

La Selva Trágica (notes)

Intro: This movie takes place in the 1920's in the jungle of southeastern Mexico near the Río Hondo, the river that forms the border between this part of Mexico and the country that we know today as Belize. The movie features a band of Mexican *chicleros*, or gum harvesters, and highlights a variety of realities of their life during this unique period of history: Their lifestyles and working routines, Mayan mythology, conflicts with the English-speaking neighbors in Belize, and connection of this remote area to the outside world through the chicle trade.

Chicle: The Spanish word for gum

Chicozapote: The name of the tree that yields chicle

Chiclero: The name of the workers who climb the trees and harvest the *chicle*. They climb the trees and use machetes to hack away the bark of the tree in a zig-zag pattern (like a series of connected X's), which allows the chicle juice, once exposed, to run down the trunk of the tree through the zigzagging pathways into a bag at the bottom.

Honduras: Meaning "depths" in English, this is the word that Christopher Columbus used to dub the area of Central America where today countries like Honduras, Belize, and Nicaragua are located.

British Honduras: At this time, the name of Belize. In this part of Central America, as with many coastal areas in the Americas and Africa, European powers fought for control of land and influence of people. In Central America, Spain obviously was winning most of these battles, but Britain did happen to "retain rights" to this piece of land when at one point, after being defeated by the Spanish army, Spain allowed the British to stay here as long as the British promised to stop causing problems, waging attacks, etc. British Honduras renamed itself Belize in 1973 when it became its own, self-governing country.

Campeche: The name of the state in southeastern Mexico where the majority of chicle from Mexico was harvested.

Corregimiento: If you want to understand Central America from the Spanish Empire's perspective, or to understand the origin of many of its political boundaries (countries, states, etc.), this term will help. A *corregimiento* is like an administrative unit of the Spanish Empire in America. They had several Viceroyalties, each of which covered the space equivalent of multiple modern-day countries in Central and South America, and within these Viceroyalties were a series of *corregimientos*, or administrative units, where a **Corregidor** ("watcher") watched over the area with the job of ensuring that no local forces interfered with loyalty to the Spanish crown. If you look at a map of Mexico, you can see a lot of similarities between the shapes and borders of the states within the country today and the *corregimientos* of the imperial era.

Disconnect between D.F. and Yucatán: Despite Mexico's independence in 1821, through the 1800's and into the 1900's, there remained a disconnect between the capital city and the country's far east legion, which was occupied primarily by Mayan peoples.

Coyotaje: This term describes the period of illegal and exploitative activities that prevailed in the chicle-producing region of Campeche through the early 1900's.

Thomas Adams: The USA guy who conceived the chewing gum industry in the 1800's. He encountered chicle while working as a secretary for Mexican president Antonio López de Santa Anna. After failing to turn the gum into rubber, he created a chewing gum that could be marketed, developed, and sold in the United States.

American Chicle Company: Adams' company

Wrigley Company: The candy and chewing gum company invented in Chicago, IL in 1891 by William Wrigley

William Wrigley: The guy who founded Wrigley Company

Wrigley's Gum

Wrigley Field: The name of the baseball stadium in Chicago where the Cubs play

Cruzob Maya: The Cruzobs were Mayan chiefs who had ruling authority in Campeche and surrounding areas of the Yucatan Peninsula. They controlled access to the jungles with chicozapote trees.

Enganche: The name of the "operating system" that existed in Campeche:

Company → *Permisario* → *Cruzob Maya*

→ *Contractors* → *Chicleros*

- The companies work with *permisarios*, or intermediaries, to gain access to the jungle through the blessing of the Cruzob Mayan chiefs.
- **Permisarios:** These are the local people living in Campeche who broker the deals between the chewing gum companies from the US and the Cruzob chiefs.
- **Cruzob Maya:** These are the guys controlling access to the jungle.
- **Contractor / Contratistas / Entrepreneur:** These are the guys who employ *chicleros* to harvest the gum. It seems that they are local people who work together with the *permisarios*. The contractors give *chicleros* an advance, which normally included the tools required to harvest the chicle. The *chiclero* works by roaming through and living in the jungle, harvesting chicle from chicozapote trees. They are expected to return to the contractor with the chicle, first paying back what they owe and then getting to retain a portion for their profit.
- **Patrón:** Throughout the video, the *chicleros* regularly reference a *patrón*. This *patrón* is most likely the contractor.
- **Chiclero bands:** *Chicleros* often worked in small groups or bands, roaming through and living in the jungle while they harvested.

Hacienda: I read one source that described the *enganche* system as an equivalent to, or best attempted replica of, the *hacienda* system in the chicle industry. Haciendas were estates and plantations that operated according to the "hacienda system" throughout the Spanish Empire and in the independent countries that evolved from the Empire. In this system, the Spanish government or Spanish elites called *hacendados* (land-owners) would seize land, establish large estates or plantations, and bring in slaves and low-paid

peons—normally indigenous or other non-Spanish people—to perform the labor. Even the peons who were paid were essentially trapped on the plantations because they were often duped into signing contracts with conditions that were impossible to fulfill and thus indebted them to their employers. The hacienda system was the way of the Spanish elites to control the agriculture industry in the areas of their territories where they operated. In the chicle industry, because the trees that yielded the chicle were scattered throughout the jungle, which meant that chicle could not be produced on a plantation, the *enganche* system was created as a way for elites to control the industry.

Migrant workers: I read a source that said during this time—the explosion of the chicle industry—that it was common for Mexicans from the center of the city closer to the capital to come to Campeche for the work as a chiclero.

Río Hondo: This is the river that divides Mexico and Belize. Much of this movie takes place on the river.

British Hondurans: The people of British Honduras, a political term to describe the people of this territory, which included Europeans, African women, Creole people (European + African), Maya, and other indigenous groups.

Mennonites: A religious group notable for, among other things, adult baptism, commitment to pacifism, and plain dress, who make up 3.7% of Belize's population. Mennonite communities can be found in over 80 countries around the world.

Interactions between the groups:

- The film portrays animosity between the chicleros and the British Hondurans. Their encounters with each other result in fighting.
- There is a white, English speaking man who is chasing after a black woman who he wants to marry. He travels by river with two black men, who act upon his orders, as they pursue the fleeing women.
- The film portrays some of the chicleros as nervous about and fearing of the patrón.
- At one point, the “lead chiclero” declares that the band is not going to return to the patrón and instead sell all the chicle that they have harvested to a Mennonite man that he knows in Belize who will pay them a large sum of money that they all can keep for themselves.

Xtabay: The name of a mythical woman, according to Maya belief. The film portrays her as temptuous.

Agnes: This is the name of the Creole woman who was fleeing the white man who wanted to marry her. The film alludes that Xtabay is present in her during the film. During her escape, she is found by the band of chicleros. They take her into their tribe. At first, their interactions with Agnes are limited and careful. With time, though, the chicleros begin to take turns sleeping with Agnes, which results in jealousy within the tribe. Other members start to become paranoid. One explains from time to time that Xtabay is present and alive in the jungle.

Post-Film

Lázaro Cardenas: Mexican president from 1934-1940, who tried to implement agrarian reform during his tenure in order to end the *enganche* system and gain more Mexican state control and influence of the industry.

Sistema de Cooperativas / Cooperativismo: Cárdenas led the movement to create a series of co-ops (organizations that are run wholly by or in partnership with members), that would manage chicle production in the region.

Sources

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