Chapter 3

Altered Landscapes and Transformed Livelihoods

The last train on the Truxillo ran on April 5, 1942, and the last purchase of fruit was in March. There will henceforth be no outlet for the small farmers in that section.

ROBERT WHEDBEE, APRIL 18, 1942

"I believe, Honorable Minister, that the true sons of Honduras should not be impeded when we want to work our own lands," wrote a frustrated Víctor Medina Romero on October 8, 1932, in a letter addressed to the Honduran minister of development.[1] Born and raised in the Honduran highlands, Medina first migrated to the North Coast in the 1920s. There he found work as a day laborer (*jornaliando*) for the fruit companies. He later left the North Coast only to return in 1932 with the hope of establishing a farm near the village of Corralitos, Atlántida. Medina's letter explained that because there were no forested lands (*montañas vírgenes*) in the area, he had sought permission to cultivate a *guamil* that belonged to Standard Fruit. When a company official informed him that the land would be made available via lease in the upcoming year, a disappointed Medina turned to the national government for help with gaining access to land that "I need so badly in order to make my own living. The companies only want slaves; the worker remains with nothing after buying his necessities." He concluded his letter by reminding the minister about the difficulties of squatting: "if these companies do not give their consent to work an abandoned farm, they won't want to buy the fruit that one harvests!"

Víctor Medina's brief yet evocative letter sheds light on the dynamic intersection between landscape and livelihood negotiated by those who ventured to the North Coast in the early twentieth century with the hope of tapping into the region's "green gold." However, his self-described identity as a "true son" of Honduras potentially obscures the fact that women also migrated to export banana zones. For example, sometime around 1927, Ángela Coto-Moreno's mother decided to leave her home in southern Honduras and head for the North Coast in the hope of finding some of her children. Accompanied by only seven-year-old Ángela, she made the difficult journey through the mountainous central region of Honduras before reaching the Sula valley, where she found both her children and a job as a labor camp cook. Ángela eventually married and left the banana camps to establish a small farm with her husband.[2]

The experiences of Víctor and Ángela were not unique: thousands of men and women migrated to the North Coast in the first half of the twentieth century. They came from all over Honduras in addition to El Salvador, Jamaica, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Belize, and Mexico. Immigrant life in export banana zones was highly dynamic: people moved from farm to farm and from job to job, blurring the boundaries between *campesino/a* and *obrero/a.* Hundreds of small-scale growers produced Gros Michel bananas for export and/or grew a variety of grains, fruits, and vegetables for local markets. Although farming afforded freedoms unavailable to plantation workers, it also held many risks linked to weather, volatile markets, and the fruit companies' monopoly power over railroads and shipping. Panama disease added another destabilizing element to everyday life: the fruit companies' practice of shifting production left residents of abandoned communities to confront the vexing task of forging new livelihoods in altered environments. For squatters, an already tenuous situation was compounded by the threat of eviction, or, as Medina's closing remark suggested, an inability to market one's produce.

In struggles for control over resources, working people frequently employed rhetorics of place that appropriated elite discourses about nation building for their own needs. Working-class visions of the North Coast tended to be as contradictory as the process by which the Honduran state attempted to incorporate the region into an imagined mestizo nation. Spanish-speaking migrants such as Víctor Medina and Ángela Coto-Moreno forged collective identities in opposition to both the hegemony of the U.S. fruit companies and the presence of "black" and "foreign" laborers. The North Coast was a contested contact zone that gave rise to both anti-immigrant campaigns and utopian land colonization projects in places that lay beyond the shadows of the banana plantations.

IN THE SHADOWS OF THE PLANTATION

Contrary to what has commonly been assumed, the expansion and vertical integration of U.S. fruit companies in Honduras did not precipitate a rapid decline in the number of small-scale banana growers. Many late-nineteenth-century centers of small- and medium-scale production, including those in the Sula valley and along the coastal plain in Atlántida, persisted into the 1930s. If the data supplied to U.S. consular officials by company officials can be trusted, the Tela Railroad Company annually purchased between 24 and 41 percent of the fruit that it exported from Honduras between 1921 and 1935.[3] Company purchases climbed from 2.1 million bunches in 1922 to 4.9 million bunches in 1928. Between 1929 and 1933, fruit purchases fell by 30 percent, from 4.3 million bunches to 3.0 million.[4] However, this decline came on the heels of a sharp increase in non-company exports during the late 1920s such that the Tela Railroad Company actually purchased more bananas during the early 1930s than they had during the early 1920s. Also, non-company fruit sales subsequently rebounded to 3.7 million bunches in 1935. Data for United Fruit's other Honduran subsidiary, the Truxillo Railroad Company, are much less complete but suggest that small-scale grower contributions to total exports were significantly less than they were in the Sula valley.[5] Standard Fruit Company documents reveal that the Aguan Valley Company purchased a majority of the fruit that it exported during the first half of the 1920s, including an impressive 76 percent (3.4 million bunches) in 1920. The proportion of the company's exports supplied by non-company growers declined steadily during the second half of the decade, bottoming out at a mere 13 percent (0.5 million bunches) in 1930.[6] Non-company bananas represented less than 5 percent of Standard Fruit's shipments from La Ceiba during the months (March–May) of peak demand in 1932.[7] However, the company's purchases increased significantly in the early 1930s even as its own production dropped sharply; in 1934, non-company growers supplied 33 percent of Standard Fruit's exports.[8]

A Honduran government report documented 955 banana farms operating on the North Coast in 1914. Approximately 61 percent of these farms consisted of less than 14 hectares of bananas; 10 percent of the farms had 70 or more hectares of bananas.[9] In the department of Cortés, *poquiteros* represented a large majority of export banana growers as late as 1926.[10] Out of 179 cultivators recorded on an incomplete 1926 survey, just over half possessed 5 or fewer hectares of bananas and more than 75 percent grew 10 or less hectares of fruit. Growers in San Pedro Sula somewhat bucked

TABLE 3.1. Source of Tela Railroad Company Banana Exports, 1921–1935

	Total Fruit Exported	*Fruit Purchased*	
Year	*In millions of bunches*	*In millions of bunches*	*Percentage of total exports*
1921	6.7	2.4	35
1922	8.1	2.1	25
1923	7.0	2.2	32
1924	8.5	2.2	26
1925	10.4	2.7	26
1926	8.2	2.7	33
1927	13.3	3.6	27
1928	15.5	4.9	31
1929	17.1	4.3	25
1930	15.9	4.3	27
1931	16.1	3.9	24
1932	13.2	3.3	25
1933	12.3	3.0	24
1934	12.9	3.6	28
1935	9.0	3.7	41

Source: Robert E. Whedbee, "A Brief, Basic Banana Industry Report," 1941, U.S. Diplomatic Post Records 1930–1945 Honduras, roll 28.

this trend: a majority grew more than 20 hectares and several individuals planted more than 50 hectares of bananas. Two San Pedro Sula planters, Domingo Galván (350 hectares) and Henry F. Panting (180 hectares), cultivated large fruit farms.

