Confidence in a Confidence Man: A Banana-Disease "Solution" in Late Colonial Jamaica

Matthew Plishka

Summary

Banana growers in 1930s Jamaica believed there was no cure for the fungus known as Panama disease that was laying waste to banana crops across the island. With their livelihoods threatened, some growers on the island latched onto the possibility of a miracle cure for the disease, even as scientists claimed no cure existed. This article tells the story of the "cure" known as Banana Sol, its creator, and his trail of deception across agricultural industries. The story of Banana Sol highlights how ecological crises create vulnerability, a vulnerability that some take advantage of for personal gain.

On 23 April 1932, *The Daily Gleaner*, Jamaica's primary newspaper, published an article on the "astonishingly favorable" experiments conducted by a planter into a product called "Banana Sol." He used it as a cure for the banana-crop-killing fungus known as Panama disease, which had been devastating banana cultivation in Central and South America for decades. During the 1920s, cases of Panama disease in Jamaica, then the world's leading banana exporter, had skyrocketed, increasing from fewer than 100 infected plants reported in 1920 to nearly 100,000 by 1930. Banana-growers' livelihoods were threatened and disease experts claimed there was no cure.

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Banana plant infected by Panama disease, 2018.

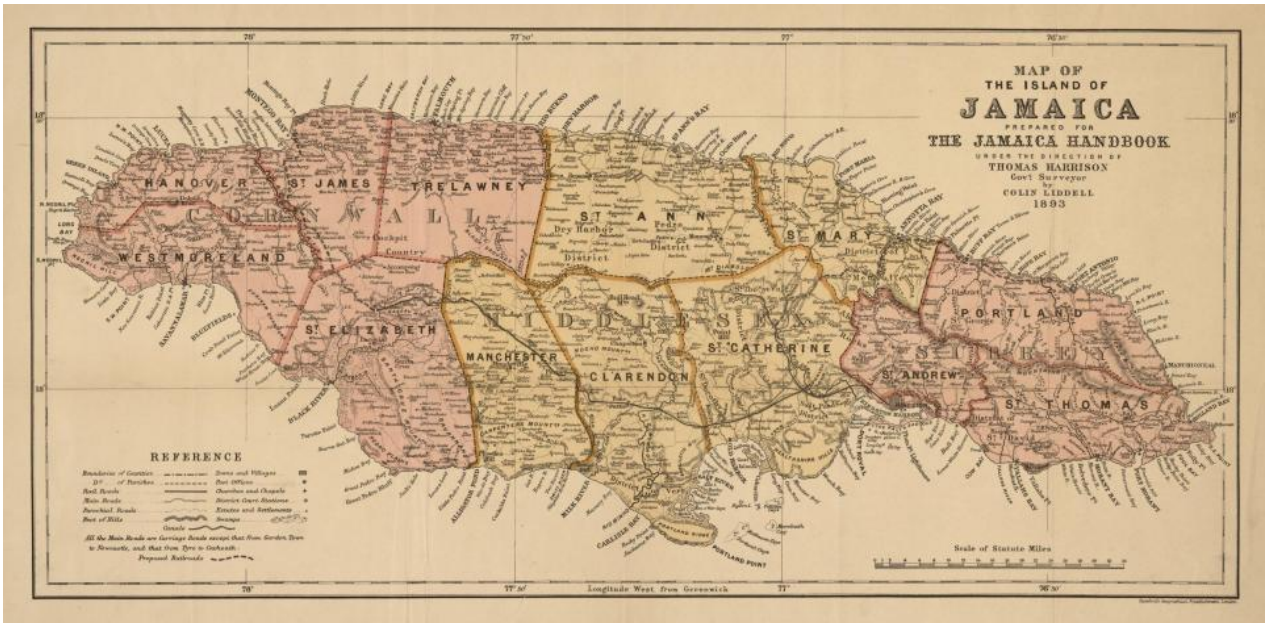
Photograph by Scot Nelson, 2018. Click here to view Flickr source .

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The *Gleaner*'s report on Banana Sol offered growers a potential path forward. Ken Pringle, a planter in the parish of St. Mary, told a reporter that although the experiments had just started, one treated tree had already "overcome" the disease and produced full fruit. Raymond Byrne, a Jamaican merchant seemingly partnering with Banana Sol's makers, called on the Jamaican government to invest in additional Banana Sol experiments and arrange for its manufacture within Jamaica. Jamaican growers latched onto the possibility of using Banana Sol, though this violated government disease quarantine policies. Debates over Banana Sol reached the island's Legislative Council, with members criticizing the Director of Agriculture for not having the Department of Agriculture test Banana Sol.

