Once the proud symbol of America’s importance in the maritime world, the ships of the United Fruit Company wrote their own unique history.

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Above you see the S.S. “San Jose”...and the house flag of the United Fruit Company’s Great White.

Talk about the “Great White Fleet” and chances are that the listener/reader will think of Teddy Roosevelt’s famous deterrent gesture a century ago when he sent the entire U.S.
Navy’s armada on a world cruise. The voyage was intended to drive home a message to Japan that we were usually a peace-loving nation but if goaded into action, we were a force to be reckoned with. The ships, normally battle-gray, were painted white on that occasion because it presented a more snappy appearance.

There was, however, another “Great White Fleet” that received the self-same moniker even earlier than the time - 1907 - 1909 - when its Naval namesake set sail. These were the United Fruit Company’s (UFC) cargo-liners that are known today as the “banana boats” and were instrumental in helping to establish what is popularly known today as the Banana Republics (not to be confused with the trendy apparel chain). There were numerous ships sailing for UFC under a variety of flags and fleets. To describe all of these would involve a lengthy, unsystematic account. I would like to concentrate here on what I consider to be the most notable and important ships that ever sailed for United Fruit - the baker’s dozen ships in the Atenas-class 5,000-tonnes of the first decade of the 20th century - the ships built expressly for UFC’s requirements. But first, it’s necessary to look at the evolution of the fruit carrier industry of Central American and the Caribbean.

GOING BANANAS - “EL NORTE” DISCOVERS THE NEW-FANGED FRUIT

The history of the United Fruit Company, trading today under the “Chiquita Banana” logo, is bound up with the North American inter-action with its southern neighbors in Central/South America and the Caribbean. While we are not here concerned with the whole elaborate, and controversial, history of the United Fruit’s role in advancing U.S. commercial (some say “imperialist”) interest south of the border, some of this background is necessary to understand the shipping aspect of this enterprise.

Although United Fruit was incorporated in 1899, the origins of the company can be traced back to the 1870's when one Capt.
Lorenzo Baker introduced Andrew Preston, the owner of the Boston Fruit Company, to “Jamaica Yellow,” a variety of banana. Previously, Capt. Baker had brought home samples of the fruit on his schooner during his earlier trading voyage to give to relatives and friends. Baker found that the novel fruit was so well-liked that he began regularly bringing home little parcels to sell to the local food markets and parlayed this new-found market into a thriving enterprise. Prior to this, “Cuban Red” bananas sporadically showed up in the U.S. market, but there was no-one to identify the real marketing potential of this fruit. The banana demand had grown from these humble roots so that by the 1880’s, Baker trading as the Boston Fruit Company, had eleven ships sailing between Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and the East Coast of the U.S., the holds mostly filled with bunches of the oblong yellow fruit. Preston eventually joined forces with Minor Keith, an engineer engaged in building railways in Central America who also was exporting bananas to New Orleans and supplying Preston with any surplus. Boston Fruit signed an agreement in 1894 with Keith to sell his bananas in the United States north of Cape Hatteras, not only putting Boston Fruit in a remarkable strong marketing position but ensuring that their ships would be full.

When the company was formed in 1899, it was already operating in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Colombia, Costa Rica, Jamaica, and Panama - pretty much the whole extent of later operations. The new company controlled about 75% of the banana market in the U.S. and proceeded at one point to have a 90% market share.

Keith, the railroad expert, was also quite a sharp businessman. In 1898, he cut a deal with Guatemalan dictator Gen. Manuel Estrada Cabrera to finish the final 60-mi of the railroad that the dictator was already building from Puerto Barrio to Guatemala City in exchange for land to grow bananas. Brazil’s wholesale entry into the world coffee market caused a crash in coffee prices and thus Guatemala could not afford to finish the railroad on its own. Keith realized that bananas would be the perfect year-round crop to transport by rail to the port cities. He imported banana plants from Panama, which were then planted, matured and sold in New Orleans for a profit. Bananas were the answer to both the lack of cargo for the railroad and money for its completion. Eventually, United Fruit took control not only of the Atlantic segment of the railroad but the Pacific as well.

United Fruit did not complete its Central American jigsaw puzzle until it added Honduras to its empire when Sam Zemurray sold them his Cuyamel Fruit Company in 1919, giving the company more than three million-acres (12,000-sq-km), larger than the landmass of Delaware and Rhode Island combined.
The company cultivated only about one third of the land, keeping the rest in reserve, both for possible expansion and to discourage competitive banana growth.