Many of the cultivators recorded by the 1926 survey grew bananas exclusively, but a larger number raised one or more additional crops, including forage grasses, plantains, sugarcane, maize, and coconuts. *Poquiteros* farming one to three hectares tended to cultivate bananas exclusively. Farmers with a bit more land tended to diversify. For example, Cecilio Machado grew bananas, maize, rice, and sugarcane on 7 hectares in Puerto Cortés; his neighbor Petronilo Aguirre grew bananas, corn, and "other" crops on 7 hectares. Inés García of Omoa grew bananas, plantains, and *zacate* (pasture) on a 5-hectare plot. Most of the wealthy *finqueros independientes* in San Pedro Sula cultivated extensive areas of *zacate* and sugarcane in addition to bananas. In the three municipalities with the

TABLE 3.2. Source of Aguan Valley Company Banana Exports, 1920–1934

	Total Fruit Exported	*Fruit Purchased*	
Year	*In millions of bunches*	*In millions of bunches*	*Percentage of total exports*
1920	4.5	3.4	76
1921	4.3	3.1	72
1922	4.3	2.9	67
1923	3.2	2.0	63
1924	2.7	1.5	56
1925	2.7	1.2	44
1926	1.9	0.7	37
1927	1.9	0.5	26
1928	3.3	0.6	18
1929	3.4	0.5	15
1930	4.0	0.5	13
1931	6.5	0.8	12
1932	5.2	1.0	19
1933	3.8	0.9	24
1934	3.3	1.1	33

Source: Aguan Valley Company, "Detail of Fruit Shipments for Years 1920 to 1930 Inclusive," 5 Mar. 1941, Standard Fruit and Steamship Company Papers, Box 8, Folder 12.

highest concentrations of banana growers—Puerto Cortés, Omoa, and El Paraíso—98 of the 150 growers recorded grew one or more crops in addition to bananas. Consequently, the term "banana grower" must be applied with some qualifications, since many farmers produced multiple crops. The tendency to grow at least two or three market crops in addition to bananas also prevailed in the department of Colón.[11]

On the one hand, the evidence presented here reflects the extent to which the organization of production on the North Coast had changed: small-scale growers, who prior to 1910 accounted for a majority of bananas exported from Honduran ports, supplied no more than 30 percent of the fruit exported during the 1930s. On the other hand, the fact that hundreds of non-company growers sold some 4.7 million bunches as late as 1934 suggests a need to revise historical narratives that emphasize the rupture between the pre- and post–United Fruit eras in Honduras.[12] Geographical centers of late-nineteenth-century export production in the departments of Cortés and Atlántida remained important sites of non-company banana farms well into the twentieth century: in 1914, the two departments accounted for 90 percent of the 955 banana farms operating on the North Coast. Also, the noteworthy difference in the percentage of purchased fruit between United Fruit's two Honduran subsidiaries is consistent with the distinct nineteenth-century histories of the Sula and Aguán valleys in which the companies operated and serves as a reminder that regional contexts mattered in shaping the fruit companies' production practices.

But if small-scale banana producers persisted on the North Coast in the twentieth century, so too did tensions between farmers and shippers. The fruit companies' control over both railroads and steamships placed growers in a precarious position that was further undermined following United Fruit's purchase of Cuyamel Fruit in 1929, a merger that squelched whatever competition existed in the Sula valley, where most of the non-company growers were found. In February 1931, an article in a North Coast newspaper accused Tela Railroad Company fruit inspectors of rejecting "almost all" of the fruit cut by "national growers."[13] One year later, an editorial in a different regional newspaper detailed how rejected fruit reduced the earnings of Luis Caballero, a Sula valley grower who cultivated approximately 35 hectares of bananas.[14] Caballero apparently did not suffer many rejections during the years 1925 and 1929, when he sold fruit worth US$4,667 and US$4,978, respectively. However, over a nine month period in 1930, Caballero had 807 bunches rejected; that same year, the company lowered the prices that it paid growers for all bunch sizes.[15] In just eight months of 1931, the company refused to buy 2,285 bunches. The rising number of rejections coincided with a dramatic decrease in the number of six-handed bunches that Caballero sold to the company. In 1925, the Tela Railroad Company bought nearly 2,400 sixes (more than 18 percent of the bunches purchased from Caballero). In 1929, the company purchased only 379 sixes; two years later, it all but stopped purchasing six-handed bunches. The case of Luís Caballero illustrates the connection between market demand and shifting quality standards: fruit inspectors tended to be less discriminating about banana quality in "boom" years such as 1925 than they were during the "bust" years of the early 1930s.

Fruit rejections were at the center of a conflict between a large number of Sula valley banana growers and the Tela Railroad Company over the terms of the 1931 purchase contract.[16] The first three clauses of the contract defined quality standards in terms of variety, peel condition, and bunch size. Harvested fruit had to be "fresh, clean, unblemished" Gros

Michel bananas. The company would not accept "bruised, damaged, dirty, or sun-burned" fruit, nor would it buy bunches that were not at the stage of ripeness requested, or that had short bananas (*dedos cortos*). Finally, the company would be obligated to accept only bunches with seven or more hands. The contract also stipulated that the fruit company could issue *avisos* on any day "without exception." Contract growers would be guaranteed a period of at least 12 hours to cut and deliver their fruit to the designated loading spots.[17] Individuals who signed the contract consented to weed and prune their farms with care (*bien limpias y deshijadas*), and to treat plant diseases according to the procedures adopted on company farms. They also agreed to sell their fruit exclusively to the Tela Railroad Company. In return, the company agreed to purchase Gros Michel fruit from contract growers at least once a week, at the rate of 50 U.S. cents for nine-hand stems, 37.5 cents for eight-hand stems, and 25 cents for seven-hand stems.[18] Upon making delivery, the contractor would be given a check or receipt that could be redeemed for cash in the company offices. The contract outlined a grievance procedure that consisted of an arbitration panel whose members were to be named by both the company and the contract grower, but disagreements related to the "variety, classification, maturity, and quality of the fruit" would be resolved by the company "without appeal."

Many fruit growers found the terms of the contract unacceptable; one outspoken critic of the contract predicted that it would lead to far more fruit rejections than in the past.[19] One week after a North Coast newspaper published the contract, the Ministro de Fomento met with a group of banana growers in San Pedro Sula. During the meeting, growers elected a committee to draft a counterproposal.[20] However, as the year came to a close, some 800 growers still refused to sign the contract.[21] In an open letter defending his fellow banana cultivators, Francisco Bográn, President of the Unión Frutera de Cortés, stated that his organization would exhaust all "peaceful and civilized means" to resolve their differences with the company. Shortly thereafter, another grower explained that he had rejected the contract because "individual sovereignty of one's lands and fruit inspectors (*juez de fruta*) are the umbilical cord of the independent farmers."[22] At least some growers believed that having some control over quality standards was absolutely crucial.

In early January 1932, the company lowered its purchase price for nine-handed stems to 30 cents. Many growers responded by refusing to cut their fruit.[23] The combative tone of Eduardo Da Costa Gómez, a spokesperson for the Unión Frutera de Cortés, underscored the heightened tensions between the company and contract growers: "Last night, sympathizers (*manos piadosas*) destroyed fruit that the company had ready [to transport]. We're starting to get New Year's presents (*aguinaldos*)."[24] At virtually the same time, Tela Railroad Company dock and railroad workers went on strike in protest over layoffs and deep wage cuts. The government of Mejía Colindres moved to end the strike by declaring martial law and sending troops to force the strikers back to work. The strike ended with in one week when the company agreed to provide food and housing for dismissed workers.[25] The wage cuts were not rescinded. Contract growers — many of whom were influential members of President Mejía Colindres's Liberal party — fared somewhat better. In mid-January, *El Pueblo* reported that Bográn and Da Costa Gómez met with the head of the Tela Railroad Company in La Lima.[26] The growers requested a reinstatement of the old prices for a period of sixty days, but the company argued that this was impossible due to a downturn in the market. Instead, company officials agreed to increase the price "immediately" when the economic situation improved and to install fruit inspectors who "would give fair receipts." Unsatisfied with these promises, the growers' representatives traveled to Tegucigalpa to meet with government officials. Shortly thereafter, the government consented to lower freight rates on the national railroad provided that the Tela Railroad Company (which under the terms of the contract was responsible for shipping costs) would raise the price paid for non-company fruit a proportionate amount.

