similarly,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 116.

European sugar imports were supplied by the Antilles and also did not require Yucatecan sugar. Therefore it was impossible for the Yucatán to enter the worldwide sugar industry on a large scale and the Yucatán had to resort to exporting sugar only to the rest of Mexico.<sup>109</sup> Events during the 1840s also led to the decline of the sugar industry. Yucatán left Mexico from 1840 to 1843 and again in 1846 to become its own independent country.<sup>110</sup> Generally, in both instances of separating, the Yucatán, an already isolated and relatively independent state, was angered by the high tariffs put in place by the Mexican government.<sup>111</sup> However, independence proved to be very expensive for the Yucatán as it had to fight to keep its independence and could not rely on the central government for financial assistance.<sup>112</sup> These independence movements proved detrimental to the sugar industry as the rest of Mexico was the only importer of Yucatecan sugar and stopped importing when the Yucatán separated.<sup>113</sup> At this time, prices of sugar fell dramatically, and often below cost of production.<sup>114</sup> Not only did the Yucatecan government have high expenses resulting from the separation movements, but it also lost income from its major export crop.

This loss of profits from the declining sugar industry helped demonstrate that henequen was a viable and successful export crop. While the export economy of sugar relied on the rest of Mexico, henequen found markets elsewhere. In this time of financial hardship for the Yucatecan government, henequen proved to be a reliable source of income since sugar income was lost and the government was desperate for income. In the years leading up to the Caste War, henequen production remained relatively stable while sugar faced a decline, which gave it the opportunity

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>110</sup> Sanders, "Henequen: The Structure of Agrarian Frustration," 12.

<sup>111</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 39; Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 157-9.

<sup>112</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 159.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 210.

to gain traction as a major export crop of Yucatán. It is clear that the sugar industry did not have much growth potential as an export crop in the same manner that henequen did. Even though sugar was the major export crop of Yucatán during the early part of the nineteenth century, it lost even more ground during the Caste War. This allowed the henequen industry to pick up the pieces of the destroyed sugar industry to find success.

*The Caste War of 1846, the Devastation of the Sugar Economy, and the Great Rise of Henequen*

The Caste War in Yucatán was an extremely violent and consequential event for the area. It is important to understand the story of the Caste War to examine how henequen was able to take control of the Yucatecan economy as a result of the devastation of the sugar industry. At the start of the Caste War, henequen was second to sugar as the primary export of Yucatán, but the already struggling sugar industry would decline even further during the Caste War years.<sup>115</sup> In some cases, the Caste War was a direct response to policies of the sugar industry and therefore, the sugar industry suffered great and unrecoverable loss as a result.

The Caste War began in 1846 as a Mayan uprising in reaction to fees imposed and lands taken as a result of recent laws passed by the government of Yucatán. In 1842, baptisms, marriages, and funerals for the Maya had increased in cost and were often challenging to afford.<sup>116</sup> An excessive tax put in place in 1844 on Mayan lands gave them further incentive to sell their lands, which were eagerly bought by sugar hacendados.<sup>117</sup> The Maya were angered that they were forced to resort to sell their lands, but they were left with no other option due to the excessive taxes. In addition, Maya mobility was restricted as many were becoming bound to hacienda labor. Although hacienda labor will be examined in Chapter Three, it is important to

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<sup>115</sup> Moseley, "From Conquest to Independence: Yucatán under Spanish Rule 1521-1821," 114.

<sup>116</sup> Ransom Carty, "Prologó," 19.

<sup>117</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 24.

note that there were laws passed which bound Mayan laborers to haciendas.<sup>118</sup> At this time, most haciendas were still sugar haciendas, so the Mayans were responding to their unhappiness with the societal effects of the sugar industry. These laws and taxes established a racist system in society, in which hacendados were favored by the government in order to promote capitalism and progress. These discriminatory changes in society sparked great anger in the Maya and they responded by raiding and killing the white settlers.<sup>119</sup>

In 1846, violence erupted in Yucatán when Mayan forces seized the town of Peto, located in the interior of Yucatán, and attacked the city of Valladolid. The Mayan uprising was surprisingly successful and by 1848, the Maya were in possession of 80 percent of the entire peninsula.<sup>120</sup> The colonists and their descendants were forced to live in fear of the Maya who frequently raided and attacked. The city of Mérida became a refuge center for whites, but close quarters resulted in dysentery and fevers which often led to death.<sup>121</sup> The Yucatecan society was in ruins and bouts of violence could break out at any time. In the spring of 1848, the Maya returned to their farms because it was time to plant corn even though they had the upper hand in the war. Without the harvest, they would go hungry, so they felt it necessary to return to plant. This however gave whites the opportunity to regroup and begin to retake lands.<sup>122</sup> Large-scale fighting and territorial exchanges continued through 1850.<sup>123</sup> In four years, the Caste War had detrimental effects on Yucatecan society. Although it is challenging to determine the exact number of casualties of the Caste War, estimates range from 25 to 50 percent of the population of Yucatán due to the war and resulting starvation and disease.<sup>124</sup> Lawrence Remmers estimates

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<sup>118</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 299.

<sup>119</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 156.

<sup>120</sup> Moseley, "From Conquest to Independence: Yucatán under Spanish Rule 1521-1821," 113.

<sup>121</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 301-2.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 303-4.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>124</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 156.

that the population of whites in the Yucatán declined by about 41 percent between 1846 and 1850.<sup>125</sup>

This incredibly violent period in the history of Yucatán had great effects on society. The Maya again proved that they were a force to be reckoned with and not a people that could be controlled. A large portion of the population was killed and society became unstable. Some estimates say that the Caste War lasted until 1901 and attacks and counterattacks continued until then.<sup>126</sup> One specific faction of the Maya formed a stronghold known as Chan Santa Cruz which they held until the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>127</sup> The Caste War effectively damaged a previous way of life to a point that could not be recovered. The rebellion instilled fear in Spanish settlers of Yucatán and many settlers felt they had to leave their homes to move to safer regions. The interior of the Yucatán suffered incredible loss in regards to population and property. The sugar industry, which was based in central Yucatán, was devastated.

Henequen and sugar had previously been in competition with each other as the primary export crop of Yucatán. The government focused on both crops as ways to bolster the economy, but after the Caste War, only henequen remained a viable option as sugar production was destroyed. The extensive violence in the interior left few sugar crops and a small amount of working machinery on sugar haciendas.<sup>128</sup> The city of Valladolid was harmed substantially by the Maya, which was a major city in the Yucatán interior.<sup>129</sup> The great destruction of the interior resulted in the movement of people from the interior to Northwest Yucatán.<sup>130</sup> The government had previously encouraged people to settle in interior lands, but with the devastation, a large

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<sup>125</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 311.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 304,309.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 305-7.

<sup>128</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 26.

<sup>129</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 5.

<sup>130</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 27.

portion of the population fled. Between 1846 and 1850, the number of people living in the interior of Yucatán declined 75 percent.<sup>131</sup> The cattle industry, which was still a significant export of Yucatán, was also further devastated by the Caste War as haciendas were destroyed and cattle were killed.<sup>132</sup> In 1847, early on in the Caste War, there were approximately 350,000 cattle in Yucatán, but by 1862, less than 120,000 remained.<sup>133</sup>

The great exodus of people from the interior and destruction of equipment left it unlikely for the sugar industry to recover. The cattle industry also suffered a great decline as a result of the Caste War. In addition, the bankruptcy of the state treasury resulted in a need for a new source of income.<sup>134</sup> Only the henequen industry remained relatively untouched due to its position in Northwest Yucatán.<sup>135</sup> Since the treasury was bankrupt and the economy was struggling, henequen again seemed like an excellent option to stimulate the economy. The decline of the sugar and cattle industries, which were previously major export products, allowed henequen to gain the attention of many elites looking to rebuild the economy. Although henequen had already been shipped outside of Mexico, elites and hacendados desired a greater presence in the world economy.<sup>136</sup> The large scale destruction of the previously successful sugar industry left henequen as the only viable option to rebuild the economy after the devastating Caste War.

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<sup>131</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 6.

<sup>132</sup> Ransom Carty, "Prologó," 19.

<sup>133</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 392.

<sup>134</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 26.

<sup>135</sup> Moseley, "From Conquest to Independence: Yucatán under Spanish Rule 1521-1821," 114.

<sup>136</sup> Sanders, "Henequen: The Structure of Agrarian Frustration," 2.

### *Conclusion*

To understand the history of the henequen boom and its eventual decline, it is necessary to understand how henequen came to be established as a major export crop in Yucatán. It is evident that the conditions in Yucatán from the pre-Columbian time through the Caste War were ideal for the development and eventual prosperity of the henequen industry. Henequen has always played a significant role in Yucatecan society, but following this period, henequen would come to take control of society. Although the Maya neither viewed henequen as a god nor gave it religious significance, it was nevertheless present and useful in their daily lives. The Spanish colonists would eventually realize that henequen could be a profitable and successful crop, and the climate of Yucatán, while extreme, was ideal for the cultivation of henequen. Therefore it was a logical crop to turn to in order to stimulate the economy. In addition, new liberal land and trade policies in Yucatán encouraged elites to begin to create a modern industrial export society and to focus on the development of capitalism.

At the start of Spanish colonization, settlers brought cattle and sugar with them and continued the Mayan cultivation of corn. While they saw henequen as a useful crop, they at first did not see the potential of expanding the henequen industry. However, the formation of a new Spanish society was ideal for the development of the henequen industry. The Spanish began constructing haciendas in the seventeenth century as an all-encompassing way to harvest crops. The hacienda system proved ideal for the later integration of the henequen crop and previously established cattle haciendas in Northwestern Yucatán eventually expanded to add henequen plants in order to increase profit.

The Spanish began to see the possibilities of henequen toward the end of the eighteenth century. They started to use henequen fiber to make the ropes on their ships, and Mayan bags,



netting, and hammocks made of henequen sparked interest in foreign markets. Even though the henequen export industry had begun in the early nineteenth century, it was still not a major export crop of Yucatán. However, the independence era caused a decline in the cattle industry which helped allow henequen to take a stronger hold in the economy. Elites were looking for new opportunities and henequen was something that had potential in the market. They were focused on progress and saw henequen as a way to enter the world economy in order to become a more modern society focused on industry instead of subsistence farming. The devastation of the popular sugar industry during the Caste War era allowed society leaders to focus on henequen as their economic savior. The violence of the Caste War in the interior of Yucatán destroyed sugar haciendas and caused a great migration to the Northwestern region of the peninsula. Previously, the government had promoted movement to the interior to stimulate the sugar industry, but after the Caste War, it became clear that sugar would not recover. Therefore movement to the region where henequen prospered and a desire to repair and stimulate the economy made henequen the ideal crop to save the Yucatán after the Caste War.

While it was always part of Yucatecan society, the Caste War gave henequen even greater opportunity for growth and allowed it to later dominate the Yucatán export economy and obtain massive revenue. Henequen has always played a crucial role in Yucatecan society, and conditions and events since the pre-Columbian Maya period resulted in the turn to henequen in the mid-nineteenth century as a main export crop. Elites saw an opportunity to use henequen to enter the world market and within the next half-century, henequen would experience a tremendous boom that would draw substantial wealth to Yucatán. The following chapters will describe how henequen was able to achieve such success and examine the societal effects of its newfound popularity.

## Chapter Two

### The Henequen Industry, the Birth of Dependence, and the Rise of Monopoly 1860-1915

#### *Introduction*

Over the half-century following the Caste War, the henequen industry achieved overwhelming success. Elites who had been searching for a way to enter the world economy after the Caste War made a wise decision in investing in the henequen industry as henequen brought great riches to the upper class in Yucatán. From 1845 to 1883, the amount of pesos of henequen in the foreign market increased by 4,000 percent.<sup>1</sup> Between 1860 and 1864, Yucatán exported 8,545 bales of henequen, and between 1905 and 1909 this number had increased to 3,028,627.<sup>2</sup> Yucatán went from a state scrambling for a way to enter to the world market to one of the wealthiest states in Mexico.

The Industrial Revolution in the United States allowed henequen to gain prominence as the wheat industry in the United States came to rely on henequen. The invention of the rasper in Yucatán, which was used to extract henequen fiber from leaves, followed by the invention of the grain binder in the United States, which used henequen to bind wheat bales, were crucial events that increased the uses and demand for henequen. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, advances in technology, and an exclusive focus on the henequen industry in Yucatán, allowed henequen to gain a prominent position in the world economy. As capitalism was expanding in the United States, the Yucatecan government and elites wanted to follow suit. Elites saw the development and expansion of the henequen industry as a way to promote

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence James Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883: The Roots of Dependence in a Mexican Region" Volumes 1 and 2 (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1981), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Piedad Peniche Rivero, "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero: A Transition to Capitalism in Yucatán, Mexico," in *The Lowland Maya Area: Three Millennia at the Human-Wildland Interface*, ed. Arturo Gómez-Pompa, Michael F. Allen, Scott L. Fedick et al. (New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 2003), 576.

capitalism and create a modern industrial economy with a place in the greater world market. As a result, with the rise of the wheat industry United States, the developed henequen industry was able to meet the massive demand for fiber to bind the wheat.

While some henequen fiber was shipped elsewhere, a great majority was exported to the United States. In 1871, the United States imported 76 percent of all henequen exported from Yucatán and by 1906, the United States was importing 95 percent of the henequen exported.<sup>3</sup> Although the United States would become dependent on the Yucatecan fiber, the wheat industry in the United States was primarily responsible for driving the Yucatecan economy. The Panic of 1873 in the United States and the 1884 recession caused the henequen industry to take a hit because demand for wheat decreased.<sup>4</sup> Even though these events highlighted the dependence on the United States market, henequeneros would continue to produce henequen because they always believed the economy would improve.

The dependence between the United States and Yucatán increased over the latter half of the nineteenth century as elites continued to focus mainly on producing raw henequen fiber for export to the United States. Dependency theories in relation to Latin America often highlight the one-sided dependence of Latin American economies on foreign markets. According to Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank in *From Silver to Cocaine*, Latin American economies are often driven by cheap exports and it is challenging for them to earn substantial revenue.<sup>5</sup> Similar to other regions, the economic dependence that formed in Yucatán was the result of foreign influences, demand, and internal conditions. The Yucatecan government linked

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<sup>3</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 727; "Merida's Many Millionaires," *Kansas City Star*, April 22, 1907, accessed November 10, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com.

<sup>4</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 739, 808.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank, eds. *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

itself to the United States economy and relied solely on United States demand for henequen fiber.<sup>6</sup> However, even though the Yucatán's economy was dependent on the United States wheat industry, it was able to make large profits from its export, unlike other Latin American countries, since Yucatecans retained substantial control of the industry and gained a monopoly over the fiber market for much of the henequen boom. Unlike other instances of dependence in Latin America, the United States wheat industry relied on the import of henequen fiber from Yucatán, and this resulted in a two-sided dependence between Yucatán and the United States. However, the United States economy did not hinge on the Yucatecan fiber in the same way Yucatán relied on United States demand, and a decline in United States demand for fiber would result in the economy of Yucatán suffering substantially.

During this period, the growing henequen market was appealing to businessmen and investors because they saw the potential to obtain great profit. Eventually, the henequen industry gave rise to a monopoly because it was so concentrated on the export of raw fiber. Cyrus McCormick and Henry Peabody of the United States, and Olegario Molina of Yucatán, who all gained success from the henequen industry, created an empire-like, monopolistic structure when they merged their businesses to form the International Harvester Company. International Harvester controlled all aspects of the henequen industry: from investment and export houses in Yucatán to the import businesses in the United States. As a result, it was able to control the price of, and demand for, henequen. Businessmen took advantage of the highly concentrated industry and were able to gain control. By consistently depressing the prices of its henequen to eliminate competition, International Harvester was able to essentially form a monopoly over the henequen industry.

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<sup>6</sup> Allen Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 6.

This chapter will examine how the henequen industry formed, how dependence evolved between the United States and Yucatán, and how the industry gave rise to monopoly from the period following the Caste War through 1915. It will begin by examining and describing henequen production in Yucatán, and will show that the elites' focus on modernization and the turn to capitalism helped to strengthen the industry. It will argue that the henequen industry led to an unequal dependence between the United States and Yucatán as Yucatán's entire society was driven by United States demand for henequen. It will show that efforts by Yucatecan elites' to diversify the industry were ultimately unsuccessful. Although the United States became somewhat dependent on Yucatecan fiber for its wheat industry, it still had many other economic resources, and therefore, dependence was skewed since Yucatán ended up investing everything in henequen exports. Finally, this chapter will argue that the structure of the henequen industry led to the rise of monopoly. What had once been a fairly autonomous Yucatecan industry would eventually come to be controlled by a foreign corporation, and the story of henequen would begin to reflect one of other Latin American export economies.

### *The Logistics and Development of Henequen Production*

After the Caste War, the elites of Yucatán put a great focus on the henequen industry in order to stimulate capitalism in the state. As a result, many hacienda owners expanded their haciendas to include henequen, and some even turned exclusively to henequen. By 1902, there were about 1,200 henequen haciendas in Yucatán employing 1,100 mechanical rasps.<sup>7</sup> The expansion of henequen production in Yucatán is important to understand in order to understand how henequen came to take control of Yucatecan society. Elites believed turning to a more

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<sup>7</sup> "Imports from Mexico Grow: United States Purchases Vast Quantities of Henequen," *San Antonio Express*, March 24, 1902, accessed November 10, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com.

capitalistic society based on industry and export would strengthen their economy and allow them to enter the world market. They focused on advancements in technology and the development of a structure of production to allow the industry to take hold, prosper, and gain traction in the world economy. Turning to capitalism, they believed, would allow Yucatán to become more modern with a stronger position in the world market.

As discussed in the first chapter, many cattle and corn haciendas were transformed into henequen haciendas between the 1830s and 1860s.<sup>8</sup> The henequen haciendas began to resemble a commercial plantation with the introduction of new machinery, but at the same time possessed characteristics of the previous hacienda structure. Henequen haciendas continued under familial management and ownership, which gave Yucatecans more control of the henequen industry.<sup>9</sup> In other Latin American countries, many large plantations had foreign ownership, but in Yucatán, haciendas for the most part remained under familial control. While elites strove to make Yucatán's society based more on capitalism, some traditional methods of farming and production were still employed. Family-owned haciendas were prevalent before henequen, and henequen was incorporated into these previously established centers of production.

Throughout the henequen boom, tools and equipment collections on haciendas remained small as not much capital was needed to produce henequen fiber.<sup>10</sup> Before the invention of the rasper during the 1850s, the average laborer could rasp, or extract fiber from, about one hundred leaves per day.<sup>11</sup> Much of the rasping was done in the few hours before sunrise because the juices from the henequen leaves would irritate the skin when heat rose.<sup>12</sup> This process was slow

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<sup>8</sup> Camilo Otero Rejón, "Presencia inadvertida, ki," in *Henequén: Leyenda, historia y cultura* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Allen Wells, "Henequen," in *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930*, ed. Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), 101.

<sup>10</sup> Peniche Rivero, "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero," 571-2.

<sup>11</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 174.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

and difficult for laborers, so the Yucatecan government began to realize that a more efficient method was needed to successfully produce fiber for the world market. In 1852, the government of Yucatán offered a 2,000 peso reward for the most effective and economical invention to extract fiber from henequen leaves.<sup>13</sup> This shows that the government was serious about embracing capitalism and focusing on the development of industry. With the invention of the rasper, henequen production would become much more efficient and henequen would become a more legitimate export crop.

By 1856, defibering machines could rasp 1,000 leaves in ten hours, which was a major improvement over the need to scrape leaves by hand.<sup>14</sup> In 1861, steam power was introduced to the rasper, which further enhanced production, and by 1910, defibering machines could process 100,000 leaves in ten hours.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the speed of production of henequen fiber was one hundred times faster in 1910 than in 1856 allowed the henequeneros to satisfy the great demand of the United States and expand the henequen industry. The raspers were further improved in 1913 with the introduction of diesel engines.<sup>16</sup> The modernization of machinery and promotion and expansion of capitalism during this time allowed raspers to become more efficient and successful in satisfying the high demand for fiber. This allowed Yucatán to gain traction in the world economy and provided substantial revenue to the state.

The harvesting process of henequen was not overly complicated, and therefore there was not a need to train laborers since tasks tended to be straightforward. The process also did not require extensive capital, so it was easy to realize high returns on investment.<sup>17</sup> After planting

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<sup>13</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 485; G.M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 24.

<sup>14</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 127.

<sup>15</sup> "The Story of Sisal: A Mexico Industry Inviting American Enterprise and Capital," *Colorado Springs Gazette*, September 4, 1910, accessed November 10, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

the henequen plant, however, it could not be harvested for seven years because the leaves had to mature to produce effective fiber.<sup>18</sup> This posed a problem for the henequen industry because henequeneros could not plant based on demand; they needed to predict the demand seven years in advance. As a result, many henequeneros simply planted large amounts of henequen with hopes that the economy would continue to prosper. The best scenario on a henequen hacienda was one third of henequen plants in cultivation, one-third in production, and one-third in decadence.<sup>19</sup> Henequen plants were typically replaced after fifteen to twenty years.<sup>20</sup>

The process to extract the precious and highly demanded fiber from the henequen leaves was straightforward as well. Laborers chopped the spines off the ends of the henequen leaves, then cut leaves from the plants with machetes, and bound them into bundles of about fifty leaves each.<sup>21</sup> Once the leaves were bundled, they were piled onto little, flat, mule-drawn carts which brought them to the rasper.<sup>22</sup> These carts were on tracks similar to railroad tracks, and were known as “*trucs*” in Maya.<sup>23</sup> The tracks led to the center of the hacienda from the henequen fields.<sup>24</sup> Once the carts arrived, laborers would catch, untie, and spread out the leaves and put them on a mechanical belt, which carried the leaves to the rasper. Once the fiber was extracted from the leaves in the rasper, it was dried in the sun for one or two days, and then sent to

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Sanders, “Henequen: The Structure of Agrarian Frustration,” *American Field Staff Reports: North America Series* 5, no. 3 (1977): 2.

<sup>19</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 446

<sup>20</sup> “Hemp Twine: How and of What It Is Manufactured,” *Boston Daily Globe*, August 28, 1910, accessed November 10, 2013, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 76; “The Story of Sisal: A Mexico Industry Inviting American Enterprise and Capital”; Sterling Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” in *A Land Between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico*, ed. Christopher R. Boyer (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 154; Anthony Andrews, Rafael Burgos Villanueva, and Luis Millet Cámara, “The Henequen Ports of Yucatán’s Gilded Age,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16, no. 1 (March 2012): 28, accessed September 6, 2013, <http://search.ebscohost.com>.

<sup>22</sup> “The Story of Sisal: A Mexico Industry Inviting American Enterprise and Capital.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.; Andrews, Burgos Villanueva, and Millet Cámara, “The Henequen Ports of Yucatán’s Gilded Age,” 28.

