

FJM-8

St. Lucia: Bananas, Politics and Poverty

St. Lucia, W.I.

March 20, 1969

Mr Richard H. Nolte
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York 10017, N.Y.

Dear Mr Nolte:

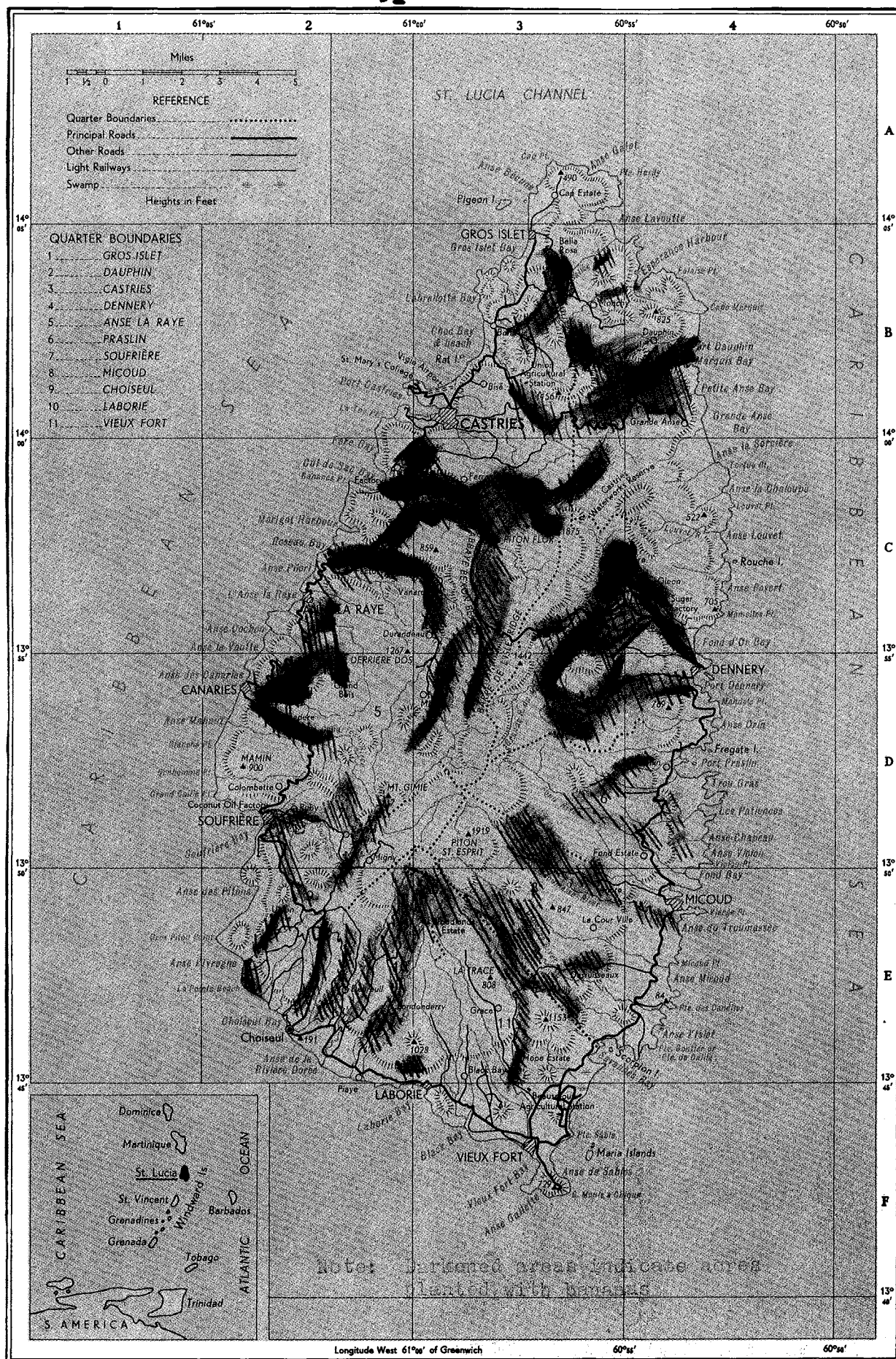


The banana, depending on variety, may be eaten uncooked when ripe, cooked when green, mixed into flour, preserved into jam, boiled to make porridge, fermented to make beer or iced to make daiquiris. Well ripened bananas may be sliced and then dried in the sun producing what the islanders call figs. When sugar is added during the last two days of drying they can be very tasty.

A green banana, full grown but unripe may be peeled and steamed, mashed with butter and salt and used as a principal source of protein and starch. West Indians often use it as their main diet.

The fibre of the banana can be extracted from the stem and used to make rope or hemp. The dead leaf stalks of the banana tree may be used as course tiestaff when green; and as thatch when dry. Laid flat, these stalks may be made into punnets (small, wooden baskets for fruit) or temporary pots for plants. When slashed and ground, the stem of the tree may also be used as a mulch or as protection for small roots of plants. The skins of the banana itself contain as much as 50 percent potash salt when burnt into ashes and consequently may be used to produce soap when boiled with fat or coconut oils.

There are hundreds of varieties of bananas in the world, some very different in size, taste and texture -- though there are normally only two or three commonly traded commercially. In Uganda, a big, red banana with an orange center is successfully grown. There is also a popular variety called the 'lady finger' banana which is very small with white pulp. These are not traded internationally because they will not ship to distant countries in good condition.