The inventor of this purported "astonishing" cure was Zenon Ioannon Solomides. Solomides, born in England, was a trained entomologist who served in this capacity in the British colony of Cyprus from 1914–1920. Following his term, Solomides returned to England and, with several partners, founded Solomia—a company that claimed to create insecticides and fungicides, also called Solomia. It was one of a number of small fungicide businesses created in the early twentieth century as the industry developed. These companies were the norm for the industry until the post–World War II centralization of the sector into large multinational organizations. Solomia's hook was its proprietary fluid. Solomides sent booklets about it to journals such as *Nature*, which noted in 1921 that "If 'Solomia' can effectively carry out all that its promoters claim for it, there is no doubt that it is a very remarkable mixture." In 1922, Solomides parlayed his experience into election to the Linnean Society of London, the world's oldest active biological society.

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Map of Jamaica and its parishes in 1893.

Map by Colin Liddell, 1893.
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Photograph of Afro-Jamaican laborers harvesting bananas, c.1923.

Unknown photographer, c. 1923.
From Artemas Ward, *The Encyclopedia of Food: The Stories of the Foods by Which We Live, How and Where They Grow and are Marketed, Their Comparative Values and How Best to Use and Enjoy Them* (New York: Artemas Ward, 1923). Click here to view source.

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The potential of Banana Sol as a cure for Panama disease led Jamaican agricultural officials to investigate the man behind the solution. What they found was a global trail of deception across a variety of crop diseases. Jamaica's microbiologist asked a friend in England, Dr. Pethybridge, about Solomides. According to Pethybridge, "As far as we here are concerned he has been absolutely quiescent for a long time, and a good thing too. Possibly has found that no one in this country can waste time with him and he may have therefore transferred his attention to the colonies." Pethybridge had worked with Solomides in 1924, when he was selling Solomia as a cure for silverleaf disease of plums and apples. Pethybridge noted that Solomides had been able to "get away" with his "cure" for several years until it was eventually discovered that the Solomia solution did not work. Another Jamaican official noted that Solomides had attempted to sell a cure for tomato wilt in another colony. Solomides seemingly moved between agricultural industries and locations, counting on the fact that members of different industries would not discuss matters with one another. He would sell his product until the hoax was discovered,

and then move on to the next crop and colony.

Unlike the silverleaf scam, which lasted several years, the Banana Sol era in Jamaica was short-lived. In an article from 4 May 1932, less than two weeks after the publication of the "astonishingly favorable" findings, *The Daily Gleaner* reported that the plant "cured" of Panama disease had fully succumbed to the disease. According to Raymond Byrne, "Banana Sol had failed to live up to the claims of its manufacturers" and he severed his connections with Solomia. As for Solomides himself, it seems likely the attempted scam in Jamaica was one of his last. Solomides appeared in the *London Times* Bankruptcy Report of 4 January 1936, with liabilities of £2,372 and no assets.

The story of Solomides and Banana Sol raises questions of trust. Who and what should we trust in times of ecological crisis? On the surface, a trained entomologist and member of the Royal Linnean Society would have seemed like a safe bet. But when it comes to Panama disease, no bet has yet paid off. The disease has been known for 150 years and there is still no cure in sight. But does Solomides's fraud mean that risks like these should not be taken? These are questions banana producers around the world are facing again today. The "cure" in the 1950s was to switch from the Gros Michel, the initial commercial variety, to the then-immune Cavendish. However, the fusarium fungus has since evolved to infect Cavendish bananas, and in 2019 the first case of Panama disease in Cavendish bananas was discovered in Latin America. Around the world, growers and scientists are experimenting with potential cures. Ignoring all of these wide-ranging experiments could mean missing out on a potential solution. And while it is likely that another Solomides will peddle their own "cure," the best response may just be to try it anyway.

Further readings:

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Related links:

- "First Report of Fusarium Wilt Tropical Race 4 in Cavendish Bananas Caused by *Fusarium odoratissimum* in

Colombia"
https://doi.org/10.1094/PDIS-09-19-1922-PDN

- Matthew Plishka, "Searching for Stability: Banana Blight and the Revitalization of Jamaica's Sugar Industry, 1910–1940" (2024)
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Dr. Matthew Plishka is a Collaborative Humanities Postdoctoral Program Fellow at Vanderbilt University. He holds a PhD in History from the University of Pittsburgh with specializations in environmental and Latin American/Caribbean history, as well as the digital humanities. Plishka works at the intersection of social and environmental history to examine how marginalized communities navigate ecological crises. His book project, "Battling Banana Blight: A Multispecies History of Jamaica's Long Green Revolution, 1870–1960," explores how Afro-Jamaican smallholders navigated a series of economic and ecological crises, particularly the banana-crop-killing fungus known as Panama disease.
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