**THE OCTOPUS - CULTIVATING AND EXPLOITING “THE BANANA EMPIRE”**

It is perhaps a hyperbole among trendy left-wing pop historians to accuse United Fruit of fomenting all the ills that still plague the former “banana republics” but one should not gloss over the North American fruit-importing giant’s partnership with repressive dictatorships, and its role in some punitive expeditions and covert operations organized by the U.S. military that fit under the rubric of “gunboat diplomacy.” United Fruit grew into what some natives of the lands hosting the plantations called “El Pulpo” (the Octopus), which rubric gives some idea of its enduring image in Latin America. Wages were not in cash, but in “scrip” which could only be redeemed in the company store. United brought in a considerable number of Jamaican workers to its plantations in the various countries. However, when one of them, William Wright, led 600 workers to strike in Guatemala, he was lynched. In 1929, 32,000 workers struck in Santa Marta, Columbia, for better wages, working conditions, and an 8-hr work day. Troops were called in and over 1,000 workers were killed. Then, there was the targeted killings conducted in response to the general strike in Honduras against United Fruit in 1954.

United Fruit’s most-blatant intervention in the internal affairs of the countries were they did business was its orchestration to overthrow Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. Arbenz committed the “sin” of calling for land reform and offering his own hacienda and United Fruit Company lands not yet cultivated to get the ball rolling. United put its PR machine into high gear and quickly painted Arbenz a communist and a threat to the Panama Canal. U.S. Secretary of Stare John Foster Dulles, who had been a lawyer for United Fruit, persuaded President Eisenhower to give the green light to the CIA, headed by Allen Dulles, to overthrow Arbenz. Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, the coup leader, was armed and trained on a United Fruit plantation in Honduras.

In 1961, United Fruit cooperated with the CIA in the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, even supplying some ships for logistical support. Castro had expropriated United Fruit land after he took power. It is interesting to note that Sam Zemurray had actually arranged for mercenaries to invade Honduras in 1911 (before his Cuyamel Fruit Company was bought out by United) and reinstall Manuel Bonilla as president. Afterwards, Bonilla gave him more land in Turjiillo and Tela.

United Fruit was good at public relations, marketing, and “branding” before that word was even used. It hired Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, to guide its advertising. Bernays, considered “the father of PR,” has the dubious distinction of working with American Tobacco in the 1920s to promote the image that it was chic for women to smoke. United used
Brazilian singer Carmen Miranda as the “Chiquita Banana Girl” who sang in countless banana ads. The image of the coquettish Latino beauty with the fruit-topped bandanna on her head is one of the enduring icons symbolizing the Yanqui notion of the Latin-American of the 1930s and 1940s, the years of the U.S. “Good Neighbor Policy.” United did a masterful job of promoting bananas as a healthy food and the perfect snack. On the other hand, the company did not diversify and did not do enough to counter disease that affected its single, mono-culture product. Its reaction to the plagues of Panama disease and of sigatoka was to pour more chemicals on the banana plants and eventually abandon the land. This created significant unemployment and the company even pulled up the railroad tracks when they left.

In Guatemala, they relocated from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific and in Honduras, they abandoned their fields around Trujillo and the port at Puerto Castillo. Some associate the suicide of United’s president Eli Black in 1975 with the death knell of the mighty United Fruit Company, which faced rough times in the 1970s. “Black Sigatoka” hit plantations in 1973 just when the Middle East War and OPEC raised the cost of fuel for transport. Hurricane Fifi hit Honduras and wiped out much of the crop. The banana-producing countries copied the OPEC cartel and formed UPEB to organize the exporters. Eli Black was under suspicion of stock fraud and it was revealed that he approved a huge bribe to the head of Honduras’ Military Junta, Gen. Osvaldo Lopez Arrellano, to get Honduras to pull out of the banana cartel. Black’s jump from his 44th floor office window in New York was true low point for the company which eventually moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, and changed its name from United Brands to Chiquita.

ESTABLISHMENT OF UFC’S GREAT WHITE FLEET

Now for the ships that carted this nutritious and tasty fruit northward. Today Great White Fleet, Ltd. (GWF), now officially rather than informally named, is the shipping arm of Chiquita Brands, the successor to United Fruit. They operate a container liner service between North American and ports in Central America. GWF can accommodate both reefer (refrigerated) and dry cargoes as well as RoRo (roll-on-roll-off) and vehicles. As one of the largest carriers to Central America, GWF offers its clients strategically located ports, a reliable sailing schedule, state-of-the-art container ships, the ability to handle both dry and refrigerated containerized cargo, integrated trucking and ocean services, and knowledgeable staff who create customized solutions for shipping needs.

The Great White Fleet designation can be traced back at least to 1907, when, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, President Teddy Roosevelt sent a fleet of warships on a worldwide tour. At the same time, the United Fruit Company also painted the ships white in order to reflect the tropical sunlight and allow banana temperatures to be more easily maintained. As the United Fruit Company fleet of big, fast, white-painted reefer vessels grew, they too became known as the Great White Fleet. It’s difficult to say whether Teddy’s warlike flotilla inspired the title for the fruit ships, but there is some unclear hint that United Fruit may have been using that label as early as the mid-1880s.