<sup>24</sup> “The Story of Sisal: A Mexico Industry Inviting American Enterprise and Capital.”



market.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, some henequeneros developed *truc* lines that expanded to Progreso in order to send their fiber directly to the port for export.<sup>26</sup> While this process was not overly complicated, it was very labor-intensive and took a physical toll on the workers. Henequeneros needed to keep labor cheap and plentiful in order to have enough workers to produce the precious fiber.<sup>27</sup>

The hacienda system, over the second half of the nineteenth century, was substantially tailored to henequen production. Although this allowed Yucatán to fulfill the demand of the United States market, it also created a society dependent on the success of henequen. The turn to capitalism in Yucatán created a society based on the exportation of henequen, and advancements and the increasing success of the industry only reinforced the continued production of the crop and the expansion of the industry.

*The Henequen Industry: Capitalist Policies and Expansion*

*From Post-Caste War through the end of the Nineteenth Century*

While the henequen industry of Yucatán bore some resemblance to other Latin American export economies of the nineteenth century, it was unique in that henequeneros were all Yucatecan. Haciendas remained in the hands of the locals, even when some United States companies came to gain some control over the industry.<sup>28</sup> This meant that most of the profits from henequen sales remained in Yucatán instead of in the United States.<sup>29</sup> Unlike its direct investment in companies such as the United Fruit Company, which obtained most of the wealth

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<sup>25</sup> Peniche Rivero, "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero," 573; "Hemp Twine: How and of What It Is Manufactured."

<sup>26</sup> Andrews, Burgos Villanueva, and Millet Cámara, "The Henequen Ports of Yucatán's Gilded Age," 28.

<sup>27</sup> Heather McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 137, accessed September 6, 2013, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/laddbates/Doc?id=10492223&ppg=150>.

<sup>28</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 197.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

from the “banana republics” of Central America, the United States investment in henequen was more indirect and allowed profits to remain in Yucatán.<sup>30</sup> This was a result of the previously established hacienda structure in Yucatán, which easily allowed for expansion to include henequen plants. Therefore, United States investment was not as necessary since henequeneros already possessed much of the infrastructure needed to grow henequen, and this gave Yucatán more autonomy in henequen production.

After the Caste War, the Yucatán government was geared toward the expansion of capitalism and industry and they saw henequen as the best option to achieve their goal of entering the world economy. As a result of the great importance placed on henequen, Yucatán became an export economy based on an individual crop. As evidenced by the government-sponsored contest for the rasper invention, Yucatán government spending either went to sponsoring the henequen industry, or paying for imports.<sup>31</sup> Yucatán was investing everything into the success of the henequen industry in order to stimulate its economy and promote capitalism. The industry was so successful that a major goal was to produce as much fiber as possible. This, however, caused henequeneros to focus on the quantity of fiber produced instead of the quality of the fiber.

Before 1869, henequen fiber was attractive, and had an appropriate cleanliness and length. However, with the dramatic increase in price, henequeneros rushed production, harvested into the winter, and did not dry or clean fibers correctly. The United States purchasers were unhappy to find fiber that was dirty and uncombed, and this caused some damage to the reputation of henequen.<sup>32</sup> In Yucatán, many individuals and newspapers promoted the quality of

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<sup>30</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 563.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 731.

henequen fiber, but legislative measures failed and quality campaigns were ignored.<sup>33</sup> Henequen remained the cheap, useful fiber, even though it was not always of the best quality. Most Yucatecans were more concerned with producing great quantities of fiber to increase profits than with creating a quality product. The primary goal was to stimulate their new capitalistic, market-based economy and that meant to produce as much henequen fiber as possible.

Throughout henequen's reign as the primary export crop of Yucatán, the government of Yucatán never imposed high taxes on its production and export in order to preserve its success. As a result, henequen was a very profitable crop since demand from the United States was so great and the taxes were so low. Henequeneros were only required to pay a land tax, and in 1882 a small export tax was imposed. The Yucatán government's support for henequen was so strong because henequen had saved the economy after the devastating Caste War, and it was hesitant to extensively tax the industry at risk of damaging its success.<sup>34</sup> These capitalistic policies, and the primary focus on henequen, allowed it to become the number one export crop in Mexico by 1883.<sup>35</sup> In addition, according to Lawrence Remmers, a historian of the henequen industry in Yucatán, the modernization of the henequen industry with equipment was basically completed by 1883.<sup>36</sup> Because the necessary machinery was in place, henequeneros no longer had to worry about increasing capital, and this also added to the profitability of henequen. By 1890, more than half of haciendas grew henequen, and almost a quarter of haciendas were exclusively focused on henequen production.<sup>37</sup>

Yucatán found great success making profits from its henequen industry even though the fiber market was challenging to enter. Henequeneros could not predict future prices or demand

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 733.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 679.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 419.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 627.

since they had to plant henequen seven years before harvest, and this made participation in the market even more difficult.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, most henequeneros planted, processed, and sold henequen no matter what its price was.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the Yucatecan government and elites believed henequen would allow their state to prosper and become more like other capitalist nations. These goals were essentially realized as the development of the henequen industry brought capitalism, industrialization, and great wealth to Yucatán, and allowed the state to enter the world economy.

### *The Rise of Henequen in the United States Fiber Market*

In order to understand how the United States came to purchase vast quantities of henequen fiber, it is necessary to understand how henequen came to peak in the fiber market. The initial main competitors to henequen were Russian hemp, Kentucky hemp, Indian jute, and Philippine manila.<sup>40</sup> At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the United States imported 3,400 tons of Russian hemp per year and this number increased during the 1820s and 1830s.<sup>41</sup> Russian hemp was popular in the United States during the early 1800s, but it was heavy, dirty, and inflexible. During the Crimean War in 1853, however, supplies of Russian hemp were disrupted, and the United States was forced to turn to the Philippines for its fiber supply.<sup>42</sup> While henequen was not yet a major player, this reduced the competitors in the market since the

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<sup>38</sup> Allen Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen," in *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000*, eds. Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 311.

<sup>39</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 152.

<sup>40</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 90-92.

<sup>41</sup> Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated," 305.

<sup>42</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 93.

Russian hemp industry was never able to recover.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the value of henequen was increased since there were less fiber options available.<sup>44</sup>

Manila from the Philippines was another major competitor to henequen. Compared to henequen, manila was stronger, more resistant to rot, and smoother, but was also more expensive.<sup>45</sup> By the 1860s, manila had been established in the United States market, and was commonly used in power cables and oil drilling.<sup>46</sup> Since manila was a better option based on its composition, henequen gained traction in the world market during the mid-nineteenth century as it cost one to two cents less per pound than manila.<sup>47</sup> While henequen and manila were both inelastic to price changes in the market, henequen had a comparative advantage as a result of the modernization of henequen production, the primary concentration of the economy on henequen, and the ideal land for growing henequen in Yucatán.<sup>48</sup> This allowed henequen to become popular even though manila may have been a better option. In addition, in 1898, the Spanish-American War disrupted the supply of manila from the Philippines, and left henequen as the only major fiber option for a period.<sup>49</sup> The rapidly expanding wheat industry required a cheap, reliable fiber that was available in great quantity, and henequen was the perfect option. As a result, the United States would come to rely on henequen fiber for the majority of its binder twine.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 376.

<sup>45</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 87, 94.

<sup>46</sup> Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated," 307.

<sup>47</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 94.

<sup>48</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 101; Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 158; Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 419.

<sup>49</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 810.

*Demand in the United States: How the Wheat Industry Came to Require Henequen and the Beginnings of a Two-Sided Dependence*

Throughout this period, the demand for henequen fiber in the United States increased dramatically. This eventually led to a rise of dependence between Yucatán and the United States. The demand for binder twine in the United States encouraged Yucatecan elites to continue to focus mainly on the production of henequen fiber because they were making such large profits. The entirety of the Yucatecan economy came to depend on the success of the United States wheat industry since the United States was responsible for importing most of the henequen fiber exported. At the same time, the United States came to rely on Yucatán for its source of binder twine as most of its binder twine was made from henequen. Some newspapers of the time even described the supply of bread in the United States as dependent on the Yucatecan fiber.<sup>50</sup> While there existed this two-sided dependence between the two regions, the United States earned revenue from many other outlets and its economy was not solely dependent on henequen. Yucatán, however, had concentrated its economic efforts on henequen and was entirely dependent on the success of the United States wheat industry. Therefore, the two-sided dependence that existed was uneven because the trade only affected one industry in the United States, while henequen had become the main industry of Yucatán.

Before henequen became a major import product to the United States, cotton helped form the basis for trade between Yucatán and the United States. Although the cotton industry of Yucatán was harmed substantially during the Caste War, it later gained momentum, and Yucatán began to ship cotton to New England and England. Between 1863 and 1864, cotton was a major industry in Yucatán due to the lack of Southern cotton as a result of the United States Civil War.

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<sup>50</sup> George Miner, "Green Gold and Bread," *The Washington Herald*, February 18, 1917, accessed November 10, 2013, [chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov).

In 1863 alone, Yucatán shipped 4,000 bales of cotton to New England and England.<sup>51</sup> However, after the South fell in 1865, cotton production increased again in the United States, and there was no longer a high demand for Yucatecan cotton.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the short-lived international success of the Yucatecan cotton industry helped sustain henequen's position in the market. Yucatán had opened trade routes with its cotton industry, which made it easier to increase the export of henequen.

The major catalyst for the enormous henequen boom was the wheat industry of the United States. The Industrial Revolution of Europe and the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century had created a massive demand for raw materials.<sup>53</sup> The United States needed wheat to feed its rapidly expanding population, which resulted in the creation of many new farmlands in the Western United States. Between 1860 and 1880, the number of farms in the West increased by 96 percent and wheat production increased 188 percent, making the United States the largest wheat producing country in the world.<sup>54</sup> The massive expansion of the wheat industry created a strong demand for henequen fiber since farmers needed a way to bind wheat bales. Henequen became a necessity in the United States wheat industry: while coffee and bananas from Central and South America were luxuries for the people of the United States, henequen, on the other hand, was an essential input to wheat production.<sup>55</sup> This created a dependence on henequen in the United States as henequen became the best option for binder twine. As a result, Yucatán focused its entire economy on the production of henequen, and became dependent on the United States industry as well.

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<sup>51</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 591-2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 594.

<sup>53</sup> Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells, eds, *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>54</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 782.

<sup>55</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 157.

The demand for henequen in the United States sprung from the invention of the grain binder. Similar to the situation surrounding the invention of the rasper in Yucatán, the growing wheat industry required people to search for ways to make production more efficient and effective. In 1831, Cyrus McCormick, who would later become a major player in the henequen industry, invented a horse-drawn grain reaper.<sup>56</sup> About two decades later, John Heath invented a binder that used metal wire.<sup>57</sup> After Charles Worthington made further improvements to the binder in 1877, John Appleby invented a mechanical knotting device that could be used in the binder in 1878.<sup>58</sup> This industrialization of the agriculture industry created a massive demand for binder twine since farmers could use it in their mechanical binders.

With early wire binders, pieces of metal would become stuck in the machines and in bales of hay. This would cause cows to fall ill since they ate the metal pieces that became engrained in the hay.<sup>59</sup> It was evident to farmers that something natural was needed, which stimulated testing of henequen fiber.<sup>60</sup> During the 1870s, Cyrus McCormick began to experiment with fiber from Yucatán in the binders and found that it was strong and effective. Since it was also resistant to rot and insects, it became a practical option for farmers in the United States.<sup>61</sup> During the late 1870s and early 1880s, binder twine became more popular and manufacturers of twine binders began to release negative propaganda, which blamed wire binders for cow deaths. While this did happen and was a concern for farmers, twine binder manufacturers exaggerated to an extent. Nevertheless, this negative propaganda caused more farmers to purchase twine binders instead of metal wire binders. They did not want to risk the

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<sup>56</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.; Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 95.

<sup>60</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 7.



loss of their cattle as a source of income and sought the more natural option of binding material. This shift to twine binders further increased the demand for henequen fiber.<sup>62</sup>

Before the invention of binder twine in the 1870s, henequen had other uses in the United States. During the mid-nineteenth century, henequen was commonly used on ships as rope, rigging cable, and towlines. Smaller ships used up to one ton of rope, while larger ships, such as the U.S.S. Constitution, could use up to one hundred tons of rope.<sup>63</sup> Between 1845 and 1860, there was a high demand for cordage fibers on clipper ships.<sup>64</sup> However, with the creation of binder twine, the henequen market expanded significantly, and binding material became the primary use for henequen fiber in the United States. The industrialization of the farming process required binder twine, and henequen was the ideal fiber for binders. Henequen could be made into a smooth, one strand cord, which made it very useful for farmers.<sup>65</sup> Between 1897 and 1902, McCormick's binder manufacturing company sold about 152,000 binders per year, which continued increasing the demand for henequen fiber from Yucatán.<sup>66</sup> By 1900, 85 percent of binder twine in North America was made with henequen from Yucatán.<sup>67</sup>

The extensive use of henequen for binder twine demonstrates the dependence between Yucatán and the United States. Overall, the United States purchased more than 90 percent of all henequen output from Yucatán, and mostly all was used for binder twine.<sup>68</sup> For every acre of wheat in the United States, two to six pounds of binder twine were needed. In 1890, 36.7 million acres of wheat were harvested in the United States.<sup>69</sup> These numbers show how strong the demand was for binder twine from Yucatán, and how dependent the societies were on one

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<sup>62</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 785.

<sup>63</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 90.

<sup>64</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 721.

<sup>65</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 96.

<sup>66</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 151.

<sup>68</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 96.

<sup>69</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 14, 16.

another. The United States primarily used henequen for binder twine, and Yucatán was the only source of henequen. At the same time, the Yucatán had to satisfy the insatiable demand of the United States, which generated a singular focus on henequen production. Aside from binder twine, the United States continued using henequen for rope. Farmers also found other uses for henequen, for example, they used it to lace shoes, to tie pants and fence rails, and to repair harnesses.<sup>70</sup> During the 1880s, henequen hammocks became popular among the upper class of the United States.<sup>71</sup> While these were not huge markets, they show that henequen had found a place in United States society.

The enormous United States demand for henequen fiber caused Yucatán to focus solely on producing henequen for the United States market, and other crops and societal developments began to fall by the wayside in order to make way for king henequen. The great focus on henequen caused the Yucatecan corn industry to decline and led to a greater dependence on the United States because at times, the Yucatán could not feed its own population. Although the population in Yucatán increased substantially between 1862 and 1885, the acreage of corn farms fell by 32 percent.<sup>72</sup> Large landowners often preferred to grow henequen since it was much more profitable, and there was no incentive to switch to corn.<sup>73</sup> As previously discussed, henequen took over some corn haciendas because hacienda owners saw henequen as a much more profitable option.<sup>74</sup> The Yucatecan government promoted henequen production to stimulate the economy and did not put great consideration into the corn industry. As a result, corn prices rose and there were occasional shortages.<sup>75</sup> At several points during the latter half of the nineteenth

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>71</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 791.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 621.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 622-3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 623.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 625.

century, the Yucatán was forced to import corn from the United States to feed its population.<sup>76</sup> In 1890, even though there were still less henequen holdings than cattle and corn holdings, it is important to note that Yucatán could not produce enough corn to feed its population.<sup>77</sup> This added another level of dependence between the United States and Yucatán: Yucatán had focused such great effort on the expansion of henequen that it needed to import food to feed its people.

*The Connection and Dependence between Yucatán and the United States Increases*

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Yucatán and the United States became more intertwined and henequen evolved into a major industry. United States businesses expanded into Yucatán, and Yucatecans made connections with United States businesses to increase revenues and become more involved in the trade. As the Yucatecan elites had dreamed after the Caste War, Yucatán was becoming a force in the modern world economy. Communications between regions increased and New York businesses sought to take control of the henequen industry, which shows they saw it as profitable and successful. However, as Yucatán began importing more from the United States in terms of food and luxury goods, it further increased its dependence on the United States. Even though this dependence was great, the United States also relied on Yucatecan fiber since its options were limited, and the regions formed a kind of mutual, yet unequal, dependence.

At this time, New York, which was a major center of industry in the world, began to become involved with the henequen industry. In 1852, a line of credit from New York banks was extended to Yucatán for henequen production.<sup>78</sup> This was the first instance of any sort of foreign investment in the henequen industry, but it shows that people in the United States began

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 626.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 420.

to see the potential of investing in henequen. Eusebio Escalante, a wealthy merchant in Yucatán, who was responsible for shipping a large portion of henequen to the United States, began establishing connections to New York during the 1850s in order to secure investments for the industry. He formed a relationship with Bouchaud, Thebaud, and Company, which was a business that found henequen buyers in the United States.<sup>79</sup> The fact that Yucatecan entrepreneurs sought assistance from the United States, and that the United States took interest in such endeavors, shows that the henequen industry was becoming a legitimate and successful industry.

According to the *New York Herald* on January 28, 1869, “the cultivation of henequen as a substitute for hemp, in the state of Yucatan, [is] now assuming immense proportions and becoming an important article of commerce...[and] the interest of both countries [call] for its ready and prompt exportation to the United States.”<sup>80</sup> People in the United States realized the importance of henequen and saw that it would benefit both regions to focus on expanding the industry. This article goes on to state that for Yucatán to become more progressive, to prosper, and to become more peaceful like the United States, it was necessary to focus on the expansion of the henequen industry.<sup>81</sup> It is evident that the authors of this article had similar opinions to those of Yucatecan elites: they too believed that henequen could promote capitalism and propel Yucatán to a more prominent position in the world. During the henequen boom, elites found success expanding capitalism and promoting industry as the United States had during the Industrial Revolution, and they were able to realize great profits.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 530.

<sup>80</sup> “Mexico. The Insurrection in Cuba—Movements in Mexico to Assist It—Condition of the Country—The New York and Vera Cruz Steamers,” *New York Herald*, January 28, 1869, accessed September 6, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

Over time, business interests in the United States began to see henequen as a successful source of revenue and wanted to control the importation of the fiber. New York businesses began to seek more power in the henequen industry, and speculators began to take advantage of henequeneros with corporations and monopolies.<sup>82</sup> At this time, most of the henequen that entered the United States entered through New York, and as a result, New York had control over the industry.<sup>83</sup> Banks in New York and New Orleans sought to monopolize imports of henequen to the United States to increase their control.<sup>84</sup> United States companies also saw opportunities in Yucatán. The largest fiber importer, Henry W. Peabody and Company of Boston, established a trade house in Mérida in 1891.<sup>85</sup> Such export houses had local Yucatecans in charge, but were mostly controlled by foreign interests.<sup>86</sup> Communications improved between the United States and Yucatán during the 1870s as well, and the *Revista* magazine in Yucatán began to print trade statistics with the United States.<sup>87</sup> In addition, United States companies began to advertise in Mérida in 1877, as upper class residents were becoming accustomed to a high standard of living and could afford luxuries from the United States.<sup>88</sup> It is clear that the expanding capitalist economies of Yucatán and the United States became interconnected during this time. Although they had done so at the expense of the henequen laborers, the elites of Yucatán had entered the world economy.

The binder twine industry began to expand in the United States as a result of henequen imports. Cordage manufacturing companies began to form to create rope and twine from the henequen fiber: one major cordage manufacturer was Plymouth Cordage Company in Plymouth,

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<sup>82</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 85.

<sup>83</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 725.

<sup>84</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 198.

<sup>85</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 24.

<sup>86</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 42.

<sup>87</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 723-5.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 572.

Massachusetts.<sup>89</sup> The main ports for the import of henequen in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century were New Orleans, New York, Boston, Mobile, Pensacola, Galveston, and Portland, Oregon.<sup>90</sup> After arriving at one of these ports, henequen fiber was then distributed to cordage manufacturers or to prisons, where binder twine was also produced.<sup>91</sup> The binder twine then most commonly ended up in the Midwestern states, Florida, Georgia, and Texas.<sup>92</sup> It is evident that henequen helped form a major industry in the United States and its use was present throughout the United States. Also, since the Yucatán was the only source of henequen fiber for the United States, and effectively, the only major source of binder twine, the United States could not control prices by playing one region against another.<sup>93</sup> In a sense, Yucatán had control over the industry since it had a monopoly on henequen production. The United States had to rely on Yucatán's supply and the prices it set, which shows the level of dependence the United States had on Yucatán.

Even though the United States did not rely solely on wheat to earn revenue, its expansive wheat industry was dependent on Yucatecan henequen. At the same time, Yucatán depended on the United States wheat industry to keep its economy afloat. According to a *Washington Herald* article from February 18, 1917, "The United States is dependent on Yucatan for its bread supply...our bread supply is at the mercy of Yucatan."<sup>94</sup> Since henequen was a necessity for binding wheat and hay, this had some truth to it; without binder twine, the United States would not be able to distribute wheat. This worried United States businessmen and around this time, they began searching for alternatives to henequen fiber in case something were to happen to their

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<sup>89</sup> "Our Sisal Imports," *Times-Picayune*, October 19, 1922, accessed November 10, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com.

<sup>90</sup> "The Story of Sisal: A Mexico Industry Inviting American Enterprise and Capital."

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 23.

<sup>93</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 46.

<sup>94</sup> "Green Gold and Bread."

Yucatecan fiber supply. While the bread supply of the United States may have been dependent on Yucatán, the entirety of Yucatecan society was dependent on the United States. According to a posting by the *Comisión Reguladora del Mercado de Henequén* in *The Sun* newspaper on February 9, 1917, “Yucatan produces practically nothing except...fib[er], and buys her food, clothing and other necessities of life in the American markets.”<sup>95</sup> Yucatán began to import food in greater quantity from the United States at the start of the twentieth century because there were so many laborers to feed.<sup>96</sup> Aside from corn, Yucatán also imported wheat from the United States, some of which was likely bound with henequen fiber.<sup>97</sup> It is evident that although there was dependence on both sides, Yucatán depended much more on the United States since it devoted its entire economy to henequen, even at the expense of subsistence crops.

It is clear that over this period, Yucatán became much more dependent on the United States. Although the United States needed henequen fiber to bind wheat and support its rapidly expanding wheat industry, Yucatán’s entire economy hinged on the purchase of henequen fiber by the United States, and it was forced to turn to the United States for food since it could not produce enough to feed its laborers. Since Yucatán was so focused on producing henequen and making profits, it came to rely more on the United States because it could not balance the production of henequen with food. The dependence on the United States was dangerous for Yucatán because it had invested everything in henequen, and if the market changed, it would result in disaster. Elites in Yucatán worried about this and sought methods to reduce this dependence, but ultimately, they were unsuccessful since henequeneros were hesitant to diverge from the method of production that had brought them such great wealth.

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<sup>95</sup> Comisión Reguladora del Mercado de Henequén, “To the American People,” *The Sun*, February 9, 1917, accessed November 10, 2013, [chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov).

<sup>96</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 166.

<sup>97</sup> “Green Gold and Bread.”

