AMERICAN SETTLEMENT IN THE
ISLA DE PINOS, CUBA*

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The Isle of Pines—"The Gem of the Caribbean" it was called in the optimism of its period of real-estate development—enjoys a certain distinction. Other tropical lands have seen American settlers come and go; but in no other tropical land has there been a deliberate development promotion such as was carried on here. The Civil War refugee settlements in Central and South America are in an entirely different category; for after the close of the Spanish-American War the impression prevailed throughout the United States that the Isle of Pines like Puerto Rico, was to be an American possession. The lure of new opportunities in the growing of citrus fruits, the romantic appeal of a tropical island with shining beaches and fertile plains, so close to their homeland, caused Americans to rush to an adventure that might have been successful had political and economic fortune been kind. As it happened, the story is one of high hopes and broken fortunes, of utopian expectations and disillusionment.

SITE OF THE AMERICAN SETTLEMENT

The settlers reached the Isle of Pines via Habana and the south-coast port of Batabanó, whence it is a 65-mile sail across the shallow waters of the Gulf of Batabanó to the mouth of the Las Casas River, the commercial gateway of the Isle of Pines.

Practically the entire American colony settled in the northern part of the island. A coastal plain of recent alluvium, ranging from a mere fringe to a belt more than five miles in width and from sandy beach to mangrove swamp, borders a subaerially eroded plain of broad swells and depressions with an altitude of 75 to 300 feet above sea level. Rising above the lowlands are conspicuous erosional remnants in the form of linear mountain ranges and isolated hills or *mogotes*. The southern third of the island’s 860 square miles, partly separated from the northern region by a deep indenta-

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tion, Siguanea Bay, and a broad morass of mangrove formation, is a low, unproductive karst plain. Only a few Americans settled in this part of the island.  

The year is divided into rainy and dry seasons. About two-thirds of the precipitation falls in the rainy season, which begins in late May and lasts through October; maxima occur in June and September-October. The annual precipitation ranges from 60 to 70 inches; the average monthly rain-

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3 See T. W. Chamberlin: Rainfall Maps of Cuba, Monthly Weather Rev., Vol. 68, 1940, pp. 4-10. Mr. Chamberlin's maps show a maximum rainfall for October. He amplifies this in a personal communication. October rains are markedly variable. For the period 1921-1927 the average was 11.4 inches, with the range 3.8 in 1925 and 27.08 in 1927. The records obtained by Mr. Bell also show a considerable variability in the October rainfall, 2.4 inches (1937) and 10.6 inches (1939).
fall in the dry season is about two inches. Occasionally during this period
cold winds, los nortes, drive the temperature down as far as 50°, but the
drop is not so uncomfortable as that brought by the cold March winds of
the United States. The hottest period of the day comes from ten to twelve
in the morning; but the cool sea breezes that usually modify the heat in the
afternoon make life bearable, and the nights are clear and cool.

Rainfall and Temperature Near Nueva Gerona*

(Rainfall in inches, temperature in °F.)

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<tr>
<td>Temp.</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>76.0</td>
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<td>89.1</td>
<td>80.8</td>
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*Average precipitation, 1936–1939 inclusive; average temperature, 1931–1939, inclusive. Records obtained by Mr. Alexander J. Bell, on Casas River 1 1/2 miles south of Nueva Gerona.

Climatically, the character of the island was not exaggerated by the
American promoters. The land can be cultivated the year round. As no
month is entirely dry and no month brings the danger of frost, the growing
of fruits and vegetables depends more on the market than on the climate.

The floral landscape of the northern part of the island is characteristically
an open pine forest—from which the island received its name—with pal-
mettos, savana of shrubs and grasses, royal palms, and low, thick mangrove
formations. In the past probably much of the region was covered with pine;
but at the time the Americans arrived the open stand was almost wholly a
secondary growth, the result of exploitation and fire. Where the soil is
sandy loam, as in many of the depressions of the interior plain, the palmetto,
particularly the species Acelorraphe Wrightii, is dominant. Margins of the
sea, rivers, and small streams can be easily identified by dense junglelike
formations, including the impenetrable mangrove, the royal palm, the
majagua, the alligator apple, the coco plum, the tree fern, and a variety of
smaller trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants. By far the most extensive floral
cover of the northern region is the savana associations of shrubs, palmettos,
and grasses. The southern part of the island presents a great many species
of hardwoods, shrubs, and ferns. The royal palm, prominent in the north,
Fig. 2—Looking westward across the Casas Valley and the Sierra los Caballos from Nueva Gerona.

Fig. 3—An isolated limestone hill or mogote north of Columbia. The mogote limestone is often highly crystalline.
FIG. 4—The Caribbean Pine, *Pinus caribaea*, is the common pine which at one time probably covered the broad swells of the interior plain.