Shortly after Sula valley banana growers reached the compromise with the national government and United Fruit, Da Costa Gómez reported that his association had entered into negotiations with Russell English of Mobile, Alabama.[27] Under the proposed terms, growers would sell all of their high-quality (*de primera calidad*) Gros Michel bananas to English.[28] Proposed purchase prices (nine-hand stem: US$.35; eight-hand stem: US$.25; and seven-hand stem: US$.15) were considerably lower than those proposed in the 1931 Tela Railroad Company contract, but higher than the US$.30 offered by that company in 1932.[29] The growers' counterproposal called on English's company to increase prices by 50 percent if and when the market price for fruit reached $2.50 per 100 pounds and/or when average fruit weights exceeded 60, 50, and 30 pounds for nine, eight, and seven-hand stems respectively.[30] In order to verify market prices, growers asked for the right to send a representative to the United States at the company's expense. The counterproposal also stipulated that *avisos* be posted every eight days and remain in effect for 36 hours. For their part, the growers and the government agreed to deliver harvested fruit to Puerto

Cortés and not to raise the shipping rates on the National Railway for the duration of the contract.

Negotiations between English and the growers continued through April.[31] In early May, a letter published in *El Pueblo* pointed out that the contract proposed by English offered growers "great advantages" and a $25,000 guarantee.[32] However, some growers insisted on a $100,000 deposit, and apparently the parties failed to strike a deal. Nevertheless, the negotiations between English and the growers' association revealed the concerns held by many banana farmers. These included ensuring that purchase prices reflected the banana's U.S. market value and creating a mechanism to verify changes in prices. The proposed pricing system also reflected growers' desires to be rewarded for producing heavy fruit bunches and to have more time between harvesting notices and delivery deadlines. The subject of fruit inspectors is absent from the counterproposal, a perplexing omission given the historic importance of this issue. Finally, the proposed contract's stipulation restricting exports to Gros Michel bananas is a reminder that the prospect of a new shipping line did not necessarily create an opportunity to export banana varieties other than Gros Michel.

Around the same time that Sula valley growers were searching for a means to loosen United Fruit's stranglehold on shipping, they became embroiled in a controversy over irrigation water. In February 1932, a member of the Honduran congress proposed reducing the tax on irrigation water applied to banana farms from ten dollars per hectare to three dollars per hectare. As Congress debated the measure, independent growers expressed their opposition to the reform. An anonymous grower wrote, "if they give the water concession they will ruin us; we, Hondurans, do not want irrigation."[33] Da Costa Gómez claimed that the tax concession would result in national growers being "permanently" displaced:

> We will never be able to offer fruit equal to that produced by the company and they'll be justified in not accepting it. The company's production will be sufficient to ruin us and buy up our lands that we would no longer be able to farm due to the high labor costs.[34]

A Puerto Cortés grower added that the reform measure would "harm national growers who will not be able to compete with irrigated fruit; therefore a greater quantity will be rejected."[35]

The concern of the self-identified "national" growers over the irrigation tax was rooted in their belief that the tax rebate would enable the fruit companies to increase their use of irrigation water and thereby produce greater quantities of heavy fruit.[36] Non-company producers, already concerned about fruit rejections, feared that cheap irrigation waters would lead to still greater rates of rejection. However, evidence suggests that the growers' most dire predictions did not immediately come true. The portion of total banana exports consisting of purchased fruit appears to have increased during the three years following the tax reduction. Furthermore, the congressional debate over the amendment revealed that the law establishing a $10 per hectare irrigation tax had not been enforced despite the fact that the companies had undertaken irrigation projects since 1923. Da Costa Gómez reported that the company had pumps operating on at least five company farms, and *El Pueblo* published photos of a pumping station located on the Ulúa.[37] In fact, confidential U.S. State Department correspondence reported that the Tela Railroad Company had more than 10,000 hectares under irrigation at the time of the controversy![38] In other words, the evidence strongly suggests that non-company growers had already been competing against irrigated fruit for nearly a decade, during which time taxes on irrigation water may not have been collected.[39] Nevertheless, contract growers' concerns about their inability to adopt capital-intensive (and resource-consuming) production methods were hardly irrational since the company stipulated that producers operate their farms in conformity with its cultivation practices. As fruit company managers in the tropics adopted novel methods to increase yields of high-quality fruit and U.S. per capita consumption of bananas leveled off, small-scale growers found themselves increasingly challenged to meet evolving production standards.

Fruit rejections and variable prices aside, the U.S. banana companies purchased tens of millions of banana bunches from contract growers during the first third of the twentieth century. For a small number of planters, the banana trade contributed to the accumulation of large amounts of capital. Fruit growers with medium-sized holdings such as Luís Caballero annually sold thousands of U.S. dollars' worth of fruit. For *poquiteros* without a purchase contract, earnings were probably scant.[40] The conflict over the 1931 contract revealed how United Fruit's transportation monopoly, along with its ability to set quality standards, enabled the company to exert considerable control over both *poquiteros* and the so-called *finqueros independientes.* The widespread protests staged by banana growers in 1931–1932 succeeded in securing a temporary government subsidy, but did little to strengthen contract growers' position vis-à-vis the U.S. fruit companies.

THE CROSS-CUTTING EFFECTS OF SHIFTING PLANTATION AGRICULTURE

Paradoxically, non-company growers felt the limits of their autonomy most acutely when the fruit companies abandoned them. In May 1931, amid rumors that the United Fruit Company was going to suspend its operations in Omoa, Mayor Samuel García dispatched a telegram to the company in order to find out the truth. The mayor received a terse reply from a high-level company official: "I am notifying you that I have received orders to suspend indefinitely the purchase and production of fruit." García also received a telegram sent by United Fruit's William Turnbull explaining that "present business conditions do not allow us to continue absorbing the enormous losses that we have endured for several years in Cuyamel, a situation that we feel has not been appreciated." Mayor Garcia responded to the grim news by convening an open meeting during which some 90 residents from Omoa and surrounding communities signed a petition addressed to Honduran President Colindres Mejía, expressing their outrage over the company's decision:

> There are more than 500 laborers who are losing their daily work and along with it their ability to provide for their families. Many years of struggling, patient labor, perseverance and cooperation with the company are going for naught simply due to an order, as if the labor of an entire community were not worth even the tiniest consideration.[41]

They appealed to the president to intervene in order to prevent the "death of the only activity that provides a livelihood for the people." García pointed out that a suspension of banana-growing activities would likely put an end to local railroad traffic, leaving the community in isolation. The petitioners admitted that the region no longer produced "what it had in the past," but they defended their bananas as being as good as those cultivated elsewhere in the department of Cortés.[42]

One year later, Mayor Garcia's fears became reality when the company began removing branch lines situated between Cuyamel and Omoa.[43] Banana growers made public appeals for help with finding a way to transport their produce.[44] In a 1932 letter to the Ministro de Fomento, Orellano Rodríguez explained that he, along with 25 other growers, stood to lose the investments that they had made in new banana farms located along Cuyamel's railroad line.[45] The minister's response offered little consolation: he informed Rodríguez that the company "has the right to abandon that section of railroad; the government has negotiated with company representatives for the line to be maintained but it does not have the right to force them."[46] The same concessions that gave the fruit companies access to the region's resources also gave them the liberty to remove their infrastructure—including railroad branches—when the transformed resources no longer met their needs.

Following his inspection of the Omoa-Cuyamel region in 1933, Honduran official Alonso Valenzuela described the stark contrast between the boom years of the past and the present economic collapse: "It's a pity to see the comparison between 1916 and today: then, banana farms covered all of the valleys and the level of commerce was astonishing; today, everything is desolate, dead. The valleys are all *guamiles* and it is hard to find a banana plant."[47] In Cuyamel, Valenzuela noted that the "greater part" of the inhabitants remained in the area. Some residents engaged in the bittersweet work of dismantling fruit company railroads and buildings. Others cultivated grains and/or raised animals including pigs, chickens, and cattle. Along a section of railroad that ran close to the sea, small numbers of cultivators continued to grow export bananas that they transported to steamers via small boats and canoes. However, by the mid-1930s, banana exports from the Cuyamel-Omoa region had all but ceased.

