

Agro-industry and cotton in the Mexicali valley. The Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico

Agroindustria y algodón en el valle de Mexicali. La Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico

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Abstract

The Mexicali valley emerged in the early twentieth century as part of the expansion of the agricultural frontier in the southwestern United States. You can not explain this without the participation of American capitalists who took over the land and water of Mexicali valley and laid the foundations of an agribusiness development around the cultivation of cotton. A company, a subsidiary of Anderson, Clayton & Company, played an important role in this process, making turning the Mexicali valley in one of the largest producers of cotton in Mexico.

Keywords: cotton, land, water, agribusiness.

Resumen

El valle de Mexicali surgió a principios del siglo xx como parte de la expansión de la frontera agrícola del suroeste de Estados Unidos. No se puede explicar esto sin la participación de capitalistas estadounidenses que se adueñaron de la tierra y del agua del valle de Mexicali, estableciendo las bases de un desarrollo agroindustrial que giró alrededor del cultivo del algodón. Una empresa, subsidiaria de la Anderson, Clayton & Company, tuvo un papel relevante en ese proceso, logrando convertir al valle de Mexicali en uno de los principales productores de algodón de México.

Palabras clave: algodón, tierra, agua, agroindustria.

Introduction

The purpose of this work is to contribute to a better understanding of what Aboites called "the cotton episode" in northern Mexico (Aboites, 2013, p.9). Specifically, some of the features of this phenomenon in the city and the Mexicali valley. Despite the nostalgia between the Mexicali citizens for the old days in which "you could sweep money with a broom," referring to a period characterized by economic prosperity, with cotton in the center of it, there have not been studies that integrate the different elements that allowed this local prosperity, which was not isolated, but it was part of a combined regional phenomenon. As Aboites noted, the Mexican cotton history of the

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twentieth century is to be done (Aboites, 2013, pp. 25-26) and this essay aims to be a palliative to that pending historiography by broadly describing a company that led for several decades the cultivation and industrialization of cotton in the valley of Mexicali.

A thematic order was chosen for the presentation of the results of this modest inquiry based on secondary sources, although within each section we have tried to follow a chronological exhibition. This is no coincidence. We are in front of a puzzle, in which key pieces are still missing, since in the second decade of the twenty first century the bibliography about the misadventures and anxieties of cotton in the Mexicali valley still remain limited. Historiography of indifference in terms of books and articles on cotton, as called by an expert on the subject (Aboites, 2013, p. 22).

The great interest in researching issues related to the agrarian structure of the Mexicali valley, considering that for almost the first half of the twentieth century most of the land in that region was owned by an American consortium, led to inquiries about the landowner and land distribution carried out in 1937, the beginning of the end of the monopoly that attracted the attention of scholars about the past of the area. The ideology of revolutionary nationalism that had the distribution of the lands as one of its main premises had a key role in replacing the interest in other issues of great historical significance such as water, cotton, migration, demographic impact and urban development, among others.

On the other hand, the lack of primary sources led to misinterpretation of the true role played by the corporation owning lands from Mexicali valley, attributing it with a leading and crucial role in economic development, to the point that some authors even claimed that, during more than three decades, "it controlled the development of agricultural production and agribusiness of Mexicali valley" (Anguiano, 1992, p. 143). The most recent historical research questions this vision, because apparently the landowner company, initiator of the cotton crop in the location, transferred its economic leadership to other agribusinesses companies.

Actually, during most of the twentieth century, in the wide valley located on the northern border of Mexico, in the state of Baja California, there was a large agro-industrial complex dedicated to ginning and industrialization of cottonseed. This complex was named Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico, locally known as La Jabonera.

Since its founding in 1925 and until its closure in 1973, this company played a crucial role in the agricultural development of the Mexicali valley and, as we shall see, much more than the value attributed to the land owner. It was not the only cotton company, but it was the most important. It shared the misadventures, misgivings by ups and downs of the international price of cotton, and the problems arising from the same culture, with other corporations in the industry.

The closure of La Jabonera completed a period in the history of the city and the valley of Mexicali. Even today some farmers still grow cotton and there are still some cotton ginning in the lands. The time when the lands of the valley of Mexicali were painted white, devoted to a single crop that was called "white gold", is part of a recent past.

The first steps

The emergence of the valley and the city of Mexicali in the early twentieth century was the result of the branching into Mexico of the Colorado River. With the purpose of

conducting water to the southeast part of the state of California, specifically for the Imperial Valley, the water was diverted through a ditch of a branch of the Colorado, known as Alamo River (Berumen, 2013, p.113).

The Mexicali valley is located in the northeast of the Baja California peninsula, bordering with the Mexican state of Sonora in the east and with California, U.S. in the north (Figure 1). This valley was formed with the lands of the Colorado River delta, since during thousands of years the mighty river deposited here the material carried during its long journey. It is considered the longest water body shed of the Pacific Ocean, born in the Rocky Mountains, the river follows a long journey before dying in the Gulf of California. The large amount of sediments deposited over the millennia explains the fertility of such lands. The Mexican Colorado River delta extends into Sonora, where it is called San Luis Rio Colorado, but is part of the Mexicali valley and, along with the California Imperial Valley, forms a geographical unit. They are the same delta, separated now by political divisions. (Grijalva, 2008, p. 13).

The Baja California portion of this delta was acquired in the early twentieth century by a group of U.S. investors led initially by Harrison Gray Otis and later by his son-in-law, Harry Chandler. Otis and Chandler, prominent businessmen engaged in real estate speculation in southwestern United States were also owners of the influential *Los Angeles Times* (Kerig, 2001, p. 65-70).

In 1902, in order to acquire the Mexican side of the delta region, adjacent to the mouth of the Colorado River in the Gulf of California, the Colorado River Land Company, SA, was organized and through a series of transactions of sale they acquired over 350 thousand hectares that made up the region (Hendricks, 1996, p. 155-162). The company remained in place until 1946, when it sold over 200 thousand of its hectares of land in the valley in 1937 to the Mexican government. This was after the president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas, expropriated about 102 thousand hectares of land that were open for crop at that time, a fact known in the annals of local history as the "Asalto a las Tierras" (Kerig, 2001, pp. 282-285).