The most commonly grown banana which is exported from the Caribbean Islands is known as the Cavendish variety, though the Grand Michele is also a very successful type. The Cavendish variety has been found to be the best exporter because it ships well, has good size and is easily packaged. The Grand Michele, on the other hand, is tastier but has a packaging problem -- it's 'hands' (the banana tree produces a 'stem' on which there may be as many as five 'hands', each hand containing about five individual bananas called 'fingers') are curled outward to such a degree that shipping them is costly and liable to cause excessive bruising.

Of all the Cavendish sub-groups, the Lacatan is the most profitable fruit; and it is the Lacatan which is most commonly grown in the Windward Islands of the Caribbean, and particularly on St. Lucia.

St. Lucia might be called the banana capital of the Caribbean. In 1968 it exported roughly five and a half million stems of bananas, weighing more than seventy thousand tons valued at \$9,636,389 BWI. In 1968, St. Lucia thus became the number one exporter of bananas in the Caribbean, surpassing Jamaica, its nearest rival.

There are 15,765 banana growers on St. Lucia. However, of these, only 11 growers account for the bulk of St. Lucia's banana production. These growers are large estate owners who produce and ship an average of eight to ten thousand stems each week. There are 84 medium-sized estates which ship between 100 and 500 stems each week; and there are 694 small farms which export between 1 and 20 stems per week. The rest (roughly 15,000) own one or two banana trees and are registered as banana growers; they may carry only one or two stems each month to the Geest ship which buys and transports bananas to Great Britain.

If St. Lucia is the banana capital of the Caribbean, John Van Geest must be considered the most important individual in the banana industry. Geest Industries is the single largest banana producing concern on St. Lucia, and Geest also buys every banana St. Lucia growers produce each week and ships them to Great Britain himself. Consequently, Geest is grower, buyer and shipper in one.

John Van Geest was born in Holland, educated in agricultural college there and then established residence in England. He began importing tulips from Holland and selling them by motor bike in London. Expanding to vegetables, Geest then acquired a small vessel to use as transport. From this small beginning, he has developed it into one of the largest shipping and vegetable importing operations in Great Britain. In 1954, upset over the high prices he was paying United Fruit for bananas, Geest sent his ships into the Caribbean to buy bananas directly. The same year, he bought Antilles Products Limited on St. Lucia and offered to buy every banana that was produced on the island. It was because of this that bananas became the major exported product of the island, so that, today the banana industry represents \$9,141,115 BWI or 78 percent of total export each year.

John Van Geest is largely responsible for this, though he is rarely seen in St. Lucia since he lives in Britain, travelling only once or twice a year to the Windward Islands. He has a house on the island which he occupies perhaps only three weeks out of the year.

Geest's Estates (he has two totalling about 8,000 acres) are the largest estates in the island. He bought them in 1961-63 and directed that they produce bananas instead of sugar which they were growing at the time. Each week, usually on Tuesday, properly ripened stems are cut from the trees, immersed in a chemical preservative to prevent spoiling during shipment, wrapped in cellophane, bundled and trucked to a central warehouse on the docks in Castries. There, usually on Wednesday evening and well into the night, the stems (weighing an average of 35-40 lbs) are 'headed' (carried by women) onto the waiting Geest ship.

Watching these women lift and carry for hours, singing or chanting when they have enough rum, is like watching hundreds of small ants scurrying in line between goods and ship. The job is a hard one, and one in which these women take little pride. They resent the long hours and the pace, but they need the money and so make the best of it. Soon these women will be replaced with long conveyor belts which will load the banana stems at the rate of 1500 per hour and deprive these women (often the sole source of income for a family) of the little money they do earn.



St. Lucians are poor. Outside of Haiti and Dominica (an island just to the north) St. Lucia is the poorest island in the Caribbean. It is 27 miles long and 14 miles across with a total land area approximately 233 square miles. Its people live for the most part in the country, on the sides of St. Lucia's high, lush-green mountains, though there are 11 towns or villages with substantial populations. The total population of the island is nearly 100,000, with a total labour force of about 38,000.

The average labourer on St. Lucia earns \$14-\$21 BWI each week -- which is \$7-\$11 US per week. House owners or estates are constantly being asked whether they need some extra help. Most young men find it difficult to find jobs, particularly if they have not gone on to secondary school. There is agriculture (shunned by most West Indians as a throwback to days of slavery); some few, small industries; clerking in a shop in Castries; transport driving, fishing or construction. Little else is available to these men and many young people therefore leave St. Lucia for Canada, the United States or Great Britain.

According to unpublished figures from the U.S. Consulate General in Barbados, nearly 1200 St. Lucians obtained temporary working visas to enter the United States or its territories in 1968, while a very few (61 in 1966) obtained visas as immigrant aliens.

A breakdown of employment by industry on St. Lucia shows that most of the island's labour force (total employed 30,110) work at the primary occupations such as farming and fishing. The totals for employment by industry are as follows:

Primary Industry (agriculture).....	14,360
Manufacturing and repair.....	3,650
Construction.....	3,500
Wholesale and retail trade.....	2,970
Banks, insurance and real estate.....	180
Transport and communications.....	1,070
Public Administration.....	825
Community Service.(teachers).....	1,935
Personal service (hotels).....	2,310

The villages of St. Lucia are constructed for the most part of wood and houses are small and cramped for space. Often as many as 15 persons live in a two room house made of wood, sitting on stilts to keep its floor dry. Most St. Lucians walk up and down the hills and mountains, to and from school or work, carrying water or when just 'liming' (wandering aimlessly as sailors did during the war). They are a very strong people with a fitness that comes of living and working in the sun.