By the time that Valenzuela and fellow inspector Pascual Torres arrived in Omoa, the fruit company railroad had already started to deteriorate from disuse. Valenzuela and Torres reported that repairing the railroad would require a significant investment on the part of the national government. Even more problematic, according to the inspectors, was the lack of potential traffic capable of generating the amount of revenue needed to meet the railroad's operating expenses. Local people reported that they generally used canoes and mules as their primary means of transportation because they were more convenient and less expensive than the fruit trains (whose frequency had been diminishing for several years). In fact, some residents declared that they had never viewed the fruit company bridges and railroads as a necessity "to the extent that is being suggested today."[48] Torres reported that the removal of an iron bridge over the Cuyamel River would not disrupt local livelihoods since the bridge had served rail cars exclusively. He stated that the people in Cuyamel would be "content" to have a government-provided truck capable of crossing the river during the dry season and a wooden bridge to facilitate crossing during the rainy season. The two inspectors may have downplayed the importance of the railroad in order to help build a case for why the government should forego a costly overhaul of the line in favor of less expensive alternatives.[49] On the other hand, their reports may have reflected the extent to which the Cuyamel Fruit railroad primarily served the interests of export banana growers.

If the residents of Omoa-Cuyamel were ambivalent about the fate of the railroad, they were anything but when it came to the fruit company's abandoned land and housing infrastructure. In some cases, local people were already established on former banana farms when the company announced its imminent departure. On a property known as "Cuyamel," several families cultivated annual crops in addition to fruit trees, plantains, pineapple, and sugarcane. They began leasing the land from the Cuyamel Fruit Company at some point in the 1920s and continued to rent from United Fruit following its acquisition of the property in 1929.[50] The renters also occupied company-built houses.[51] When word circulated in 1933 that the national government intended to reclaim the properties, the Junta de Fomento de Cuyamel (Cuyamel Development Committee) petitioned Honduran President Tiburcio Carías to recognize the presence of the renters who had occupied the land "for years."[52] One year later the national government approved the statutes of the Junta de Fomento, investing the body with the power to administer the property.[53]

However, the Junta soon became a target of official criticism. In 1937, Cortés Governor Castañeda listed examples of what he characterized as the committee's inefficiency and corruption: "The former Cuyamel Fruit Company buildings, with minor exceptions, are deteriorating; there are no tires on the truck; the promised investments in the property have not been made; and the land and houses have become the spoils of the Junta."[54] He also accused the committee of tax evasion and fraud. In addition, local police officials reported that a group of "non-Hondurans" living in Cuyamel were dismantling former fruit company houses and selling off the lumber and furniture.[55] In the eyes of Governor Castañeda, the failure of the Junta de Fomento to prevent illegal actions was further proof of its inability to administer the Cuyamel property, and he urged his superiors to dissolve the committee.

In the case of the Omoa-Cuyamel region, then, the fruit company's departure placed severe constraints on local livelihoods by leaving hundreds of laborers unemployed and dozens of non-company banana growers without access to export markets. Railroads and export banana production on the North Coast had developed hand-in-hand during the twentieth century; the loss of one tended to spell the end of the other. But if United Fruit could remove railroad tracks and bridges, it could not haul away the land. In some instances, former workers gained access to abandoned farms and housing that enabled them to cultivate crops for local and regional markets. However, the substitute crops seldom generated the income that export bananas had produced during the boom years, leading many people to migrate to active banana zones. Finally, for some residents, the end of the export banana trade indirectly created opportunities for short-term profiteering and patronage via administrative structures ostensibly created to facilitate local control over abandoned resources and infrastructure.

Although Omoa cannot be held up as a "typical" case of abandonment, similar patterns unfolded in many North Coast communities following the cessation of export banana production. In August 1931, residents of Mezapa (Santa Rosa del Norte), a small village in the municipality of Tela, began "creating difficulties" for workers attempting to remove a branch line operated by the Tela Railroad Company.[56] Shortly thereafter, both the alcalde of Tela, Coronel Modesto Orellano, and Atlántida Governor Adolfo Miralda traveled to the village where they met with nearly 80 residents in order to resolve the matter. Governor Miralda read an official statement from the Ministro de Gobernación, reaffirming both the Tela Railroad Company's right to remove its branch lines and the government's resolve "to protect the rights of the company."[57] He then acknowledged the railroad's importance to the community but explained that he could not compel the company to leave the line intact.

The villagers did not dispute the right of the company to remove the track. Instead, they requested that the bridges over the Naranjo River and several creeks be left in place in order to facilitate the movement of people and animals during the rainy season. They also called for the rebuilding of a bridge over the Naranjo River that had been damaged by flood torrents. Mezapa residents claimed that prior to the arrival of the company, the Naranjo River generally "was dry" and "crossed with great ease." However, the Tela Railroad Company had rechanneled the river and created a network of drainage ditches that combined the flows of several other creeks into the Naranjo. As a result, locals described the river in 1931 as "very deep and dangerous," particularly during the rainy season when the swollen waterway carried trees and other debris down stream. Finally, noting that the fruit company piped potable water from the Mezapa River through the village to its nearby labor camps, the residents requested that, as "an act of justice," four water spigots be installed for the community's use. The following day, Mayor Orellano reported that the matter had been resolved to the satisfaction of all parties.[58] The residents of Mezapa agreed to permit the removal of the railroad in return for the Governor's promise that the bridges would remain intact. The Governor and the Mayor also promised to take up the issues of the water spigots and the Naranjo River bridge with Tela Railroad Company officials.

However, less than one week after the meeting, the assistant mayor of Mezapa, Ciriaco Torres, informed Governor Miralda that he had ordered the workers to stop taking up the rails because the Tela Railroad Company had failed to complete "the construction of the bridge spanning the Naranjo River." The governor's reply to Torres was firm: the village could not insist that the company build a new bridge because one was already in place.[59] But the content and tone of his letter to the Ministro de Gobernación were very different. Miralda explained that many of Mezapa's 400 inhabitants made a living by selling food and other products to plantation workers in the nearby municipality of El Progreso. Between Mezapa and these markets lay the Naranjo River and numerous other creeks that during the rainy season could only be crossed via bridges. Miralda urged his Tegucigalpa-based superior to pressure the company to rebuild the bridge in light of both the environmental changes precipitated by the company's operations and the potential for further resistance on the part of Mezapans:

> I repeat that the villagers have justice on their side because the problem has resulted from the channeling work [of waterways] that the company has done in that jurisdiction. And I am of the opinion that it is the company that has the most to gain by complying with the just desires of the inhabitants of Mezapa. The actions that the government could take to pacify the villagers would not prevent them from taking revenge upon the company.[60]

Unfortunately, the historical record does not indicate whether the bridge was rebuilt, or if the villagers sought "revenge." Nevertheless, the events at Mezapa reveal the historical connections between altered landscapes and transformed livelihoods. The Tela Railroad Company's arrival in the region created new ways to earn a living while altering the landscape. When Panama Disease reached the Mezapa area and reduced the profitability of growing bananas, the company pulled out, removing the infrastructure that it had placed there. However, the Naranjo River and the area's drainage basin remained altered, prompting the villagers to impede the removal of the railroad in order to ensure that the company maintained a series of local bridges essential to the (twice-transformed) local economy.