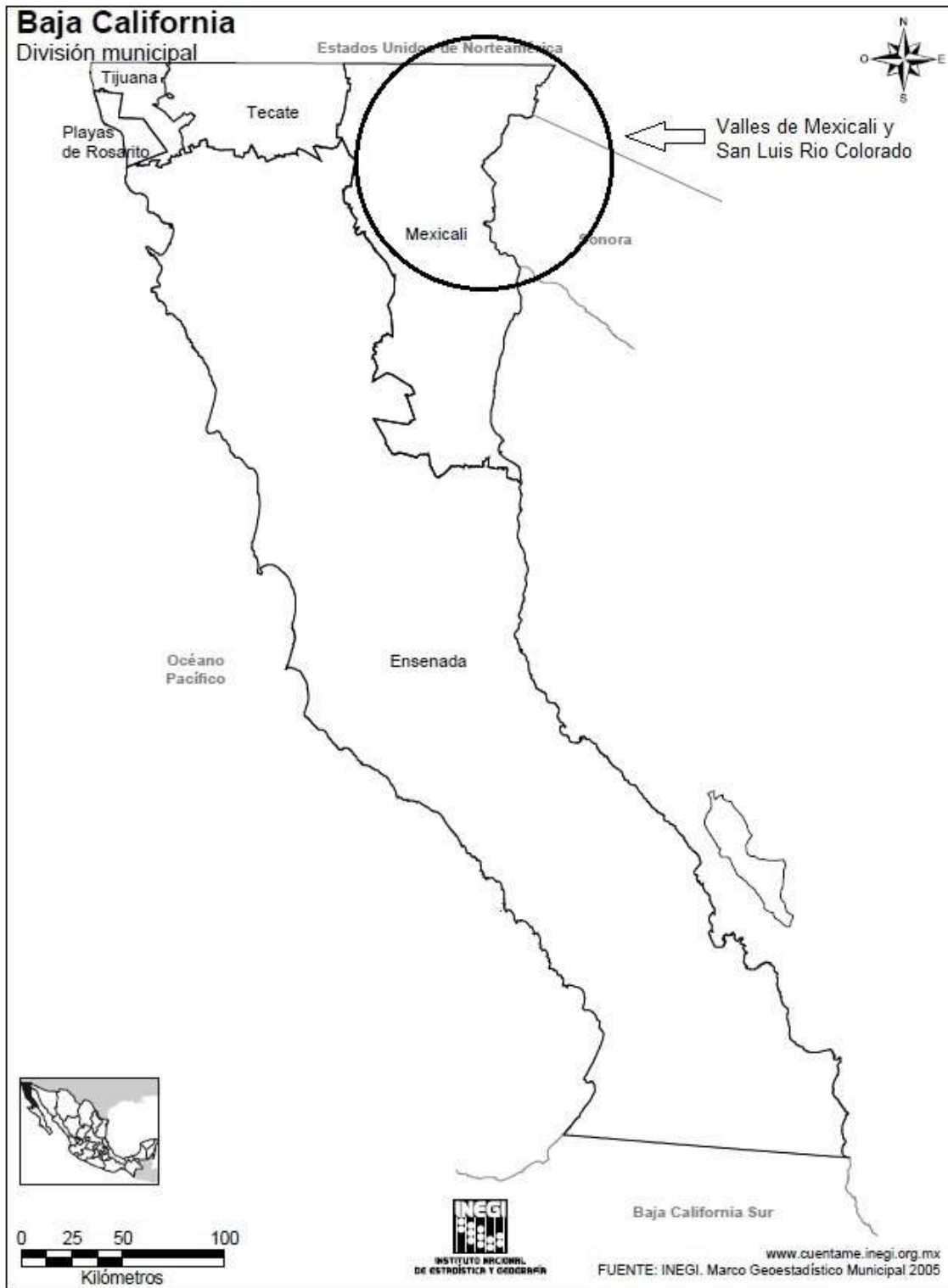
The American owners of these lands were the ones who started growing cotton in the Mexican delta of the Colorado River. Although at first this was not the purpose, the intention was to establish a cattle ranch (Kerig, 2001, pp. 82-83), with the demand for cotton resulting from the 1914-1918 world war, the landowners of the Mexican Colorado delta opted to establish a cotton field, as was already done in the neighboring Imperial Valley. The first cotton harvest was recorded in 1912 with 12 hectares of sown field and a product of 15 bales. The harvested area increased to 42,483 hectares in 1919 (Aboites, 1991a, p. 8) and for the 1920-1921 period 79 200 bales were obtained on 50 thousand irrigated hectares (López, E. 1977, p. 55).¹

Unlike other parts of the country, the isolation of the Mexicali valley from the rest of Mexico led to great agricultural prosperity² and to the rise of irrigated agriculture during the revolutionary period (1910-1920) (Aboites, 1991b, p.517). "During the most chaotic phase of the Mexican Revolution, the northern Baja California had, by contrast, a period of relative peace, growth and economic prosperity," says historian Dorothy Kerig P. (2001, p.128).

¹ A study from Pablo Bistráin notes that 8741 hectares were irrigated in 1912 and by 1920, the hectares planted amounted to 76 890 (Bistráin, 1953, p.64).

² In that period the highest point was the season crop of 1918-1919, when the cotton crop was valued at 28 million pesos (Aboites, 1991a, p.8).

Figure 1.



Precisely, it was the owners of the Colorado River Land Company, better known as "la Colorado", who invited Juan F. Brittingham, a pioneer businessman in the cotton ginning who had a factory dedicated to industrialize cottonseed in northern Durango and also developed nitroglycerin³ and soaps of all kinds, to move into Mexicali to install a factory like the one he had in Gomez Palacio, in the region known as La Comarca Lagunera (Kerig, 2001, pp. 220-222). The offer was because although it had a few cotton gins in place, they were not sufficient for ginning all the cotton, which was successfully cultivated in the Mexicali valley in the second decade of the twentieth century.