*Campaigns to Diversify the Market and Reduce Dependence*

The henequen industry in Yucatán relied mainly on the export of raw fiber to the United States and some elites believed that it was necessary to diversify in order to create stability. If the demand for raw fiber from the United States disappeared, the Yucatecan economy would face a major challenge and this worried elites. During the first couple years of the 1880s, Yucatán began to construct more cordage plants in order to produce more than simply raw fiber.<sup>98</sup> These factories were typically built on a North American model and were used to make rope and twine. Hammocks and sacks were still constructed by hand in Yucatán, however, since the factories were not equipped to manufacture these goods.<sup>99</sup> The purpose of these factories was to create goods out of raw fiber to export, instead of simply relying on raw fiber. The goods coming from these factories were typically of high quality, and Yucatecan henequen goods had a positive reputation in the market.<sup>100</sup> However, as the 1880s progressed, henequen planters stopped selling to these factories because there was such a high demand for raw fiber.<sup>101</sup> Henequeneros were making a much higher profit from selling raw fiber to exporters and as a result, cordage factories were forced to shut down.

In 1883, four of the largest and most modern cordage plants in Yucatán were closed. *La Miraflores* was one such example: it had modern machinery and was driven by steam power.<sup>102</sup> The closing of these factories was, in a sense, going back in time for Yucatán. Instead of further expanding capitalism with modern factories and production, they returned to the sole focus of exporting raw fiber. The fiber would then be processed in the United States to produce twine, and Yucatán was only needed to supply the raw material. Yucatecan elites had expanded

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<sup>98</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 615-6.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 617.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 618.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 793.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 794.



capitalism to a point where it brought great profit, but then decided that further modernization was too great a risk. This put them at a disadvantage because it would make it more challenging for them to adapt to changing markets and demands as they invested everything in the production of raw henequen fiber. In 1897, Yucatecan elites again attempted to create a cordage plant. Cyrus McCormick saw value in this factory and invested in its construction.<sup>103</sup> He even considered making this factory, *La Industrial*, a major supplier of binder twine to the United States, but then realized this would be challenging because Yucatán was further away than North American cordage factories.<sup>104</sup> Unfortunately for the elites of Yucatán, in 1899, McCormick decided to build his own factory in Chicago. Yucatecan plants could no longer compete with these larger United States plants that were more convenient for United States buyers, and in 1903, *La Industrial* was forced to close.<sup>105</sup> Even though these cordage plants were an attempt to diversify the industry to ease the dependence on the United States, they ultimately failed and could not compete with plants in the United States. The major source of profit was still raw fiber, and henequeneros did not want to diversify and potentially harm their flow of income.

Around this same time, some Yucatecan elites also considered diversifying their exports to include European markets. They saw the danger of solely relying on the United States and believed that expanding to Europe would create a more stable market.<sup>106</sup> The henequen market tended to experience great fluctuations, and economic downturns in the United States effected Yucatán negatively. The Panic of 1873, for example, took a toll on the henequen market and elites believed that expanding the market to Europe would alleviate such problems resulting from

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<sup>103</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 40-1.

<sup>104</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 64.

<sup>105</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 42.

<sup>106</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 757.

a dependence only on the United States.<sup>107</sup> In 1876, Yucatecan Governor Eligio Ancona placed a bounty on henequen to Europe as he thought it would be wise to expand the market and not only depend on the United States.<sup>108</sup> This shows that even the Yucatecan government understood the importance in diversifying. In 1879, the United States Foreign Minister to Mexico, John W. Foster, learned of the bounty on European henequen and was upset since he believed that it was “discriminating,” and would harm the supply of henequen to the United States. Even though this bounty had expired after two years, the United States saw the consideration of shipping to Europe as a threat to its own market and twine supply.<sup>109</sup> Most of the henequen that ended up in Europe at this time was actually imported by New York and later sold to Europe by United States companies. Many Yucatecans and Europeans were unhappy with this arrangement and wanted to eliminate the United States’ role to reduce its stronghold on the industry.<sup>110</sup>

Although there was a strong campaign to diversify the henequen market to Europe in Yucatán, it was ultimately unsuccessful. Henequeneros had a stable source of income from the United States and did not want to take the risk of losing money by shipping to Europe instead.<sup>111</sup> Many hacienda owners realized such great wealth from the United States that it did not seem practical to diversify to Europe. Export firms also had previously existing contracts and relationships with United States businesses and were worried about losing business by expanding to Europe.<sup>112</sup> Overall, expanding to Europe was not worth the risk to Yucatecans. While they understood that dependence on the United States could be dangerous, since fluctuations in the

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 739.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 766-7.

<sup>109</sup> Mr. Foster to Mr. Evarts, February 11, 1879, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1879-1880, Mexico* (Washington), accessed November 9, 2013, 796-7.

<sup>110</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 805.

<sup>111</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 758.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 776.

market were felt strongly in Yucatán, they saw the United States as a mostly reliable source of revenue. The henequen industry was extremely profitable, which made many Yucatecans hesitant to take the risk of harming their successful recipe. Nevertheless, the lack of diversification reinforced the dependence on the United States market, which led the United States and certain individuals to gain even greater control of the industry over the next few decades.

### *International Harvester: The Henequen Monopoly from 1902-1915*

Dependence on the United States further increased with the consolidation of the henequen industry in the International Harvester Company. Yucatecans had previously enjoyed substantial control over the henequen industry, but others began to see the opportunity to make profits. As a result, International Harvester would come to essentially form a monopoly over henequen production and many elites of Yucatán were forced to relinquish their control over the industry. Elites had explored the option of diversifying, but ultimately, they decided to remain with what brought the most revenue. This lack of diversification allowed International Harvester to easily gain control since the United States was responsible for almost all imports of henequen fiber. By forming alliances with people in Yucatán, International Harvester came to control prices and demand. It gained so much control that the United States Senate even investigated complaints of an International Harvester monopoly after the company was dissolved in 1915.<sup>113</sup> Elites had been hesitant to diversify because exporting raw henequen fiber to the United States provided great revenue, but this ended up harming independent hacienda owners who became indebted and bankrupted by International Harvester.

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<sup>113</sup> Paul Wooton, "Sisal Agent Says Only New Orleans Bankers Would Aid," *Times-Picayune*, February 18, 1916, accessed November 9, 2013, [infoweb.newsbank.com](http://infoweb.newsbank.com).

The consolidation of the International Harvester Company had its roots at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1898, Cyrus McCormick, who was responsible for the manufacture of binders, signed a contract with Henry W. Peabody, a henequen importer with an office in Mérida, in which he loaned Peabody a large amount of capital. This contract also gave McCormick the right to monitor Peabody's purchases and transactions in the henequen market.<sup>114</sup> This contract between two powerful players in the henequen industry would later include Governor Olegario Molina Solís of Yucatán, who was the most successful henequenero during his time and would enforce International Harvester's policies from Yucatán. This formation of a monopoly was a major implement of United States control over the henequen industry.

In 1902, Molina founded Molina y Compañía, or Molina and Company, which reduced his competition and forced down the price of fiber. As a result, some henequeneros were forced into debt because they had expected higher fiber prices.<sup>115</sup> By eliminating competitors, Molina was able to acquire more plantations and control over the industry in Yucatán. Eventually, Molina offered mortgages and credit purchases, had a hold on communications, infrastructure, and banking, and controlled production and prices.<sup>116</sup> His motto was "plant more henequen," and he encouraged Yucatecans to continue to grow henequen plants to uphold the success of the economy.<sup>117</sup> Also in 1902, Molina signed a contract with the newly created International Harvester Company to be the exclusive Yucatecan henequen agent. International Harvester

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<sup>114</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 49.

<sup>115</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 111; Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 46.

<sup>116</sup> Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated," 309.

<sup>117</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 161.

required him to drive down prices further in order to eliminate competition and keep henequen as the best fiber option. As a result, prices for henequen generally fell between 1903 and 1911.<sup>118</sup>

Molina controlled the henequen industry from the Yucatán side, while McCormick supplied the capital from Chicago, and Peabody was responsible for the exportation of the fiber. Between 1900 and 1915, Peabody was responsible for 80 percent of all henequen shipments, which shows the level of control this company had over the industry.<sup>119</sup> International Harvester supplied a line of credit to Molina and his family to continue expanding his holdings in the industry, and as a result, Molina was able to invest when the economy was suffering. When other henequeneros went bankrupt and lost holdings, Molina would purchase their haciendas cheaply with the money supplied by International Harvester. In 1909 for example, International Harvester granted Molina a \$600,000 line of credit.<sup>120</sup> By 1913, Molina owned 247,000 acres of land in Yucatán and controlled 75 percent of the henequen trade.<sup>121</sup> This shows the extensive control Molina gained over the industry, and it is evident that the United States had great power as Molina was financed by International Harvester. As International Harvester was forming a monopoly, Yucatán was becoming even more dependent on the United States as United States interests were coming to control the industry.

Eusebio Escalante and Manuel Dondé, who were previously major players in the henequen industry, both went bankrupt, which allowed International Harvester to become the only body in control of the henequen trade. Dondé went bankrupt in 1894, during an economic panic, and Escalante followed suit in 1907, as a result of another panic and the increasing control

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<sup>118</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 810.

<sup>119</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 161.

<sup>120</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 49.

<sup>121</sup> Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," 161.

of International Harvester.<sup>122</sup> The henequen market had previously been competitive, which had allowed henequeneros and exporters more freedom and reduced their dependence, but International Harvester eliminated such competition.<sup>123</sup> During its control of the henequen industry, from 1902 to 1915, International Harvester controlled 90 percent of the Yucatecan fiber trade and in 1910 alone, it controlled 99.8 percent.<sup>124</sup> The International Harvester philosophy was to produce a large amount of henequen and sell it cheaply in order to eliminate competition: between 1902 and 1911, henequen dropped from nine cents per pound to three cents per pound due to International Harvester's control.<sup>125</sup> The *Times-Picayune* newspaper of New Orleans describes the opinion of Dr. Victor Rendón, who was a representative of the Yucatán State Commission: "so long as there was competition in Yucatan between the American cordage manufacturers, the producers were able to make some profit from their crop."<sup>126</sup> Rendón testified against International Harvester, and he believed that profits were decreased as a result of the forced down prices of henequen. International Harvester had effectively taken control of the henequen trade, and henequeneros became dependent on the company. Although they had always been dependent on the United States, henequeneros were now required to conduct business through International Harvester, which added another level of dependence as they became solely dependent on one specific company. International Harvester gained full control of prices and the export of fiber, which left hacienda owners with little freedom of choice.

In 1912 and 1913, even Molina began to see the negative impacts of the International Harvester monopoly. He saw the depressed prices as harmful to the Yucatecan economy and as a result, he terminated his contract with the company. However, his son-in-law, Avelino

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<sup>122</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 811.

<sup>123</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 51.

<sup>124</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 25.

<sup>125</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 56, 52.

<sup>126</sup> Wooton, "Sisal Agent Says Only New Orleans Bankers Would Aid."

Montes, took his place as the Yucatecan connection to the company.<sup>127</sup> International Harvester continued its monopolistic control over the Yucatecan industry: in 1914, it consumed about two times as much fiber as all of the other smaller manufacturers combined.<sup>128</sup> Sterling Evans compares the company to United Fruit Company since it essentially formed an empire in Yucatán with its widespread control of production and pricing.<sup>129</sup> Before International Harvester, Yucatán's henequen industry was unique from other Latin American export economies, such as the "banana republics," due to its autonomy. However, with the arrival of International Harvester, Yucatán became completely dependent on United States interests, which reflects a pattern of other Latin American export economies that became solely dependent on United States corporations. The previously Yucatecan industry had become infiltrated by United States interests and henequeneros became dependent on International Harvester.

The United States, while it still did not have ownership in Yucatán, gained great control over the industry with International Harvester. Cyrus McCormick was offered to buy railroads and large plantations, including Yaxcopoil, which was one of the largest henequen plantations near Mérida, but he ultimately declined.<sup>130</sup> He preferred to stick with his policy of indirect control because in that way, he was able to continue to dominate the market without making large, potentially risky, investments.<sup>131</sup> International Harvester had such control and fame that some investors even suggested calling a henequen zone "Ciudad McCormick," but this was never done.<sup>132</sup> In 1912, International Harvester donated a substantial sum to the presidential campaign of Woodrow Wilson.<sup>133</sup> It is clear that International Harvester had great power and

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<sup>127</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 53.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>129</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 25.

<sup>130</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 45.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>132</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 25-6.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

influence during its time, and it is evident that it came to control the henequen industry in Yucatán. The development of this monopoly shows that the henequen industry was profitable and desirable since United States interests saw benefit in gaining control.

While Yucatán became integrated into the world economy through the henequen industry, the massive export trade did not result in equal development. The monopoly eliminated competition, elites collaborated together to control society, and labor was coerced.<sup>134</sup> As a result, lower classes were unable to experience the benefits as elites did. In addition, with the formation of International Harvester, many henequeneros went bankrupt due to falling profits from price reductions. Many American farmers, as well as Yucatecans, were unhappy with the International Harvester monopoly because it controlled the entire industry, including imports and prices.<sup>135</sup> There was less freedom for henequeneros and American farmers with the extensive control imposed by International Harvester. In Dr. Rendón's testimony, he describes an International Harvester agent bribing railway and telegraph employees to not allow independent producers to obtain their own cars to ship their products.<sup>136</sup> Assuming this was factual, it shows that International Harvester did what was necessary to gain control over the henequen trade. Even though the company never owned land in Yucatán, it still formed an almost imperialistic empire in Yucatán.<sup>137</sup> It forced its prices and policies on the henequeneros of Yucatán, and tailored the industry in order to expand its influence and success. International Harvester gained great control during its thirteen years, and this had a great impact on Yucatecan society. While henequen remained popular and successful, it fell under monopolistic control and only a few people could realize the profits.

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<sup>134</sup> Topik and Wells, eds, *The Second Conquest of Latin America*, 25.

<sup>135</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 26.

<sup>136</sup> Wooton, "Sisal Agent Says Only New Orleans Bankers Would Aid."

<sup>137</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 45.



### *Conclusion*

At the beginning of the henequen industry, Yucatán had been more autonomous and profitable than comparable Latin American export economies. However, by the twentieth century, with the control of International Harvester, it became completely dependent on foreign interests. While the growth of the industry reflected a turn to capitalism and brought immense revenue to Yucatán, society did not progress in the same manner. Labor conditions were abysmal and there was essentially a “plantation economy” in place.<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, Yucatán had entered the world economy. Henequen became the second highest valued export of Mexico during the 1870s and 1880s and Progreso became the second largest volume export port in Mexico between 1872 and 1884.<sup>139</sup> From 1873 to 1915, Yucatán went from exporting 31,000 bales of henequen fiber to 1.2 million bales of the fiber.<sup>140</sup> Between 1880 and 1902, some of the peak years of the henequen boom, almost 7 million bales of henequen were shipped out of Yucatán and had a value of about \$185,937,955.<sup>141</sup> Elites who had turned to henequen after the Caste War saw their product bring massive wealth to Yucatán as henequen realized unparalleled success.

The henequen industry sprung from the Industrial Revolution and the rise of international capitalism. The insatiable demand for binder twine in the United States wheat industry resulted in the expansion of henequen production. Henequen was the best material for binder twine, and Yucatán was the only supplier of the henequen fiber. Therefore, the United States came to depend on the Yucatán for its binder twine material. The great success and expansion of the wheat industry caused the henequen industry to succeed as well. However, the primary focus on

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>139</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 779; Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 36.

<sup>140</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 156.

<sup>141</sup> “Much In Little,” *Baltimore American*, January 6, 1905, accessed November 10, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com.

henequen in the Yucatán resulted in a great dependence on the United States as the United States was its main source of revenue with its henequen purchases. The almost exclusive focus on henequen production caused Yucatán to demand food from the United States on several occasions because it could no longer provide for its growing population. It is evident that even though the United States depended on Yucatecan fiber for wheat production, the entire economy of Yucatán was centered on henequen, which created a much stronger dependence on the United States. Elites and the government of Yucatán attempted to diversify the industry to reduce this dependence, but ultimately to no avail. They were worried that a downturn in the United States economy, or the lack of demand for henequen fiber would devastate their economy, but henequeneros were not willing to take the risk of slowing their flow of revenue.

The henequen industry was so profitable that United States interests sought to gain control, and eventually International Harvester formed a monopoly over henequen production and imports. This ended the previously existing structure of industry, which was mostly in Yucatecan hands, and gave control instead to United States entrepreneurs. As a primarily foreign run business, International Harvester essentially created an empire in Yucatán since it gained such great control by setting prices and nearly eliminating competition. Merchants and henequeneros lost the freedom to trade on their own and were forced into the web of International Harvester, which increased Yucatecan dependence on the United States as foreign interests had effectively gained control of a previously Yucatecan industry. Even though there were never any haciendas owned or operated by foreign investors, International Harvester still had control over the industry, although more indirectly.

Many elites believed that henequen would never lose its popularity and during World War I, henequen exports would reach record highs with the major demand for United States

wheat. However, later events would stimulate the downfall of the golden age of henequen. The Mexican Revolution, which had begun in 1910, reached Yucatán in 1915, and worried the United States, which began to seek alternatives to henequen fiber. The Yucatán's dependence on the United States would prove disastrous since it did not have another viable option to stimulate its economy. Chapter Four will discuss the decline of the henequen industry and examine the factors that were responsible for the substantially reduced demand for the fiber.

The henequen industry also had an incredible influence on the society of Yucatán. The entire class structure was reinforced by the focus on henequen. While elites enjoyed massive wealth, advancements and profits did not reach the lower classes, who were essentially slaves on the henequen plantations. Even though there existed great class disparity, certain areas of Yucatán did benefit from the henequen boom as railroads and ports were created and Mérida was modernized and beautified. Chapter Three will examine the profound impact the henequen industry had on Yucatecan society during the time of the henequen boom.

### Chapter Three

## The Impact of the Henequen Industry on Yucatecan Society: Elites, Modernization, and Labor

### 1870-1915

#### *Introduction*

The concentration on the export of henequen fiber after the Caste War brought about great changes to Yucatecan society. In order to sustain the massive revenue from fiber production, elites believed it was necessary for the state to tailor its society to the growth and export of henequen. This dedication to the expansion of capitalism began to realize great success for Yucatán in terms of profit and development. Yucatán had been one of the poorest states in Mexico prior to the growth of the henequen industry, but henequen brought immense wealth to the state. Elites made fortunes and lived extravagantly on their palatial estates in the wealthy section of Mérida. They gained substantial control of society in government and in the development of infrastructure. For example, the most powerful henequenero of the time, Olegario Molina Solís, gained hundreds of thousands of acres on the Yucatán peninsula and was governor of Yucatán in the early years of the twentieth century. As a stark contrast to the great wealth obtained by the elites, impoverished laborers were bound to haciendas through debt peonage. Due to demands for increased production, workers were subject to live in slave-like conditions where they had limited rights and were subject to backbreaking labor.

While laborers struggled to afford basic staples of life, the revenue from henequen allowed Yucatán to modernize with new railroads, ports, and other services and amenities. The state poured resources into the development of railroads and ports, especially the port of Progreso, in order to ensure the continued export of henequen. Mérida especially began to reflect a “modern” city with paved roads, expanded education, and banks. According to an 1869

article in the *New York Herald*, “it is the opinion of all the more progressive and enlightened Mexicans that their country will become peaceful and prosper in proportion to the extent and freedom of its intercourse with the United States.”<sup>1</sup> Elites in Mérida sought to create a society that resembled the United States, and the revenues from henequen allowed them to develop a more modernized, and beautiful, capital city.

Over the latter half of the nineteenth century, public and private capital increased substantially in the state of Yucatán due to the expansion of the henequen industry, which allowed for spending on modernization projects.<sup>2</sup> Yucatán saw modernization as the expansion of capitalism and services and the development of a worldly city that would compare to other prosperous Latin American cities. This increasing wealth brought a spirit of enterprise to Yucatán and the “elevated level of affluence suddenly seemed possible to even the working-class people in Mérida.”<sup>3</sup> Yucatecan society was changing dramatically and people saw the attainability of great wealth. In 1916 for example, henequen received a 53 percent return on capital invested, and some of the wealthier henequeneros received around a 600 percent return on capital.<sup>4</sup> This incredible accumulation of wealth allowed elites to live in immense luxury and keep up with the lighting and plumbing of the time. They had houses at their haciendas with multiple pools, marble surfaces, and porcelain chamber pots.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Mexico. The Insurrection in Cuba—Movements in Mexico to Assist It—Condition of the Country—The New York and Vera Cruz Steamers,” *New York Herald*, January 28, 1869, accessed September 6, 2013, [infoweb.newsbank.com](http://infoweb.newsbank.com).

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence James Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883: The Roots of Dependence in a Mexican Region” Volumes 1 and 2 (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1981), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Heather McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 135, accessed September 6, 2013, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/laddbates/Doc?id=10492223&ppg=150>.

<sup>4</sup> Sterling Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” in *A Land Between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico*, ed. Christopher R. Boyer (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 159.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Chim Toom, Tour of Hacienda Yaxcopoil, Yaxcopoil, Yucatán, December 17, 2013.

These elites created a new wealthy class of Yucatán composed of henequeneros, investors, merchants, bankers, and dealers.<sup>6</sup> Many of them were recently wealthy and often were not careful in their investments, which created debt. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the economy of Yucatán was based on credit. Henequen prices and the confidence in the security of continued revenue caused henequeneros to invest substantially in capital and spend on luxury goods.<sup>7</sup> Since the main focus of the economy was on the export of henequen, the entirety of society was dependent on henequen prices.<sup>8</sup> This dependence, which would eventually prove disastrous, was especially evident when there were fluctuations in prices as the entire economy felt the effects.

Modernization and the expansion of the Yucatecan henequen industry also brought changes to land organization and industrial labor opportunity. Urbanization was part of the modernization process in Yucatán as cities were expanding and absorbing smaller towns and communities so that society as a whole would become more “modern.” Henequen haciendas also expanded their holdings into smaller communities. While this initially provided labor for some rural residents, they would quickly discover that the labor was challenging and binding. In addition, new taxes, loss of land, and new political districts resulted in unrest among rural communities and there are reports of some violence ensuing as a response.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the increased demand for henequen laborers, expanding haciendas also needed blacksmiths and carpenters to work on machinery in case there were problems. As discussed in the previous chapter, henequen machinery became more modern over the late 1800s with inventions of new defibering machines. In order for henequeneros not to have to worry about the expenses of

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<sup>6</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 159.

<sup>7</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 735.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 773.

<sup>9</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 139-40.

importing foreign parts for the machines, they employed blacksmiths and carpenters.<sup>10</sup> Many of these professionals had shops at specific haciendas and some lived on the haciendas, so they could be easily accessible should there be a machinery malfunction.<sup>11</sup> While there were very distinct elite and labor classes, the expansion of henequen also led to the development of a middle class. They played an important role in the henequen-based society as they provided services to elites and contributed to the operation of the industry.