The special problems associated with shipping bananas were recognized early on. There is about a four- or five-day window from the time the fruit is picked from the trees in an unripened, green condition to the point where the banana turns black and its insides squishy - as such, suitable only for mixing into cake or bread dough. With sailing ships, it was a hit-or-miss affair, as both speed and the ability to sail at all depended on the capricious weather of the tropics. When steam-powered ships became both efficient and faster by the mid-1880s, this part
of the problem was being resolved.

In the early days, United shipped its fruit on the small vessels of the New Orleans, Belize, Royal Mail and Central American Steamship Company and of the Bluefields Steamship Company, which it controlled. In 1904, the Tropical Fruit Steamship Company, Ltd., was organized and three ships especially commissioned for the banana trade sailed under the British flag. It was thus that Andrew Preston created United’s Great White Fleet. He saw a profit in passenger traffic and, in 1899, chartered four new ships (the *Admiral Dewey*, *Admiral Schley*, *Admiral Sampson*, and the *Farragut*) that originally had been built for the Navy. Each carried 53 passengers and 35,000 bunches of bananas, which assured a fast and efficient service from the tropical beaches and picturesque surroundings eventually drew thousands of well-heeled tourists to embark on the (for the times) luxurious banana boat vessels and escape the harsh winters up north. The Great White Fleet, in effect, created the Central American and Caribbean tourist industry.

In 1903, the Venus, owned by the Weinbergers of New Orleans and chartered by United, was rigged up of refrigeration, and was the first profitable refrigerated ship dedicated to the carriage of bananas. Earlier experiments with refrigerated ships for meat transport were conducted as early as the 1880s and in 1884, the first purpose-built “reefer,” using the new ammonia compressor device, was transporting mutton from New Zealand to Great Britain. The meat ships and, then, the reefer banana boats started a new era in ocean transportation. Preston contracted for the building of three almost identical ships, the *San Jose*, *Limon*, and *Esparta* - the nucleus of the White Fleet which grew to 95 ships by 1933. Note though that, although there was a refrigeration device to provide primary refrigeration, carbon-monoxide as opposed to the earlier more hazardous ammonia-based system, ice was an important supplement. In fact, in 1915, Standard Fruit, which was UFC’s biggest...
competitor (eventually bought out by them in 1930), bought up all the ice factories in New Orleans for use in their fruit ships. Another problem was that bananas had to be shipped separately from the citrus fruit crops of the tropical growing nations because the oxidation given off the citrus fruits had the effect to rapidly ripening the bananas.

Fast, refrigerated ship alone could not ensure the efficient movement of bananas from the tropics to the United States. The profitable handling of bananas also involves rapid communication of directives and information between domestic offices and the remote plantations. This requirement was a corollary of the need to have ships ready for loading as soon as the banana crop was ready to be picked. Telephone and telegraph services between the United States and areas of United’s tropical operations were hopelessly inadequate. As early as 1903, Preston and Keith became interested in radio. Pioneering in wireless communication was expensive and not always successful. Static and tropical storms were a constant problem. In 1904, United was first to put commercial radio on shipboard. At last in 1910, thanks to Preston’s vision and tenacity, uninterrupted radio communication between the United States and Central America was formally established. For the first time, commercial international broadcasting became trustworthy. In 1913, Tropical Radio Telegraph Company was incorporated as a subsidiary of United Fruit.

A word is needed here in order to explain why the British Union Jack flew above the GWF’s ships until 1914. It was a matter that vexed some American passengers and the U.S. citizens in the crews. There was cause in the U.S. Navigation laws of the time that allowed the Federal government to requisition any U.S.-registered ships in time of war. United Fruit’s directors were of the opinion that if such a law existed in Great Britain or Germany for example, it would not be too painful to shippers since there was a wide diversity of corporations engaged in the trade. However, the U.S. merchant fleet was quite small and UFC was worried that in wartime such a seizure would cripple its business. By 1914, the U.S. navigation laws were relaxed with regard to outright seizure of merchant shipping in wartime and the stars and stripes flew above UFC’s ships.

THE BANANA BOATS

Since were are focusing on the ships, rather than the business, it’s time to take a look at the characteristics of the vessels of UFC’s GWF during the classic period spanning roughly from 1890 to 1911, with special emphasis on the 13 “5,000-ton” ships built from 1908-1911. This is an interesting group not only for reasons of space, but because they represent the classic UFC reefers from the period marking the high tide of the fleet and they are the largest single class built for the corporation. Plus, they are extremely striking vessels in their own right.

characteristics

Captain Baker had negotiated a working arrangement to charter ships from Atlas Steamship Co. of Liverpool until 1901 when Atlas was bought out by Hamburg America Line. In 1884, when Baker with J. H. Freeman and A. Preston formed the Boston Fruit Co., they purchased their own steamship and in 1889 sold off their remaining schooners.