The bridge over the Naranjo River, then, can be seen as a symbol of the tangible benefits that United Fruit's engineering wizardry brought to the residents of Mezapa. But the company's production practices also changed the region's water and soil resources in two distinct, but historically linked ways: seasonal flooding of the Naranjo River and a decline in banana production due to Panama Disease. These new dynamics in turn triggered another series of linked social processes that included the fruit company's abandonment of the area, Mezapa residents' efforts to maintain their livelihoods, and subsequently new historical meanings for company-built infrastructure. Viewed in this context, the bridge—trembling as it gets pounded by tree trunks—represents the instability of complex agroecosystems shaped by dynamic processes operating at local and international levels.

Two years after the Mezapa protest, the residents of San Francisco, a small village west of La Ceiba, protested Standard Fruit's removal of a branch line. Echoing the concerns raised by his counterpart in Mezapa, San Francisco Mayor Sebastían Figueroa declared that the removal of the track would be a "mortal blow" to his community because it was the only means of transport possible through the swampy terrain in which the village was located. He added that the branch line in question crossed no fewer than 26 bridges. The Ministro de Fomento and the Ministro de Gobernación both contacted Standard Fruit in order to request a suspension of work until the matter could be discussed. Standard Fruit's general manager, A. J. Chute, responded by explaining that the track in question had serviced farms taken out of production due to Panama disease prior to 1929, and that company trains had already ceased to service the branch. However, he believed that with only minor repairs the rail bed could be converted to a roadway suitable for pedestrians and horses. Chute added that at the request of some "local employees and residents of San Francisco," the company had decided to leave two bridges in place.[61]

Chute's reply indicated that San Francisco had already endured an extended period of relative isolation prior to the removal of the branch line. In addition, a government report written four years prior to the incident described San Francisco and its neighboring villages as former "emporiums of wealth that today are barely surviving."[62] This suggests that the removal of the branch line signaled less the beginning of an abrupt transition for the residents of San Francisco than the culmination of an ongoing decline in local economic activity. Whether Mayor Figueroa remained satisfied with Standard Fruit's promise to leave two bridges in place is unclear, but his interest in impeding the removal of useable elements of the fruit companies' transportation infrastructure was consistent with community-based responses to abandonments elsewhere on the North Coast.

Local and regional government officials were not the only ones who initiated negotiations with the fruit companies over resources: many former plantation workers took direct action by squatting on company properties in an effort to create new livelihoods. In 1927, more than a hundred people occupying abandoned (*enguamilado*) Standard Fruit farms near La Masica petitioned Honduran President Miguel Paz Barahona for the right to work 7-hectare plots of land "independently." When Standard Fruit objected to the squatters' presence, Jacobo P. Munguía defended their actions by explaining that the squatters sought permission to plant modest amounts of Lacatan bananas: "Rather than leaving these lands uncultivated, they want to plant them in that disease-resistant variety and should the company find a market for the variety, they will happily sell their fruit to the company."[63] He admitted that the lands belonged to Standard Fruit, but stressed that the company would find the squatters to be reasonable collaborators, not adversaries. Unfortunately for the would-be banana growers, export markets for Lacatan fruit did not materialize during the 1920s. The onset of Panama disease exposed the limited freedom possessed by non-company producers, large and small. Even those willing to gamble on the Lacatan were ultimately forced to abandon the trade, shut off from both transportation and marketing networks.[64]

That same year, members of the Unión Ferrocarrilera de Honduras (Honduran Railroad Workers Union) and a group of campesinos began working "lands around an abandoned camp" of the Standard Fruit Company situated to the west of Sonaguera.[65] Labor leader Zoroastro Montes de Oca requested that the government help to ensure that fruit companies did not seek to evict the workers from the land as apparently had happened elsewhere in the area. He offered the activities of a railroad worker named Luis García as an example of the squatters' industriousness: on some seven hectares of land, García planted maize along with smaller amounts of sugarcane, plantains, bananas (for animal feed), root vegetables (*malanga*), and coffee. According to Montes de Oca, García had unknowingly found "the key to complete freedom" that would enable him to quit his job on the company railroad in favor of farming. He further promised that, if supported by the government, the worker-campesinos would soon form a "great property or cooperative" on the land.

In 1931, a La Ceiba–based workers' organization asked the national government to grant them the free use of "lands abandoned by the banana companies on the North Coast in sufficient quantities to provide for the unemployed."[66] Some 200 signatures were appended to the petition that claimed that at least 5,000 workers were unemployed and that available land was scarce due to the "different railroad and banana companies established on the lands most accessible to centers of consumption." The following year, the Governor of Atlántida, noting the "constant" stream of cultivators who appeared to request protection of their rights to either *ejido* lands (controlled by municipal governments) or those abandoned by the banana companies, authorized municipal chiefs of police to assist cultivators without property titles to establish property boundaries.[67] Efforts to resolve land disputes often proceeded slowly in part due to the inability of municipal governments to cover the expenses associated with a titling process that one local official described as "protracted and costly."[68]

Frustrated with the difficulty of obtaining land in export banana zones, some Honduran worker organizations turned their gaze toward Mosquitia—a large region lying between the department of Colón and the border with Nicaragua that was inhabited primarily by indigenous populations long viewed as primitive by Spanish-speaking highland elites. Honduran labor leaders first proposed colonizing Mosquitia in 1911.[69] During the 1920s, North Coast worker organizations showed renewed interest in the region. In July 1926, the Sociedad Lucha Obrera wrote to the Minister of Development declaring its intention to acquire a land concession in the Mosquitia region, "a place coveted by foreign elements and the only one that remains available to us on the North Coast."[70] A couple of months later, a letter from a La Ceiba–based artisans' guild urged the national government to approve a concession for 50,000 hectares of land "suitable for agriculture" near the Patuca River in Mosquitia.[71] Throughout 1927, guild members donated their labor on Sundays to build a sailing vessel for the purposes of making a preliminary expedition into Mosquitia. The organization also sponsored cultural events, including plays and holiday pageants, in order to raise funds for the project.[72]

In a 1927 address delivered in La Ceiba, Zoroastro Montes de Oca, secretary of the Honduran Railroad Workers Union, wove the language of both class and nationalism in exhorting his comrades to support the Mosquitia project: "How many families can we take to Mosquitia without the help of the state? Every worker's organization in the Republic that holds to the ideal of controlling all of Mosquitia's land for the common good and health of the Republic ought to ask itself that question. As we, the workers, understand it, those lands belong to the nation."[73] In the view of Montes de Oca, workers' claims to the resources of Mosquitia were grounded in ideas about both social justice and the rights and responsibilities of liberal citizenship. If workers loyal to the Honduran nation-state did not act, Mosquitia could easily fall under the control of a foreign interest, be it neighboring Nicaragua or a U.S. corporation.

In August 1928, a group of sixteen workers sailed their vessel eastward from La Ceiba to the mouth of the Patuca River. They proceeded upstream in dugout canoes with the intention of establishing a logging camp. However, by early November, more than half of the workers reportedly had left due to inadequate provisions and swarms of mosquitoes that made sleeping unbearable. The remaining expedition members abandoned the camp in December and returned downstream disgruntled and with little mahogany to show for their efforts.[74] Three months later, the Federación de Obreros Hondureños (FOH) reached an agreement with the Ministro de Fomento that ceded the FOH the right to colonize 40,000 hectares of land along the Patuca River.[75] At least one Olancho newspaper expressed its enthusiasm for the project in an editorial entitled "The colonization of Mosquitia by, and for Hondurans is an unfulfilled need." Describing the region as "majestic plains of great fertility and luxuriant and inaccessible forests yet untrammeled by humans," the newspaper's editors declared that "cultivation is urgently called for whenever there are poor natives, lacking in resources and livelihoods, in a countryside in which benevolent Nature has spilled its cornucopia of abundant gifts."[76]

But not everyone was so optimistic. In January 1929, J. Amado Flores, a logger and self-described supporter of worker causes, wrote a lengthy letter to the FOH in which he praised the organization's efforts to "liberate the fatherland from voracious foreigners" but warned against "blindly pursuing Utopias."[77] Amado suggested that the colonization project was based on a poor understanding of the region's resources. Mahogany trees, he explained, grew in very small, widely dispersed clusters, meaning that logging operations would be labor intensive. As far as cultivation was concerned, the lower portion of the Patuca River was flanked by thin, waterlogged soils. High wages and distant markets would restrict agriculture to high-value cash crops.[78] He estimated that the local population along the Patuca River did not exceed sixty people due to mosquitoes and a harsh climate. This gloomy portrait notwithstanding, Amado stressed that a "Honduran presence" in Mosquitia was vital in light of Nicaraguan "incursions" into the region. He urged the FOH to proceed with the project on a drastically scaled-down basis and offered his personal assistance:

"Being a proud Honduran, I would seek . . . to put these extensive regions in the hands of those who could make them healthy, populate them and make them productive."