Poverty has its effects just below the surface however. A survey of school children in 1962 showed that 95 percent of them had worms, mainly *Ankylostomoa*, *Ascaris* and *Trichiuris*. Of the total number of children examined, 88 percent had two or more species of worms. Schistosomiasis is another problem. "Schisto", as its called, is contracted from the rivers which flow throughout the island. Children playing or women washing clothes in the rivers easily catch the disease. According to the same report, at least 60 percent (most agree more) of the island's population can be assumed infected. Shisto results in anaemia and listlessness. Other findings showed that "the diet of the average St. Lucian is very low in Vitamin A and protein"....and caloric intake is slightly below the recommended W.H.O. standards.

The present educational system is, like on so many of the smaller Caribbean Islands, most inadequate. Every 550 births make it necessary to construct and staff a new school within five years. At the moment the schools (62 primary and 5 secondary) are often large, single room structures with as many as 300 pupils crowded together. To teach in one of the primary schools, with eight or more classes going on at the same time, is a great strain on both teacher and pupil alike. Many teachers are untrained teenagers who have taken on the task of trying to instruct the younger members of the village.

One of the major problems with which the Government must contend is the rapid rate of birth (rate of increase 1.72 percent). When I asked the Premier, Mr John Compton, about this, he pointed out that for many St. Lucian women, babies were a form of insurance against poverty in old age. To have 15 babies was not unusual and Compton felt that it was this attitude that had to be altered. He did not feel that the Catholic Church (St. Lucia is almost entirely Catholic -- John Compton is an Anglican) either helps or hinders in



Above: Loading the Geest ship with women 'heading' the bunches of bananas to (right) the waiting hands of men who transfer them into the hold



this task. There is no Government family planning programme, though there is a Family Planning Center run by a husband and wife team in Castries. It is an uphill battle for Mrs Louise who operates it.

John Compton, the Premier of St. Lucia, is a direct, intelligent and popular leader: Barrister-at-Law by training, educated in a St. Lucian secondary school and then at University in Wales where he read law. Compton became a member of the St. Lucia Legislature in 1954 as a member of the then powerful Labour Party. Because of a conflict of policy, Compton split from the Labour Party in 1961 and founded his own, National Labour Movement Party. This Party, and another which evolved from it, The United Workers Party, are the political base which brought Compton to full power in 1964.

Compton's popularity originates from 1957, when he led strikes against the sugar interests and identified himself with the trade union movement. Having led what was then an illegal strike in the Dennery Valley, Compton was jailed for "unlawfully besetting the approach to La Caye estate". This act made him a hero to common working man and it is still talked about today.

When St. Lucia became an Associated State (fully self-governing internally but dependent upon Great Britain for its foreign affairs and defence) in February 1967, Compton became St. Lucia's first Premier. His Party controls eight out of the ten elected seats in the House of Assembly and when elections are held "sometime this year" there is no doubt that Compton's Party will be returned and perhaps even take all ten seats.

John Compton's rise is linked with the ascendancy of bananas and the fall of sugar. In leading the sugar strikes and supporting the shift from a sugar based economy to one supported by bananas, Compton in effect was also supporting the small, independent landowners against the larger estate landowners. To understand this one must understand the political significance of the banana.

Bananas may be grown all year long. They may be planted, cut, carried and sold by the small landowner or labourer. Sugar on the other hand must be planted, cut and sold in large quantities. Sugar is also cut only once a year which results in long periods of unemployment. Thus the large estate can grow and profit from sugar while the small, independent farmer cannot. With bananas this all changed, bringing a sense of independence to the working man who had a bit of land he could plant himself.

Compton identified himself with this movement and has therefore reaped the political rewards.

I spent some time with the Premier and came away with the impression that he was forceful and unusually direct for a West Indian politician. Compton intends to move further away from dependency on Great Britain and toward fuller association with the other three Windward Islands: Grenada, St. Vincent and Dominica. His hope is to federate these three islands and St. Lucia to produce a Windward Island Federation. "Already", he says, "we have economic cooperation, and now we need to cooperate politically so that we have more stable, powerful governments as individual units". Compton wants



Above: Premier John Compton addressing a Constitutional Conference held in London. On his immediate right is Minister of Health, Education and Social Affairs, Hunter Francois.

to see the St. Lucian identified with a unit larger than St. Lucia itself. His objective, he says, must come within five years. "If not, I'll take St. Lucia on its own, establishing us as a fully independent country with special treaty arrangements concluded with Britain to handle certain aspects of our foreign affairs".

