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A History of the Trinidad Cocoa Industry

The Early Years 1617-1870

Spanish settlers in seventeenth century Trinidad, although only a few thousand in number, mainly resident in the valleys of the Northern Range, had built up a small tobacco exporting business. English and Dutch ships called frequently. This trade flourished despite the fact that it contravened the rigid Spanish system of restricting trade with Spanish colonies to Spanish vessels and to Spanish ports, until 1611 when a special commissioner was despatched to Trinidad to deal with this contraband trade. The result was that the inhabitants were reprimanded and the Governor dismissed. Tobacco cultivation was consequently diminished and the Spanish looked for a suitable crop as an alternative.

About 1678 cocoa plants were imported from Venezuela, then another Spanish colony, and soon a small but lucrative industry developed.

The demand for labour to work this new industry was supplied by the Carib Indians through the missions who sent them as labourers to the cocoa fields in return for pay, food and religious instruction. The system broke down when the missionaries seeing the poor physical state of the returning Indians refused to continue the arrangement. This refusal led to the missionaries being compelled to leave the Island, whereon many of the Indians fled to the hills.

From this period the industry began to depend

upon imported slave labour.

Though production was never extensive, cocoa became the staple product of the Island and, as it was considered superior in quality to that grown in other places, it found a ready market in Europe where chocolate drinking had become fashionable. Prices were high and a period of prosperity resulted.

Unhappily this period was brought to an abrupt halt when in 1727 the industry was destroyed by 'blast' which was probably a fungus disease. The predominantly 'Criollo' type cocoa was practically wiped out.

A period of depression followed during which time many of the colonists and their slaves left for the mainland and the population was depleted to a few score people.

In 1756 an attempt was made to revive the industry by the importation of hardier 'Forestero' varieties but progress was slow.

As an inducement the trade of the Island was thrown open to foreigners in 1765, but it was not until the Cedula of 1781 and the Cedula of 1783, with its special inducements of land grants which were liberally interpreted, that a real impetus to development was initiated.

Population was swelled by colonists from nearby territories many of them non-Spanish, who concentrated on sugar growing in preference to cocoa and by 1793 sugar was the primary crop of Trinidad and remained so for more than a century.