In 1901, the Elders & Fyffes Co. was established in Great Britain with the purpose of shipping and distributing of Jamaican bananas withing the United Kingdom. With British government support, the company became a formidable competitor to UFC. By 1910, UFC had gained a controlling interest in the British-owned shipping firm and ships were being regularly transferred between the two fleets.
For practicality, rather than delve into the details of all the motley assortment of vessels chartered before UFC ordered tailor-made vessels for her cargo-liner service, I will begin with those purpose-built ships and, as mentioned, focus on the 13 “5,000-ton” class of vessels commissioned with the company between 1908 and 1911, which was in essence, the heyday of the GWF. I will also attempt to give a sense of how the passenger accommodations on these state-of-the-art ships kept pace with the requirements to provide a cosy “home away from home” for trips that would at times start in frigid wintry conditions and end in sweltering tropical sun. The length of the journey would vary with the selected ports of embarkation/debarkation but typically - those who wanted a vacation cruise experience rather than mere transportation - could last ten-days to a month. Even though the UFC combo-freighters (combination passenger liner and cargo ship) only sailed on an essentially coastwise or short-sea itinerary, the owners and designers set out to rival the finest facilities of the classic trans-Atlantic liners of the day.

In 1901, shortly after incorporation as United Fruit Company, the fleet consisted of the aforementioned four chartered (from the American Mail Steamship Company) Admiral-class vessels. These were configured to carry up to 53 passengers and were each was capable of transporting 35,000 bunches of bananas. The four ships - Admiral Dewey, Admiral Sampson, Admiral Farragut and Admiral Schley - were originally built in 1898. They were intended to serve as “dispatch vessels” for the U.S. Navy, meaning they were planned as couriers shuttling messages between the squadrons of the Pacific fleet at a time when reliable wireless communications were a few years in the future. Still in the early phases of construction upon the termination of hostilities with Spain, the ships were completed and purchased by the American Mail Steamship Company, an offshoot of the American Fruit Company of New York. Because
the Boston Fruit Company (UFC’s direct predecessor) had previously agreed to take all four sister ships on a time-charter for a period of 10-yrs, this deal with American Mail was nothing more than a paper transaction. With their future assured, the ships were completed in accordance with plans submitted by the Boston Fruit Company and handed over to that firm in December 1898 after completing trials on the Delaware River. Two-deck steel steamers with two masts and a single funnel, they measured 2, 104-gross registered tons. The four Admirals were 291.2-ft-long overall and 36.1-ft in beam. Draft and depth was about 22-ft. Because the Navy required both safety and a good turn of speed, rather powerful triple-expansion engines producing up to 2,650-ship were supplied. At full speed, these twin-screw ships could make 14-kts and could comfortably steam at their required service speed of 12-kts. During 1908 refits, these vessels were among the first ocean-going American ships converted to burn oil, their original coal-firing boilers being replaced by two single-ended water tube oil-firing boilers.

Providing a high level of comfort for relatively small numbers of passengers, public rooms and deck space were quite adequate. During their United Fruit careers, passengers lived in comfortable quarters on the promenade and main decks. In the large forward house on the promenade deck, abaft the Pilot House and chart room, were the Captain’s cabin, nine passenger cabins and a social hall built around the main staircase. All but one cabin was entered from within this housing, the single exception having only outside access from the promenade. At the after end of that deck, abaft the engine shafts and casings in a small deckhouse, were the smoking room which extended the width of the housing and opened onto both sides, and two more passenger cabins, both of which opened onto the after deck. Passengers had use of the open spaces on this deck.

The remaining passenger spaces were on the main deck. Arranged to provide the most-efficient communication between the galley and the dining room and thereby avoid the additional expense of an uptake dedicated to galley exhausts, the dining salon was placed amidships. Forward, 13 two-berth cabins were arranged in a rough U-shape along the sides of the deckhouse. Between these, along the centerline, were sanitary (bathroom) facilities and an inside cabin for the stewardess. Of course, no cabin was provided with private facilities - these were virtually unknown at the time of the ships’ built. Also rare was running water fitted in each cabin in the form of a simple face-washing and tooth-brushing sink. Instead, cabins featured an apparatus that was known as a compactum, a closet-like device into whose storage tank at the top a steward poured water. Performing bathing functions in private, the passenger drew tepid water from the tank which ran into another holding tank below the porcelain basin. When summoned by the passenger, the steward removed the used water below, and refilled the upper tank. Thus, simple cosmetic daily ablutions could be performed in the privacy of one’s own cabin, but more extensive body-cleansing and commode facilities were only available in a common, shared facility.
By 1901, all four ships bore the funnel markings of the United Fruit Company. According to UFC lore, these four vessels were the first to sport the all-white livery which gave rise to the nickname “Great White Fleet.” If so, this moniker would precede the U.S. Naval expedition’s use of the term by at least a half a decade.

While the Admirals were supplemented during these years between 1901 and 1904 by several smaller ships, these vessels had much-reduced passenger carrying capacity and were primarily used to carry cargo - bananas, citrus fruits, coffee, etc. and are not of special interest here. The smaller ships had provision for between 15 and 33 passengers each, but UFC considered the four Admirals to be their first true passenger ships as such.