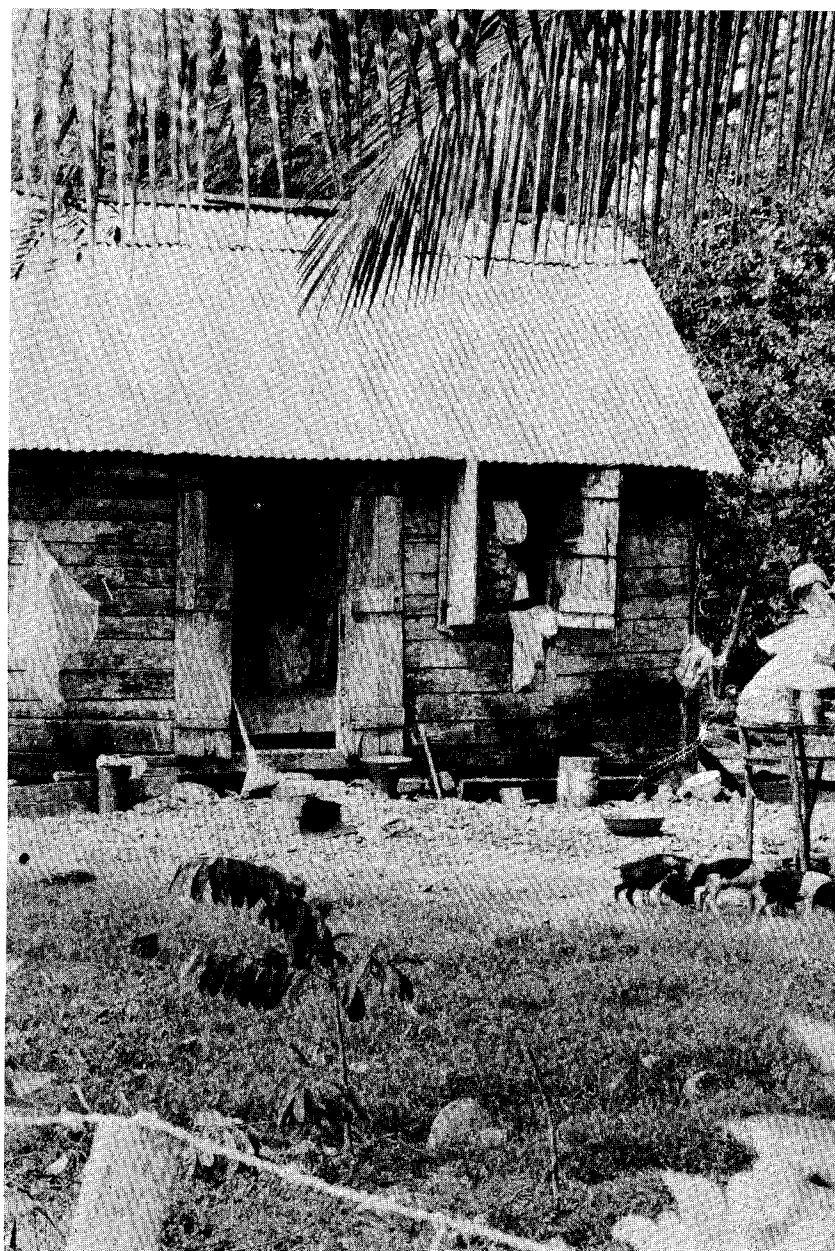
Compton sees CARIFTA (Caribbean Free Trade Association) as a "small" help economically; and he is outspoken about the need to establish a development bank within the region. He thinks that such a bank would provide him with the needed capital to initiate Government controlled tourism and land reform.

Land reform is one of the major goals of John Compton's government. He was optimistic and said that within ten years he would have enough capital to begin buying up some of the large estates in St. Lucia and foresaw that he would have to have his people ready, equipped and trained to take charge of the land. He realized that "you can't be bull and just go ahead and begin land reform programmes....first we need money in an Agricultural Bank and then we need people to effectively manage these lands when they have them".

The Premier has a large task before him. Eighty percent of the farmers on St. Lucia are very small landowners, while only 1 percent of the landowners on St. Lucia control nearly 55 percent of the land. Compton then pointed out that "we have effectively eroded the political control of the large, predominantly white, landowners.... soon we will have eroded their economic power as well". Compton sees this as inevitable since it is getting increasingly more and difficult for large landowners to hire the necessary labour they require to work the land. With hotels being built and the diversion of labour they will create, the large landowners will be forced to cut down the size of their operations. That is when the Government hopes to step in.

Besides bananas, tourism is soon to become the other development factor for the island. This year seven hotels are in the process of being built and most of the island's available beach land has been bought up by foreign capital with future tourist development in view. The Premier explained that his Government has just begun to set up a Government controlled corporation in the southern part of the island where he hopes to develop a tourist complex with British and Canadian capital. Asked about why he is not seeking American capital for this project, Compton added: "We have been burned by American speculators who have come here saying they would develop the land with no intention of doing so". (Compton is particularly upset over an American speculator by the name of Turner who bought up hundreds of acres of land and then simply placed a shack on the beach with a sign saying "St. Lucia Development Company Limited"). Compton also discussed the problems of speculation the Bahamas have encountered, particularly on Grand Bahama Island -- another American operation.