FIG. 5—Open pine forest and palms near Santa Barbara.
Fig. 6—Karst lands in the southwest of the Isle of Pines, north of Jacksonville, showing evidence of past hardwoods and secondary growth.

Fig. 7—A fringe of dense mangroves in the Cienaga de Lanier. Siquanea Hill in the background.
Fig. 8—White quartz sand and a variety of palms southeast of the Sierra La Cañada.

Fig. 9—A new road under construction between the Siguanea Hills, site of a tungsten mine, and San Pedro dock. View south of the San Pedro tract, once the site of an active American (Ohio) settlement.
is entirely absent in this region. Tropical storms and fire have destroyed much of the hardwood.

On the broad uplands of the interior plain the zonal soils, lateritic in character, are coarse in texture and red to brown in color; a gray sandy loam, largely azonal, predominates in the depressions. Heavy applications of fertilizer are essential to the maintenance of productivity. During the latter part of the dry season, irrigation is necessary in some locations and at least beneficial in others. Citrus trees are planted, principally on the uplands and particularly near sources of water. The lowlands are well suited to vegetable growing.

THE FIRST DECADE OF AMERICAN COLONIZATION

The rush of American investors to the island after the Spanish-American War was the result largely of a misunderstanding as to the ownership of the land. The treaty of peace concluding the war stated that “Spain cedes to the United States the island of Porto Rico and other islands now under Spanish sovereignty in the West Indies.” When the Cuban republic was set up, the question arose whether the Isle of Pines was a part of Cuba or one of the “other islands.” A considerable body of opinion favored the latter, on both strategic and economic grounds. The Hay-Quesada Treaty signed in 1904 gave Cuba title to the Isle of Pines, but pressure of opinion prevented ratification, and meanwhile the island’s attractions had been publicized throughout the United States. The status of the island remained unsettled until 1925.7

From 1898 to 1900 the population of the island numbered some 2000 to 2200, of whom about ten were Americans. The original plantations of Nueva Gerona and Santa Fe had grown into towns of 150 and 350 respectively.8 Some roads had been built during a period in which the island had served as a Spanish penal colony; but the years of Spanish occupation had included pirate domination, feudalism, and neglect, and little had been done to improve the agricultural characteristics of the land.

C. M. Johnson was the first American to take up residence in the Isle of Pines after the close of the war. He erected a sawmill at Los Indios. The first conveyance of title to land to an American took place in 1899, when Captain H. Haemal received some acreage at Los Indios. George Roberts, L. C.

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8 In 1940 the population of Nueva Gerona was estimated at 2600 and that of Santa Fe at 1500.
Giltner, W. D. Middleton, S. H. Pearcy, and T. J. Keenan took up residence in 1901. The contribution of Mr. Giltner to the progress of the island was outstanding. He was the first American civil engineer to settle in the Isle of Pines; mention should be made of his map, published in 1904. He is also credited with the introduction of the first citrus fruit tree.

The first American town to be founded was Columbia, at the foot of Mt. San Juan, eight miles from Nueva Gerona over a picturesque road through the pass of the Sierra los Caballos. The new town was also near the beautiful Bibijagua Beach, later to be popular with tourists. Columbia was founded in 1902. By 1910 it had progressed to the point of possessing a hotel, a general store, a post office, a school, a church, and many houses; its wharf was on the Jucaro River.

In 1902 surveying and clearing were also begun at McKinley, whose name suggests its period and its origin. The new town, 7½ miles from Nueva Gerona, near the Las Nuevas River, had the distinction of being the first purely American colony to be established on the island.

Thereafter promotion was rapid. The period from 1902 to 1910 was a time of land booms, carried on by “Land Companies.” These American corporations, which bought up large tracts from their Cuban and Spanish owners, cleared the titles, and surveyed and laid out the properties in parcels, were the real American pioneers of “Treasure Island.” All the usual stages of the land boom were experienced, including the less favorable aspects—inaccurate information about the location and nature of the land that was being sold, the natural obstacles to agriculture in general, and the exaggerated reports of the opportunities for investors. Here is a typical description:9

The San Pedro estate consisted originally of twenty thousand acres purchased by The Whitney Land Company, organized in 1906, and five thousand acres purchased by the Columbus Isle of Pines Company in December, 1908. The first development in this section was started by the latter company, which, immediately after having taken possession, commenced improvements on a large scale. A little later, owing to the rapid growth of their colony, it became necessary to have more land, and negotiations were completed in the spring of 1910 whereby all the land of The Whitney Land Company, including seven thousand eight hundred acres . . . came under the control of . . . the Columbus Isle of Pines Company, and the combined properties are now being exploited by this firm as one proposition.