The Admirals’ exceptional quickness and comfortable cabins and public rooms made them a favorite for passengers looking for a trip down to the sunny and vibrant “tropical paradies” below Mexico and surrounded by the Caribbean Sea. They cut travel time from Boston to Jamaica down from seven- to five-days and from Philadelphia, to merely four. Their speed also commended them to the United States Post Office, which was at that time subsidizing suitable ships that could carry the mails with sufficient hustle to allow for timely delivery.

After its initial buy-out of several possible competitors ended in 1900, United Fruit spent some time developing both plantations and markets. By 1903, it was investing again in developing mission-specific shipping, experimenting with refrigeration aboard ship with the previously mentioned Danish freighter Venus. This led to the order for a trio of refrigerated banana boats. In consequence, the first custom-built reefers for UFC to their precise design were the San Jose, Limon, and Esparta of 1904. The first of a long line of ships built to the specialized requirements of the UFC, these 3,300- gross ton vessels with space for 18 first class
passengers, came from the Belfast yards of Workman Clark & Company in 1904. This firm’s work was highly satisfactory to UFC, resulting in the follow-on contract for the 13 larger ships discussed below. The San Jose-class ships measured 330.5-ft length overall with a beam of 44-ft and a depth of 18-ft. They were impressive ships for their time, but were merely harbingers for the subsequent large bloc of commissioned vessels which would comprise the zenith of the CWF’s ship-building ventures. These vessels sailed between Boston and Port Limon, Costa Rica, whereas the Admirals ran from Boston and Philadelphia to Port Antonio (Jamaica), Bowden, and Kingston, omitting Port Antonio on return voyages.

The performance of the trio delighted UFC; even now, over a century after their debut, these three sisters are still considered among the finest banana carriers ever built, just below the 1908-1911 new-builds. An assessment of the motley collection of older vessels that comprised UFC’s informal fleet, showed UFC executives that the best bet was to continue to exploit the parallel demands for fruit carriers and comfortable passenger vessels by commissioning a new improved class of vessels based on the successful experience gained in operating the four Admirals and the San Jose trio.

END OF ‘PART I’

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Once the proud symbol of America’s importance in the maritime world, the ships of the United Fruit Company wrote their own unique history in the annals of cargo history /PART II - CONCLUSION

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OVERVIEW OF PART ONE

Although incorporated in 1899, the origins of the United Fruit Company can be traced back to the 1870s when Capt. Lorenzo Baker introduced Andrew Preston, owner of the Boston Fruit company to “Jamaica Yellows” an early variety of what we today know as bananas. Seafarer Baker first brought home samples of the delicious fruit to his stateside friends and family. They in turn began locally selling small quantities of the fruit, which soon proved to be a popular commodity in the northeast.

Thanks to his entrepreneurial skills, Preston realized a fortune was to be made importing the delicious oblong fruit and soon parlayed this lunch into a thriving enterprise. Creating a net
work of banana importers and distributors, by the 1880s, Preston had eleven ice-cooled reefers sailing between Cuba, the Dominican Republic and the east coast of the United States. Mergers and other importers soon expanded the banana market to include New Orleans and the southern states. When United Fruit Company was formed in 1899, it already controlled 75% of the banana market. With its economic future secured, the company became a true “Banana Empire” with political environs that reached deep into the overall development and destinies of Panama, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Colombia, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. The company became so large with more than a 100,000 employees it issued its own “script” rather than paying in pesos. By 1905, employees had nicknamed the company “El Pulpo” - the octopus.

As UFC grew, it began building a special fleet of refrigerated banana ships which were unique in design and employment. Preston ordered three reefers built expressly to haul bananas and, in so doing, created another era in sea transportation. The ships were fast and mechanically cooled by ammonia, taking lessons from the ice-cooled meat ships of the late-1880s. Since the color white best reflected the sun’s rays, UFC’s fleet were all painted white with buff-colored funnel tops, thus giving their ships the sobriquet “The Great White Fleet.” With en route time of the greatest essence in bringing the fruit to market before it ripened, UFC’s fleet boasted a number of firsts, the most important being two-way short-wave radios which helped to tightly schedule banana delivery. By 1933, the mega-corporation owned 93 ocean-going ships, many of them well-appointed combination freighter/passenger vessels which took advantage of being able to deliver passengers with top speed and grace to remote Central and South American cities.