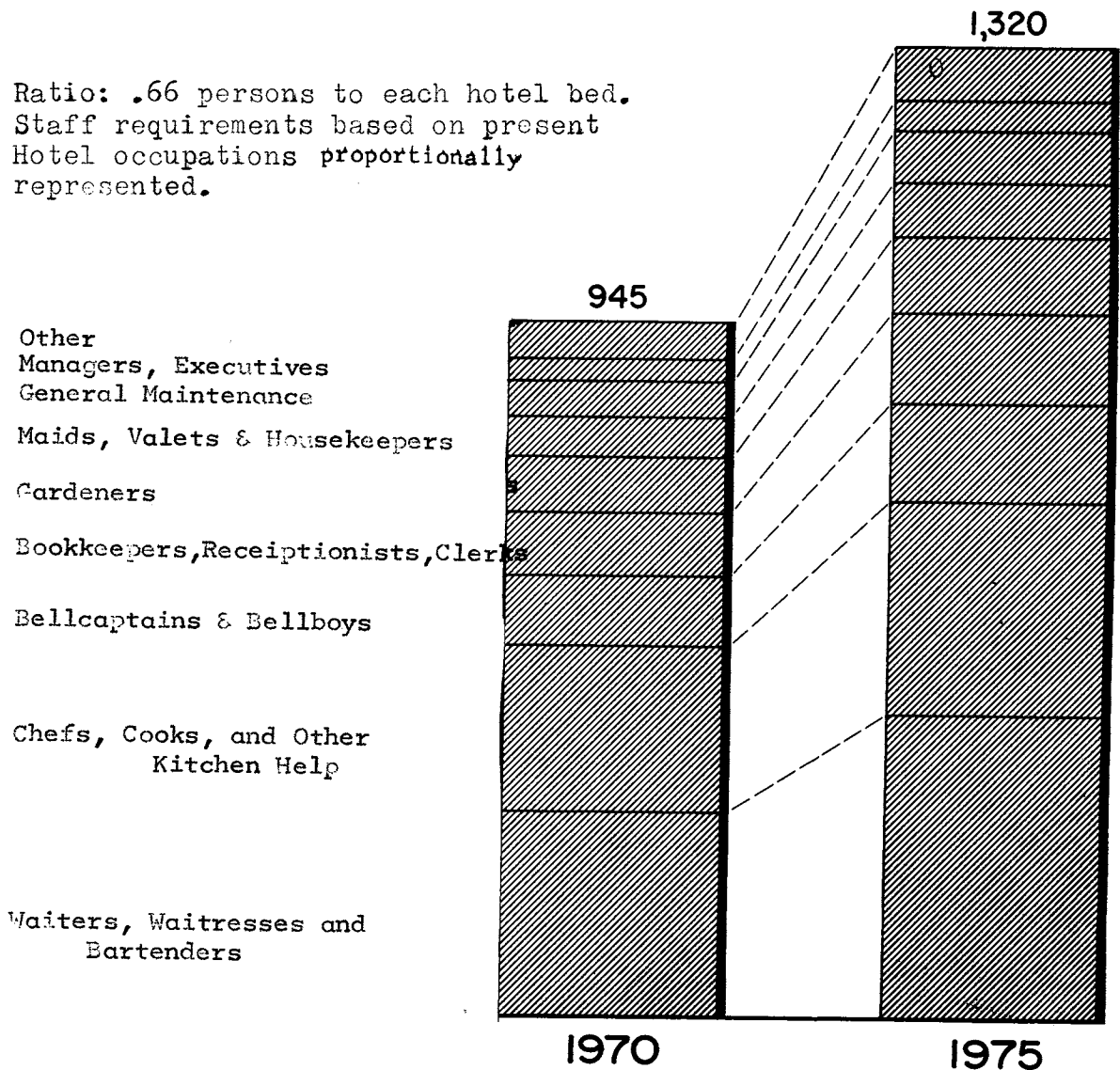
Development of St. Lucia's economy in the 1970's will depend heavily upon a mix of tourism, agriculture, forestry, fishing, some light industries and perhaps the continued support of the banana industry.