Worker organizations appear to have abandoned the Mosquitia colonization project in favor of settling on lands abandoned by the fruit companies. Nevertheless, the failed settlement represented an ambitious and coordinated attempt by artisan/worker organizations to create livelihoods independent of the banana industry. The project also sheds light on the meanings that at least some labor leaders inscribed on the North Coast's resources. The message espoused by Montes de Oca was clear: powerful foreign companies already controlled the best lands along the North Coast; loyal workers needed to ensure that Mosquitia remained under Honduran sovereignty. He and other labor leaders claimed a stake in a territory that they had never seen on the basis of their status as *hijos de la patria*—sons of the fatherland. In order to do so, they appropriated elite visions of a mestizo nation descended exclusively from Indian and Hispanic peoples in an effort to erase the cultural heterogeneity found within the nation's borders and particularly on the North Coast where hispano-Honduran men and women mingled with Garifunas, Jamaicans, Palestinians, and gringos from the United States.[79] Mosquitia became a wilderness without a peopled past—a place to create a mestizo society comprised of male-headed agrarian households free of the social inequities and cultural diversity found on the North Coast.

The utopian vision underlying the Mosquitia project was probably more the exception than the rule among worker-cultivators, most of whom forged livelihoods by migrating in and around export banana zones. As the fruit companies redirected their railroads toward disease-free lands, they left many communities facing economic crises while simultaneously stimulating economic activity elsewhere by injecting capital and providing transportation linkages to regional and international markets. The history of Sonaguera, Colón, illustrates the cross-cutting effects of shifting plantation agriculture. Separated from the Caribbean Sea by the Nombre de Diós mountains, Sonaguera did not participate in the late-nineteenth-century banana boom that took place in and around Caribbean port towns. The municipality remained largely disconnected from the banana trade during the first two decades of the twentieth century, a situation reflected in community leaders' enthusiastic response to a U.S. investor's 1907 proposal to build a railroad from Trujillo to Sonaguera: "[The railroad] is our only salvation since it would both repopulate the

FIGURE 3.1. *Mahogany logs on Standard Fruit train in La Ceiba. Author's private collection.*

extensive, uncultivated *vegas* of the Aguán River, and put an end to the constant emigration of our sons to the Costa Norte."[80]

The principal livelihood in Sonaguera in the early twentieth century was small-scale ranching. In 1918, 66 residents reported owning between 1 and 40 head of cattle.[81] In 1920, local officials approved a timber concession for Luís Masnada, a businessman from La Ceiba with ties to Standard Fruit. The five-year contract agreed to sell Masnada "5,000 mahogany and cedar trees" averaging 8 feet in diameter.[82] Revenue from the timber sale was to finance various public works projects, including a new town hall and schools. The deal strongly suggested that at least part of the municipality contained extensive forests and that existing ranching and agriculture operations did not generate much revenue. One year later, the Mayor of Sonaguera convened a special meeting to discuss the "near exhaustion" of forests in the ejido*s* due to the actions of "certain residents" who were felling trees in order to plant pasture. Local officials, expressing concern that such practices would threaten the ability of "poor residents" to establish small farms, agreed to divide the ejido into two zones, one for livestock (*zona ganadera*) and the other for agriculture (*zona mixta*).[83] This initial effort to limit the expansion of ranching was a portent of the future, but the shift toward an agricultural base was only beginning; as late as 1923, cattle, horses, and other animals continued to range freely throughout municipal lands, and the financial burden of erecting fences to protect crops rested squarely on farmers' shoulders.[84]

Life in Sonaguera began to change rapidly when not one but two fruit-company railroads approached the municipality from opposite directions. In 1924, one hundred residents led by Inés Lanza presented a petition to the municipal council calling for Sonaguera's ejidos to be rezoned for agriculture in anticipation of the "foreign companies' " arrival.[85] The petitioners complained that the presence of "all kinds" of roaming livestock was impeding agricultural development. The Sonagueran council, perhaps hoping to avoid rendering a decision on a contentious topic, unanimously agreed to seek advice from higher authorities. The following year, Mayor Martínez reported he had received multiple complaints from the Standard Fruit Company about cattle-related damages on its new plantations.[86] This time the municipal council took action, establishing an agricultural zone on "land pertaining to this jurisdiction" that surrounded the municipal ejido.[87] Ranchers were given three months to corral any livestock and relocate them to ejido lands where free grazing continued to be permitted.

This measure apparently did little to resolve the conflicts between ranchers and cultivators. In March 1926, Nicolas Robles, Adolfo Sarres, Rosalio Escobar, Enrique B. Ocampo, and forty other Sonagueran ranchers petitioned the municipality for permission to erect, at their own expense, a barbed-wire fence in order to avoid damaging the plantations of the "foreign companies" that encircled the ejido.[88] Local officials approved the request, yet the power of the ranchers—who would now bear the burden of preventing damage to agricultural fields—was diminishing. Less than one year later, Robles, Petrona Ocampo, Tomasa Ramos, and some twenty other Sonagueran residents sent a letter to the Ministro de Fomento, complaining about the "severe fines" that they received on account of their cattle entering the banana farms of the Truxillo Railroad and Standard Fruit companies.[89] Describing themselves as "small cultivators and ranchers," the authors claimed that they lacked the financial resources to enclose their pastures and called on the national government to oblige the companies to fence their plantations. The Minister's somewhat ambiguous reply probably brought them little satisfaction: he urged the petitioners to respect the existing regulations that obliged "every owner of cattle and agricultural fields" to enclose their fields, but he made no specific reference to the fruit companies.[90]

By the end of the 1920s, export banana production in Sonaguera had increased dramatically. A majority of the output came from the farms of Standard Fruit and United Fruit subsidiaries, but small-scale cultivators contributed as well. Beginning in 1925, a growing number of people solicited land for agricultural activities. Among the many who sought parcels in 1928 were Porfirio Guerrero and Eladio Zelaya, who each requested 35 hectares in order to plant export bananas. That same year, Alberto Ortíz, Esteban Bardales, Octavio Robles, Juan Bardales Ortíz, and Eugenio Orellano each solicited 7 "forested" hectares on which they intended to grow bananas.[91] In February 1930, a number of residents asked that the ejidos be rezoned for agricultural use.[92] They acknowledged the importance of ranching in the past but noted that the number of cattle had fallen considerably in recent years as residents turned increasingly to banana cultivation on the ejido's "fertile soils." The municipal council agreed to redesignate the ejido as agricultural land, and ordered that fences be erected around existing pastures within a period of six weeks. One month later, the Governor of Colón approved the measure.