The organization of the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico as a limited cooperation (SCL) was an outcome of that invitation, its business was to take the seed cotton that was harvested in the land of Colorado River Land Company, SA and lease it to farmers, mostly foreigners, mainly Chinese and Japanese and rarely Mexican or "lands whose seed production subsequently affects society," as stated in the second clause of the articles of incorporation of the company (Grijalva, 2008, P. 71).

Juan F. Brittingham was established in Mexicali for five years. At this time, he built very similar facilities to the ones he had erected in Gómez Palacio, Durango, but in 1930 he transferred his interests to Anderson, Clayton & Company.⁴ By then "La Jabonera" consisted of an oil mill, a refinery, and a warehouse for the "cake" that produced the mill, the shed seed and a building where they kept the soap. There was another shed where a boiler was installed to supply steam to the mill and possibly another was installed to cover another pot to the refinery and soap. All these buildings had prefabricated steel structures and roofs of corrugated and galvanized aluminum sheet of good quality. According to the testimony of a former employee, they functioned during all the years until the demolition of La Jabonera (Grijalva, 2008, pp. 69-70).

Anderson, Clayton & Company acquired two-thirds of the shares of La Jabonera, and almost became the owner of that company. An agricultural credit system was established in Mexicali valley, whereby farmers were enabled to count with the funding necessary to sow their land, from its preparation to the harvesting of the crop. The condition was that they sowed the cotton which had to be delivered to the manufacturer company, which in turn ensured ginning in their facilities and the seed that was later industrialized in their mills.

Besides the original la Jabonera, there were other companies involved in cotton ginning like the Mexican Chinese Ginning Company, SA, later named Despepitadora de Mexicali but better known as La Chinesca,⁵ and the Compañía Algodonera de Baja California, SA, the production pioneer in the region.⁶ Together with other similar companies that established themselves after the cultivation of this malvaceae, they contributed to the

³ The nitric acid and sulfuric acid is synthesized with the cotton, the same needed to make nitroglycerin. This is the base of the so-called gun cotton, better known as smokeless powder. Its discovery had place in the mid-nineteenth century.

⁴ The company name was Anderson, Clayton & Company. This appeared on the letterhead of the company. Inside Mexico it was known as "la Clayton" and its official name was Anderson, Clayton & Company, SA. The initials were ACCO.

⁵ Established in 1919 by James B. Hoffman and Teophilus J. West. It had four cotton gins, 75 workers and had the capacity to produce 350 bales in 24 hours. Apparently these were the largest facilities in its field at that time (Grijalva, 2008, p. 149).

⁶ Supposedly the first cotton gin in Mexicali valley, a subsidiary of Globe Grain and Milling Company of Los Angeles, California (Aboites, 1991, p. 519), better known as the Globe Mills, having been established in 1916. Had two or more batteries of cotton gins and had a small oil mill (Grijalva, 2008, p.149).

Mexicali valley becoming one of the largest producers of cotton in the Mexican Republic during the mid-twentieth century, surpassed only by the Comarca Lagunera. Such was the case with the Hohenberg Company, Despepitadora Mac Fadden, Algodonera del Valle, Industrias Unidas del Colorado and Productora Agrícola (both from Esteve Brothers), Despepitadora La Popular, Algodones Universales, Algodones Unidos, Algodonera Internacional, Despepitadora de Oro Blanco, Empresas Longoria, also including Rafael Leyva Castro y socios Company. (Grijalva, 2008, p. 148) (Figure 2).

Cotton global competition

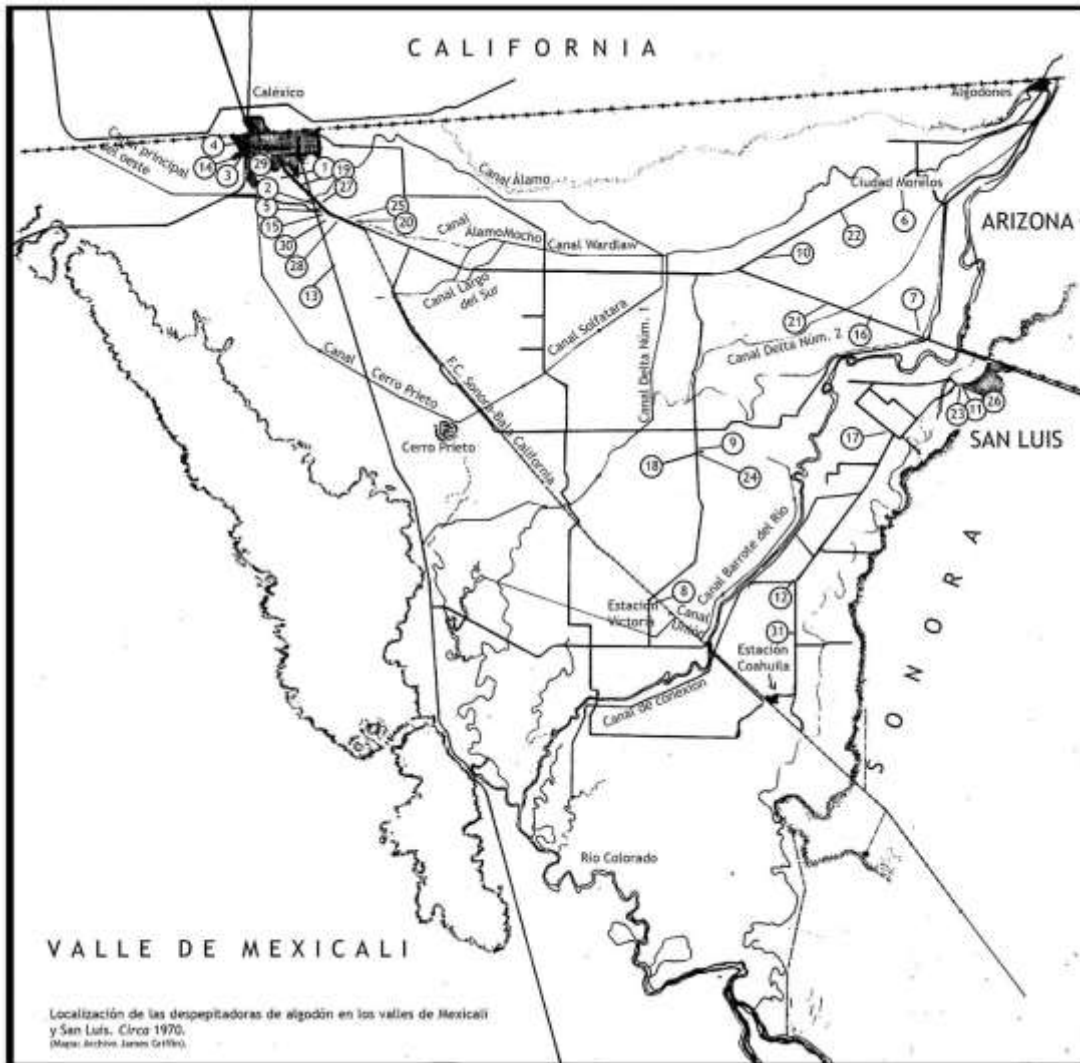
The general tendency to produce cotton in both the southwestern United States and northern Mexico during this period coincides with what was called "The Irrigation Age" in the United States, which led to the government funding of large-scale water projects (Colby and Jacobs, 2007, p. 12-16). The purpose was "to flourish American desert" (Walsh, 2007, p. 101), within the context of the struggle waged in the early years of the twentieth century between Britain and the U.S. for global control of the textile industry (López, E., 1977, p.52).