This chapter will examine the massive impact henequen had on every aspect of Yucatecan society from the latter decades of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. It will show how the successful and expanding henequen industry allowed for great wealth and advancements in Yucatán. It will examine how elites, such as Olegario Molina, became millionaires and took control of society. The influx of revenue from henequen allowed elites to create a movement to beautify and modernize the city of Mérida in order for it to become a more worldly city. This modernization also included a focus on the expansion of railroads, ports, education, and banks. This chapter will then discuss the more negative side of modernization efforts in Yucatán by examining the labor structure on the henequen haciendas. Many refer to the henequen era in Yucatán as the “era of slavery,” and this chapter will show how henequen laborers were bound to haciendas by debt and were treated abysmally.<sup>12</sup> This chapter will argue that there were two sides to modernization in Yucatán: elites and cities profited with wealth and advancements, but this modernization was backward for laborers who were stuck in slave-like conditions on haciendas without freedom. This chapter will conclude by

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<sup>10</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 506.

<sup>11</sup> Chim Toom, *Tour of Hacienda Yaxcopoil*.

<sup>12</sup> Allen Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 2.

examining President Porfirio Díaz's visit to Yucatán in order to highlight the extreme inequality of these modernization efforts.

### *The Elites of Yucatán*

Although the economic focus on henequen had begun some time earlier, it was not until the 1870s and 1880s that elites began to accumulate large fortunes.<sup>13</sup> The profits from henequen allowed hacienda owners to obtain power and elevated status in society. Over the last part of the nineteenth century, these elites governed most of the wealth and land of Yucatán and worked with foreign companies to build railroads and fix the exchange rate of henequen fiber.<sup>14</sup> While foreign companies played a small role in the henequen industry, for the most part, the henequen industry was entirely Yucatecan, which allowed profits to remain in the area. There was not a need for foreign investment and foreign companies did not have holdings in the state, which allowed Yucatecan elites to obtain substantial revenues.<sup>15</sup>

The henequen era elites were a fairly homogeneous group. They were often white and of Spanish descent, and typically came from one of two categories: either they were born into Creole families who were well-off before the development of the henequen industry and adapted to the changing economic climate, or they used the import and export trade of henequen to obtain new wealth.<sup>16</sup> Many of the elites were part of the first category, and came from families that had been wealthy and powerful during the colonial time.<sup>17</sup> Although the Yucatán government was

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<sup>13</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 539.

<sup>14</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 136.

<sup>15</sup> Mira Wilkins, "An Alternative Approach," in *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930*, ed. Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), 201.

<sup>16</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 64; Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, Facultad de Arquitectura, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras* (Bogotá, Colombia: Escala, 1996), 31-32; Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 23.

<sup>17</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 63.



under liberal control during this period, as discussed earlier, the state was careful to protect the interests of the elites to preserve the industry and revenue.<sup>18</sup> Without the henequen industry, it was likely that Yucatán would return to poverty, so the government believed it necessary to protect those who brought wealth to the state. This gave elites great power in society and they invested in railroads, banks, and other industries, which gave them even greater power and wealth.<sup>19</sup> Many elites lived in Mérida and were involved in politics, communications, and commerce as well.<sup>20</sup> They lived in stone mansions, enjoyed French lessons, and owned pianos.<sup>21</sup>

Elites had insatiable appetites for land and wealth, and sought to do what was necessary to increase their fortunes. Early on in the henequen era, elites wanted the abolition of *ejidos*, or communal Mayan lands, so they could expand their plantations.<sup>22</sup> If land was made private, they would have the opportunity to purchase it. When reform laws in 1856 divided up communal lands among village leaders, henequen elites were quick to buy the land from the Mayans. The impoverished Mayans saw the sale of their land as a way to earn some money and provide for their families.<sup>23</sup> However, this led to elites becoming even more wealthy and powerful. By 1907, there were nearly as many millionaires in Mérida as in the rest of Mexico combined. According to a 1907 Kansas City newspaper, one out of every 2,000 inhabitants in Mérida was a millionaire.<sup>24</sup> Many hacienda owners lived lavishly in Mérida and left their haciendas in the

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<sup>18</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 135.

<sup>19</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 63.

<sup>20</sup> Piedad Peniche Rivero, "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero: A Transition to Capitalism in Yucatán, Mexico," in *The Lowland Maya Area: Three Millennia at the Human-Wildland Interface*, ed. Arturo Gómez-Pompa, Michael F. Allen, Scott L. Fedick et al. (New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 2003), 572.

<sup>21</sup> Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 43; G.M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 33.

<sup>22</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 448.

<sup>23</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 124.

<sup>24</sup> "Merida's Many Millionaires," *Kansas City Star*, April 22, 1907, accessed November 10, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com.

hands of overseers, only visiting once in a while.<sup>25</sup> Elites also had a high standard of living and often purchased foreign goods and followed trends in foreign fashion.<sup>26</sup>

While there were many elites that were successful in the henequen industry, twenty to thirty families of Mérida became known as the “*casta divina*,” or “divine caste.” These families had incredible power and were said to have had control of 80 to 90 percent of the henequen industry.<sup>27</sup> In other states in Mexico, it was common for there to be one family with substantial power, but in Yucatán, the power was divided up among the members of the *casta divina*.<sup>28</sup> They were the people who were responsible for a majority of the investment in Yucatán and owned a majority of the land in the state. The three hundred or four hundred henequeneros who were not part of the *casta divina* were still powerful, but often faced financial challenges.<sup>29</sup> Due to the volatility of henequen prices and the seven year delay in harvest from initial planting, many henequeneros were in debt.<sup>30</sup> They also saw the profits of the henequen industry as endless, and therefore borrowed substantial amounts of money on the future success of the crop.<sup>31</sup> These henequeneros also became accustomed to excessive luxury and spent beyond their means to live fancy lifestyles.<sup>32</sup>

Eulalio Casares was one example of a wealthy henequenero who ended up bankrupt due to poor investments and lavish spending. When the Yucatecan government divided up the *ejido*

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<sup>25</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 445-6.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 606.

<sup>27</sup> Robert M. Buffington and William E. French, “The Culture of Modernity,” in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, eds. Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 419.

<sup>28</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 150.

<sup>29</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Allen Wells, “Henequen,” in *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930*, ed. Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), 111.

<sup>31</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 65.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 144.

lands, Casares purchased 400 hectares from community leaders.<sup>33</sup> He gained a prominent role in society and loaned money to the Mérida-Valladolid railroad project.<sup>34</sup> According to Allen Wells in *Yucatán's Gilded Age*, Casares had many large parties and even bought a tram car from North America in 1893 to transport his guests.<sup>35</sup> While Casares is just one example of a henequenero who relied on the future success of henequen, many other henequeneros who were not part of the *casta divina* also had the same fate. In 1895, Casares was forced to file for bankruptcy because his henequen revenues could not keep up with the debt he had accumulated.<sup>36</sup> Many times, henequeneros became indebted to members of the *casta divina*, and as a result, the *casta divina* families would earn even more money and gain property when the indebted henequeneros went bankrupt. This, and the fact that the wealthiest henequeneros, such as Molina, were in control of the government and trade, was frustrating for many hacienda owners.<sup>37</sup> As the *casta divina* gained more wealth and holdings, it became more challenging for other henequeneros to gain prominent positions in society.

### *The Rise of Molina*

Olegario Molina was the most powerful member of the *casta divina*, and was sometimes known as the “King of Henequen Kings.”<sup>38</sup> During the early to mid-nineteenth century, the Molina family was not wealthy.<sup>39</sup> The Spanish-descended family was originally a family of tobacco farmers in Campeche until their plantations were harmed during the Caste War and by

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>37</sup> Allen Wells, “Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen,” in *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000*, eds. Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 315.

<sup>38</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 67.

people with different political opinions. Unlike many other residents of Campeche, the Molinas did not support its secession from Yucatán. After their crops were sabotaged again in 1857, the Molina family decided to flee to Mérida for a new beginning.<sup>40</sup> Olegario Molina received a law degree in 1866 and was appointed as the director of the Literary Institute in Mérida. Molina was a liberal, and when the liberals won elections at this time, they appointed Molina to this position.<sup>41</sup> Some years later, Molina obtained an engineering degree and began to work as a railroad engineer in Yucatán.<sup>42</sup> He worked on the railroad from Mérida to Progreso in 1874, which was a crucial project for henequen exports.<sup>43</sup>

Joining the Mérida-Progreso railroad project gave Molina the opportunity to gain substantial power. The project was one of José Rendón Peniche, who owned an import and export company. As an ambitious businessman, Molina established a partnership with him, and once he earned substantial revenue, he bought out the business in 1887 and created Olegario Molina and Company.<sup>44</sup> The new company allowed Molina to work with North American importers, as well as sell equipment, extend lines of credit, and offer loans and mortgages. It was at this time that Molina began to establish his power in the henequen industry because he was extending many loans to henequeneros. When they were unable to pay their debts, they were forced to relinquish their property to Molina.<sup>45</sup> As a result, Molina was able to gain henequen lands little by little and Molina and Company began to earn profits. By 1903, Molina had gained significant amounts of land and wealth.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 68-9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 74.

As a powerful and well-known man in Yucatán, Molina ran as the liberal candidate for governor and won. He occupied the role of governor from 1902 to 1908.<sup>47</sup> As governor, Molina believed it was his job to create a “modern Caribbean capital,” and began many construction projects.<sup>48</sup> Although he still retained substantial control in the henequen trade as governor, he also oversaw the state’s social, economic, and political life and was often known as “*el constructor*,” or “the constructor.”<sup>49</sup> Like many other elites of Yucatán, Molina wanted the area to be modernized and gain a more prominent position in the world. He donated large amounts of his own money, and even his first year salary as governor, to projects that would make Mérida into a modern world city. As governor, Molina achieved success in building a hospital, an asylum, a theater, and a more modern prison system.<sup>50</sup> He also focused on combating diseases and protecting the environment from deforestation.<sup>51</sup> During his time as governor, Molina also served as President Díaz’s Minister of Development, which shows Molina’s dedication to development and modernization. Molina symbolized Díaz’s mission to modernize Mexico through his success and policies, and although Yucatán was somewhat autonomous from the central government, Díaz saw Molina’s Yucatán as one of his great successes.

As the most wealthy and prominent henequenero, Molina used his power to gain the governorship of Yucatán. As henequeneros went into debt, Molina obtained even more land and continued to profit from his henequen plantations. By 1913, during the time of International Harvester, Molina owned 247,000 acres of land on the Yucatán peninsula and was in control of 75 percent of the henequen trade.<sup>52</sup> Molina’s family also became successful and powerful:

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<sup>47</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 160-1.

<sup>48</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 142.

<sup>49</sup> Buffington and French, “The Culture of Modernity,” 414.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 154; Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 51.

<sup>52</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 161.

several of Molina's sons-in-law made successful investments and purchased large henequen plantations. Avelino Montes, a son-in-law of Molina, was in charge of Molina's export house during his time as governor, and eventually became one of the most powerful men in the railroad projects of Yucatán.<sup>53</sup> While Molina is one extreme example of henequen industry success, it is evident that henequen brought great power and wealth to Yucatán. Molina not only controlled a major portion of the henequen trade, but also controlled the government for a period of time. Other henequeneros were very involved in politics and development as well, and this was only possible as a result of the wealth accumulated from henequen production.

The Peón Family was another family in the *casta divina* that gained immense success from the henequen industry. While Molina followed the pattern of elites who gained success by joining the import and export business, the Peón family was wealthy before the establishment of the henequen industry. They were a more typical Latin American elite family of Spanish descent who owned large tracts of land. As henequen became a major industry of Yucatán, the Peóns adapted their lands to grow henequen and were able to profit substantially.<sup>54</sup> Unlike Molina, the Peóns were not able to gain power in the government because they were conservatives at a time of liberal control.<sup>55</sup> However, several members of the Peón family were on the board for the development of railroads, and they invested heavily in railroads.<sup>56</sup> They also provided credit to henequeneros and received lands when the henequeneros could not pay their debts. Like many other henequeneros of the time, the Peóns purchased former *ejido* lands from Mayan communities.<sup>57</sup> While the Peóns were not as active politically, they gained substantial control in

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<sup>53</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 75.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-80.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-9.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

many other aspects of society, and are another example of successful elites who gained even more wealth and power through henequen.

Although there was a previously established class of elites in Yucatán before the onset of the henequen industry, henequen brought even more power and wealth to many elites. In addition, there was a new wealthy class of people who had not been members of the upper class before the henequen era. Olegario Molina is one such example of a man who used henequen to gain exceptional power and wealth. Although he was known as the “henequen king,” many others also found new opportunities in the henequen industry, and were able to invest and obtain government positions. While there were many henequeneros who did not invest wisely and became indebted to powerful figures such as Molina, for the most part, henequen brought immense wealth to the elites of Yucatán and created a new class of wealthy hacienda owners who became accustomed to living lives of luxury.

### *Henequen Brings “Progress and Modernization” to Yucatán*

With the great influx of revenue to Yucatán as a result of the henequen boom, efforts to modernize society began. Elites wanted to make their society a more modernized capitalistic society based on more “modern” nations such as the United States. They wanted to prove to the world that their state had become part of the world economy, and that they could construct a worldly city. Under President Díaz, between 1877 and 1911, there were many efforts to modernize Mexico. In Yucatán, the government had the means to modernize from the success of henequen, and began to construct railroads, telegraph lines, and hospitals. There was also a focus on beautifying public spaces.<sup>58</sup> A new public health system and new sanitation services

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<sup>58</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 134.

were put into place that would show Yucatán's advancement.<sup>59</sup> During the early years of the twentieth century, elites undertook large measures to combat malaria, typhus, and yellow fever.<sup>60</sup> In 1906, Governor Molina even launched a campaign to fight against yellow fever in Yucatán.<sup>61</sup> However, for the most part, modernization efforts were only realized in urban areas, since elites did not concentrate on rural areas and haciendas.<sup>62</sup> The goal was to convert the cities, especially the capital city of Mérida, into modern, clean, and healthy places to live and conduct business.<sup>63</sup> They believed that this would attract the attention of the rest of the world, whereas it was not necessary to modernize the rural areas because they would not be in the limelight.

Elites were focused on agricultural and industrial modernization, and believed the state should direct the economy. Private property was important as well for the success of the state.<sup>64</sup> While Yucatán was somewhat removed from the central government, President Díaz's liberal policies and way of thinking still reached Yucatán.<sup>65</sup> Liberalist ideals were not present on haciendas, but the ideas of freedom, private property, and laissez-faire capitalism were ever-present in the government of Yucatán. Many elites also believed that if Molina and other members of the *casta divina* were successful, the rest of Yucatán would prosper as well.<sup>66</sup> The success of henequen propelled Yucatán into the spotlight and became a model of modernization for Díaz.<sup>67</sup> Even though Yucatán often considered itself separate from the rest of Mexico, Molina worked with Díaz, and both governments essentially possessed the same political ideals. Díaz wanted Mexico to become a modern world power, and he believed that the success of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>64</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 42.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 49.

<sup>67</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 134.



henequen could help him achieve this goal. Molina and the elites of Yucatán wanted to establish Yucatán in the world economy as well, and henequen was their way of doing so.

Education was also important to elites in modernizing their society. While hacienda laborers did not receive much education aside from the production of henequen, other residents in Yucatán saw an expansion of education. In 1857, there were twenty-one public primary schools with less than 2,000 students, but by 1883, there were 225 schools with over 8,000 students.<sup>68</sup> In addition, secondary and professional education advanced. By 1884, Yucatán was the state with the fifth most secondary and professional schools in Mexico.<sup>69</sup> Despite all of the increases in education, the literacy rate was still low due to the many laborers on haciendas.<sup>70</sup> The overall expansion of education shows the effort by elites to create a more modernized society with an educated citizenry. The revenues from henequen allowed the government to build schools and hire teachers, and they felt that education was necessary to become a more modern society.

As stated earlier, a goal of Molina was to create a modernized Caribbean capital city, and aside from building infrastructure to support henequen, modernizing Mérida was a major focus of elites. Throughout the henequen era, Mérida's streets were paved and the city received an entirely new sanitary system.<sup>71</sup> Mérida also became the new economic center of Yucatán: it became the center for commerce, finance, and transportation.<sup>72</sup> Many new stores opened and professionals migrated to open offices.<sup>73</sup> According to Heather McCrea, the goal of henequeneros was to increase production, but the main goal of the Yucatán government was to

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<sup>68</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 608.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 610.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 45.

<sup>72</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 646.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 648.

beautify Mérida to give Yucatán a new and improved image in the world.<sup>74</sup> The state government also focused on developing enterprise with incentives to expand the market and stimulate investment, production, and trade.<sup>75</sup> However, all of this expansion focused specifically on henequen. As discussed in Chapter Two, the development of industry in Yucatán was solely based on henequen, and all of these economic efforts were no different. Aside from the beautification of the city to attract foreign attention, elites mainly catered to the needs of the henequen industry in the modernization of Mérida.<sup>76</sup>

In developing Mérida, Molina and other elites wanted to prove to foreign capitalists that their city had become a city with a place in the world.<sup>77</sup> What before was a city of poverty, war, and illness became an affluent and beautiful city.<sup>78</sup> The street Paseo de Montejo was constructed with stately, stone mansions for the elite henequeneros.<sup>79</sup> The government contracted a Philadelphia-based company to build sewers and byways in Mérida.<sup>80</sup> Mérida became the first city in Mexico to be completely lit by electricity, it had horse-drawn street cars to transport visitors and elites, and streets were numbered scientifically.<sup>81</sup> Many new gardens and roundabouts were installed to increase the visual appeal of the city.<sup>82</sup> Efforts of the government and elites proved successful as European and American travelers began to take notice that Mérida had become a more modern city.<sup>83</sup> In addition, when President Díaz visited Mérida in

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<sup>74</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 142.

<sup>75</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 649.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 142.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 33.

<sup>80</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 154.

<sup>81</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 43.

<sup>82</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras*, 37.

<sup>83</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 143.

1906, he was impressed, enthusiastic, and referred to Yucatán as an “integral part of the rapidly modernizing Mexican nation.”<sup>84</sup>

Elites wanted to promote the culture of Yucatán as well to attract the interest of foreigners. During the mid- to late-nineteenth century, Yucatán began to promote its arts, crafts, industry, and agriculture to the world. For example, in 1865, when Empress Carlota visited Yucatán, she was presented with an exhibition of elements of Yucatecan culture.<sup>85</sup> In addition, Yucatán held an exhibition in 1879 with over five hundred exhibits of local Yucatecan products.<sup>86</sup> Finally, Yucatán participated in many fairs in the United States and Europe to show its local products.<sup>87</sup> This shows that the state government made a huge effort to prove to the world that Yucatán had become a modern region in the world. These exhibitions show that Yucatán was integrating into the world community, as well as the world economy. Henequen allowed Yucatán the means and opportunity to gain recognition on the world stage, and elites took advantage of this to promote Yucatán, especially its capital city, to the developed world.

Most of the other modernization that occurred in Yucatán was to promote and expand the henequen industry. In order to facilitate henequen exports, it became necessary to construct a system of transportation that could work well enough to keep up with world demand. Before the construction of railroads, there were only narrow trails and paths.<sup>88</sup> By 1890, however, Yucatán had more rail construction than another state in Mexico.<sup>89</sup> Two years later, Yucatán was second only to the Federal District in the modernization of its railroad lines.<sup>90</sup> Many new roads and railroads linked the towns and cities of Northwestern Yucatán to assist with the transport of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>85</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 671.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 671-2.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>89</sup> Evans, “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950,” 163.

<sup>90</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 138.

henequen. There were new rail transportation routes between Mérida and Motul, Valladolid, Izamal, Sotuta, and Ticul.<sup>91</sup> By the 1920s, there were about 4,500 kilometers of rail lines in the Northwestern region of Yucatán.<sup>92</sup> Some tramcars were American-made, and some of the rails were from French manufacturers.<sup>93</sup> In order to function as a modern, capitalistic society, it was necessary for Yucatán to have the supporting infrastructure. Railroads were cheaper, faster, and more reliable than the previously established Maya *truc* system.<sup>94</sup> The development of railroads allowed Yucatán to more easily transport henequen to the ports.

While they were built specifically for the henequen industry, railroads also provided employment and helped transport imports to Yucatán. Even though labor opportunities were plentiful with the henequen haciendas, railroads provided another source of employment and income.<sup>95</sup> The development of the henequen industry allowed the railroad industry to prosper as well, and helped make Yucatán a more modernized region with modern transportation. Railroads also provided an easier way to transport goods coming from other regions of Mexico or the world.<sup>96</sup>

Most of the railroads were located in the Northwest, where henequen was mainly grown. However, in 1897, there was a movement to build railroads in Southeastern Yucatán. Molina and three members of the Peón family were on the board of directors for these new railroads.<sup>97</sup> The efforts never proved fruitful, though. Many people believed that the railroads were

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<sup>91</sup> Anthony Andrews, Rafael Burgos Villanueva, and Luis Millet Cámara, "The Henequen Ports of Yucatán's Gilded Age," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16, no. 1 (March 2012): 28, accessed September 6, 2013, <http://search.ebscohost.com>.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 515.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 663.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 668.

<sup>97</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 99.

unnecessary and would take away henequen laborers.<sup>98</sup> It is important to note that the Southeastern rails would have been the first rail system built that would not provide direct benefit to henequen.<sup>99</sup> For this reason, they ended up failing, because many people did not see the purpose of constructing railroads that would not benefit the most profitable industry. This reinforces how dedicated Yucatán was to henequen, and only henequen.

The expansion of the henequen industry also led to the development of ports to facilitate the export of henequen. Progreso was the major port that was built during the henequen era. During the 1840s, people began to discuss that the Sisal port was too far from Mérida. Therefore, Simon Peón and Juan Miguel Castro came up with the idea to build a more accessible port.<sup>100</sup> The government of Yucatán had tried to promote settlement in Sisal, but to no avail.<sup>101</sup> In addition, by *truc*, goods took thirty-six hours to reach Sisal from Mérida, as opposed to twelve hours to reach Progreso.<sup>102</sup> The development of Progreso was halted during the Caste War, and it was not until the henequen industry became significantly more successful that Progreso finally opened in 1871.<sup>103</sup> In 1870, the Yucatecan government had moved the customs house from Sisal to Progreso.<sup>104</sup> A railroad to Progreso, funded by the state and federal government, began construction in 1875, and was completed in 1881.<sup>105</sup> Progreso quickly became the major port for shipping henequen to the United States.<sup>106</sup> By 1900, it was the second largest volume export port

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>100</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 245.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 652.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 658.

<sup>106</sup> Andrews, Burgos Villanueva, and Millet Cámara, "The Henequen Ports of Yucatán's Gilded Age," 28.

in Mexico.<sup>107</sup> It is evident that Progreso represents progress and modernization in Yucatán as a result of the henequen industry as it became a main port in Mexico in less than thirty years.