Invoking a contrasting view of the local landscape, some eighty Sonagueran ranchers rose to defend their livelihoods before the council: "It is common knowledge in this town that the majority of ejido lands . . . are not adequate for agriculture."[93] They criticized the proliferation of banana farms, a livelihood that from the ranchers' viewpoint "offered no future" since after the second harvest the soils would be "completely exhausted" and yields would fail to cover production costs. Livestock raising, on the other hand, had sustained the region since "time immemorial." The petitioners pleaded with the municipality not to "drown a proven source of wealth for an unknown one." But the ranchers' argument—by no means unreasonable in light of the ongoing abandonment of banana farms elsewhere—was unlikely to convince local officials; by 1930, Sonaguera was Standard Fruit's most important center of banana production and unprecedented amounts of revenue were flowing into municipal coffers.[94] Unsurprisingly, the municipal council dismissed the ranchers' appeal and instructed them to comply with the new ordinance.

Less than ten years after reaffirming the rights of ranchers to graze their animals on ejido land, Sonaguera's municipal council reversed its land-use policy, a reflection of both the changing local economy and the rising political power of banana growers. Small-scale farmers had enjoyed little success in challenging the privileges of ranchers until wayward cattle began finding their way onto the newly established plantations of the U.S. fruit companies. The arrival of the companies, then, provided small-scale growers with both economic opportunities and the political leverage necessary to vie for greater control over local resources. What in retrospect appears to be a straightforward example of U.S. corporate domination may have seemed much more ambiguous to the people who lived the experience.

Sonaguera's participation in the export banana trade was shaped by the unusual condition of having, for a short period of time, two major banana companies operating within its boundaries. In at least one instance, a group of *poquiteros* was able to take advantage of the companies' overlapping zones of influence. In July 1929, forty-five individuals wrote to Honduran Ministro de Fomento Salvador Corleto requesting titles to the farms that they worked in an area lying just east of Sonaguera's ejidos identified as "Lot 19."[95] The cultivators asserted that they had been farming the land in question for ten years and that they had recently signed a five-year contract to sell bananas to the Standard Fruit Company. However, the Truxillo Railroad Company ordered them to stop their activities in the area, alleging that it had bought the property several years earlier from a local landowner. Citing Standard Fruit maps of Lot 19 as evidence, the *poquiteros* claimed that they were occupying national lands and requested that the government deed its members *lotes de familia* as stipulated by the 1925 agrarian law. Two weeks later, the group's representative, Colonel Jesús J. Zelaya, wrote a second letter to Minister Corleto, "on behalf of the village La Paz," in which he indicated that the *poquiteros* had rejected a buyout offer made by the Truxillo Railroad Company because "we want to expand our farms, not sell them."[96]

In November 1929, Minister Corleto's office informed Romualdo López, a farmer in the disputed zone, that Lot 19 belonged to the Truxillo Railroad Company.[97] However, this "fact" did not put an end to the matter. In January 1930, an executive order ceded the growers 2,500 hectares of Lot 19 on which to establish *lotes de familia*.[98] When Truxillo Railroad Company General Manager E. E. Thomas received an order to suspend all company activities in the disputed area, he dispatched a lengthy letter of protest to the Governor of Colón in which he asserted that prior to 1928, no one lived in the forested region where the "imaginary" village of La Paz claimed to be established.[99] According to Thomas, La Paz had its genesis when a group of laid-off Standard Fruit Company workers, assuming that the forested lands in Lot 19 were national, began to clear timber and plant crops.[100] Soon thereafter, Truxillo Railroad Company forest rangers arrived on the scene and prohibited the workers from further clearing.

Sometime later, Thomas's letter explained, Jesús Zelaya, a "rich property owner from Balfate" convinced the workers to renew their clearing activities over the fruit company's protests. Zelaya himself established a "small plantation" in the area before traveling to Tegucigalpa—with funds supplied by the ex-workers—where he published notice of the formation of La Paz village and arranged for the government to parcel out *lotes de familia.*[101] According to Thomas, Zelaya had even seen the company's property title and "accepted" the "undeniable rights" of the company to the disputed land. The fruit company's general manager concluded by requesting that the President's office overturn the decision to cede the land to the *poquiteros,* lift the order halting the company's operations in the area, and protect the property from further acts of trespass.[102]

The respectful yet firm letter, accompanied by several enclosures in support of the company's position, may have convinced the national government, but it did not deter the residents of La Paz. In 1931, the Mayor of Sonaguera reported to the municipal council that La Paz was a "progressive village whose residents cultivate bananas on a large scale."[103] He urged the municipality to support the creation of a school in La Paz, a proposal that elicited a formal protest from the Truxillo Railroad Company. The residents of La Paz maintained a tenuous hold on the land for three more years. In fact, the village appears to have grown despite both the ongoing legal dispute and depressed prices for bananas on international markets. In 1934, La Paz consisted of 172 houses, 431 families, and a school that enrolled 53 students. Residents cultivated approximately 1,200 hectares of bananas, in addition to smaller amounts of *plátano macho,* pasture, maize, and beans.[104] One year earlier, approximately 150 villagers had attended a council meeting in Sonaguera in order to garner official support for their efforts to convince Standard Fruit to build a branch rail line toward La Paz.[105] The municipality agreed to make an official request to the company concerning the line. During the same session, the municipality also authorized a cemetery for the village. Its origins may have been mythical, but La Paz was quickly becoming a tangible reality.

In March 1934, a government commission consisting of Colón Governor Romero, General Sanabria, and a Truxillo Railroad Company official went to La Paz to discuss the conditions by which "an honorable transaction of the fruit" could take place.[106] A declaration submitted by the company to the Governor of Colón reiterated many of the points made in Thomas's 1930 letter, but also contained some important changes in the company's position.[107] Truxillo Railroad Company officials expressed little sympathy toward the *poquiteros,* whom they described as individuals "of diverse backgrounds who violently and without heed to private property" established themselves and planted bananas in a place called "La Isleta." The company's 1934 version of events replaced the complex and morally ambiguous version found in Thomas's 1930 letter with one in which the cultivators' activities were premeditated criminal acts. Also, the letter referred to the disputed area as "La Isleta," and did not acknowledge the formation of La Paz.

However, after declaring its inalienable rights to the property, the company official offered to cut a deal: "The company is willing to consent to the trespassers' (*intrusos*) presence, provided that they remain circumscribed in the area where they are currently established and on the strict condition that they sell their bananas to the company under the same terms as do other independent growers who farm their own lands."[108] The Truxillo offered to facilitate the transport of fruit grown in La Paz by building a branch line that would bring the fruit to the bank of the Aguán River, at which point the fruit would be carried across the river via an aerial tram to the company's main railroad. The company emphasized that any grower who did not accept these terms would be bought out.