The fierce competition between the two contenders caused Britain to undertake an unprecedented campaign to introduce the cultivation of cotton in his territory, colonies and protectorates such as Nigeria, Uganda, Rhodesia, South Africa, Tanganyika, Punjab, and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan with the aim of no longer relying on the American cotton (Case, 1929, p. 343). Despite this, before the First World War, England was still importing millions of bales of cotton from the United States. In the period between 1913 and 1938, exports of cotton in the British cotton industry declined drastically as the global recession and the fall in income of the productive nations reduced the demand for British textiles (Singleton, 1998, p. 62).

Instead, the U. S. successfully implemented a strategy to boost cotton crop, investing heavily in the construction of irrigation systems, the installation of compressor plants, cotton gins, warehouses, loading equipment and transportation necessary for moving cotton and the opening of roads. By the 1920s, the U.S. had become the largest cotton producer, producing more than the other countries together (López, E., 1977, p. 52-53). The *Cotton Belt* was moving forward from East to West, including Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, the Carolinas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and all the way to California (Grijalva, 2008, p. 116) including the Colorado River delta region. It was amid this global situation that the works started to use the waters of the Colorado River to irrigate land in the Imperial Valley, where they began to cultivate cotton in 1906 (Musoke and Olmstead, 1982, p.386).

This clearly explains why, starting in the second decade of the twentieth century, cotton dominated irrigated agriculture in northern Mexico, to the point that 95% of cotton was produced in this part of the country leading to a geographical relocation of the crop (Aboites, 1991). Thus, the called "cotton binational border societies in the border areas," as suggested by Casey Welsh were born, as was the case of the Mexicali and Imperial valleys (Walsh, 2007, p. 101).

Figure 2. Picture of ginning from Mexicali valley and San Luis Rio Colorado. Circa 1970



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|--|---|
| 1. Algodonera del Valle | 17. Algodonera Internacional (Planta Moctezuma) |
| 2. Algodonera de Baja California | 18. Algodonera Internacional |
| 3. Empresas Hohenberg | 19. Despepitadora Popular |
| 4. Compañía Industrial del Pacífico (La Jabonera) | 20. Empresas Longoria (Planta Palaco) |
| 5. Despepitadora del Pacífico, Planta Pacífico (La Jabonera) | 21. Empresas Longoria (Planta Tabasco) |
| 6. Despepitadora del Pacífico, Planta Morelos (La Jabonera) | 22. Empresas Longoria (Planta Paredones) |
| 7. Despepitadora del Pacífico, Planta Río Colorado (La Jabonera) | 23. Empresas Longoria (Planta San Luis) |
| 8. Despepitadora del Pacífico, Planta Victoria (La Jabonera) | 24. Empresas Longoria (Planta Veracruz) |
| 9. Despepitadora del Pacífico, Planta Crucero (La Jabonera) | 25. Productora Agrícola (Esteve Hermanos) |
| 10. Algodonera Delta, Planta Tecolote (La Jabonera) | 26. Industrias Unidas del Colorado |
| 11. Algodonera de San Luis (La Jabonera) | 27. Algodoneros Unidos |
| 12. Despepitadora del Pacífico, Planta Coahuila (La Jabonera) | 28. Despepitadora Oro Blanco |
| 13. Despepitadora Mc Fadden | 29. Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal |
| 14. Despepitadora de Mexicali (La Chinesca) | 30. Algodones Universales |
| 15. Algodonera Internacional (Planta Mexicali) | 31. Empresa de Rafael Leyva Castro y socios |
| 16. Algodonera Internacional (Planta Hermosillo) (Esteve Hermanos) | |

Fuente: Archivo James Griffin.

Water and land reorganization in the Mexicali valley

Not only was the land controlled by a group of foreign investors but also the water. The *Compañía de Terrenos y Aguas de la Baja California*, a subsidiary of Imperial Irrigation District, an American company responsible for the distribution of water in the Imperial Valley, was the owner of the canal of the Alamo, the branch of Colorado River that diverted water towards the Californian valley, as well as an important network of conducting channels and water distribution in the region (Rubio, 2007, p.112).

This company had won a 50-year concession at an auction, which was granted to an irrigation company called *Sociedad de Irrigación y Terrenos de la Baja California* in 1904, by the Mexican government,⁷ for the distribution and sale of the Colorado River water resulting in Mexican territory. This situation persisted even after the inauguration of the All-American Canal in 1940, which severed the dependence of the Imperial Valley farmers channel to the water from the Alamo river located in Mexico, and after the signing of the water treaty between Mexico and the United States in February 3, 1944 (Hundley, 2000, pp. 152-153 & 178) and even after the Morelos Dam began its operations in September 1950 (Rubio, 2007, p.105-111).