**THE ATEMIS/CARAGO CLASS OF BANANA BOATS**

The next series of 13 ships, built from 1908-1913, constituted the core of the GWF up into the WW II years when some were requisitioned as attack cargo (AF) vessels, and a few were sunk by U-boats. Some say they were the handsomest of all the ships that ever plied the seas between North American ports and the Latin American tropics before or since. The new class were to be built at the Workman,
Clark & Company yards in Belfast, the firm that had built the *San Jose* trio. The imminent opening of the Panama Canal spurred new interest in Central America and the Caribbean by U.S. tourists. It was obviously the time for UFC to provide itself with modern ships to handle the company’s growing needs. Neither the four *Admirals* nor the many other small fruit boats with their limited passenger accommodation were able to cater to the rapidly growing transportation needs of UFC. The *Admirals* had already done quite a bit to promote the development of tourism to Jamaica. Gratified by the response to their limited passenger services, the management of the company concluded that ships with high-quality accommodations could attract enough revenue producing passengers to pay handsomely. New ships could also help advertise bananas, still something of a novelty to some consumers. Projections showed that even if the tourist traveler were ignored, the far-flung operations of the giant firm required a robust personnel transport for its own employees and contractors.

After the *San Jose* and her sisters settled down into service, UFC decided to build an adequate number of ships to allow each of its divisions sufficient ships to operate at least a weekly service from both New York and New Orleans. The advantages offered by a fleet of similar, if not identical, ships were obvious. Such vessels could run for either division, plus the standardization of equipment and furnishing would yield better economy of operation. UFC decided to begin its fleet expansion with the construction of three big ships. In the planning stages, little besides basic dimensions, capacity and speed were set. Because of the substantially higher cost to build ships in American yards and operate them under the American Flag, UFC turned once more to Workman, Clark & Company in Belfast and asked for their collaboration in the design and eventual construction of the desired new ships. With progress in drawing plans for the new series of ships well advanced by 1906, through its subsidiary Tropical Steamship Company, UF awarded Workman, Clark & Company the contract for the construction of three important new combination passenger and freight ships for their Southern Division.

Details of the new ships were soon released. These would be the biggest banana carriers

Left/Below: Here is an advertising postcard from circa 1940s. *SS Chiriqui* depicted here illustrates one of the later vessels. Built by Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Co. and delivered to United Fruit in 1932. She was transferred to the U.S. Navy as an attack-cargo ship in 1941 and commissioned as the *USS Taraxed (AF-13)*. She was reverted back to *Chiriqui* when returned to USFCO service after the war.
ever seen. At nearly 5,000-gross tons, they would be (relatively speaking) veritable mammoths. Many in the shipping business were convinced that the desired 5,000-ton ships were far too big for Caribbean trading but UFC was confident that they would never sail empty, at least not northbound. These would be handsomely proportioned two-decked (within the hull) steel steamers with straight stems and counter sterns. Above snow-white hulls would rise four decks of superstructure and the ships would displace about 10,000-tons. Single funneled, two-masted, three-island vessels, they were designed with an overall length of 392-ft. In short order, the planned trio of ships was expected to be followed by a few more sisters. Six would work from New Orleans, four from New York and three from Boston. This was fast becoming an exciting prospect, indeed, 13 sister ships for a company owned by Americans! The first tens ship were a few inches more than 49-ft in beam while the last three were just over 50-ft in beam and the depth of all the ships was 29-ft. By 1913, all 13 ships were in service. Original equipment in each ship included five coal-fired Scotch boilers working under forced draft to feed steam to a set of triple-expansion engines capable of a maximum of 3500-hp to allow these single-screw steamers to maintain sustained sea speeds of 12.5-kts and a top speed of 14-kts. Each ship had a four-bladed bronze propeller and a streamlined rudder. All but the Almirante would eventually be converted to burn oil after which their speeds were increased to allow them a cruising speed of 14- and a maximum speed of just over 15.4-kts. Four water-tight bulkheads subdivided the hull.

Naturally, carriage of the highly perishable banana was the paramount consideration in planning this series of new-buildings. Loaded unripe, it was important that the fruit not mature before arrival in the United States. Over-ripe bananas are unsaleable. The ocean floor off the mouth of the Mississippi River and off the New Jersey coast has been littered for years with tons of ripe bananas, dumped overboard from countless banana boats during the night before arrival at New Orleans or New York. There was no point to keep them aboard long enough for the company to have to pay stevedores for their off-loading. It made better sense just to dump them over the side. In order to keep the bananas from ripening too quickly, temperature in the holds must be continually cool.

While Naval architect Llewelyn Williams was busy designing the new sister ships in 1906, the use of refrigerating equipment at sea was still in its infancy. Few refrigerated ships
were then in operation and even then, they were considered better suited to the meat trade. The new United Fruit ships were ordered with specially designed cargo spaces. To better handle the heavy cargoes of construction equipment for the banana divisions and the construction of the Panama Canal, the ships were built with no orlop deck in the forward hold. Later on, all but two of the class were fitted with that customary deck. Each ship was designed to have four holds, providing eight cargo compartments in all. All fruit spaces were insulated with cork and cooled air was circulated throughout each compartment by electric fans. Air was cooled by carbon dioxide since that gas was less an irritant than the usual ammonia. Using the less offensive CO2 allowed the whole of the refrigerating system to be located within the engine rooms instead of in a separate house on deck. The designers demonstrated to United Fruit an extra advantage of the ships’ cooling systems - providing forced cooled air into cabins and public areas, a feature much appreciated in the sultry tropical climates where the ships spent most of their time. With a capacity of 150,000- to 160,000-cu-ft, cargo spaces were large enough for each ship to carry 50,000 stems of bananas. Cargo handling was divided between the capacity of twelve booms located at the two masts which served the four hatches and by conveyor belts rigged at each set of side-ports in the hull. Each of these sisters had a heavy lift boom at the Number 2 hatch.