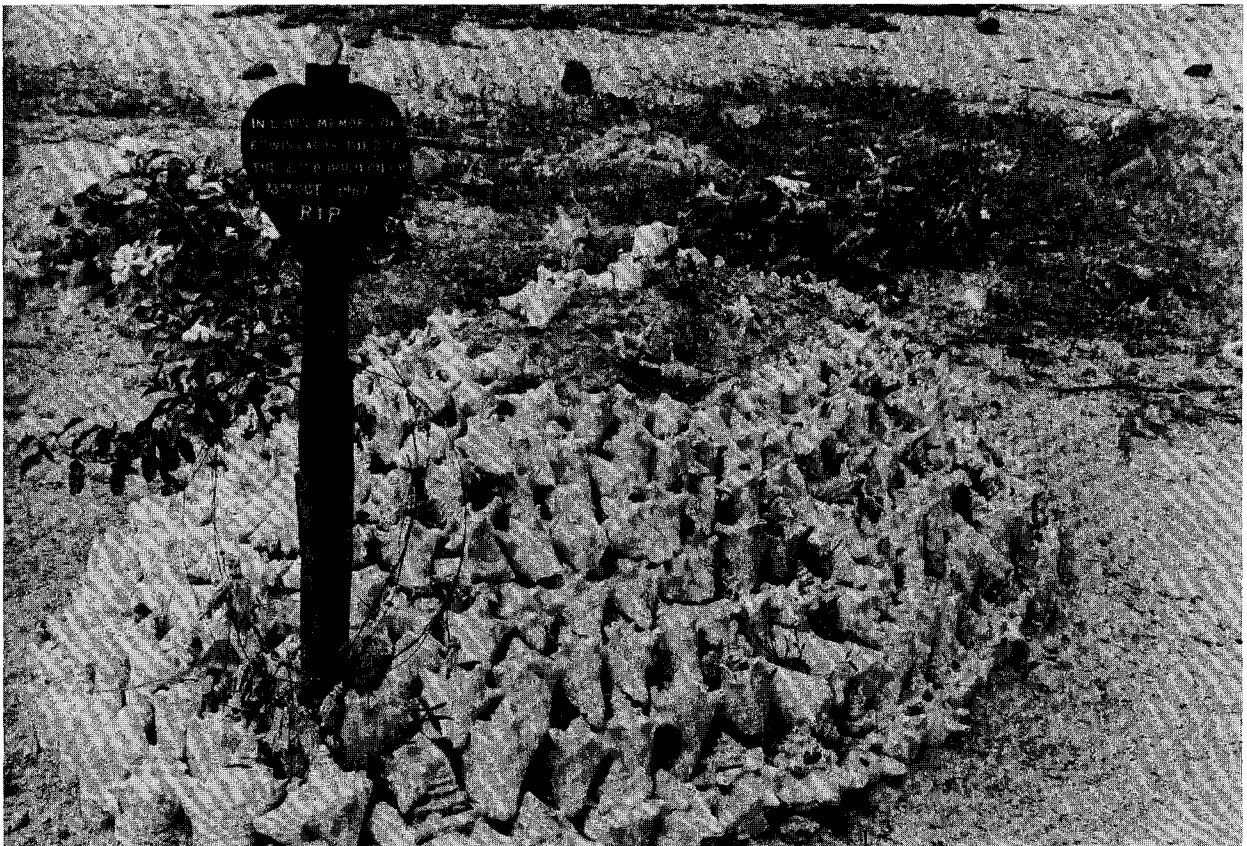


Above: A little girl peers out from her home in Gros Islet, St. Lucia, a small village of 500 which borders the sea. The coal pots in front of the doorway serve as cookers for heating food.

In terms of employment, money flow, building and construction, tourism is certain to be helpful to the economy, though not the entire solution to its problems. The Tripartite Economic Survey of the Eastern Caribbean, a study of the region done by a group of international economists enlisted by the United Nations in 1967, found that "the potential for tourist development in St. Lucia is beyond dispute and an expansion of 500 rooms or a thousand beds might be envisaged by 1970".

This assumption has proved correct. The seven hotels in the process of being in construction should be completed within the next year. Estimating that these 1,000 beds will provide roughly 660 jobs for unemployed St. Lucians (present service requirements at St. Lucia's hotels are .66 persons employed to every bed) by 1975 there should be as many as 1,320 jobs opening up. A chart below graphs the different staff openings which will have to be filled if the hotels are to operate at present efficiency levels:



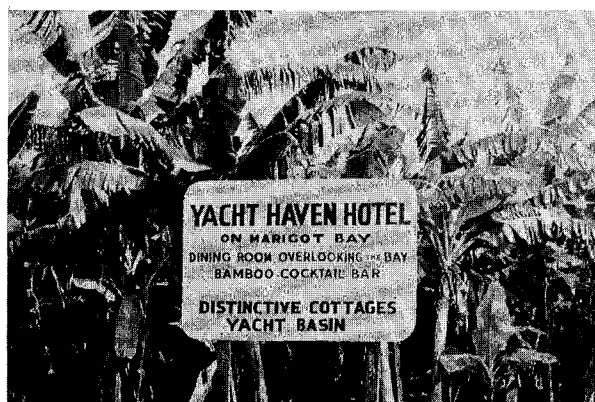


Above: In Gros Islet, the dead are buried with no pretensions. Earth covers the body; and then if the man lived near the sea, or was a fisherman, his grave is covered with conch shells--as is the grave of Mr. Edwin Jacob.