While Progreso was the main port developed as a result of the henequen industry, other ports were also created to support henequen exports. Some of these ports were constructed simply for henequen exports, while some were converted from previously established fishing ports. San Crisanto, for example, was originally a fishing port later converted to export henequen.<sup>108</sup> Many ports were also created to export henequen to the port of Progreso, from where it would usually be shipped to the United States. Four ports were specialized for shipping to Progreso and they were linked to haciendas by railroads.<sup>109</sup> Elite hacienda owners often owned the smaller ports and many were responsible for transforming them from fishing ports to henequen ports.<sup>110</sup>

Overall, there was a massive effort to develop ports during the henequen industry to make exporting as easy and profitable as possible. The influx of revenue allowed the government and elites to construct these ports to facilitate henequen exports. According to Anthony Andrews, Rafael Burgos Villanueva, and Luis Millet Cámara, who studied the development of Yucatecan ports, ports represent the “massive investment of labor and capital at the height of the henequen industry.”<sup>111</sup> Ports were crucial to the expansion of the henequen industry and they were successful in reducing transportation costs to maximize henequen profits.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, the construction of these ports as a result of the henequen industry created

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<sup>107</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 36.

<sup>108</sup> Andrews, Burgos Villanueva, and Millet Cámara, “The Henequen Ports of Yucatán’s Gilded Age,” 28.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

a more modernized economy in Yucatán and allowed it to become a major center of import and export.

Before the henequen industry took hold in Yucatán, there were no banks in existence in the state. For that reason, loans to henequeneros typically came from New York banks or wealthy elites. It was challenging for many henequeneros to find credit because so much was required for the expansion of henequen plantations. However, in 1882, the *Banco Nacional Mexicano*, or the Mexican National Bank, was the first bank to open in Yucatán, due to the demand for credit.<sup>113</sup> Seven years later, the first Yucatecan banks opened to provide credit to henequeneros. In 1889, *Banco Yucateco* and *Banco Mercantil de Yucatán* were founded.<sup>114</sup> In order to support the expansion of the henequen industry, it was necessary to establish banks in Yucatán that could provide credit to henequeneros. The economy became based heavily on credit, which shows that banks aided the growth of industry. Even though the establishment of banks was not as prevalent as railroads or ports, it demonstrates another way in which the henequen industry helped modernize the state of Yucatán.

### *Yucatán's "Era of Slavery": Hacienda Labor during the Henequen Era*

While elites were enjoying their wealth and luxurious amenities, the conditions that hacienda laborers faced reflected a darker side of this modernization as workers were subject to strenuous labor and often bound to haciendas by debt. There was such a great demand for hacienda laborers in Yucatán that many rural community members, mostly Mayan, sought work on haciendas. The modernization of Yucatecan society had a very different effect on the hacienda laborers; while elites were prospering and developing society, laborers were stuck in a

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<sup>113</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 527.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

backward slave-like system on haciendas. Since they did not often venture away from their haciendas, they were stuck in an ancient system and unable to benefit from the changing society. While elites relied on their labor to modernize society, henequen workers were essentially slaves as a result of the debt peonage system. The beautification of Mérida and development of railroads and ports all came at the expense of these impoverished hacienda laborers.

In 1840, one-third of people lived on haciendas and ranchos in Yucatán, but by 1910, 75 percent of rural Yucatecan residents were living on haciendas.<sup>115</sup> The division of labor on haciendas before the henequen era continued into the henequen era as well. As stated earlier, many hacienda owners lived in Mérida and only visited their holdings once in a while. As a result, they left administrators, overseers, and foremen in charge of managing tasks and laborers. These people were often given the task of disciplining laborers, and they tended to do so harshly.<sup>116</sup> After those in charge of haciendas, labor was divided into categories. Most workers were known as “*luneros*,” which came from the term for laborers who only worked one day a week on haciendas to pay their debts.<sup>117</sup> They were then divided into “*solteros*,” or bachelors, who were responsible for weeding and harvesting henequen; “*muchachos*,” or boys, who tended to fiber and plant nurseries, and transported waste; and “*reservados*,” who were older men responsible for cleaning the hacienda and fields.<sup>118</sup> No matter which category a worker was in, labor was very demanding and challenging and overseers were cruel.

As a result, many refer to the henequen era as “*la época de esclavitud*,” or the “era of slavery,” in Yucatán. There was, and still is among scholars, a debate about whether the labor system of Yucatán was one of slavery. Many writings and reports of the time discuss whether or

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<sup>115</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 91; Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 27.

<sup>116</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 75.

<sup>117</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 155.

<sup>118</sup> Peniche Rivero, “From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero,” 574.



not slavery existed.<sup>119</sup> While it may not have been slavery in a literal sense, the labor system in Yucatán could be seen as a form of modern, capitalist slavery. It is important to note, as will be examined more in-depth later, that many laborers were not free to leave haciendas until their debts were paid, which in many cases was impossible. Therefore, they were subject to endure the cruelty of the overseers on haciendas. Violence was prevalent, and accepted, on haciendas. The secretary of Yucatán's henequen commission, Felipe Cantón, was quoted as saying that it was necessary to beat workers to make them do their jobs.<sup>120</sup> A Yucatecan proverb of the time said, "*los indios no oigan sino por las nalgas*," which means something like "the Natives [Maya] do not listen except with their backsides," implying that it was necessary to beat them into compliance.<sup>121</sup> As early as the 1870s, laborers began to protest their rights being taken away. Conflicts and violence ensued as *luneros* were beaten and overseers were not paying wages.<sup>122</sup>

Many other characteristics of labor in henequen-era Yucatán reflect tendencies of societies that have instituted slavery. In 1882, the government of Yucatán passed an agricultural law (*ley agrícola*), which stated that if a worker escaped and another hacienda owner protected him, that hacienda owner could be subject to arrest.<sup>123</sup> Laborers often escaped due to the harsh conditions, which gave rise to bounty hunters in Yucatán.<sup>124</sup> Newspapers included advertisements for laborers who had run away from their haciendas, and all laborers were required to bring identification when travelling away from the hacienda where they were employed.<sup>125</sup> Some workers were even locked up at night so that they would not escape.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 60-1.

<sup>120</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 139.

<sup>121</sup> Channing Arnold and Frederick J. Tabor Frost, "Porfirio Díaz Visits Yucatán," in *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002), 274.

<sup>122</sup> Peniche Rivero, "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero," 580.

<sup>123</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 157.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

While many elites claimed that there was no slavery in Yucatán, the actual situation had a strong resemblance to slavery. *Luneros* even often conspired to kill hacienda owners because they were so unhappy and treated poorly.<sup>127</sup>

In addition to the harsh treatment by overseers and lack of freedom, the rasping and harvesting of henequen fiber was tedious and backbreaking labor.<sup>128</sup> Health problems and injuries were prevalent, but workers did not have access to medical treatment. Henequen is a rough, spiny plant, and its continued contact with skin often caused irritation and eczema among laborers. The challenging manual labor led to many fractured or broken arms and legs. In addition, carrying henequen leaves in the sun and heat of Yucatán was especially grueling.<sup>129</sup> Between 1858 and 1881, an estimated 3,000 workers were killed or maimed while operating henequen machinery.<sup>130</sup> To worsen the situation, public health agents ignored hacienda conditions and doctors were rarely present.<sup>131</sup> Despite the modernization efforts in society, healthcare on haciendas was virtually non-existent, so modernity was mainly limited to spaces outside of the hacienda system. Conditions were unsanitary, and diarrhea was the leading cause of death, especially among infants.<sup>132</sup> Poor diets and the lack of sufficient food led to starvation for many laborers, and suicide was not uncommon.<sup>133</sup> Doctors and medicines were only present on larger haciendas, and even then, they were not sufficient to treat the quantity of health issues faced by laborers.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras*, 22.

<sup>127</sup> Peniche Rivero, "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero," 580.

<sup>128</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 137.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 499.

<sup>131</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relation: Epidemics, Public Health, and State Building in Yucatan, Mexico, 1847-1924*, 154.

<sup>132</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 170.

<sup>133</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras*, 22; Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 170.

<sup>134</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 77.

Despite the denial of slavery by Yucatecan elites, two travel writers journeyed to Yucatán and reported their findings. Channing Arnold and Frederick J. Tabor Frost were British writers who claimed, after their trip, that “Yucatán [was] rotten with afoul slavery” and compared it with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which describes horrific slavery conditions in the United States during the nineteenth century.<sup>135</sup> Arnold and Tabor Frost also reported that “Yucatán [was] governed by a group of millionaire monopolists whose interests [were] identical, banded together to deny all justice to the Indians, who, if need be, [were] treated in a way an Englishman would blush to treat his dog.”<sup>136</sup> Finally, they observed that the Mayan laborers were basically prisoners and that if they were given “freedom” from their work, they would not know what to do. They say that the concept of freedom would be “too dazzling for their poor atrophied eyes.”<sup>137</sup> While these are strong claims, it is evident that conditions for laborers on haciendas in Yucatán were very poor. Although elites were sensitive to the term “slavery,” in actuality, their laborers lived in conditions that appeared close to slavery. The concept of “freedom” described by Arnold and Tabor Frost gives the impression that it was unattainable for laborers who were bound to the haciendas and forced to endure cruel treatment. These laborers were so engrained into the slave system that they did not have the capacity to become a part of the modernizing society. Their role was to allow elites to continue to exploit their labor to develop their own society, separate from the hacienda system.

### *The Accumulation of Debt leads to a Lack of Freedom*

The government of Yucatán and elites believed that slavery did not exist because laborers were earning wages and free to leave haciendas at their will. However, with the establishment of

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<sup>135</sup> Arnold and Tabor Frost, “Porfirio Díaz Visits Yucatán,” 274.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 278.

the credit system on haciendas, laborers quickly became indebted and were then forbidden to leave haciendas. While they were not purchased by hacienda owners as in other cases of slavery, they still became bound to haciendas and were forbidden to leave. During the 1840s, hacienda laborers were paid sixteen to seventeen cents per day in food and wages. They were given a place to live, land to farm, animals, water, and firewood.<sup>138</sup> Throughout the henequen era, laborers at henequen haciendas were given rent-free housing, employment, income, food, land, water, and credit.<sup>139</sup> This was very enticing at the beginning, but credit became dangerous for laborer freedom. In addition, they were paid very minimally, based on the area weeded or amount of leaves harvested, and their food typically consisted of two tortillas, a bowl of beans, and a plate of fish.<sup>140</sup>

Henequeneros created accounts for laborers at their haciendas, which was a manner of social control because the laborers would instantly become indebted to the hacienda owners. There were two types of loan accounts: “*nohoch cuenta*,” which was a large account, and “*chichan cuenta*,” which referred to a small account. *Nohoch cuentas* typically were accounts used for large events, most commonly weddings, baptisms, or funerals.<sup>141</sup> In 1842, the clergy increased the costs of these large events and laborers could no longer afford to pay without borrowing money.<sup>142</sup> Workers also used the large accounts for retirement funds, medical care, and housing expenses.<sup>143</sup> Most haciendas had a hacienda store, or “*tienda de raya*,” which was another instance where credit was used as a manner of control. These stores often had goods that

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<sup>138</sup> Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883,” 259.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>140</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 75; Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras*, 22.

<sup>141</sup> Peniche Rivero, “From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero,” 572; Maureen Ransom Carty, “Prologó,” in *Henequén: Leyenda, historia y cultura* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006), 19.

<sup>142</sup> Ransom Carty, “Prologó,” 19.

<sup>143</sup> Peniche Rivero, “From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero,” 572.

could be purchased in the town center, but they were usually less expensive.<sup>144</sup> However, laborers would purchase items on credit and become more indebted to the hacienda owners. The state government even aided the hacienda owners in their increasing control over laborers. In 1839, a law was passed, which stated that workers could not leave haciendas until their debts were paid off.<sup>145</sup> An Agricultural Law of 1843 prohibited laborers from leaving haciendas during the agricultural year, which also limited the freedom of the workers.<sup>146</sup>

On haciendas, it was very challenging, if not impossible, for laborers to come out of debt, which inhibited their freedom.<sup>147</sup> This was because laborers often accumulated massive amounts of debt; for example, on Hacienda Yaxnic, which was just to the south of Mérida, the average debt of laborers increased by 300 percent between 1876 and 1890.<sup>148</sup> In just two years, between 1878 and 1880, the amount of laborers in debt servitude in Yucatán increased from 16,362 to 20,767.<sup>149</sup> Even though elites claimed that laborers had the right to leave haciendas, realistically, they were accumulating huge debts and were unable to escape. For this reason, many people claim that hacienda workers were enslaved since it was often impossible for them to pay off their debts, which meant they were prohibited from leaving the hacienda at which they were employed. Another consequence of low wages and high debt was the lack of a domestic market in Yucatán. Around 1900, rural laborers were spending half to three-quarters of their incomes on basic staples of life, mainly food.<sup>150</sup> This meant that there was very little demand for goods in Yucatán because the majority of residents could only afford to buy food.<sup>151</sup> While laborers were

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<sup>144</sup> Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen," 312; Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 646.

<sup>145</sup> Peniche Rivero, "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero," 579.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 106.

<sup>148</sup> Peniche Rivero, "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero," 581.

<sup>149</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 468.

<sup>150</sup> Buffington and French, "The Culture of Modernity," 419.

<sup>151</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 39.

treated as if they were enslaved, chronic indebtedness forbade them from leaving the haciendas, and they were therefore subject to slave-like conditions. Debt was another method of control for the henequeneros, and it ensured their continued supply of labor and the laborers' lack of freedom.

### *Families and Women on Haciendas*

As discussed earlier, haciendas were comparable to towns for the laborers since they lived, worked, and shopped at the haciendas. Families of laborers lived with them at the haciendas and often stayed at specific haciendas for many generations.<sup>152</sup> They were rarely separated because henequeneros encouraged family units and marriages so that laborers would work harder in order to support their families.<sup>153</sup> Following the same line of thought, marriages were often prohibited to people outside of the hacienda.<sup>154</sup> Henequeneros wanted to keep laborers loyal to the hacienda, and by having a family there to support, it encouraged workers to stay. When there were deaths, families reformed and joined with other families, and many people became interrelated on haciendas.<sup>155</sup> In this way, the society became more connected, and laborers had stronger reason to remain where they were instead of moving to a different hacienda.

In the family structure, men had the authority since they earned wages. Women had less mobility and remained mainly in the home.<sup>156</sup> It was very rare for women to work with the henequen crop. For the most part, they remained home making tortillas and other food,

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<sup>152</sup> Peniche Rivero, "From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero," 575.

<sup>153</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 103; Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 473-4.

<sup>154</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 77.

<sup>155</sup> Piedad Peniche Rivero, *La historia secreta de la hacienda henequenera de Yucatán: deudas, migración y resistencia Maya 1879-1915* (Mérida: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2010), 84.

<sup>156</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 103.

retrieving water and firewood, making hammocks, and doing other household chores.<sup>157</sup> They were also expected to reproduce to create another generation of henequen laborers for the hacienda owner.<sup>158</sup> While women were often banned from manual labor in the fields, on the rare occasion that they were needed, they were not paid for their work.<sup>159</sup> Since men earned the income, they had the power over the women, who were seen as having the lowest status in hacienda society. The male laborers were subordinate to their overseers, and as a result, their wives were subordinate to them.<sup>160</sup> There were often cases where workers would beat their wives due to frustration from the challenges of their job.<sup>161</sup> Allen Wells refers to this as “misdirected rage” since the laborers felt the need to exercise their authority somewhere, and took out their anger on their wives.<sup>162</sup> Women were also subject to the sexual impulses of men. It was usually permissible for men to follow sexual urges in what Sterling Evans calls a “tyranny of lust.”<sup>163</sup> Sexual subordination was also used to show where power was located on the hacienda. In what was known as the “First Night Ritual,” a henequenero or overseer would invade a laborer’s hut and violate his spouse or daughter to show that he was the ultimate source of power at the hacienda.<sup>164</sup> The power structure was very clear on henequen haciendas. While laborers were treated like slaves, their wives often experienced the effects of their anger and frustration in the form of violence. Women on henequen haciendas had very few rights and were under the control of both their husbands and their husbands’ overseers.

Mayan families were also required to comply with restrictions and did not receive much education. In Yucatán at this time, much of the education was devoted to the expansion and

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<sup>157</sup> Peniche Rivero, “From Milpero and Lunero to Henequenero,” 574; Wells, “Henequen,” 103.

<sup>158</sup> Wells, “Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen,” 314.

<sup>159</sup> Wells, “Henequen,” 103.

<sup>160</sup> Wells, “Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen,” 313.

<sup>161</sup> Wells, “Henequen,” 104.

<sup>162</sup> Wells, “Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen,” 314.

<sup>163</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 59.

<sup>164</sup> Wells, “Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen,” 313-4.

success of the henequen industry, and as a result, laborers were mainly trained in henequen production. Therefore, many people in Yucatán were illiterate.<sup>165</sup> In addition, laborers were required to wear specific types of clothing. They were not allowed to wear foreign styles as only those of European descent could wear imported styles. Finally, workers and their families were required to cut their hair a certain way.<sup>166</sup> This shows the amount of control henequeneros had over the laborers since the laborers had minimal rights and needed to comply with the stringent demands of their overseers. Although hacienda owners claimed slavery was non-existent, their rules and practices bear strong resemblance to a slave society.

### *Imported Labor*

The henequen industry grew at such an exponential rate that it became necessary to import laborers from elsewhere because Yucatán could not supply the amount of workers needed. During the 1880s, elites began to discuss the option of bringing laborers from other parts of Mexico and the world. They first talked about contracting African laborers and Chinese laborers.<sup>167</sup> For the most part, people were supportive of these ideas because it was necessary to hire more workers, but recognized it would be expensive to transport them to Yucatán. In addition, some elites were wary about the possibility of another race war after the experience of the Caste War.<sup>168</sup> In 1882, laborers from elsewhere in Mexico began to migrate to Yucatán to work at henequen plantations.<sup>169</sup> There was a great demand for the laborers, and they were eager to find employment. In addition to hacienda labor, Yucatán needed laborers to build the

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<sup>165</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 40.

<sup>166</sup> Edward H. Moseley, "From Conquest to Independence: Yucatán under Spanish Rule 1521-1821," in *Yucatán: A World Apart*, eds. Edward H. Moseley and Edward D. Terry (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), 103.

<sup>167</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 455.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 456.

<sup>169</sup> Ransom Carty, "Prologó," 19.



railroads that would support henequen exports and during this period, railroad workers were imported from China and Korea, as well as elsewhere in Mexico.<sup>170</sup> However, Chinese and Korean laborers had difficulty with Spanish, did not earn sufficient revenue to send home, and felt like outsiders. In addition, they were not used to the agricultural techniques or harsh climate of Yucatán.<sup>171</sup> Therefore, while there was some importation of labor, for the most part, it was more logical to look for workers closer to Yucatán.

The most prevalent hacienda laborers who were not Yucatecans were the Yaqui natives from central Mexico. In 1880, the government of Sonora had confiscated hundreds of thousands of acres from Yaqui communities due to the strong presence of natural resources on their lands.<sup>172</sup> However, the Yaquis were not passive and resisted the government with great force. The government was spending large amounts of money in wars against the Yaquis, and it was necessary to find a solution.<sup>173</sup> During the early years of the twentieth century, Molina, as the national Minister of Development, facilitated the transport of Yaquis to work as laborers in the henequen industry.<sup>174</sup> Both states benefitted from this arrangement: wars would subside in Sonora with less resistance, and Yucatán would gain a larger labor force. Between 1905 and 1908, 15,700 Yaquis were transported to Yucatán.<sup>175</sup> However, they were not used to the humidity and diseases that were present in Yucatán, and two-thirds of the laborers died during their first year in Yucatán.<sup>176</sup> Some Yaquis tried to escape, but they were often forced into marriage or bought by hacienda owners.<sup>177</sup> Although non-Yucatecan laborers never constituted

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<sup>170</sup> Thomas Sanders, "Henequen: The Structure of Agrarian Frustration," *American Field Staff Reports: North America Series* 5, no. 3 (1977): 2.

<sup>171</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 57.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 69, 71.

<sup>174</sup> Buffington and French, "The Culture of Modernity," 414.

<sup>175</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 77.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

more than ten percent of the labor force, many haciendas came to depend on Yaqui labor because there was such a labor shortage.<sup>178</sup> The Yaqui situation also reflects a slave-like society as many were rounded up and sold to hacienda owners. The conditions for the Yaquis were often as bad, if not worse, than those of the Maya laborers, since they were not used to the climate and were ripped from their homeland.

### *Labor Unrest in Yucatán*

Some reports of Yucatán during the henequen era claim that Maya laborers were passive and accepting of their situation. However, laborers did rebel and used many forms of resistance against henequeneros.<sup>179</sup> Violent events, such as assaults, robberies, and murder, occurred occasionally on haciendas.<sup>180</sup> There were even instances of murders of overseers and hacienda owners. In 1873, for example, twelve laborers joined together and killed Manuel Rodríguez Solís, who was the owner of Hacienda Kancabchén, a hacienda located between Mérida and Cancún.<sup>181</sup> While events like this were not very common, they still show the great unrest of the laborers.

Fortunately for the henequeneros, revolutionary movements never took form because laborers were isolated on their specific haciendas and could not create organized resistance.<sup>182</sup> Nevertheless, there was a constant fear among elites of rebellions and uprisings, and as a result, they increased the presence of police officers and bounty hunters.<sup>183</sup> Elites were also afraid to imprison laborers because they felt it could create the potential for more revolts.<sup>184</sup> However,

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 88, 57.

<sup>179</sup> Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen," 315.

<sup>180</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 478.

<sup>181</sup> Peniche Rivero, *La historia secreta de la hacienda henequenera de Yucatán*, 67.

<sup>182</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 88.

<sup>183</sup> Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 179.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 180.

rebellions tended to be short-lived and did not accomplish a great deal. For the most part, they simply showed the frustrations and dissatisfaction of the laborers.<sup>185</sup> Since organized resistance was not as common, workers tended to express their unhappiness in other ways; in addition to treating women violently, suicides and alcoholism were present on many haciendas.<sup>186</sup> Overall, it is evident that labor conditions on henequen haciendas were abysmal. Laborers were treated poorly and were very unhappy, and many did not have the option to leave as a result of their debts. However, they were unable to organize and form strong resistance since they were isolated on their distinctive haciendas.

Gilbert Joseph poses an interesting question in *Revolution from Without* when he asks: why were laborers treated so poorly if there was a labor shortage?<sup>187</sup> Since there was such a high demand for labor that it was necessary to import workers from other regions of Mexico and the world, it would be logical for henequeneros to treat their workers well. However, Joseph gives possible answers to his question, saying that the henequen market fluctuated frequently and it was necessary to work laborers hard during the peak times to produce and export as much fiber as possible. If laborers were ill or died during less crucial harvests, it would not affect the hacienda, so it was important to use them to the fullest of their abilities. He also suggests that the fact that many henequeneros were also in debt made it impossible for them to provide services they could not afford.<sup>188</sup> The capitalist system in Yucatán created a credit system that was utilized by all classes, and it ultimately created a dangerous system of debt not only among laborers, but among henequeneros as well.

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>186</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 478.

<sup>187</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 78.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

Whatever the reason for poor treatment, it is clear that laborers were treated like slaves and did not have the freedom to escape from their situation. Henequeneros had the power on the hacienda, especially with the credit system, and laborers had no choice but to continue harvesting henequen. While elites of Yucatán deny that there was ever slavery present to this day, the henequen system was verging on a slavery system. Workers were beaten, occasionally worked to death, and forbidden from leaving the haciendas by the law. Even though the elites would show President Díaz a happy and prosperous labor body, it is clear that they had gone well out of their way to hide the atrocious labor conditions that were present on most haciendas.