Since then, the Morelos Dam distributes the Colorado River water to which Mexico is entitled by said treaty of 1944. This allowed the proper operation of the Colorado River's Irrigation District No.14, created in 1938⁸ as part of the National Irrigation Commission (Cárdenas, 1962, p. 54). It opened an extensive network of canals to properly distribute, between the land and the colonies of the valley, the water distributed through the Morelos dam or obtained by exploiting wells (Rubio, 2007, p. 119-127).

The company that owns the license to divert water from the Colorado River played an important role in the expansion of the agricultural frontier into the Mexican delta of the Colorado River. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the growth rate of cropping land was established by the construction of canals, levees, dams and inlet pipes done by the mentioned irrigation company and allowed the incorporation of new land into the irrigation area, especially in the Imperial Valley (Berumen, 2013). The *Compañía de Terrenos y Aguas* continued existing until 1961, when the Mexican government agreed to pay compensation for hydraulic works in Mexicali valley (López, A. 1961).

In 1946, shortly after the signing of the water treaty, the Colorado River Land Company sold to the Mexican government the vast amount of land they still possessed in Mexicali valley (Herrera, 2002, p. 185-191). After being recovered by the Mexican government, with few exceptions, these lands were not given in the common land deal, as did Lazaro Cárdenas in 1937, but they were sold to farmers, who were named smallholders or settlers, euphemistic term as this allowed some "smallholders" access to an unlimited number of hectares, putting their children and family as landowners. "The means for simulation in the division of states are diverse and varied [...] Family

⁷ On May 17th, 1904, Manuel González Cossio, head of the *Secretaría de Fomento, Colonización e Industria*, signed a contract with the attorney for the *Sociedad de Irrigación y Terrenos de la Baja California*, authorizing to lead up to 284 cubic meters per second of water from the Colorado River through "the channel that they built in Mexican territory" (Cárdenas, 1962, p. 20).

⁸ The agreement of the *Ejecutivo Federal* of August 23, 1938 created the Colorado River Irrigation District and awarded the *Comisión Nacional de Irrigación* with the control, maintenance and refurbishment of irrigation works and the distribution of water volumes (Cardenas, 1962, p.54).

members and close friends of the true owner of the land play an important role in this farce," said a scholar of the agriculture in the Mexicali valley (Cárdenas, 1962, p.49). A dichotomy was established on land owned place: common land owners with plots of 20 hectares⁹ and the settlers, as the smallholders were known.

These two events contributed to what has been called the Mexicali Valley "cotton boom". A local agrarian bourgeoisie emerged, a new sector of wealthy farmers who used the available land, water and agricultural credit to cultivate the land which, combined with the mechanization of some of the tasks required for cotton sowing, turned the area into a center of development, with Mexicali as the center of economic gravitation in Baja California. This was stated by Emilio López Zamora who estimated that in 1964, 70% of the general economy of Baja California depended of the agricultural production that was made in the Mexicali valley, i.e. the cotton crop (López, E., 1977, p. 79).

The Mexicali valley prosperity was such that it led to a heavy migration to the region since the signing of an agreement between the government of Mexico and the United States during World War II led to a massive influx of farmer from all over Mexico who sought to work in the agricultural fields of the American Southwest. The agreement known as the Bracero Program was fundamental in setting up a domestic labor market¹⁰ available in northwestern Mexico, especially in the agricultural area of Baja California (Grijalva, Niño and Arriaga, 2012, pp. 229-282). This phenomenon was parallel to the existence of the "cotton boom" in the Mexicali Valley as the duration of the bilateral agreement, from 1942 to 1964, matches with the peak of agriculture in the Mexicali valley.

Cotton entrepreneurs

In 1884, the American Juan F. Brittingham, along with a classmate, Juan Terrazas, established a small soap factory in the city of Chihuahua in northern Mexico. Later, he merged with Francisco Beltran to consolidate several oil mills and soap factories. In 1892, in association with several owners of cotton plantations, he organized the powerful Compañía Industrial Jabonera de La Laguna SA based in Gómez Palacio, Durango, in the heart of what is known as Comarca Lagunera, in order to use the oil extracted from the seed of the cotton and to make soap. For the historian Mario Cerutti, the creation in 1898 of the Compañía Industrial Jabonera de La Laguna, illustrated one of the key moments of articulation cycles between capitals in most of the northern Mexico during the Porfiriato (1876-1911). After the twentieth century, this oil and soap factory was considered one of the largest of its kind in Latin America (Barragán and Cerutti, 1993).

In 1925, Brittingham, 65 years old, accompanied by his sons John, Edward and Nelson, moved to the small town of Mexicali, to start a new business. His partners were Harry Chandler and Moses H. Sherman, majority shareholders of the Colorado River Land Company, SA, who had installed their own cotton gin, the Lower Colorado River Ginning Company (Kerig, 2001, p. 220). This was the starting point of the new society whose aim was "to produce all kinds of oils, glycerin, soaps and their derivatives", for

⁹ According to Aboites, the amazing average of 20 hectares of irrigation area by common land is "a remarkable local uniqueness" (Aboites, 2013, p.172). Eyewitnesses said that there was a special request to not repeat the experience of land distribution in La Laguna, where common land plot was seven hectares and James Stone, the then director of La Jabonera, had suggested an extension to 20 hectares (Dipp, 2002).

¹⁰ Understood as an internal or regional labor market for agricultural work.

which it pledged to "establish factories, plants, liquor stores, wineries and all the facilities needed for the soap industry "as stipulated in the articles of incorporation of the new agribusiness society (Grijalva, 2008, p. 71). Brittingham demanded exclusive rights to all the seed cotton harvested on land owned by the Colorado River Land Company (Kerig, 2001, p. 220).¹¹

Twenty specialized employees of Juan F. Brittingham in La Laguna, were sent from Gómez Palacio, Durango, on October 12, 1925 to install buildings, machinery and put into operation the oil mill of the new cotton company with a promise to return them to their homes in a year if they did not want to stay in Mexicali, according to the testimony of one of these workers, Ismael Adame (Jiménez & Dipp, 2003, pp. 46-47). Some sources indicate that by 1928, the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico was worth \$1.5 million (Kerig, 2001, p. 232).