Not until adequate provision for the carriage of bananas was satisfied could the design project continue. Thus far, except for Jamaica-bound passengers traveling in the four Admirals, most passengers carried by United Fruit were involved either in the fruit trade, were leading members of the upper classes of the small Central American republics served by the line, or were on their way to the Canal Zone to build or sell. United Fruit was still a new comer to the passenger-as-tourist business. Searching for knowledge and insight, UFC observed the previous performances of the various Hamburg American Line vessels on West Indies services. Already having a working agreement with them through its interest in the Atlantic Fruit Company, UFC looked at the Hapag ships as those which operated most akin services. Of greatest interest to UFC was Hapag’s recently acquired Atlas Line, which had been trading to the West Indies from New York for decades. Shortly after buying the Atlas Line and its fleet and services, Hapag learned that a single class of high-grade accommodations was enough to yield profitable returns from passenger operations. Then serving on Atlas Line routes from New York, were the seven Hapag Prinz-class steamers. Built by several yards in Germany, Hapag’s Prinz ships then

Another one of UFCs ships the SS Quirigua
enjoyed a reputation as the finest ships in the trade. Besides some 100 first-class passengers, the Prinz steamers carried bananas and other tropical produce to earn their keep. Five Prinz ships were of just under 5,000-tons. The other two measured just over 6,000-tons. The operating cost of the larger ships proved high enough that the advantages of their larger size were outweighed by the extra expenditures involved in their operation. Thus, after careful study of contemporary tonnage, UFC looked to the Hapag Prinz ships for cues in the plans for their own big new banana boats.

No carbon copies of Prinz ships, the new UFC ships would incorporate all the best elements. It was the intention of UFC to provide ships unparalleled for the excellence of accommodation, and in the context of the times given the limitations of the ships’ dimensions, they did just that. Reviewing the plans and specifications of the new ships, some UFC staffers considered their planned accommodations too elaborate for the Caribbean trade, but so fine were the planned spaces that doubters were soon won over. Remark ing in their literature that the first ten ship comprised “the most remarkable aggregation of passenger vessels in the world,” UFC offered evidence to substantiate its extraordinary claim, one which could be defended against any but the largest passenger ships then afloat. First of all, an air cooling system allowed regulated indoor temperatures in all the new ships but the Cartago, Parismina and Heredia (these three would incorporate the cooling feature after their refit to oil-fired boilers). In the “social room,” or “lounge,” each ship had a piano, music cabinet containing a large selection
of recorded music plus a library of books, magazines, and newspapers in several languages. Besides the lounge and smoking rooms, lobbies were fitted as sitting rooms. Each ship had a mahogany-paneled smoking room furnished with leather-upholstered chairs and settees.

UFC took pride in the passenger cabins. These were well-lighted and ventilated. Fitted with primitive rheostats, cabin lights could be dimmed at will. Several cabins in each were arranged with private bathrooms, a feature quite rare in ships of their size. It is hard to imagine by modern cruise ship aficionados that luxury travel could ever contemplate shared bathing and toilet facilities, but this was the norm in all but the largest ocean-going passenger vessels of the first decade of the 20th century.

Passenger accommodations in the first six “5,000-tonners” ranged over three decks in 152-ft-long superstructures. Chief venue for indoor social activities was the lounge, located on “A” or promenade deck forward. Originally called the “social room,” this was a room with cottage windows looking out to sea on three sides, a skylight above and a well open to the dining saloon directly below. A sparkling example of the best in contemporary Edwardian decor, it was furnished with hand-carved furniture upholstered in fine fabrics. The lounge led into a large foyer whose prominent stairway at the after bulkhead served as a decorative focal point for the whole ship. Abaft the “A” deck foyer were four handsomely furnished large cabins with private facilities called Suites A, B, C, and D. Below, covered promenades flanked the entire “B” deck house. Forward on that deck was the 90-seat dining room. Entered from doors opening from the hurricane decks but with no means of internal communication were five two-berth cabins on each side. Each cabin was also fitted with a sofa berth for a third passenger. Though these cabins and the suites were among the first at sea to feature cottage windows instead of portholes, access via the promenade decks was not the asset one might think of as passengers often slogged through rain and mist along the slippery deck. Such arrangements also gave concern for security in port for access to such cabins by unauthorized persons was relatively easy. Later refits allowed for internal, weather-protected cabin entry.