#### *President Díaz Visits Yucatán*

The incredible success of the henequen industry, but also rumors of slavery in Yucatán, captured the attention of President Porfirio Díaz. He decided he would travel to Yucatán and experience the labor situation for himself; his visit would be the first presidential visit to Yucatán.<sup>189</sup> The success of the henequen industry brought about national attention, and in addition to the labor question, Díaz was also interested in seeing the development of the state due to his strong interest in the modernization of Mexico. Channing Arnold and Frederick Tabor Frost also documented Díaz's visit to Yucatán, in addition to their descriptions of the slave-like conditions. According to Arnold and Tabor Frost, Díaz was not concerned about the welfare of the Mayans, but he was concerned about the image of Mexico and therefore felt it necessary to investigate the accusation of slavery.<sup>190</sup> Elites were worried about Díaz's opinion since Díaz had heard of the existence of slavery, and they wanted to prove to him that the rumor was false.

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<sup>189</sup> Buffington and French, "The Culture of Modernity," 414.

<sup>190</sup> Arnold and Tabor Frost, "Porfirio Díaz Visits Yucatán," 275.

The elites of Yucatán decided that it was necessary to do everything possible to hide the labor conditions from Díaz on his visit. They cleaned the roads and lined them with flowers and hosted huge feasts and banquets. One single dinner cost \$60,000. Some henequeneros even went into debt to distract Díaz from the slave-like labor conditions.<sup>191</sup> The effort by elites to hide the actual conditions on the haciendas shows that they were embarrassed and were aware they were committing wrongdoing. However, the president observed energy, perseverance, and “tranquil happiness” in the faces of laborers he saw.<sup>192</sup> Arnold and Tabor Frost state that the workers had to say they were happy, or else they would suffer severe punishments.<sup>193</sup> While Díaz was not overly concerned with the welfare of the laborers, he was likely relieved to not see first-hand evidence of the slave-like system.

On his tours, Díaz witnessed clean, furnished laborer huts with amenities, such as sewing machines. It was likely that the huts were constructed specifically for Díaz’s visit so that they would appear to be of the highest quality.<sup>194</sup> In addition, the furnishings that were supposedly present in these huts were returned to stores after Díaz returned to Mexico City.<sup>195</sup> While Díaz did not see anything to validate the claim that slavery existed in Mexico, he was sheltered from the atrocious conditions by the elites. It is evident that the elites felt they had something to hide from Díaz, and they went into debt in order to preserve the positive image of Yucatán and the henequen industry.

As a major force of modernization in Latin America, Díaz was interested to see the progress made as a result of the henequen industry. His visit culminates what was the essence of modernization in Yucatán. The modern society – the beautification of Mérida, the wealth, the

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 276-7.

railroads, and the ports – was built on the backs of the laborers who could not even comprehend the concept of freedom. The injustices against laborers were hidden from Díaz because elites knew that the conditions they faced were unacceptable. Elites focused on modernization and development to impress Mexico and the rest of the world, and this became even more evident in Díaz's visit. They were aware, as Díaz likely was as well, that the laborers lived in a slave-like system, and went to every measure possible to cover up what was happening on haciendas. While there was substantial modernization in society, laborers were unable to witness the various changes going on in their state. Their lack of freedom secured their position on haciendas and elites were able to prosper on a world stage at their expense.

### *Conclusion*

The massive changes to the Yucatán peninsula brought about by the prosperity of henequen reflected two sides of modernization: while on the one hand, elites prospered and enhanced their society and infrastructure; on the other, laborers were subject to harsh, slave-like conditions on haciendas. Henequen prices drove the economy, and the desire to maximize profits and become part of the world market was strong among elites. The profits of henequen created a new wealthy class in Yucatán who wanted to modernize society. Elites became incredibly wealthy and were involved in every aspect of society. Many gained immense power and control with their investments and in the government. Olegario Molina is one example of someone who used the henequen industry to accumulate great wealth and power as he was able to obtain significant land and win the governorship. Although there were many henequeneros who were not careful with their investments, Mérida was still home to many millionaires whose fortunes came from henequen.

While laborers were stuck in slave-like conditions on haciendas, Yucatán, and especially Mérida, received many modernization efforts. Mérida received paved roads, new sanitation systems, gardens, and mansions. It became a city that foreigners recognized as a modern world city. The henequen industry also brought about expansions in education and the creation of railroads, ports, and banks. Even though many efforts were to promote the henequen industry, they still show how henequen brought modern changes to Yucatán. The economy became so focused and dependent on henequen that changes in world demand, and changes to the industry brought about by the Mexican Revolution, would eventually result in disaster.

As elites enjoyed their luxuries and amenities with new advancements in society, at the opposite end of the social structure were the laborers. While there is still debate about whether or not slavery existed in Yucatán, it is evident that laborers were treated horribly and did not have many rights. They were beaten and easily became indebted. Because they could not afford to pay off debts, they were often bound to haciendas for life and subject to brutal labor. Labor was in such high demand that henequeneros imported labor from elsewhere in Mexico and the world, but these workers usually faced even greater challenges and many died as a result of the climate and unfamiliar diseases. Rumors of slavery were so serious that President Díaz made a visit to Yucatán to see the situation himself. However, elites put great effort into hiding the true conditions from him, and he left Yucatán feeling that it had become a modernized state with free and content laborers.

Although the Mexican Revolution began in 1910, Yucatán did not begin to see changes to society until 1915. Revolutionary leaders saw the control elites had over society, especially with the formation of International Harvester, as discussed in Chapter Two. They decided to expand rights to laborers and raise the price of henequen. However, the Revolution, which

would become the first challenge to the “modernity” that had been established in Yucatán, ultimately had a negative impact on the henequen industry, and Chapter Four will examine how the wealth and profits of the henequen era would become only a memory of the past.



## Chapter Four

### The Death of King Henequen: Revolution, Competition, and Dependence 1915-1930

#### *Introduction*

In 1915, Yucatán's golden age of henequen began its rapid decline. What had previously been a flourishing, profitable industry for the elites of Yucatán would become only a nostalgic memory. The imagery of this downfall, which began with the onset of the Mexican Revolution, was captured in a 1924 Cleveland Gazette article:

With changing political and labor conditions, the henequen industry has been passing through a serious crisis. Owing to the lack of labor and lack of funds for operation, many of the plantations have been permitted to grow up to weeds and brush. The machinery and equipment on these temporarily abandoned plantations deteriorate more quickly than if used...<sup>1</sup>

While the author of this article states that the plantations were “temporarily” abandoned, many, in fact, would never be used again. The abandoned haciendas scattered throughout Yucatán, with their rusted machinery, would become symbols of a past glory that would be impossible to recover.

Henequen had enjoyed unprecedented success during the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, but a series of events in the second decade of the twentieth century would lead to the downfall of the successful henequen empire in Yucatán. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Yucatán enjoyed 90 percent of the binder twine market, but by the end of the 1930s, Yucatán would only claim 30 percent of the market.<sup>2</sup> This rapid demise of the industry was a result of a variety of factors stemming from the arrival of the Mexican Revolution in Yucatán. The increased presence of the state in the economy and its reforms caused the

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<sup>1</sup> “Sources of Binder Twine: Greater Part of Raw Material is Grown in Yucatan,” *Cleveland Gazette*, July 5, 1924, accessed November 10, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Sanders, “Henequen: The Structure of Agrarian Frustration,” *American Field Staff Reports: North America Series* 5, no. 3 (1977): 3.

United States to seek competing fibers, and Yucatán's exclusive focus on the export of raw fiber would ultimately bring devastation to the state.

At the beginning of the 1900s, elites had remained confident about the future of henequen, and did not predict the downturn in the industry. A Yucatecan authority was quoted in a Kansas City newspaper in 1907 saying that "the stability of the henequen industry [was]...greater than that of any bank."<sup>3</sup> As late as 1910, this great confidence in the industry remained. An article in the Colorado Springs Gazette from September of that year stated that the future of henequen was assured and that "in view of the constantly growing demand for binder twine caused by the vast new acreage being planted to wheat...the future demand for this staple article seems destined to far outstrip the ability of the planters to supply it."<sup>4</sup> This false sense of confidence among elites distracted them from diversifying the industry and pursuing other options. Even though demand for henequen fiber did remain strong throughout World War I, it was evident that the reign of henequen was coming to an end.

World War I was actually the most successful period of the henequen industry, but the great revenue brought in from that period was not enough to stop the ultimate downfall of the industry. During the war, there was a rise in henequen prices and demand for the fiber skyrocketed.<sup>5</sup> This increase in demand resulted from the heightened demand for United States and Canadian grain.<sup>6</sup> In the United States, "wheat will win the war" was a popular catch phrase during wartime as the United States supplied wheat to other allied powers.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Turkish

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<sup>3</sup> "Merida's Many Millionaires," *Kansas City Star*, April 22, 1907, accessed November 10, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com.

<sup>4</sup> "The Story of Sisal: A Mexico Industry Inviting American Enterprise and Capital," *Colorado Springs Gazette*, September 4, 1910, accessed November 10, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com.

<sup>5</sup> Allen Wells, "Henequen," in *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930*, ed. Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), 115.

<sup>6</sup> Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 161.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

forces had blocked the export of wheat from Russia, so there was a huge demand for North American wheat in Europe since its supply had been interrupted. This resulted in a large increase in prices of wheat from the United States.<sup>8</sup> President Woodrow Wilson encouraged farmers to increase their wheat production in order to supply Europe's wheat demand, and by 1919, wheat farms had increased by 13.5 million acres in the Midwest.<sup>9</sup> Between 1890 and 1918, wheat harvests in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming had increased by 176 million bushels. This great increase in wheat production resulted in a massive demand for binder twine from Yucatán.

However, while wheat and henequen were prospering during World War I, the Mexican Revolution had arrived in Yucatán, and the new leaders sought to reform the society that had been established by the henequen industry by increasing labor rights and the role of the state in the economy. The attempt by the new government to preserve the henequen industry while reforming society ultimately proved unsuccessful. The industry had been built on a system of slave-like laborers and powerful elites, and without that structure, it would come unraveled. This caused severe damage to the industry as the United States reacted to revolutionary changes by seeking alternative options so as to reduce its dependence on the seemingly unstable Yucatán. President Wilson and other United States officials realized that sole dependence on Yucatán for fiber could prove disastrous, and the Revolutionary agenda caused them to worry about their continued supply of fiber.<sup>10</sup> In addition, after World War I, Europe was more successful in growing wheat, and no longer needed to import wheat from the United States.<sup>11</sup> Even though henequen realized great success during wartime, the henequen industry machine had begun to

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 91, 107-8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 184.

fall apart. Wilson and others had begun to seek alternatives, and World War I would become the final hurrah of the henequen industry.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the dependence on the United States that developed during the henequen boom would prove detrimental to Yucatán. While the United States sought to reduce its dependence on Yucatecan fiber, Yucatán had no other sources of revenue to explore aside from its export of raw fiber to the United States. It is not until the decline of the henequen industry that it becomes evident how disastrous dependence could be. The economy of Yucatán was solely focused on the production of henequen, and most of the societal and technological advancements presented in Chapters Two and Three were for the sole benefit of the henequen industry. Therefore, the Yucatecan economy and society did not really develop outside of henequen production. The lack of diversification and the inability to switch to a different resource left Yucatán with no other option once there was less demand for henequen fiber. Elites had invested everything in henequen, and when the United States turned to other fiber options, Yucatán would quickly become one of the poorest states in Mexico.

This chapter will examine how the arrival of the Mexican Revolution and its interference in the *Comisión Reguladora del Mercado del Henequén*, or Henequen Market Regulatory Commission, inadvertently changed the structure of the henequen industry in a way that would lead to its downfall. Although the revolutionaries' changes were well-intentioned, Yucatecan elites and the United States did not react well to them due to increased prices, labor costs, and instability in Yucatán. This chapter will then discuss the competition to henequen that increased during this period as a result of substitutes and new technologies. It will also show how reactions to the goals of Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto's socialist government would further influence this demise. Finally, it will examine how Yucatecan dependence on the export of raw

fiber would result in disaster for the economy and society. This chapter will argue that the Mexican Revolution, as a result of its goals to reform Yucatecan society by expanding rights to lower classes, while diminishing the power of elites, was primarily responsible for the downfall of the henequen industry. It will also point to increased competition and strict dependence on henequen fiber as contributing factors to Yucatán's launch into poverty.

*The Mexican Revolution Comes to Yucatán: The Challenge of Reforming Society while Preserving Industry*

According to an elite and educated Yucatecan in an interview on September 7, 1927, the Revolution was the sole cause of the decline of the henequen industry of Yucatán. He said that it was necessary to return to a more conservative government in order for the henequen industry to regain its prior success.<sup>12</sup> The Mexican Revolution arrived in Yucatán in 1915, five years after it had begun in Mexico City. Yucatán had always been somewhat autonomous, and the location of the state and its prosperous economy helped delay the Revolution's arrival.<sup>13</sup> At first, the revolutionaries were liberal constitutionalists who were focused on state intervention in the economy and labor rights.<sup>14</sup> They sought to preserve the henequen industry because they saw how crucial it was to the economy of Yucatán, but it proved impossible to impose their changes and maintain the success of the industry at the same time. Laborers had experienced slave-like conditions, and the revolutionaries sought to give them more rights. This "freeing" of the labor class, in addition to land seizures, angered elites and disrupted the smooth operation of henequen production. In addition, the governmental unrest in Yucatán worried the United States, who began to seek fiber from other sources.

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<sup>12</sup> Manuel Zapata Casares, *Vía-crucis del henequén, 1917-1961* (Mérida, 1964), 117.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

In September 1914, President Venustiano Carranza appointed Eleuterio Ávila as military governor of Yucatán in order to establish the revolutionary presence in Yucatán. Ávila outlawed the slave-like labor system on haciendas and cancelled workers' debts so that they would have the freedom to live where they pleased.<sup>15</sup> However, henequeneros and International Harvester rebelled against Ávila's changes and were able to restore their previous way of life.<sup>16</sup> Yucatán's unwillingness to cooperate with the Revolution angered Carranza, who said that "Yucatán need[ed] to obey," and sent General Salvador Alvarado to Yucatán with troops. Although Alvarado entered with his forces, the Revolution in Yucatán was nonviolent: the only casualties were a few criminals and soldiers who had committed crimes.<sup>17</sup> However, Alvarado enforced land divisions and freedoms, which satisfied laborers, but infuriated elites.<sup>18</sup>

Carranza and Alvarado both saw the importance of the henequen industry and sought to preserve the industry and increase prices of henequen.<sup>19</sup> Alvarado was devoted to his success in Yucatán and wanted to make Yucatán a successful populist and socialist revolutionary movement.<sup>20</sup> He sought to make henequen profits bring greater benefits to Mexico, instead of to the United States and other foreign interests, such as International Harvester.<sup>21</sup> One of his main goals was to interfere in the *Comisión Reguladora del Mercado del Henequén*, and turn it into an organization that focused on bringing the benefits of henequen exports to Yucatán.<sup>22</sup> In order to

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<sup>15</sup> Maureen Ransom Carty, "Prologó," in *Henequén: Leyenda, historia y cultura* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 2006), 19.

<sup>16</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 92.

<sup>17</sup> G.M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 95.

<sup>18</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> Allen Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen," in *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000*, eds. Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 315; Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 93.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 100.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, Facultad de Arquitectura, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras* (Bogotá, Colombia: Escala, 1996), 23.

preserve the henequen industry, Alvarado recognized the importance of defending capitalism and preserving private property, but he also sought to increase the wages of laborers and put an end to their indebtedness.<sup>23</sup> In his efforts to clean up the hacienda structure by increasing labor rights and confiscating excess hacienda lands, Alvarado interfered with the way of life of henequeneros and interrupted their successful production system.<sup>24</sup> It was a great challenge to expand labor rights, while at the same time preserving the henequen industry and its success, and it proved to be impossible.

A book published by the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán states that the Revolution gave way to an anti-henequen production structure as revolutionaries sought to increase labor rights and allow everyone to have access to capitalism and participate in the economy.<sup>25</sup> This shows that the slave-like system of labor in place prior to the Revolution had allowed for the prosperity of henequen, and the expansion of labor freedom was detrimental to henequeneros. Between August 1915 and February 1917, the cost of production of henequen fiber increased by more than double due to the increase in wages for workers. In addition, laborers worked fewer hours, children were prohibited from working, schools were opened, and working conditions improved.<sup>26</sup> These changes were positive for laborers, but henequeneros were forced to pay higher wages and provide more services to the workers. Since these changes occurred during the henequen boom of World War I, henequen was still profitable since demand was so high, but once that demand subsided, it would be impossible for henequeneros to continue supporting labor rights and produce henequen profitably at the same time. While Alvarado did not work to mobilize laborers because he understood their crucial role in henequen production, the expansion

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<sup>23</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 102.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>25</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Comisión Reguladora del Mercado de Henequén, "To the American People," *The Sun*, February 9, 1917, accessed November 10, 2013, [chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov).

of rights still proved burdensome to hacienda owners.<sup>27</sup> In addition, many Yaqui workers who were still in Yucatán were returned to Sonora with the onset of the Revolution, so henequeneros were also unable to exploit their labor.<sup>28</sup>

Aside from increasing rights to laborers, the Revolution also brought land reform to Yucatán. Elites, including the Molina and Peón families, were required to give up lands beginning in 1915.<sup>29</sup> Alvarado did not like the extreme wealth of the *casta divina* and wanted to relieve them of their power over society.<sup>30</sup> He wanted to divide up lands among workers, and he allowed many rural workers to become small landowners.<sup>31</sup> He created some *ejidos* and distributed land among lower classes.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the Constitution of 1917 returned land to the people from whom it had been taken during the expansion of the henequen industry.<sup>33</sup> Although henequen lands were often not part of redistribution, elites were still angered to lose their lands and were less willing to cooperate with Alvarado's wishes.<sup>34</sup> While some henequeneros learned to work with Alvarado, many were against the Revolution and resisted its authority.<sup>35</sup>

One major effect of the Revolution on the henequen industry was that it worried President Wilson and United States officials that they would not receive their henequen supply. Since the United States had come to rely on Yucatecan fiber, fiber manufacturers had a huge influence on Washington.<sup>36</sup> The instability in Yucatán as a result of the Revolution and the great dependence on henequen fiber would encourage the United States to seek other fiber sources. In

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 113.

<sup>28</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Allen Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 88.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 127-8.

<sup>31</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 165.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 130.

<sup>33</sup> Jeffery Brannon and Eric N. Baklanoff, *Agrarian Reform and Public Enterprise in Mexico: The Political Economy of Yucatán* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 126.

<sup>35</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 165, 92.

<sup>36</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras*, 23.



1915, Wilson was worried that the Mexican Revolution would disrupt the fiber supply and sent a gunboat to Yucatán to establish a United States presence.<sup>37</sup> That same year, Carranza imposed a blockade on the port of Progreso in order to prevent the import of arms to rebels in Yucatán and to stop illegal deals between International Harvester and henequeneros.<sup>38</sup> During this blockade, 200,000 bales of already-contracted fiber were blocked. The incident appeared on the cover of the New York Times, and Wilson was not amused.<sup>39</sup> The blockade was very worrisome to the United States because it depended on Yucatecan fiber, mainly from International Harvester, and Carranza had blocked the import of henequen to the United States. Wilson issued an ultimatum to Carranza to remove the blockade after fiber was prevented from entering the United States, and Carranza complied as he did not want the United States to intervene in the situation.<sup>40</sup>

Although Carranza supported the henequen industry, Wilson still saw him as a threat to the henequen economy and the import of henequen to the United States.<sup>41</sup> Upon the arrival of the Revolution, rumors spread that Carranza would destroy and burn henequen crops in order to reform society. While there was never any evidence of this, it worried Wilson as well.<sup>42</sup> In his efforts to take power from International Harvester, Carranza had blocked railroads from International Harvester. This thwarted fiber supplies to the United States as the blockade had, and at Wilson's request, Carranza reopened the railroads to International Harvester.<sup>43</sup> The land reforms that had angered elites at the onset of the Revolution in Yucatán were stopped by Carranza in 1916, and it is likely that this decision was influenced by the United States.<sup>44</sup> Carranza relied on Wilson for diplomatic favors, arms shipments, and supplies, and he likely did

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<sup>37</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 91.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 131.

not want to anger Wilson.<sup>45</sup> Wilson clearly had some influence over Carranza since he convinced him to lift the blockade and reopen the railroads, but nevertheless, Wilson did not entirely trust Carranza and believed his actions to be harmful to the henequen industry.

As the Revolution entered Yucatán and henequen export and production was threatened, the United States became more aware of its dependence on henequen. When henequen exports were suspended, the wheat industry suffered.<sup>46</sup> Even though Alvarado sought to protect the henequen industry, the instability of the market under the revolutionaries caused the United States to seek substitutes for henequen, which will be addressed in further detail later in this chapter.<sup>47</sup> According to the book about the henequen industry published by the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, the Revolution did not produce new social relations or strengthen the economy. It simply arrived and interfered with the successful recipe for henequen production, which would result in disaster for the economy of Yucatán.<sup>48</sup> While there is no doubt that revolutionary changes were positive for laborers who suffered in conditions that bordered on slavery, the structure of society had been ideal for henequen production. It was impossible to restructure the industry on Yucatecan terms since the United States already had substantial control, and would not respond well to the necessary price increases that would result from expanded labor rights. As a result, the state's disruption to the industry brought about by the Revolution would cause irrevocable damage and eventually cause Yucatán to fall into a state of poverty.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>46</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 120.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 119-20.

<sup>48</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, *Arquitectura de las haciendas henequeneras*, 24.

*The Reestablishment of the Comisión Reguladora del Mercado del Henequén Causes Further Damage to the Henequen Industry*

The *Comisión Reguladora del Mercado del Henequén* was created in January 1912 by the legislature of Yucatán as a response to the control International Harvester had over the henequen industry. It was a cooperative organization of henequen farmers under the control of the state government, but it was unable to gain success due to International Harvester's control of the industry.<sup>49</sup> However, with the arrival of the Revolution and efforts to decrease the power of International Harvester, the *Comisión Reguladora* was reestablished by Alvarado in November 1915 in an effort to ensure that all profits were going to farmers.<sup>50</sup> International Harvester had driven prices so low that henequen planters were unable to find buyers in New York, and were forced to sell at International Harvester's reduced prices.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the *Comisión Reguladora* sought to take over the monopolistic control of International Harvester and raise the prices in order to allow henequeneros to earn more profit. An article in the *Washington Herald* in 1917 said that the people of Yucatán had become sensible and eliminated the middle man.<sup>52</sup> This was a result of the reestablishment of *Comisión Reguladora* and Alvarado's mission to increase profits. Even though this organization was beneficial to many henequeneros who were able to earn higher profits, it damaged the henequen industry because prices were raised, and the United States responded by looking for alternative products. United States purchasers had become accustomed to the low prices under International Harvester and did not appreciate the increase in prices under Alvarado.