There is a hotel at San Pedro . . . A general store does a thriving business, and the enterprising young American who runs it has recently been made postmaster and will distribute the mail for both San Pedro and La Siguanea. A schoolhouse, thoroughly up-to-date and in keeping with other improvements made on this tract, has just been completed.

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and will be maintained by the settlers of San Pedro as an exclusively American school. Church services which have heretofore been held in the hotel will be held in the new school building, until a suitable structure can be erected for that purpose.

San Pedro is the youngest settlement on the Isle of Pines and the liveliest. It is in the hands of active managers who are observant men, and, therefore its people are profiting by the past experiences of all the Isle. They know what to plant, when to plant it, how to care for it, and, by the time the fruit is ready to ship, they will be in a position to market their crops to greater advantage than has been possible heretofore to any colony.

In 1940 the only evidence of the San Pedro project was in the form of broken chimneys, a dilapidated packing house, and practically impassable roads.

By 1910 some five thousand Americans had purchased land and about two thousand had come to the island to make their homes.¹⁰

¹⁰In addition to the San Pedro tract described above, the
Invested American capital included $500,000 in buildings and $2,000,000 in fruit groves. The situation has been thus presented: 11

Americans are in the majority of the population; American money is not only the official but the actual currency of trade; the prevailing architecture outside the towns is American; American ministers preach from Protestant pulpits; American teachers preside over schools where American children congregate, and these schools are conducted in English, as Americans use that language. American spring wagons and automobiles have replaced the clumsy ox-cart and the picturesque coach, and they travel over the best of roads—wide, smooth highways, which facilitate shipments of fruits

following tracts were surveyed and developed to greater or smaller extent:

Santa Rosalia, Almacigos, La Ceiba, Santa Fe, El Canal, Calabaza, Canada, Los Indios, San Juan, El Hospital, Las Tunas, Hatillos, Ojo de Agua, El Mamey, and Paso Luis. The Land Companies operated in the following districts: Nueva Gerona, Santa Fe, Santa Barbara, McKinley, Los Indios, Columbia, San Pedro, Cisterna Heights, Caleta Grande.

11 Wright, op. cit., p. 42.
from orchards and gardens owned by Americans, producing for American markets. It is literally true that Americans own the Isle of Pines. Not two per cent of its area is the property of persons of other nationality.

The period of land-company promotion may be regarded as coming to an end about 1910; after that year attention was focused on development. Small investors had been encouraged to buy small parcels of land, in the hope that they could make a comfortable living from the cultivation of fruit; and during the period 1910-1915 more than a million dollars was spent in experiments with citrus fruits and $240,000 on road development. Civic organizations were formed, and, particularly during 1916-1917, there was a considerable amount of planned activity. Promoters envisaged the island not only as a source of income for fruit growers but as a tropical playground, rivaling Florida's east coast; and Bibijagua Beach was "boosted," a golf course was built, the opportunities for riding splendid saddle horses over entrancing bridle paths were advertised, and plans were drawn for the erection of a modern hotel.

In 1917 the Isle of Pines experienced two reverses. America entered the war, and attention was diverted from such things as citrus groves and tropical playgrounds. However, the real blow was a devastating hurricane, which created profound discouragement. Many settlers were as anxious to leave the island as they had been to arrive.

**A Second Period of Colonization**

The interest that sprang up after the Spanish-American War was rekindled at the close of the World War. A second period of settlement and colonization began, probably due to unrest in the United States; new lands and opportunities were again sought. Endeavors were made to fill the gaps and to resell and resettle some of the places that had been abandoned by the less temerarious owners who had left the island in the wake of the hurricane. Newcomers no longer were pioneers. Much of the preliminary clearing, surveying, and even building had already been accomplished; and a great deal more was known about the possibilities of agriculture and the markets for its products. At the close of 1921 about 8000 Americans owned property on the island, and about 750 of them lived there permanently.

Some of the improvements that resulted from this second wave of colonization were good roads to all parts of the occupied areas and the installation of telephone exchanges at Nueva Gerona, Santa Fe, and Santa Barbara. American interests included the cultivation of some four thousand acres of
grapefruit and orange groves, the largest of which were in the Nueva Gerona and Santa Barbara districts.

Optimists again predicted the complete Americanization of the Isle of Pines. Actually the capital investment of the Land Companies that had promoted the island in the first place was too great to let go without a struggle; and advertisements flared from newspapers, magazines, prospectuses, and billboards in the United States in an effort to reawaken public interest in a home in the tropics.

The Land Companies were incorporated under the laws of the United States and were managed by American methods, both from headquarters in the United States and by local representatives; the officers and practically all the employees were Americans. Such companies rendered a great service in the development of the island, though most of them lost heavily in the venture.