In February 1930, Brittingham sold his shares, which was a third of the capital in La Jabonera, to the Texan cotton magnate from Anderson, Clayton, who also acquired a second third from other shareholders (Kerig, 2001, pp. 222-223). He shared with the Colorado River Land Company one-third of the shares of the cotton gin, same that eventually came to belong to the Mary Street Jenkins Foundation, when "la Colorado" left the Mexicali valley in 1946, getting rid of their interest in the area.

Anderson, Clayton & Company had been founded in the early twentieth century by William L. Clayton, who since his youth had worked in cotton marketing. At first, Clayton was associated with his brothers in law Frank and Monroe Anderson, but when they were out of business, he was in charge and in a short period of years, through World War I, the company began to grow rapidly (Grijalva, 2008, p. 94). Dedicated to the collection, use, sale and distribution of cotton, by the mid-20s, he already had subsidiaries in Europe, Egypt, India and China for the next decade and Anderson, Clayton & Company was already the biggest cotton company in the world with cotton gins and oil mills in the United States, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Egypt (Anderson s/f).

By 1945, Anderson, Clayton & Company had 223 cotton gins, 33 oil mills and 123 cotton storage plants worldwide, being considered the largest buyer, seller and stocker of cotton in the world. By the mid-twentieth century, Clayton sales in the international market became 3.5% of the world cotton production (Grijalva, 2008, p. 94 and 129).

Is not hard to understand why when Brittingham decided to sell its investments in the Mexicali valley, immediately Anderson, Clayton & Company arrived as a bidder. Due to the global crisis of 1929, all branches of the Mexican economy linked to the international market suffered a collapse; there was uncertainty as to the continuity of the activities of the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico in Mexicali valley, However, in a short period of time, the company had recovered and established an effective and excessive agricultural credit system to finance cotton crop in place.

The Great Depression that began in the United States and around the world in 1929. It may have been one of the reasons why Brittingham decided to retire from La Jabonera

¹¹ The control of the seed had been one of the requirements Brittingham laid down in the articles of incorporation for the Compañía Industrial Jabonera de La Laguna, a point which had been a source of controversy and conflict among farmer-members of this agribusiness society. For Brittingham, having this monopoly was essential. See also Cerutti, 1994, p. 107). With this background, it is understood that when he repeated his experience in the Mexicali valley, this was a main point in the charter of the new company.

del Pacífico, but there is no certainty.¹² In 1926, the cultivated area in Mexicali valley rose to 70 130 hectares, although the year with higher yields was in 1929 (17,659 tons), only 59 thousand hectares were planted. In 1932, only 11,000 were sowed with cotton (Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento [SAF], 1939, p. 87). The production dropped drastically from 45 456 bales in 1930-31 to almost half, 26 250 in 1931 to 1932 and 14 thousand bales in 1932-33 (López, E. 1977, p. 63).

Related to the above, the decline in cotton prices was also radical. By the end of July 1931, it dropped to \$ 5.87 per quintal, when in previous years the average price was \$ 20 (Vargas-Lobsinger, 1999, p. 128). Between 1931 and 1932, Mexicali valley farmers had to deliver cotton at 45 cents per pound, when the previous decade the price had varied between 1.65 and 1.23 dollars (Aboites, 2013, p. 405), which caused huge losses among both farmers and companies. (López, E., 1977, p. 56). Luis Aboites points this was the only agricultural region of northern Mexico that had such a decrease (Aboites, 1991b, p. 515). "Baja California was the most affected by the crisis" (Aboites, 1991a, p. 13).

When the situation began to improve in Mexicali valley, Lazaro Cárdenas expropriated in 1937 to "la Colorado" approximately 102,000 hectares that were open to cultivation at the time, and mainly partitioned between farmers and laborers who moved from different parts of Mexico, who became common lands owners.¹³ The blow to the landowner company, associated to the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico, caused a crisis in which ACCO took a leading role in its resolution.

Towards agribusiness consolidation

Before the arrival of Anderson, Clayton & Company to Mexicali valley, "la Colorado" had already established an effective mechanism to work the land, through leasing and share cropping systems in which Chinese, Indians, Japanese and rarely, Mexicans, participated. The funds to purchase seeds, agricultural implements and livelihoods were provided by the bank of the company, Merchants Bank (Kerig, 2001, p. 241), charging for the raw cotton or cotton wool, which was delivered to the landowner company (Dicken, 1938, p. 365).

Sharecroppers were contractually obliged to carry out land clearing and repair of irrigation canals with their own resources (López, E., 1977, p. 35), while the owners of "la Colorado" carefully supervised the sowing, cotton crop and the land irrigation (Dicken, 1938, p. 365). When some scholars point out those company owners invested between two and three million dollars in annual funding in cotton crops, it is not difficult to guess the amount of proceeds obtained (Kerig, 2001, p. 232).

The commercial credit facilitated the opening, preparation and land leveling. This credit, besides facilitating the introduction of seeds that were used in the American cotton fields, allowed the incorporation of advanced agricultural and agribusiness technologies. Mexicali valley, like the Comarca Lagunera, flourished thanks to the funding of

¹² Some versions mention that he had heart problems, and decided to sell and retire to live in Los Angeles, California, where he died in 1940.

¹³ Landowners are members of a common land, a form of land ownership, in which a group or core population receives land for agricultural purposes, and whose ownership is shared collectively. Each landowner receives a common land, which shall not be less than ten hectares and there is a legal fund, which is where the residences of the members of the common land should be. Each landowner is entitled to a plot where they can build their residence. That is called common land population.

merchant capital, as well as its agricultural expertise, and the fact that land ownership was in few hands (Cerutti, 1994, p. 100).

So when the common land distribution was performed,¹⁴ the beneficiary farmers faced a dilemma, they came from other parts of the country where their crop practices were different, many of them lacked experience in cotton cropping. On the other hand, the mexicanization of the land put the government of Cárdenas against the problem of taking over the financing, organization and commercialization of common land crops (Walsh, 2007, p. 105). Despite the creation of the Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal in 1936, the oil expropriation in 1938 prevented the access of Lazaro Cárdenas to international credits to support the Banco Ejidal, thus he could no subsidize the new landowners of Mexicali valley (Jimenez and Dipp, 2003, p. 63).