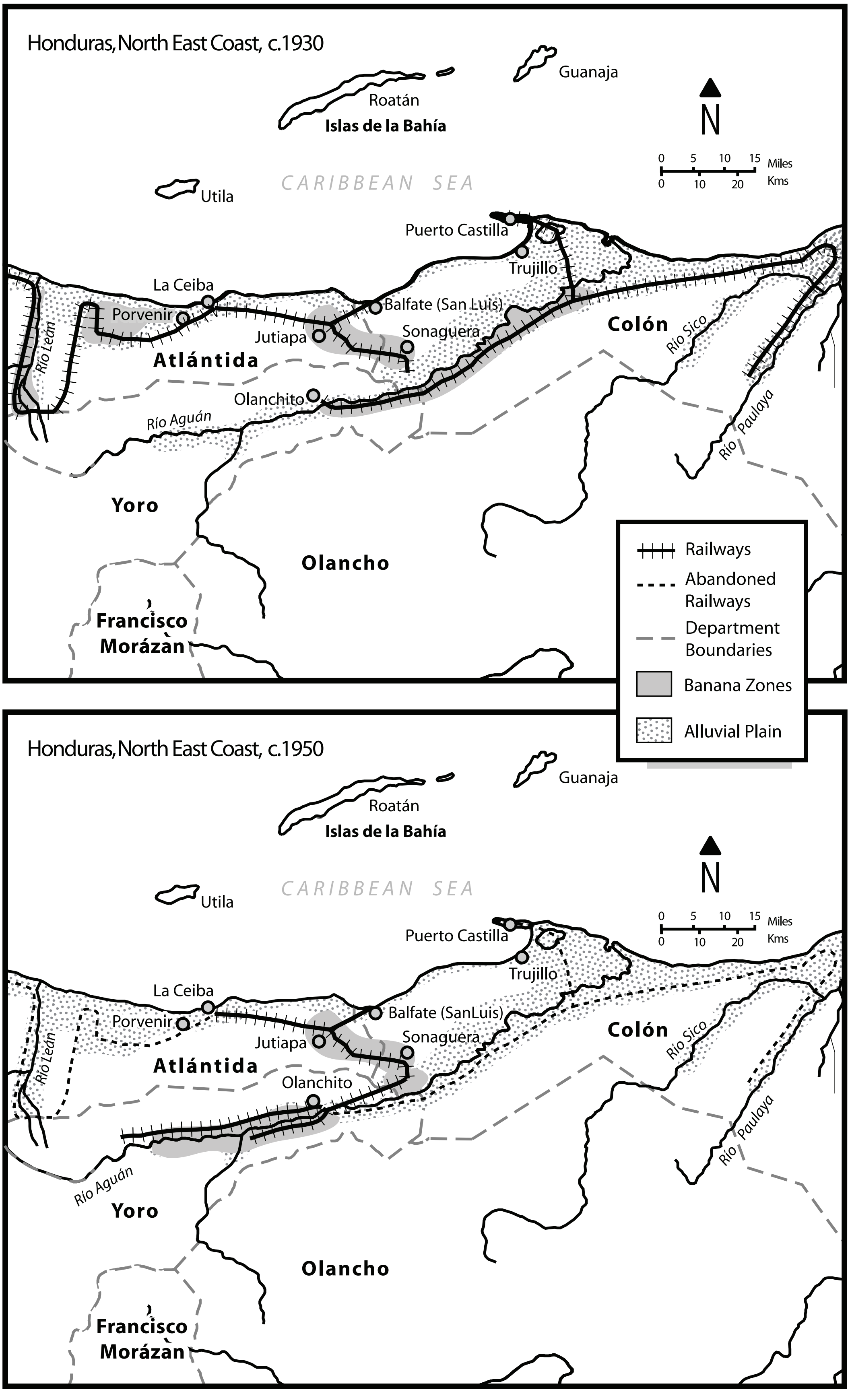
But the *poquiteros* were not ready to relinquish their fields. On April 2, 1934, they submitted a document to the municipal council signed by around 100 individuals requesting that the legal status of their settlement be changed from *caserío* (hamlet) to *aldea* (village).[109] In considering the request, the municipal council acknowledged the Truxillo Railroad Company's claim to the land, but pointed to the existence of a school with 53 students as evidence of the community's legitimacy (conveniently forgetting that the council itself had authorized the school's creation). Council members unanimously agreed to designate La Paz as a village with an area of one square kilometer. The language of the act was unwavering in its support: "Should at any time the Truxillo Railroad Co. or any other entity seek to assert a legal claim, the municipality will, regardless of the title presented, ask for the expropriation of the land in the name of the public good in accordance with Article 27 of the Agrarian Law." Ten days later, Sonaguera Mayor Montiel telegraphed the Ministro de Gobernación, appealing for help in preventing the eviction of the 129 *poquiteros,* plus some 500 field hands from Lot 19: "If this comes to pass, what will more than one thousand Honduran workers do without employment or housing?"[110]

On April 23, Governor Romero returned to the disputed property for another meeting with the *poquiteros* that resulted in the signing of an act laying out two options for the future of La Paz: either the settlers would sell their farms to the fruit company at a "fairly assessed rate," or the company would sell the land to the settlers for the same price that it had originally paid.[111] On May 3, government surveyor Camilo Gómez reported that La Paz village was located on lands that were owned by the Truxillo Railroad Company.[112] He added that the company was still extending its offer to purchase the growers' bananas and install the infrastructure needed to transport the fruit to its railroad. However, according to Gómez, the *poquiteros* refused under any condition to sell their fruit to the company, preferring to either sell or purchase the land.

The inhabitants of La Paz continued to present evidence in support of their right to occupy the land during meetings with both government and company representatives in early May.[113] Then on June 1, 1934, following what Governor Romero described as "intense deliberations," the parties struck an agreement whereby the growers would sell their farms to the company.[114] The accord granted the *poquiteros* a period of four months to relocate and permission to continue selling their bananas to Standard Fruit until the Truxillo Railroad Company was able to erect a transportation system. How and where the residents of La Paz village relocated is unclear, but by November 1935, observers referred to the zone as the "La Paz farms of the Truxillo Railroad Company," suggesting that the company had assumed control over the land as agreed upon.[115]

The story of the drawn-out struggle to control the soil resources of Lot 19 does not readily conform to images of omnipotent fruit companies usurping the lands of hapless smallholders. The *poquiteros*' stubborn squatting and shrewd alliance making succeeded in keeping the Truxillo Railroad Company at bay for at least five years. The La Paz growers gained the support of local and regional authorities in spite of evidence indicating that the property had been transferred to the fruit company. The strong statement of support issued by the Sonaguera municipal council in 1934 suggests that if some local elites' initial backing of the *poquiteros* was motivated by little more than opportunism, support for La Paz evolved into an expression of Honduran nationalism. Local officials did not question the sanctity of private property, but they believed in the right of "Hondurans" to access the resources necessary to create dignified livelihoods. Significantly, the La Paz residents sustained local political support through the initial years of President Carías Andino's sixteen-year rule, a period in Honduran political history noted for both its authoritarianism and the far-reaching influence of United Fruit.

Of course, the La Paz villagers' "silent partner" throughout the dispute was the Standard Fruit Company, whose willingness to purchase the *poquiteros*' fruit provided the latter with access to export markets. The fact that Standard Fruit refrained from building a branch line to service La Paz may have reflected the company's reluctance to openly antagonize its powerful competitor. On the other hand, by doing business with



MAP 3.1. *Shifting geographies of production, Standard Fruit and Truxillo Railroad Company between 1930 and 1950*

the *poquiteros* they undermined the Truxillo Railroad Company's efforts to evict the cultivators. Although the company eventually reclaimed the land, its effort to cast the *poquiteros* as criminals largely failed. The persistence of La Paz, then, can be attributed in large part to its geographical location: in contrast to the abandoned farms occupied by squatters along the coast of Atlántida, the La Paz settlement straddled the active production zones of two fruit companies. However, this condition was far from permanent. The rapid spread of Panama disease compelled the Truxillo Railroad Company to abandon dozens of farms in the lower Aguán valley. In 1942 the company made its final purchase of fruit before shutting down its rail service for good.

The fragmentary portraits of North Coast people and communities offered in this chapter reveal the cross-cutting effects of the fruit companies' shifting plantation agriculture. Local economies all but collapsed due to massive layoffs, outmigrations, the drying up of government tax revenues, and a slowdown in commercial activity. The companies often added insult to injury by removing branch railroads. In places like Mezapa and San Francisco, residents challenged fruit company power through collective, direct protests over the removal of transportation infrastructure. But not everyone lost in the cycle of shifting production. As towns along the Caribbean littoral entered a period of acute economic crisis and outmigration, inland communities situated in the region's major river valleys experienced an expansion of agricultural production and immigration. The fruit companies' response to Panama Disease contributed to a process of "uneven development" along the North Coast that did not bring about the extinction of non-company banana farmers, but it exposed the limits of their autonomy. The power that the fruit companies wielded over non-company growers would become all the more apparent when a second fungal pathogen appeared without warning on the North Coast.