Just as the war and the hurricane in 1917 had retarded the growth of the settlement, politics and nature combined in 1925 and 1926 to give the project its deathblow. In 1925 the long-disputed question of the ownership of the Isle of Pines was finally settled by the ratification of the Hay-Quesada Treaty, by which the island became the undisputed property of Cuba. As most of the Americans who had bought land there had done so in the firm belief that it was only a question of time until their property would be under the American flag, their bitter disappointment is readily understood. The coup de grâce for the colonists came in the form of a devastating hurricane in 1926, which leveled much of the improvement that had been made in boom days. No attempt to rebuild has been made, and in 1931 the American population had shrunk to 276.\(^{12}\)

The causes of the decline of the American settlement may be summarized briefly. Many of the original land purchasers (parcel purchasers, not the Land Companies) bought in ignorance of conditions on the island and were disappointed when they arrived. Most of them knew little or nothing about the growing of citrus fruit, the opportunities for which had been overrated; they lacked sufficient capital to tide them over the period of settlement and early cultivation; and they lacked adequate transportation and other facilities for marketing their fruit to advantage, when once they had grown it. During the period of greatest expansion the World War sent the price of essential fertilizers so high that they could hardly be obtained. Increasing compe-

\(^{12}\) In 1931, according to the official Cuban census, the population of the Isle of Pines was 9450, including 276 Americans, 686 Spaniards, 1005 Britishers, 136 Japanese, and 62 Chinese.
tition from both Florida and Cuban growers caused further difficulty. Finally, the hurricanes and the Hay-Quesada Treaty made the continuation of promotion effort seem hopeless.

**Present Status and Future Outlook**

At the present time probably fewer than 150 Americans reside throughout the year on the Isle of Pines, in contrast with the two thousand who were there in 1910. Most of those who remain live in the Nueva Gerona and Santa Barbara regions; a few are scattered in such decadent places as Los Indios, McKinley, and Columbia. A comparatively small percentage of merchants and distributors are American now. Many former Americans have become Cuban citizens. The only increase in the number of people who have come from the United States in recent years has been in those people who, for reasons of health or for the prospect of a pleasantly peaceful retirement on competent income, have remodeled or built homes along the Las Casas River. Of the former great tracts of land owned by Americans, only the Swetland estate remains intact, and it serves now primarily as a winter residence.

As to activities, the most exciting time occurs on “Boat Days” and the morning after the arrival of the boat from Batabanó. Then Nueva Gerona takes on a little of its former bustle and life. Otherwise, Americans center about Bibijagua Beach and an English-speaking club originally founded by the American Legion. The “American School” retains its name, and English is taught there; but most of the pupils are children of Canadian, English, or Cuban parentage. The language of the island now is Spanish, and there are many inhabitants who cannot speak English.

The citrus industry, which was to have made so many American fortunes, has been reduced from the 4000 acres cultivated in 1910 to less than 1000 acres in 1940. By far the largest part of the groves is now in the hands of English and Canadians. Vegetable growing is now a distinctly Japanese enterprise. A few Americans remain who are interested in the cattle indus-

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13 Most of the packed citrus fruit is shipped to the United States and has also, until recently, been shipped to Great Britain. For the years 1935–1939 inclusive, exports to foreign markets totaled 611,122 standard crates of grapefruit and 234,297 crates of vegetables, mainly cucumbers. Shipments to Habana total annually 125,000 bulk crates of grapefruit and 100,000 bulk crates of oranges. Other fruits and vegetables exported are limes, watermelons, peppers, and eggplants. Usually fruit is shipped to the United States during August and September, because of the reduction of our import duties against Cuban fruit during this period, granted by the present commercial reciprocal treaty between the United States and Cuba. For the same reason vegetables are exported from December 1 to March 15.
try; there is one large American holding in the south-coast region. It is almost certain that in the course of the next generation or two the last vestige of the former American settlement will be assimilated by Cuban culture.

As for the future, it is to be hoped that government policy will place greater emphasis on the conservation of the island’s forest resources and a more equitable adjustment in citrus-fruit production and market demands. In terms of potentiality—estimated on the basis of soils, climate, and water available for irrigation—the Isle’s citrus-fruit culture and vegetable production could be increased many times. The marble quarries, the tungsten mine, and, probably, antimony, manganese, and gold will add increasing revenue. Undoubtedly the coastal waters will continue for many years to support an important sponge industry. Recent experiments in the culture of sea-island cotton indicate the possibility of a small production of this needed fiber. Particularly for Americans, the island, with its unexcelled climate, beaches, fishing, and local color, has much to offer tourists seeking a winter resort.