But Cárdenas was not alone. He turned to William Clayton so his company, Anderson, Clayton & Company, could take over the financial and business operations of the Mexican cotton in exchange for a big slice of profit (Walsh, 2007, p. 105). That is how "Cárdenas embarked on the task of increasing a thousand percent in national exports of cotton, with Anderson, Clayton & Company in the middle as the capitalist giant of the cotton production," as says Walsh (2007, p. 105).

The agreement signed between the President of Mexico and Clayton in early 1937, upheld the agreement that the former deputy director of the Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal, Julián Rodríguez Adame, established in 1938 with James Stone, director of the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico, to facilitate capital for credits. For three years, the Banco Ejidal enabled credits to their customers for the sowing of cotton, wheat and alfalfa (Jiménez and Dipp, 2003, pp. 63-64). Not only that, Anderson, Clayton & Company-through La Jabonera del Pacífico- assisted in the Irrigation District of Colorado River in credits in the first months of each year, while the budget came from the headquarters of the Comisión Nacional de Irrigación. The latter allowed supporting the maintenance and construction of 136 kilometers of canals and drains in Mexicali valley (Jiménez and Dipp, 2003, p. 64).

The strategy conceived by the Cárdenas government allowed Anderson, Clayton & Company to establish itself in the Mexicali valley through its subsidiary, and from that moment began the radical transformation of the region and the "cotton boom" that had national and international repercussions.

Some circumstantial factors contributed to this. On one hand, the U.S. involvement in World War II, as of December 8, 1941 and on the other hand, the substantial modification of agrarian government politics following the arrival of a new President of Mexico, Manuel Avila Camacho (1940-1946). The massive redistribution of land between 1934 and 1940, during Cárdenas administration, resulted in an agrarian movement totally dependent on the Mexican State. The inherent contradiction between the common land and capitalist development of Mexican agriculture led to a series of problems, which allowed Avila Camacho and then Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) to justify a series of changes in the orientation of political government regarding land possession. (Stanford, 1993, p. 192).

¹⁴ There is no agreement among scholars on the number of common land and hectares spread. When official documents were reviewed, it is surprising to find that the Mexican government had no clear information about the distribution of land or the number of common land established. While Gabino Vazquez, head of the Agricultural Department, reported the formation of 44 common land in 99,924 hectares of land, the governor of the North Territory of Baja California, Rodolfo Sanchez Taboada, reported 102,375 hectares of land expropriated and distributed to farmers. (Kerig, 2001, p. 199).

In 1941 only some collective common land were authorized in a few regions of Mexico, because their organization contradicted the agricultural modernization scheme of the state. The common land defense was maintained on rhetorical level in the official Mexican discourse, while the government promoted the division of common land, public investment and credits to the subsidized private sector. (Stanford, 1993, p. 192). This was parallel to the establishment of a public policy known as import substitution, which stimulated domestic production of manufactures.

The government focused on improving agricultural efficiency through the use of technology, training to modernize the marketing and distribution, creating new projects to expand crop land and offering assurances to individual owners to encourage investment (Medina, 1978, p. 251-260).

Under the government administration of Miguel Alemán, the attack to the common lands was accelerated. In December 1946, reforms to the article 27 of the Constitution made soon after the start of the presidency of Alemán expanded the "small property" to 150 hectares if it was devoted to cotton. (González, 1988, p. 9). In 1948 a decree declared that Baja California was an unaffected colonization zone, "which resulted in colonization obstacles for a definitive rural population settlement and the creation of farms to achieve the latter issued objectives of the Agrarian Reform" (López, E., 1977, p. 21).

Braulio Maldonado, the first constitutional governor of the newly created state of Baja California (1953-1959), regretted not being able to distribute land among the laborers who came to the region with the hope of working in the state of California. As a presidential decree, it was prohibited under certainty of the federal government that when 1950 arrived "all agrarian necessities of Baja California would be met" (Maldonado, 2006, p. 214).

Therefore in 1946, when the Colorado River Land Company sold to the Mexican government around 200 hectares of land that they still owned in Mexicali valley, the land reclaimed for the domain of the nation were not given as common land. The Mexican government established a trust fund through Nacional Financiera, with the name of Compañía Mexicana de Terrenos del Río Colorado, and immediately held contracts with the Comisión Nacional de Colonización who authorized the sale for the newly acquired land (Herrera, 2002, p. 205 and 219). The lands were sold to farmers, some of which enforced their rights as formers sharecroppers of "La Colorado" (Grijalva, 1978, p. 140-178). A small agrarian bourgeoisie, composed of the smallholder sector was consolidated¹⁵ and the lands acquired in this fashion were called colonies.

In this context is how the sown cotton area in Mexicali valley began to increase steadily. In 1941, the cotton harvest was already over production by 100 thousand bales for the first time. The shortage of cotton on the international market during the years of World War II brought an unprecedented demand for this fiber with increasingly high prices. The last minute demands resulted in the prices and surcharge in Mexicali valley being paid above the official value. The area dedicated to the cultivation of cotton in Mexicali valley was growing to the point that other crops

¹⁵ Rigoberto Cardenas notes that in the Mexican law there is no clarity regarding the definition of what is considered small property. Even though it is a "legal form of ownership of the land", there are different guidelines for determining what a small farm is. (Cárdenas, 1962, p.46).

disappeared almost completely from the Mexicali area. A witness of that time tells it like this:

The heat turned into fever, all alfalfa crops turned into cotton crops, all winter sowing was reduced to prevent the decrease of land usable for cotton, and the incipient trials done with crops of corn and milo ended. Word was spread that Mexicali valley was "El Dorado" of legend and people who were eager to make money arrived (López, E., 1977, p. 60).

Reality corroborated this perception. In 1954, Mexicali valley moved to the Comarca Lagunera to produce 434,075 bales of cotton on 200,000 hectares in that year, an average of 200 000 bales per hectare, winning first place as producer of cotton in the Mexican Republic (Kerig, 2001, p.165 and Aboites, 2013, p.401).