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<sup>49</sup> Comisión Reguladora del Mercado de Henequén, "To the American People."

<sup>50</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 165; Comisión Reguladora del Mercado de Henequén, "To the American People."

<sup>51</sup> Paul Wooton, "Sisal Agent Says Only New Orleans Bankers Would Aid," *Times-Picayune*, February 18, 1916, accessed November 9, 2013, [infoweb.newsbank.com](http://infoweb.newsbank.com).

<sup>52</sup> George Miner, "Green Gold and Bread," *The Washington Herald*, February 18, 1917, accessed November 10, 2013, [chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov).

The presence of the *Comisión Reguladora* represented the transition between economic liberalism and state intervention.<sup>53</sup> Previously, International Harvester and powerful henequeneros had full control of the market and labor. However, with the arrival of the Revolution and the *Comisión Reguladora*, this stronghold was loosened by the state. The *casta divina*, which Alvarado resented, was not included in the *Comisión Reguladora* to allow other henequeneros to have the chance to earn more revenue.<sup>54</sup> The *Comisión Reguladora* was created with investment from United States and Canadian banks.<sup>55</sup> According to the *Times-Picayune*, in 1916, a \$10 million loan was given to the *Comisión Reguladora* by New Orleans banks. This newspaper goes on to say that this loan was not in the best interest for the United States because it allowed for fiber prices to increase. While it would help henequen farmers, it was not in the interest of wheat farmers as fixed prices were eliminated and henequen prices returned to competitive levels.<sup>56</sup> As a result of these changes, Henry Peabody's export business was forced to close in 1915 because 90 percent of henequeneros had signed contracts with the *Comisión Reguladora*.<sup>57</sup>

The *Comisión Reguladora* guaranteed that hacienda owners would sell their henequen and would forgive debts if they sold all of their fiber to the *Comisión Reguladora* for a five-year period.<sup>58</sup> If they failed to complete the contract, they were required to pay a fee, and they were required to report all of their acquisitions and sales to the *Comisión Reguladora*.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, they were given more opportunities with the organization that sought to replace the *casta divina*

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<sup>53</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 149.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>55</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 66.

<sup>56</sup> "To Open Yucatan Henequen Market to Competition," *Times-Picayune*, January 2, 1916, accessed November 10, 2013, infoweb.newsbank.com; Comisión Reguladora del Mercado de Henequén, "To the American People."

<sup>57</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 140.

<sup>58</sup> Zapata Casares, *Vía-crucis del henequén*, 46; Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 139.

<sup>59</sup> Zapata Casares, *Vía-crucis del henequén*, 46, 45.

and International Harvester with its own monopoly. Alvarado saw *Comisión Reguladora* as an opportunity to join henequeneros together to rebel against the established monopolies so that they could have more control of prices and the opportunity to earn profit. It is evident that Alvarado believed it was very important to maintain the henequen industry through his reestablishment of the *Comisión Reguladora*, but the effects of his organization would alienate United States buyers with high prices.

Although the United States had supported International Harvester even though it was essentially a monopoly, Congress went after the *Comisión Reguladora* with claims that it had monopolistic power. The United States government cited that the prices of henequen were high and that buyers had no option but to buy from the *Comisión Reguladora*.<sup>60</sup> International Harvester essentially had controlled the entire henequen market, but prices were so low that it did not seem to bother the United States. However, the United States would continue to fight against the power of the *Comisión Reguladora*. Congress held hearings and sought to disband the monopoly. Dr. Rendón, who worked for the *Comisión Reguladora*, testified that the organization increased revenue for Yucatecan farmers, reduced debt peonage, earned money for schools, and promoted development of services.<sup>61</sup> In addition, even though United States farmers were paying five cents more per acre with the increases in 1916, they were earning several dollars more per acre for their grain crop.<sup>62</sup> Congress, however, was more preoccupied with the increases in prices for wheat farmers and ruled that the *Comisión Reguladora* was in

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<sup>60</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 168.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>62</sup> Comisión Reguladora del Mercado de Henequén, "To the American People."

fact a monopoly.<sup>63</sup> Luckily for Alvarado, the United States government did not have the authority to call for the breakup of his monopoly.<sup>64</sup>

Even though the United States could not take power from the *Comisión Reguladora*, the Senate did recommend that United States farmers begin to seek twine from alternative sources.<sup>65</sup> Prices were still high in 1918, and United States Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover suggested a food embargo on Yucatán until prices were reduced.<sup>66</sup> This was ineffective because there was a huge harvest in 1918 and farmers did not have enough twine without the supply from Yucatán.<sup>67</sup> This also demonstrated to the United States how dependent it was on Yucatecan fiber as it could not survive a harvest without its supply of henequen. Events like this worried Wilson and United States officials and further encouraged them to seek fiber from other sources.

Although International Harvester's monopoly had been eliminated with the establishment of the *Comisión Reguladora*, the company still had control of henequen purchases in the United States. However, in 1919, International Harvester stopped purchasing henequen from the *Comisión Reguladora* due to the high prices. The United States had purchased enough fiber in 1918 for both the 1918 and 1919 seasons, which made this embargo possible. This resulted in a large supply of unsold henequen fiber in the hands of the *Comisión Reguladora*.<sup>68</sup> The inability to sell fiber caused the *Comisión Reguladora* to be unable to pay the henequeneros, who became angry. Henequeneros in Yucatán began to agree with people in the United States that the high prices of henequen could be detrimental. If the United States was not purchasing any fiber, henequeneros would not earn any revenue.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 170.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 153.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.; Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 172.

<sup>68</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 173.

<sup>69</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 164.

In April 1918, Yucatecan elites formed the *Asociación de Hacendados Henequeneros*, or the Henequen Hacienda Owner's Association, to express their complaints to President Carranza.<sup>70</sup> In addition, an angry mob stormed Governor Castro's home, who had become governor after Alvarado. The mob burned down his house, killed his son, and could only be broken up by federal forces.<sup>71</sup> Laborers were not getting paid because the *Comisión Reguladora* was unable to pay their employers, and as a result they became violent and rebelled.<sup>72</sup> In response to the disaster brought about by the United States' embargo on the *Comisión Reguladora*, Carranza liquidated the organization in July 1919.<sup>73</sup> The decrease in fiber demand after World War I and increased competition inhibited the success of the henequen industry, and the high prices of the *Comisión Reguladora* could not be sustained.<sup>74</sup> Although Alvarado had good intentions when he reestablished the *Comisión Reguladora*, it would eventually contribute to the downfall of the industry. He sought to expand the role of the state in the henequen industry to liberate the labor force and keep profits for the people of Yucatán. However, the success of the industry was built on a model of slave labor and powerful elites who controlled the economy. Once Alvarado and the state interfered and increased the prices of henequen, the United States reacted to these high prices by pursuing other fiber options.

#### *Competitors to Henequen Gain Traction in the Fiber Market*

The hard fiber market has always been a volatile market with strong competition.<sup>75</sup> Henequen had fortunately been able to find success in the market at a time when competitors

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>73</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 174.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated," 304.

were more expensive and not as readily available. However, its time at the peak of the fiber market had come to an end with the arrival of the Revolution. The United States had always known that it was dangerous to depend solely on the Yucatecan crop and had begun to explore other options early on. In 1892, the first sisal plants were brought from Yucatán to Florida, then to German East Africa. By the 1920s, there were many flourishing sisal plantations in Kenya. Sisal fiber was stronger than henequen, and labor costs were much cheaper in Africa, especially with the wage increase in Yucatán as a result of the Revolution.<sup>76</sup> International Harvester and other companies also explored other options for henequen plantations. For example, in 1907, people of Brownsville, Texas saw that henequen had brought fortunes to Yucatán, and attempted to establish henequen plantations.<sup>77</sup> However, this never really took off, but it reflects the efforts in the United States to find other suppliers of twine.

The instability in Yucatán with the arrival of the Revolution, as discussed earlier in this chapter, caused Wilson and others to look to other sources of fiber as well. During the halted exports in 1916, International Harvester began a hemp farm in North Dakota and attempted to establish sisal plantations in Florida.<sup>78</sup> Canada had also begun to experiment with growing fibrous plants.<sup>79</sup> While these efforts never ended up being fruitful, it shows how dedicated the United States was to seeking other sources of fiber. It had become evident that the United States had a strong dependence on Yucatecan fiber, but that it could not rely on Yucatán as a result of Alvarado's unpredictable government. Therefore, it was crucial to find substitutes.

During the early 1920s, Yucatán again tried to increase the prices of henequen fiber, this time by withholding fiber from the United States so that scarcity would lead to higher prices.

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<sup>76</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 115.

<sup>77</sup> "Henequen at Brownsville," *Brownsville Daily Herald*, November 13, 1907, accessed November 10, 2013, [chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov).

<sup>78</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 29, 31.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.



This greatly angered the United States and caused them to increase purchases from elsewhere in the world. In 1922, International Harvester and other fiber buyers began purchasing fiber from East Africa, the Philippines, and Java.<sup>80</sup> A Cleveland Gazette article from July 5, 1924 stated that with increased imports of henequen from Cuba, sisal from East Africa and Java, and manila from Philippines, there was “little danger of a serious shortage of fiber for binder twine during the coming season.”<sup>81</sup> Even though a majority of fiber still came from Yucatán at this time, other markets were gaining more popularity in the United States, and the United States was diversifying its fiber supply. It would not be long before Yucatán would lose its monopoly to become one of many fiber suppliers.

The 1920s saw a massive decrease in Yucatán’s presence in the fiber market. The United States had begun to look for other fiber suppliers as a result of the Revolution, and these other suppliers began to gain more traction in the market during this decade. In 1920, East Africa supplied one-fifth of the world’s fiber, not including Yucatán, but by 1930, it was the number one hard fiber producer aside from Yucatán.<sup>82</sup> By 1927, Asia and Africa made up 50 percent of the world’s hard fiber production.<sup>83</sup> The United States began to buy more fiber from these sources, and therefore needed less from Yucatán. In addition, East Africa began to supply Europe’s twine market after World War I. In 1923, East Africa produced 20,000 tons of sisal, but in 1931, it produced 83,000 tons.<sup>84</sup> This shows how much success East Africa had gained in the fiber market in a short amount of time, and this also took away from Yucatán’s share of the market.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>81</sup> “Sources of Binder Twine: Greater Part of Raw Material is Grown in Yucatan.”

<sup>82</sup> Lawrence James Remmers, “Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883: The Roots of Dependence in a Mexican Region” Volumes 1 and 2 (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1981), 812.

<sup>83</sup> Wells, “Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated,” 309.

<sup>84</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 199.

Diversification of the fiber market continued to increase during the latter part of the 1920s as well. In 1900, almost 100 percent of hard fibers in the world had come from Yucatán, and during World War I, 88 percent still came from Yucatán. However, even though slightly more than 50 percent of hard fibers in the world came from Yucatán in 1929, it was the first year that East Africa, Java, and Cuba would produce more fiber than Yucatán.<sup>85</sup> In 1929, International Harvester also began to experiment even more with fibers in the Philippines, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Africa. A sisal plantation in Cuba began producing 2,500 tons of fiber starting at this time as well.<sup>86</sup> Finally, the onset of the Great Depression further diminished the demand for Yucatecan fiber. There was a decrease in demand for wheat since people could not afford to buy an excess supply. As a result, there was less demand for twine.<sup>87</sup> Market prices had dropped during the 1920s and 1930s with increased competition, which led to less henequen planting in Yucatán because henequeneros were used to such high prices.<sup>88</sup> At the end of the 1920s, not only had competition to henequen increased substantially, but overall demand for fiber had decreased. This led to a massive decline of the henequen industry in Yucatán from which it would be impossible to rebound.

In terms of market factors, the ultimate nail in the coffin of the henequen industry was the invention of the combine. Although it was invented in 1838, it did not gain popularity until the 1920s on wheat farms in the United States.<sup>89</sup> At first, combines were expensive, so farmers were hesitant to buy them. Binders were considered a safer investment, but eventually, the advantages of the combine outweighed those of the binders.<sup>90</sup> Combines were much faster than binders and

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 179, 200.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 206-7.

required much less labor.<sup>91</sup> However, combines did not require binder twine, which greatly reduced the demand for fiber from Yucatán.<sup>92</sup> During the 1920s, combines became incredibly popular: in Kansas for example, 4,700 combines were in use in 1920, but by 1925, there were over 24,000 in use.<sup>93</sup> Between 1926 and 1930, there were 117,000 combines sold in the United States.<sup>94</sup> The increased popularity of this equipment provided yet another reason for the United States not to purchase fiber from Yucatán. While the combine was not direct competition to henequen, it provided competition to the once-popular machine that had required binder twine.

During the latter half of the 1910s and the 1920s, competition to henequen increased exponentially, and hurt the Yucatecan market substantially. Initially, Wilson and United States officials were wary of dependence on Yucatán's fiber, which prompted the exploration of other options and the development of industries in East Africa, Asia, and elsewhere in Latin America. Even though Yucatán retained a large percentage of the industry, it had lost great revenue and prosperity due to the arrival of competitors. While it is likely that competitors would have entered the market without the influence of the Revolution, Wilson's search for alternatives accelerated their success. Finally, the popularity of the combine further harmed the henequen industry since it could harvest wheat without using binder twine. The decade of the 1920s proved devastating to the henequen industry as it had quickly lost its market stronghold. The instability in Yucatán at the time of the Revolution, which promoted the United States' quest for substitute fibers, coupled with the state's strict dependence on the United States and the failure to diversify, resulted in a lack of additional economic opportunities. Therefore, it was detrimental to the economy of Yucatán when other fibers gained popularity.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 210.

*The Continued Decline of the Henequen Industry under Felipe Carrillo Puerto and the Socialists*

By 1920, it was evident that the henequen industry's glory was falling apart under the revolutionaries. The United States' search for substitutes as a result of Alvarado's monopoly and high prices brought ruin to the henequen industry. However, the arrival of Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto in Yucatán further promoted the goals of the Revolution and reactions to his policies continued to damage the already declining henequen industry. While Carrillo Puerto did attempt to save the industry, his policies were ultimately ineffective since they angered elites. Carrillo Puerto was more of a socialist than Alvarado, and was even more focused on the rights of the laborers. Alvarado had been removed from power by Carranza in 1918 after he had lost popularity among the people of Yucatán, especially henequeneros.<sup>95</sup> The henequen industry had continued to be successful under Alvarado, but this was because he was in control during the World War I boom. After he left office, the industry declined substantially.<sup>96</sup>

Carrillo Puerto took office in 1922 after several interim governors.<sup>97</sup> Similar to Alvarado, his main goal was to increase the role of the state in society and take power from elites and distribute it among laborers. He had always looked out for the working classes, and considered himself a populist and a socialist.<sup>98</sup> He even claimed that his government was the first Socialist government in the Americas.<sup>99</sup> Like the revolutionaries, Carrillo Puerto recognized the importance of henequen industry success and wanted to preserve the industry to the extent possible.<sup>100</sup> However, he attempted to mobilize laborers, and was seen as the man who saved the Maya from slavery.<sup>101</sup> He also broke up some, though not many, henequen plantations into

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<sup>95</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 115.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 115, 198.

*ejidos*, so that lower classes could be in possession of land.<sup>102</sup> Finally, in order to preserve what was left of the henequen industry, he sought to diversify by forming his own *Comisión Exportadora*, or Export Commission. Henequeneros were very opposed to Carrillo Puerto's government as he mobilized their laborers, took their lands, and interfered with their business. Even though Carrillo Puerto understood the importance of the henequen industry, his changes to society generated anger among the henequen elites, who ultimately rebelled. They were so accustomed to the previous structure of industry that they could not accept Carrillo Puerto's changes, which added to the decline since they were no longer as willing to cooperate in henequen production.

In an attempt to relieve tension among henequeneros, Carrillo Puerto increased loan amounts for hacienda owners and named a henequenero ally, Tomás Castellanos Acevedo, to lead the *Comisión Exportadora*.<sup>103</sup> However, planters remained unhappy with the changes he had imposed. Carrillo Puerto also angered elites by expanding education in Yucatán. While the expansion of education is typically positive, his educational system taught socialism, which angered the more conservative elites. Many sent their children away to be educated as a result.<sup>104</sup> In response to Carrillo Puerto's actions, some planters rebelled and removed fields from production. If they could afford to, they stopped planting and laid off workers.<sup>105</sup> The year after he became governor, Carrillo Puerto was overthrown and kidnapped right before enacting a major land reform. There is a theory that hacienda owners had a hit out on him because he ended up being killed the following year.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 246-7.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 263.

Despite his abbreviated role as governor of Yucatán, Carrillo Puerto had added to the devastation of the henequen industry, in part because his additional land reforms and mobilization of laborers angered elites, who rebelled and decreased the supply of henequen. The increased instability in Yucatán encouraged the United States to continue to seek other sources of fiber. While the henequen industry had already been in decline, the reactions to Carrillo Puerto and his socialist reforms helped to accelerate this decline during the 1920s. Even though Carrillo Puerto did understand the importance of henequen and attempted to diversify to save the industry, elites were unhappy with his changes in society and did not respond to his wishes. Carrillo Puerto was correct in his understanding that the henequen industry should be diversified, as the exclusive dependence on the export of raw fiber to the United States would bring devastation to society in Yucatán.

*The Devastating Results of the Dependence on a Monocrop Economy on Yucatecan Society*

Once henequen became popular and profitable, elites had focused solely on the export of raw henequen fiber. As discussed in Chapter Two, this fostered a strong dependence on the United States since the henequen industry was the only major source of revenue for Yucatán. Therefore, with the arrival of the Revolution, the subsequent reestablishment of the *Comisión Reguladora*, and the increased competition in the hard fiber market, the Yucatecan economy would face disaster. They had no other options to maintain their prospering economy, and the decline of the henequen industry resulted in poverty and economic disaster. It is important to note, however, that while the Yucatán became dependent on the United States, regions can only sell products that others demand. The law of comparative advantage states that specific areas

specialize in one or a few different products.<sup>107</sup> Yucatán is an example of this: it built an industry around the United States' demand for fiber, but unfortunately, it would lose its comparative advantage to competitors early in the twentieth century. This section will focus on the consequences of the dependence on the United States, and why the Yucatán was unable to stimulate its economy once the henequen industry began its decline.

An article in *La Prensa* newspaper in 1930, titled "The Yucatán Henequen Industry is going through a Crisis of Life or Death," stated that "the situation is chaotic because the Yucatecan does not have any other product other than the [henequen] fiber, and does not have any other market than that of the United States."<sup>108</sup> It had become strongly evident to Yucatán and the United States that the henequen industry was going through a crucial period, and the lack of henequen industry success would lead to disaster in Yucatán. As discussed in Chapter Two, despite evidence that the Yucatán had become increasingly dependent on the United States market, elites continued to focus exclusively on the production of henequen. Instead of producing sufficient staple crops, henequen took precedence.<sup>109</sup> According to elites, if they could buy corn somewhere else, why should they reduce production of the more profitable henequen crop?<sup>110</sup> While this was a logical argument at the time, it did not foster economic expansion or self-sufficiency.

As a result of dependence on the United States, the economy of Yucatán failed to develop aside from henequen. Henequen is a key example of the staple crop model in Latin America: many regions focused specifically on one single export staple, which did not allow the economy

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<sup>107</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 32-3.

<sup>108</sup> "La industria henequenera pasa en Yucatán por una crisis de vida o muerte," *La Prensa*, April 23, 1930, accessed November 9, 2013, [infoweb.newsbank.com](http://infoweb.newsbank.com), translated by author.

<sup>109</sup> Robert M. Buffington and William E. French, "The Culture of Modernity," in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, eds. Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 419.

<sup>110</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 623.

to diversify from their one specialized crop.<sup>111</sup> As a result, many Latin American regions are negatively affected when their single crop loses popularity, and they are left with no other options to improve their economies. According to historian Lawrence Remmers, in Yucatán there was “dependence and skewed growth without development.”<sup>112</sup> In order to sustain long-term growth, it is necessary for a region to have the ability to shift resources.<sup>113</sup> However, it is evident that Yucatán did not possess this ability since it had focused its entire economy on henequen. Once dependence had been established, it was difficult to reverse, and Yucatán could not respond to the new competitors or unanticipated changes in the market.<sup>114</sup> In Yucatán, henequeneros were often short on cash and focused on traditional methods of production, so there was a lack of resources to adapt to change and henequeneros became tied to the market.<sup>115</sup> For the most part, henequen production did not undergo great changes over time, and elites, for the most part, chose the method that made them most comfortable and that earned the most profit. This made diversification and development nearly impossible in Yucatán. When revolutionary changes arrived, the already established economy was unable to adjust to the new labor rights, and it had become too late to diversify since Yucatán had invested everything in henequen.

As a result of the dependence on henequen, Yucatecan society failed to develop outside of the henequen industry. Most of the changes discussed in Chapter Three – the railroads, the ports, and the banks – were all for the advancement of henequen production. Almost all advancements in infrastructure had been solely for the benefit of henequen.<sup>116</sup> In addition, since

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>114</sup> Wells, “Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated,” 303.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 304, 309.

<sup>116</sup> Wells, *Yucatán’s Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 7.



International Harvester had such great control of the industry, there were no resources to build more schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure that was not related to the henequen industry.<sup>117</sup> For the most part, education in Yucatán was focused on the henequen industry, which meant that people did not have experience or education in other fields, which added to the challenge of development aside from henequen.<sup>118</sup> The lack of a domestic market further inhibited the ability to develop the economy as there was no possibility for the emergence of a new industry.<sup>119</sup> In 1918, Yucatán only had produced 30 percent of its food supply.<sup>120</sup> Society was tailored to the success of henequen, and without it, poverty would ensue and Yucatán would be unable to rebuild its economy.

The great dependence on henequen would also be detrimental to henequeneros as many went bankrupt due to risky investments on the future success of henequen. Many henequeneros had invested in the long term success of their henequen crops as they borrowed large sums of money in confidence that henequen would remain profitable years into the future.<sup>121</sup> In addition, many henequeneros invested in haciendas, railroads, and ports, all of which depended on the success of the henequen industry.<sup>122</sup> As a result, they could not afford to pay back loans with the fiber they had promised, which resulted in indebtedness and bankruptcy.<sup>123</sup> These hacienda owners had millions of dollars of debt as a result of real estate mortgages and crop liens. Even though Alvarado relieved much of their debt when he created the *Comisión Reguladora*, they

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>118</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 40.

<sup>119</sup> Buffington and French, "The Culture of Modernity," 419.

<sup>120</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 231.

<sup>121</sup> Anthony Andrews, Rafael Burgos Villanueva, and Luis Millet Cámara, "The Henequen Ports of Yucatán's Gilded Age," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16, no. 1 (March 2012): 43, accessed September 6, 2013, <http://search.ebscohost.com>; Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen and International Harvester 1860-1915*, 65.

<sup>122</sup> Andrews, Burgos Villanueva, and Millet Cámara, "The Henequen Ports of Yucatán's Gilded Age," 43.