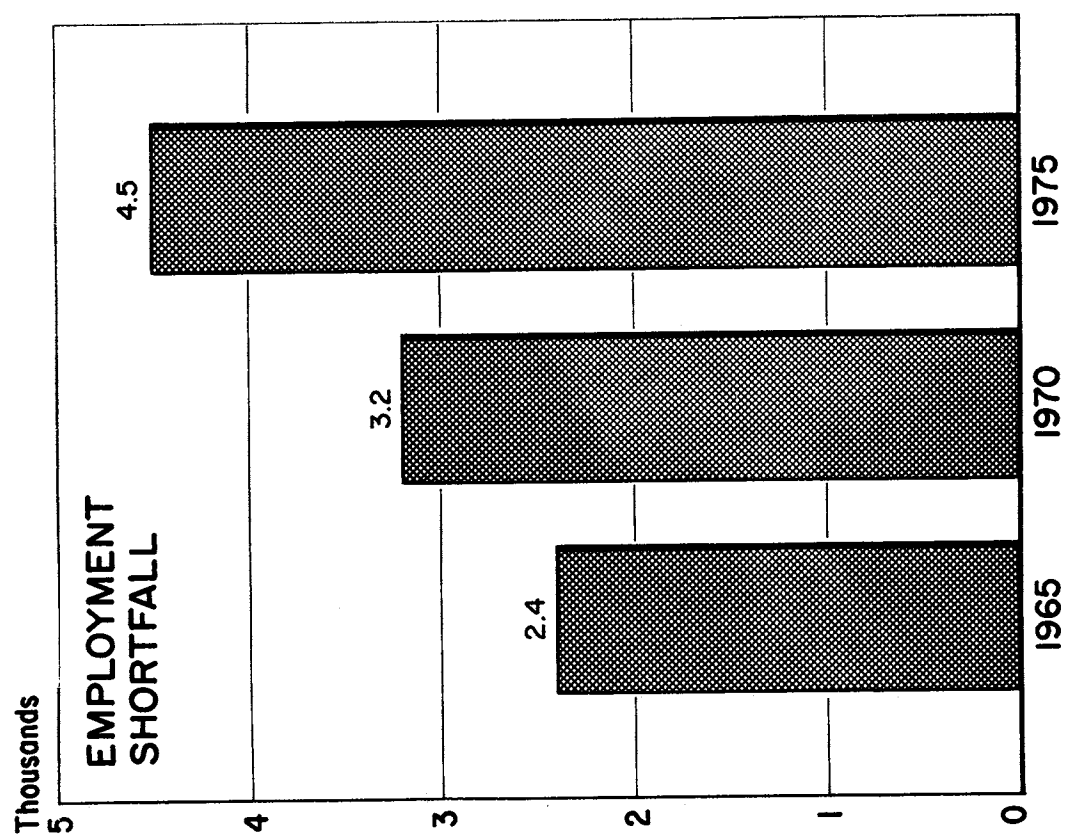
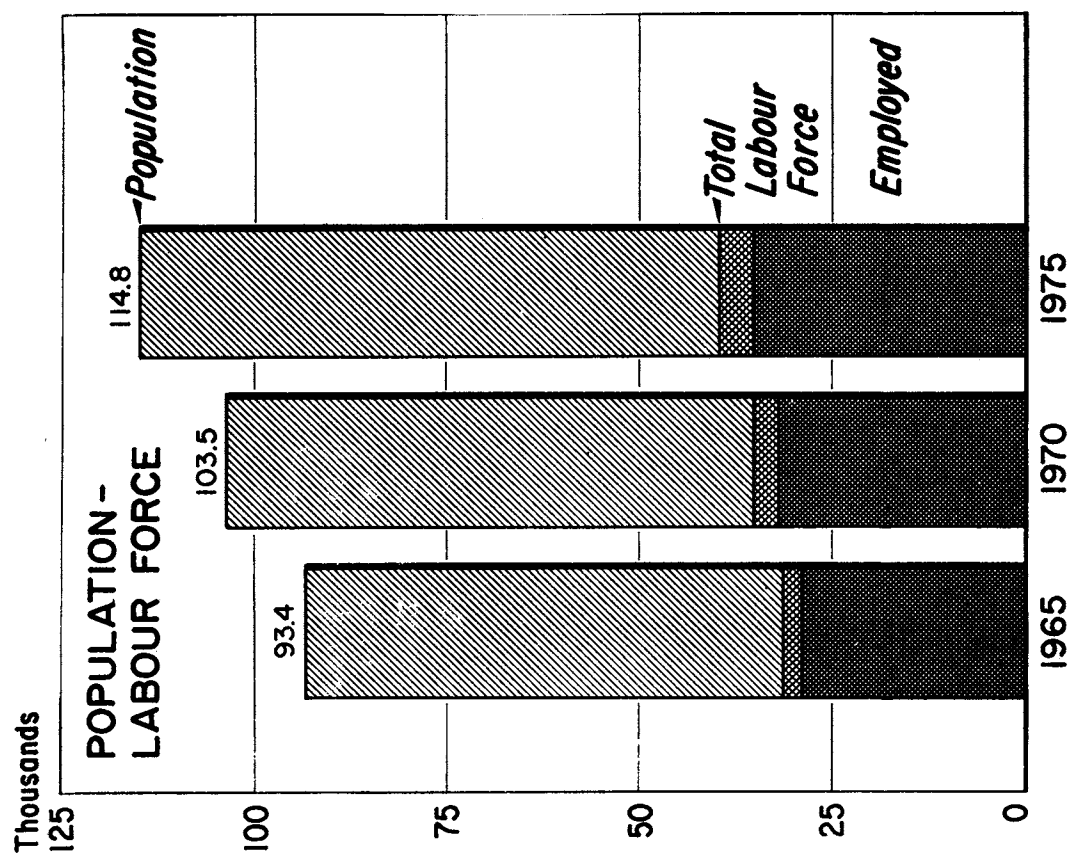
On the other hand, tourism may also become a social burden to the island's people and a political liability to its government. Alien control is now reaching the point where most of the land which borders beach and sea is owned by outside interests -- mainly British and American developers. Already some resentment is felt by St. Lucians who sense that it isn't "our island anymore", which is disconcerting to a people who have been colonized for three hundred years and who have no desire to continue being colonized in an indirect way.

I admire John Compton's efforts to develop a tourist complex in the form of Government joint ownership in a tourist corporation and as a result St. Lucians may be able to exert some control over this sort of precarious development. Whether he will be able to find the necessary outside capital is of course the problem. Had he the time to wait until the proper sort of capital came to the island, I would say that he stood a good chance. However, he, like so many Caribbean Heads of Government, is pressed by the desires of his constituency to produce results quickly. Consequently, Compton is caught between the wish to achieve stable and sound investment for the benefit of St. Lucia, while at the same time facing popular pressures for rapid, economic progress.

This pressure will not diminish with time, particularly with unemployment among unskilled workers on the upswing. The estimated population, labour force, employment and employment shortfall for the decade from 1965 to 1975 is given on page 14. The graph shows that figures for this year reveal that the island is in need of nearly 3,200 more jobs for unskilled labourers and that by 1975 this number will have increased to 4,500.