Another example of the masculine preserve was the smoking room, really an enlarged foyer of the stairs leading below. Located at the aft end of the house on “B” deck, it was a dark apartment featuring mahogany-paneled walls, tiled flooring, wooden swivel chairs and leather-clad settees. The smoking room gave into a small covered veranda which looked out aft. Walls were paneled in dark woods and tiled flooring covered the deck. On “C” deck, there were 22 more outside passenger cabins, each sleeping up to three persons. Forward on the centerline, there were four inside cabins, each fitted with three berths. Measuring only 88-sq-ft - 8 ft in width and 11-ft in length - most cabins were small by today’s standards. The original passenger capacity of these first three “5,000-tonners” was 116, but on the basis of a more-comfortable, two passengers in a cabin was only 80.

When the ship went to the yards for conversion to oil firing after 1921, their passenger accommodations were rearranged to reflect that aboard the other ships of the class. The dining room was located to “C” deck, replacing the inside cabins. The “B” deck house was widened giving room for an internal access corridor on either side of the engine casings. In the space formerly occupied by the dining room on “B” deck, ten cabins, a block of sanitary facilities, and purser’s office were built. Open skylight wells in the public rooms were filled in to allow more floor space overall. More cabins were built in the “B” deck house abaft the foyer. Several more cabins were fitted with private facilities. On “C” deck, some cabins were enlarged. Five cabins were gone from passenger sale - the three forward most had been removed to make way for the
new dinning room, while the remaining pair was used for staff. Eleven cabins for passengers were retained on “C” deck. These changes reduced the total number of berths by three. There were now 113 beds and berths in 35 cabins and four suites - a capacity of 78 on the basis of two passengers to a cabin. The number of passengers varied slightly by vessel and by year. Despite minor differences among the ships this description of the refitted Cartago, Parismina and Heredia is valid for the other ten ships of the series. It can be said that the 5,000-tonners had passenger accommodations for a maximum of about 100 passengers, but a passenger list of 80 was usually a full ship.

The “Class of 1908-1911" were of a size ample enough to both handle the escalation in the demand for bananas and the need for classy accommodations for passengers lured by the parrots, palms, and lush hues of the “Tropical paradise” below the Rio Grande.

In the early years, Atenas and Parismina, ran the circuit New Orleans, Colon, and Bocas del Toro, while Cartago and Heredia toured New Orleans, Puerto Barrios, Port Limon and Bocas del Toro.

They all had five coal-fired Scotch boilers under force draught feeding four-cylinder triple-expansion engines capable of 3500-hp, delivered to a single four-blade bronze propeller in front of a streamlined rudder. Service speed was 12.5-kts and maximum speed 14-kts. Later all were converted to oil firing and service speed was increased to 14-kts with a maximum speed of 15.4-kts.

Total hull volume was 4,937-gross registered tons with a displacement of nearly 10,000-tons with two decks in the hull and four decks of superstructure.

SS Cartago, the first of the ships to be commissioned, was named after the Costa Rican city and province (banana-growing region) and originally ran under the Tropical Fruit Steamship Company subsidiary with a British captain and crew of 78 officers and men and registered at Glasgow.

In 1921, she was converted to oil firing, had the forward end of the promenade deck glassed in for weather protection and accommodations rearranged. In 1932, she was chartered for 7-yrs to States Steamship Company and renamed General Lee for service to the Orient (ironically wearing their swastika symbol on the funnel - which had nothing to do with the Nazis). It was noted that the three vessels of this class to enter trans-Pacific voyaging were susceptible to the buffeting and pitching encountered in the Pacific Ocean tempests, since they were not originally constructed to deal with this type weather and seas. Cartago was laid up in 1945 and scrapped in 1947.
The career of another one of the original group of 13 from 1908-1911 is typical. SS Abangarez, the third of the 13 5,000-gross ton banana carriers built between 1908 and 1911 was completed in Ireland in 1909 and entered service on the company’s Costa Rica. On the outbreak of war in 1914, she was transferred from British to United States registry. After U.S. entry into the war, she was requisitioned by Shipping Board and served as a troopship under Navy control, (but not as a Navy ship) in 1918. She passed into Army service in January 1919, was released from requisition at the beginning of March, and sailed on her first post-war voyage for United Fruit in April.

Abangarez made the news on 28 October 1923 when she collided with the U.S. Navy submarine 0-5 as the submarine entered Limon Bay preparatory to transiting the Panama Canal. The merchant ship was little damaged, but the submarine sank in less than a minute with the loss of three men. A lengthy legal proceeding resulted in a finding that Abangarez had not been at fault.

While UFC continued both to build and lease ships for its lucrative banana/passenger trade to the Latin tropics through the 1920s and 1930s, lending a number of its ships for service in both world wars, none of these later ships quite captured the classic beauty of those built in the first decade of the 20th century. Their livery and shipboard ambience captures a bygone era when the gringos flocked to visit Chiquita-land “down equator way.”

END

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