<sup>123</sup> "Green Gold and Bread."

were still broke.<sup>124</sup> The decline of the henequen industry meant that producers did not have the fiber they had promised to pay their debts with, and as a result, they were forced into poverty. They had invested only in the future of henequen, and when it was failing, they did not have anywhere else to turn.

The 1920 to 1921 season of production was the first time that Yucatán's earnings were negative. The state lost almost 25 million pesos in export earnings, which continued to devastate the region.<sup>125</sup> In 1921, political violence became prevalent as laborers went hungry due to the inability of henequeneros to pay salaries. There were rebellions, and even some murders of hacienda administrators, foremen, and laborers.<sup>126</sup> During the 1920s, elites made a desperate attempt at diversification. While they had considered diversifying the industry at the end of the nineteenth century, they never followed through since it seemed illogical to stray from the successful recipe of the export of raw henequen fiber. However, this time they began to advertise the use of henequen for carpets, drapes, tapestries, hammocks, bags, and rope.<sup>127</sup> The industry was not designed to produce these goods, and it was impossible to regain henequen's previous glory. Yucatán was left with no alternatives to remain part of the international economy once henequen had substantially declined.<sup>128</sup> The dependence had resulted in disaster and poverty for Yucatán, and it was too late to seek alternatives since the entire economy had been dedicated to the production of raw fiber. During the boom, elites had not pursued diversification of the industry, and the downfall of henequen in Yucatán demonstrates how detrimental sole reliance on a specific export crop can be.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 229.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>127</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 213.

<sup>128</sup> Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated," 316.

Henequen Revenues and Exports, 1918-1922		
Year	Revenues (USD)	Tons of Henequen Exported
1918	91,000,000+	n/a
1919	37,581,495	141,414
1920	30,184,291	154,249
1921	11,878,348	100,905
1922	6,192,557	63,979

Figure 4.1 (from Joseph, *Revolution from Without*, 250)

### Conclusion

The arrival of the Mexican Revolution in Yucatán marked the beginning of the end of the success of the henequen industry. Carranza and Alvarado, while recognizing the importance of maintaining the henequen industry, imposed changes to society that did not allow for the continued success of henequen. Yucatecan elites and the United States did not react well to their revolutionary changes, which accelerated the decline of henequen. The industry was built on the back of a slave-like labor system, and the extension of rights to workers harmed profits due to an increase in prices and labor costs. Most importantly, the instability of the industry under Alvarado worried President Wilson. The only reason henequen continued to prosper under Alvarado was the massive demand created by World War I. However, the United States had already begun searching for alternatives to the once-popular Yucatecan fiber due to the instability of Alvarado's government. East Africa and Asia became major raw fiber suppliers, and with the new popularity of the combine, henequen was no longer in high demand.

While the Revolution, unlike many other revolutions, did not bring violence to Yucatán, the goals of Carranza and Alvarado to "free" laborers and raise henequen prices resulted in problems for the henequen industry. Henequeneros had to pay higher wages and were unable to maintain their high levels of profit. In addition, land reforms further angered elites who lost land as a result of Alvarado's redistribution. The unrest in Yucatán and rumors that Carranza was

opposed to the henequen industry made the United States realize how dependent it was on henequen. In an effort to lower prices, the United States could not even maintain a food blockade against Yucatán because its demand for the fiber was so high. Wilson and other officials worried about this dependence, and began to seek alternative sources of fiber.

The reaction to the state's intervention in the henequen industry with the reorganization of the *Comisión Reguladora del Mercado del Henequén* added to the decline. While Alvarado's intentions were positive as he sought to bring power back to the henequeneros of Yucatán, the increase in prices under the *Comisión Reguladora* increased the anger of the United States. Congress considered the *Comisión Reguladora* to be a monopoly and urged wheat farmers to purchase fiber from other sources.<sup>129</sup> The high prices imposed by the *Comisión Reguladora* caused the United States to purchase less henequen fiber, which resulted in the halting of payments to henequeneros and laborers. Eventually, the *Comisión Reguladora* had to be liquidated by Carranza since it could not properly sustain the henequen industry. The *Comisión Reguladora* further alienated the United States, which continued to seek fiber from other parts of the world.

In an effort to reduce its dependence on Yucatecan fiber, the United States began to purchase more fiber from East Africa, Asia, and other regions of Latin America. Even though efforts to develop fiber production in the United States were unsuccessful, in the 1920s, International Harvester began to purchase more fiber from non-Yucatecan producers. In addition to the increase in competing fibers, the demand for fiber decreased as well. After the boom of World War I, there was less demand for wheat, which resulted in less demand for twine. The onset of the Great Depression further decreased demand for wheat, and subsequently, for

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<sup>129</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 170; Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 153.

henequen. Finally, the invention of the combine would add to the depressed demand for fiber as it did not require fiber in wheat harvests.

By the time Felipe Carrillo Puerto became governor of Yucatán, the henequen industry was already in crisis. However, his goal of remedying the inequalities in society through state intervention brought further damage to the industry. His labor mobilizations, land redistribution efforts, and creation of the *Comisión Exportadora* angered both elites of Yucatán and the United States. Henequeneros rebelled against Carrillo Puerto and ceased to plant and harvest henequen when possible. While the henequen industry was already in rapid decline, Carrillo Puerto's changes to society only made things worse. The further instability in Yucatán and increased prices of henequen encouraged the United States to continue seeking different sources of fiber. Although the henequen system of production was an antiquated one that required what was essentially slavery, it had allowed Yucatán to earn great revenue.

During the 1920s, it became evident that the dependence on henequen and the United States led to economic disaster for Yucatán. While the beginning of this dependence was examined in Chapter Two, it becomes clear how it would lead to disaster in the third decade of the twentieth century. Yucatán had invested everything in the development and expansion of the henequen industry and as it began to lose its profits, elites did not have anywhere else to turn. In 1917, a Yucatecan stated that "henequen is the only thing to which the inhabitants of Yucatán can dedicate themselves."<sup>130</sup> Despite evidence that dependence could be disastrous during economic panics and declines in prices, elites continued to invest only in henequen.<sup>131</sup> As a result, Yucatán would begin its plunge into poverty as henequeneros could no longer pay their debts or their laborers.

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<sup>130</sup> Zapata Casares, *Vía-crucis del henequén*, 27.

<sup>131</sup> Remmers, "Henequen, The Caste War and Economy of Yucatan, 1846-1883," 706.

Even though the Revolution brought devastation to the henequen industry, this decline may have been inevitable.<sup>132</sup> It was only a matter of time before other fiber options became available, and it just happened that Alvarado was there to accelerate the process. His time as governor encouraged the United States to look elsewhere for fiber, but this may have eventually occurred naturally. The United States had always been aware that dependence could be dangerous, and Alvarado's policies simply made this clearer. In addition, the Revolution did bring many positive changes to Yucatán as it ended the slave-like labor conditions and gave more rights to laborers. It also created thousands of schools, health reforms, and sanitation services.<sup>133</sup> So, while it accelerated the decline of henequen, it is also important to consider that it may have been positive for Yucatecan society overall.

After the 1920s, the henequen industry faced continued challenges. The Great Depression continued to affect society, which reduced the demand for wheat and henequen.<sup>134</sup> During the 1930s, a huge drought in the Great Plains, as well as windstorms, the Dust Bowl, grasshoppers, cold winters, and long, hot summers, caused further damage to the wheat industry.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, wheat farmers did not have need for a large supply of binder twine. Between 1934 and 1940, President Lázaro Cárdenas of Mexico redistributed large amounts of land, which resulted in the confiscation of 61 percent of henequen fields.<sup>136</sup> Events like this resulted in poor relations between henequeneros and the government, and continued fueling the

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<sup>132</sup> Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924*, 298.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Wells, "Henequen," 115-6.

<sup>135</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 179, 182.

<sup>136</sup> Sterling Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," in *A Land Between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico*, ed. Christopher R. Boyer (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 167.

decline of the henequen industry.<sup>137</sup> By 1938, Yucatán only made up 23 percent of the fiber market.<sup>138</sup>

The days of unlimited wealth and prosperity in Yucatán had come to an end. While there are many factors that contributed to the decline of the henequen industry, the changes brought about by the Mexican Revolution were the catalysts that would bring about an era of poverty in Yucatán. The Revolution highlighted the societal problems in Yucatán, and the expansion of laborers' rights increased henequen prices and made it a less desirable product in the United States. Elites had no other successful product to turn to, and haciendas were abandoned at a rapid rate. The massive plunge into poverty resulted in the need for assistance from the federal government, and Yucatán would become dependent on federal subsidies.<sup>139</sup> For what had once been a significantly autonomous region, this new form of dependence reflects the serious desperation of the post-henequen economy. In less than ten years, the glorious henequen industry experienced a very swift and painful death, and Yucatán could no longer fend for itself without the assistance of Mexico City.

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<sup>137</sup> Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated," 315.

<sup>138</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 186.

<sup>139</sup> Wells, "Reports of Its Demise Are Not Exaggerated," 316.

## Conclusion

A trip to Yucatán today reveals remnants of a past glory that was the henequen industry. Almost a century after the beginning of the decline of this industry, businessmen have sought to turn abandoned haciendas into hotels and restaurants. There is a major focus on tourism today as visitors can tour haciendas, and visit mansions and cenotes. Hacienda Sotuta de Peón, in the city of Tecoh, claims to be one of the last fully functioning henequen haciendas in the Yucatán today.<sup>1</sup> According to their website, the owners of Sotuta de Peón have searched abandoned haciendas for machine parts, tracks, and other relics of the golden age of henequen. Their goal has been to preserve a part of the henequen industry in order to educate visitors and to not forget the history of the glory days of henequen.<sup>2</sup> For a steep price of 700 pesos, tourists can take a tour of Sotuta de Peón and relive the process of henequen production.<sup>3</sup> The Sotuta de Peón tour is sometimes referred to as the “*fresa*” experience of henequen production by local Yucatecs, which translates to mean that the experience is reserved for conceited, wealthy tourists. It is interesting to observe that Sotuta de Peón is one of a kind, so many local Yucatecs cannot afford to, or would not choose to use their money to, relive the history of the industry that formed their state.

Visits to towns such as Yaxcopoil and Misnebalam, while they have not been preserved to the extent of Sotuta de Peón, also reveal a sense of past glory and nostalgia. Deteriorating hacienda structures reveal stunning buildings with impressive architecture that give some insight into the wealth and prominence of the period. Yaxcopoil allows tourists to pay 75 pesos for a tour to learn the history of the hacienda and see how the owners lived. Dishware, tables, and chairs have all been preserved from the era of henequen, and one can see how intricate and

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<sup>1</sup> José Antonio Carrillo, Tour of Hacienda Sotuta de Peón, Tecoh, Yucatán, December 22, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Sotuta de Peón, “Who We Are,” accessed March 9, 2014, [http://www.haciendaviva.com/tour/who\\_we\\_are.php](http://www.haciendaviva.com/tour/who_we_are.php).

<sup>3</sup> Carrillo, Tour of Hacienda Sotuta de Peón.



elaborate housewares were to get a sense of just how wealthy the elites became.<sup>4</sup> Misnebalam is a town that was abandoned in the 1920s, as henequen was declining rapidly, and no one currently lives there. Roofs of buildings have caved in, and while there is still some henequen machinery, it is evident that the demise of henequen had a profound effect on small henequen towns.

While Progreso and Sisal are still functioning ports, although not to the extent that they were during the henequen boom, many minor ports that were in operation during the henequen era have been abandoned. The ports Mina de Oro, San Benito, and Miramar that were built for henequen exports during the early twentieth century have all been abandoned, and today little remains.<sup>5</sup> Many railroad systems in Yucatán have also been abandoned. There is a railroad museum in the center of Mérida, but throughout the city, one can observe abandoned railroad tracks and train cars. Many *truc* rails, which carried henequen plants through plantations, have also been abandoned. However, a few are still in operation to transport tourists to cenotes. At Sotuta de Peón, guests travel on the *truc* rails through henequen fields to get a sense of the experience of hacienda laborers. The tour of the Cenotes of Cuzamá also utilizes *truc* carts to bring visitors to the three different cenotes. Gradually, Yucatán has begun to use elements of the henequen industry to benefit and promote tourism in order to strengthen an impoverished economy.

This thesis has shown the massive impact the henequen industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had on the state of Yucatán. It explained how events following Mexican independence, especially the rise of liberalism and capitalism, caused elites to seek entry into the world market. It showed how henequen came to take control of the economy, and how society became wholly dependent on the production and export of the henequen crop to the

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin Chim Toom, Tour of Hacienda Yaxcopoil, Yaxcopoil, Yucatán, December 17, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Andrews, Rafael Burgos Villanueva, and Luis Millet Cámara, "The Henequen Ports of Yucatán's Gilded Age," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16, no. 1 (March 2012): 40, <http://search.ebscohost.com>.

United States. It examined the local effects of the henequen industry, and discussed the two different sides of modernization present in the henequen-based society. Henequen production seemed to require a structure of elites who earned substantial revenue at the expense of impoverished laborers. Finally, it explained why the henequen industry began to decline. It pointed to the changes instilled by the governments of the Mexican Revolution as the catalyst for this demise, and showed how the United States began to seek other fiber sources in order to ensure its fiber supply during Yucatán's period of instability.

The story of henequen is not an entirely unique one with respect to other Latin American export economies. Dependence on the United States is a key theme for these economies, and laborers often find themselves living in poverty. While henequen brought wealth to elites, it also brought about poverty and peonage, which thwarted development of society. At the beginning, henequen looked different from similar export crops because elites of Yucatán were in control of the industry. However, the decision to export mainly to the United States and the lack of diversification, coupled with the arrival of United States interests, such as International Harvester, led to a strong dependence on the United States. Elites of Yucatán lost their control of the industry, and henequen began to reflect similar themes present in sugar and banana production elsewhere in Latin America.

The dependence on the United States became apparent once the United States sought alternative fiber options. Without its great quantity of henequen exports, Yucatán had no major source of revenue, and entered a state of poverty. While there were some efforts to reduce dependence during the henequen boom, elites felt that they were unnecessary because henequen was so profitable, and they did not foresee an end to their massive revenues. However, once the Mexican Revolution arrived in Yucatán, and the government began to focus more on labor

rights, the henequen society was destroyed. The United States saw higher prices and instability as a reason to explore other fiber options, which left Yucatán impoverished.

After 1930, the henequen industry continued to decline even more. In a short period of time following the henequen boom, Yucatán became one of the poorest states in Mexico because it had no major source of revenue.<sup>6</sup> In 1916, there were about 60,000 henequen laborers, but only twenty years later, the number of henequen laborers was only about 25,000.<sup>7</sup> The decline of the henequen industry was swift and disastrous for Yucatán. During the 1930s, haciendas and fields continued to be abandoned, and Yucatán became dependent on the federal government for funding.<sup>8</sup> Ailments such as hunger, poverty, and illness would return to Yucatán during the 1930s as well since there was no revenue to provide for cures.<sup>9</sup> Severe economic depression had reached Yucatán, and elites could only reminisce of their previous fortunes and prosperity.<sup>10</sup>

During the 1960s, there was an attempt to revive the henequen industry. Elites remembered the great wealth of the henequen era, and sought to regain this to some extent. However, their efforts were unsuccessful because of the seven year wait before harvest, the low price of henequen, and the disrepair of machinery and haciendas. In addition, hard fiber industries had already been established in other areas, and it would have been very challenging for Yucatán to become competitive in the market again.<sup>11</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, the invention

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Sanders, "Henequen: The Structure of Agrarian Frustration," *American Field Staff Reports: North America Series* 5, no. 3 (1977): 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 180.

<sup>10</sup> G.M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States 1880-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 294.

<sup>11</sup> Carrillo, *Tour of Hacienda Sotuta de Peón*.

of low-cost synthetic fibers resulted in a further decline in what was left of henequen production in Yucatán.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the collapse of the henequen industry, Mexico now imports much of its hard fiber supply from Brazil because it no longer has the resources to produce henequen on a large scale.<sup>13</sup> The region that once supplied a major portion of the world's fiber now cannot produce enough fiber to supply the rest of Mexico. Nonetheless, as of 2012, forty percent of Yucatán was still devoted to henequen production. Most of the uses are local and include artisans' crafts, hammocks, and rope.<sup>14</sup> As a result of the harsh climate, there are not many economic opportunities, which is why so many people still work to produce henequen.

Despite the debt peonage and monopolistic control that existed during the henequen industry, there still exists a sense of nostalgia for the henequen era in Yucatán. It was a time when Yucatán had a place in the world market and wealth was abundant. For a brief period, Yucatán was able to experience wealth and prosperity on the world stage, but once henequen lost its popularity, Yucatán, in a sense, returned to the state it had been before the henequen boom. Hacienda tours and a walk down Paseo de Montejo give visitors an idea of the lavishness and wealth that existed during the henequen industry. Now, there is an effort in Yucatán to promote its tourism industry. Cuisine, cenotes, beaches, and haciendas are some of the draws of the region, and while it is unlikely that the region will ever produce a popular export staple again, the development of various tourist attractions have begun to draw visitors from Mexico and the

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<sup>12</sup> Allen Wells, "Henequen," in *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930*, ed. Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), 116.

<sup>13</sup> Carrillo, Tour of Hacienda Sotuta de Peón.

<sup>14</sup> Sterling Evans, "King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatán, 1850-1950," in *A Land Between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico*, ed. Christopher R. Boyer (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 167.

rest of the world. Through tourism, visitors have the opportunity get a sense of the great power once possessed by King Henequen.

## Visuals of the Henequen Industry



Henequen plant (Photo by author)



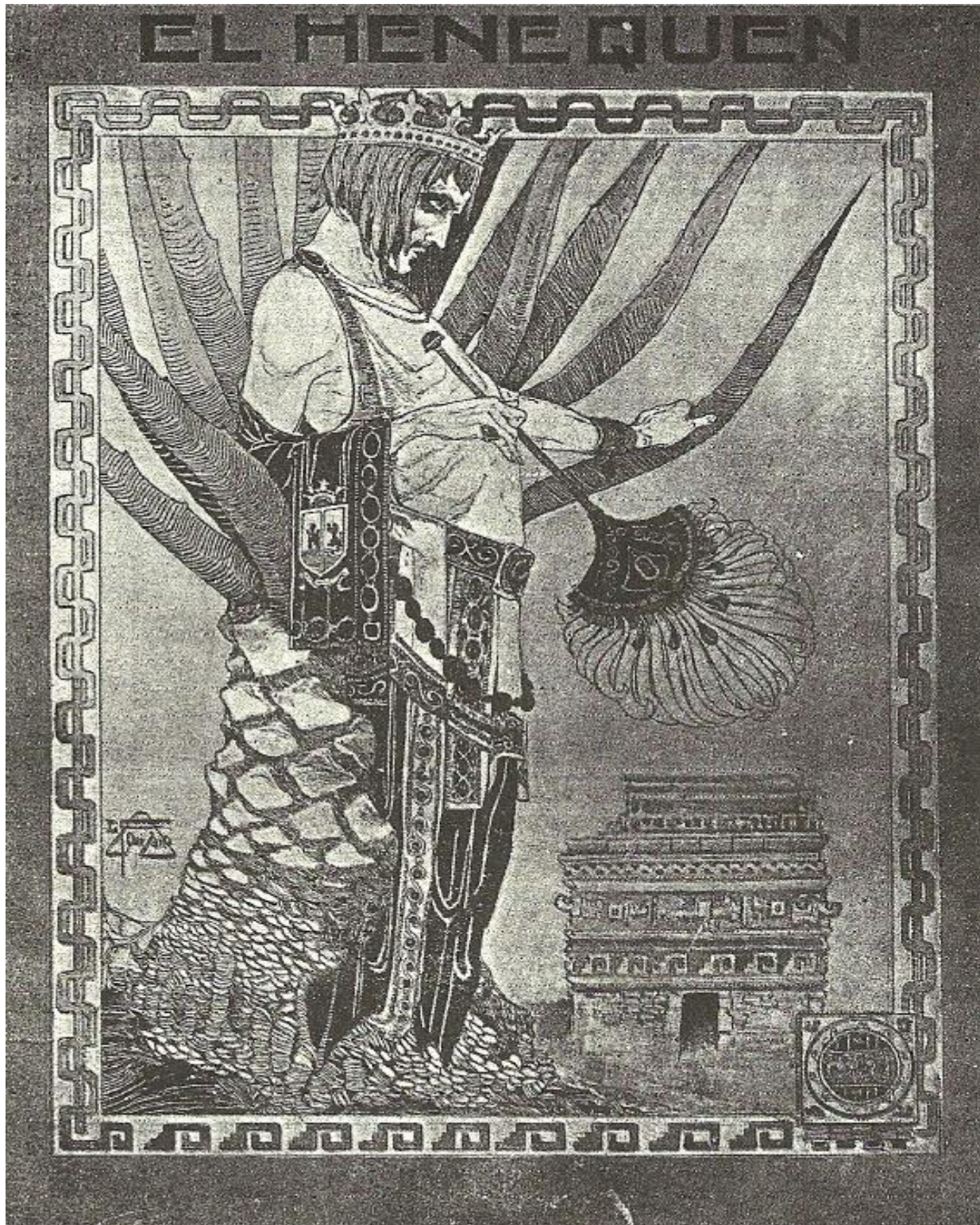


Right Panel of Painting by Fernando Castro Pacheco of a henequen laborer at the mercy of henequen (from “Las Tres Etapas Históricas del Pueblo Yucateco” por Fernando Castro Pacheco. Óleo sobre tela montada en madera, 243.5 x 600 (Tríptico) Préstamo Temporal del Museo Nacional de Arte al Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Ateneo de Yucatán, <http://www.macay.org/exposicion/1/fernando-castro-pacheco>)



1914 Twenty Peso Bill of the *Comisión Reguladora del Mercado de Henequén* (from [http://articulo.mercadolibre.com.mx/MLM-441153341-20-pesos-de-la-comicion-reg-del-henequen-\\_JM](http://articulo.mercadolibre.com.mx/MLM-441153341-20-pesos-de-la-comicion-reg-del-henequen-_JM))





King Henequen depiction (from cover of *El henequén* 2 [May 31, 1917] from Evans, *Bound in Twine*, 44)





Henequen machinery building, Hacienda Yaxcopoil (Photo by author)



Defibering machine, Hacienda Yaxcopoil (Photo by author)





Hacienda Yaxcopoil (Photo by author)



Porcelain chamber pot at Hacienda Yaxcopoil (Photo by author)





Henequen fiber drying, Hacienda Sotuta de Peón (Photo by author)



Henequen fiber, Hacienda Sotuta de Peón (Photo by author)





A street in the abandoned town of Misnebalam, Yucatán (Courtesy of Roberto Vazquez)



The center of the abandoned town of Misnebalam, Yucatán (Courtesy of Roberto Vazquez)





Port of Progreso (Photo by author)



Trucks used to bring tourists to the Cenotes of Cuzamá (Photo by author)



A night in the center of Mérida, December 2013 (Photo by author)



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