Above: Entrance to one of the ten hotels on St. Lucia
Within five years, perhaps as many as 25 more to be built



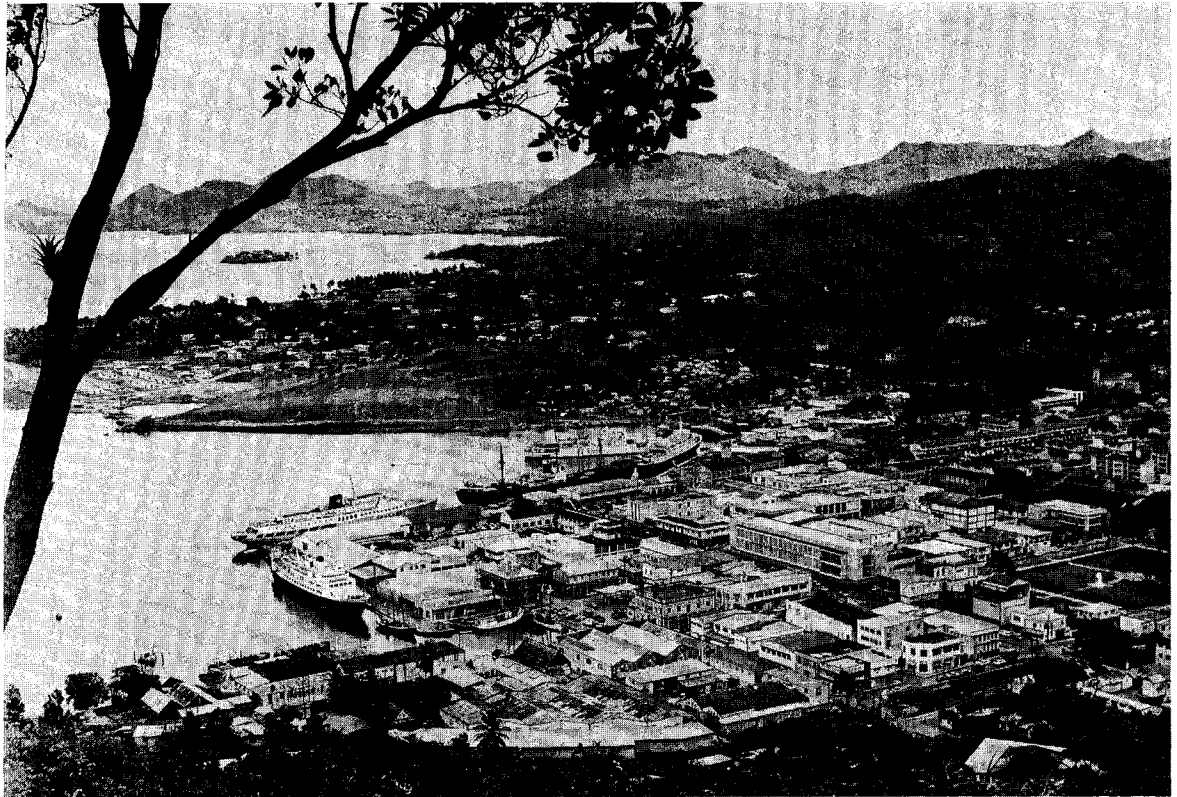
While there is unemployment, there are also manpower needs on St. Lucia. Many of the professions and jobs which require at least a secondary school education, will be understaffed in the 1970's. Estimates of current needs and future development show that with the current educational system, St. Lucia will be hard pressed to find the human resources it needs in that time. The island needs teachers to train others in the skills the economy will require; but at the moment it doesn't have them. According to a recent survey done by the University of the West Indies titled "Manpower Surveys", St. Lucia's economy will need 1,785 professionals by 1975. The breakdown, in categories relating to the job performed rather than the university degree required, is as follows:

Clergymen and religious.....	55
Barristers, magistrates and judges....	22
Dentists.....	15
Nurses, midwives.....	188
Pharmacists, dispensers.....	35
Medical technicians, public health inspectors, radiographers, optometrists, public health engineers.....	55
Teachers.....	985
Architects, surveyors, draftsmen, town planners, builders.....	70
Engineers and scientists.....	57
Accountants.....	60
Government Administrators.....	58
Directors, managers, writers and others.....	140

In addition to tourist development, Premier Compton realizes that there is a great need to encourage the development of the agricultural resources of the island: the good supply of water, fertile soil and sun. Without developing an agricultural base for the economy, the money flow which Government hopes moves into the island will only seep out through the importation of foodstuffs which the island cannot or will not be able to produce itself.

The problems Compton faces are of course rooted in the reluctance Caribbean peoples have to work the land, in the lack of incentive, knowhow and experience. (For decades, the Caribbean has produced nothing but sugar which has made it a single product, agricultural economy; so consequently the tradition of a diversified agricultural base has never taken root. Bananas have not helped to change this.)

Compton is optimistic, however. He says that within two years, when hotels are seeking agricultural produce, the supply will be available locally. I find this too optimistic, knowing the difficulties one faces in trying to revitalize and redirect the farming industry in the West Indies. Compton counters, nevertheless, with the insight that once a St. Lucian farmer sees that there is indeed an immediate market for his produce, "tomatoes will be only eight weeks away".



Above: Castries, St. Lucia, W.I. Burned down in 1948, rebuilt, now the Capital of the island with a deep water harbour. Last year 33 tourist ships called in at this port. This year just ended, 97 ships have visited the island. The ship docked in the photo is the Geest Banana ship which is being loaded for its return to England.

Until tomatoes come, however, bananas are here, supporting the economy until the economy becomes more diversified. Such a diversification had better come quickly since bananas may soon be on their way out; for once Britain joins the Common Market, the subsidy on Caribbean bananas will end and the result will be that St. Lucia's economic base will collapse. This has happened once before to the St. Lucians, when "king sugar" no longer provided the islands with a vigorous economy. At that time, bananas were around to save the island's people from impoverishment. No one knows how long they will last.

Yours,

Frank M. Donald





Received in New York March 21, 1969.