Was soap made in La Jabonera?

When James Griffin¹⁶ came to Mexicali, on October 31, 1953, to meet with James Stone, the legendary director of the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico, knew that this was among the best of Anderson, Clayton & Company and the division of California was considered as the most modern and best managed of all. Griffin had worked almost seven years with Anderson, Clayton & Company. First in America and then in the last four years, Argentina and Paraguay, in charge of the operation and construction of several cotton gins and the operation of an oil mill.

Upon returning to America, his bosses at the main office of Anderson, Clayton & Company in Houston, Texas told him that there were two possibilities for job in Mexico, one in Empalme, Sonora, in a new oil mill which was under construction and the other, in Mexicali as superintendent of cotton gins (Grijalva, 2008, p. 27). By then, the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico had the largest concentration of cotton gins in the world.

Griffin arrived to Mexicali during the collecting season of cotton crop of 1952-1953, and his first impressions of the facilities of the Compañía Industrial Jabonera were perplexing:

As we talked I noticed the disarray in the courtyards and cotton gins, I understood why no one had wanted to show me the plants. There was trash accumulated inside and outside of the plants, water on the floor nearby the electrical controls. Seeds and cotton were scattered everywhere. Among twelve cotton gins, two to four of them were indefinitely out of service. I never saw the twelve working simultaneously (Grijalva, 2008, p. 31).¹⁷

This situation was the result of the frenzied activity that was taking place as a result of the agricultural strength that existed in the region. During the decade of the 50s, the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico had expanded its facilities to occupy the 33 hectares that, originally, were provided by the Colorado River Land Company in 1925

¹⁶ James Griffin worked for Anderson, Clayton and Company since he was young. He was in La Jabonera between 1953 and 1971, where he held high responsibilities, the superintendence of cotton gins and oil mill. The testimony of his experience in La Jabonera is narrated in a book published about this cotton company. (See Grijalva, 2008).

¹⁷ The engineer Emilio Lopez Zamora complained that, while the federal government and Mexicali farmers held substantial investments in both waterworks and clearing and leveling of land, roads, agricultural machinery, cotton companies had outdated facilities on cotton gins, oil mills, compressors, etc. (Zamora Lopez, 1977, p.31).

when the company was created. There were twelve cotton gins on six buildings,¹⁸ where the cotton was loaded on trucks from different parts of Mexicali valley. That is where the cotton seed was separated, meaning that the cotton was ginned using saws and bulldozers and then the fiber turned into a fluffy blanket and was put into a box to form a bale.¹⁹

A bale, once completed, was weighed on a scale, tagged with a number and a mark with ink on the blanket in which the bale was wrapped and then it was sent to the storage yards off the compressor (Grijalva, 2008, p. 142). The ginning plants are one of the most important lines of these agricultural enterprises and the quality of equipment used to carry out the ginning process greatly influences the quality of the cotton obtained (López, E., 1977, p.124).

Truckloads of manually picked cotton arrived to these ginning plants, picked by hundreds of agricultural workers,²⁰ -pickers-, who did what was considered one of the toughest jobs in the field, they pulled up the cotton plant and placed it in an ixtle bag which they carried to the scales where they weighed the cotton obtained. Most of these trucks carried the cotton harvested by farmers subsidized by the same Jabonera, but in several times they also carried fiber that was cultivated thanks to credits from similar agricultural enterprises²¹ or official institutions like the Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal or Crédito Agrícola.

Also, raw cotton came in railroad cars, which was sent by the railroad along the northern valley, this line was strung in the early twentieth century under the name of the Inter-California Southern Railroad (Kerig, 2001, pp. 81-82).

In the storage yards, bales were placed once they had been classified.²² The "assessment" done to the fiber depended on the profits per harvest. All this involved the farmer, the buyer, the exporter and the consumer, in this case, the textile industry. For future identification and once the bale was out of the gin plant, they took a sample from each side of the bale and put a brand with a tag coupon numbered on each bale. This explains the importance of the building where the "cotton room classification" and the classifiers, skilled men in these tasks, were.²³

Beside the huge bale storage yards was the building where they were compressed and prepared for shipment, if authorized by the owner of the cotton. We refer to the compressor which was also responsible of the bale control. As time passes by, the mechanisms of compression have evolved, to the extent that their size was decreasing, which was significant in saving in transportation costs to national and international markets. La Jabonera was one of the first companies to introduce special agricultural machinery, specialized to produce high density, compact and well pressed bales, which

¹⁸ There were two other cotton gins called Pacific Division on the outskirts of Mexicali and three in San Luis Rio Colorado, a town on the left edge of the Colorado River in the state of Sonora, also part of the Mexican Colorado River delta.

¹⁹ A bale weighs about 220 to 250 kilos.

²⁰ This process involved men, women and even children, sometimes entire families, who performed this heavy task starting in August under a blazing sun and temperatures ranging between 40 and 50 degrees Celsius.

²¹ This was a result of the organization of the Asociación Algodonera de Valle de Mexicali, that protected itself in this fashion to avoid what they called "Cotton Moon". This is when the cotton funded by a company was sold by the farmer to another, avoiding the payment of the pre-funding.

²² The classification of cotton is still important today, it is the basis of the product marketing.

²³ Nowadays, the quality of cotton is automatically classified by electronic and mechanical devices that determine the color, foreign matter content, the micron and the length of the fiber. The determination of resistance has been replaced by "Grams per Tex" which is more accurate (Grijalva, 2008, p. 124).

was more advanced than the United States. "Probably our cotton gin operations were the most modern in the world in those years" affirms James Griffin (Grijalva, 2008, p. 44).

Trucks loaded with bales came from the plant, since almost all of the cotton in Mexicali valley was exported. At first they were sent to California, to the ports of San Pedro and Long Beach and during the decade of the 1960s to Ensenada, the Pacific port located in northwestern Baja California. From those ports they headed to Asia, mainly to Japan.

These processes were the ones related to cotton fiber, but a very important part of the activities of the agribusiness complex were those concerning the industrialization of cottonseed. The oil mill was considered the heart of La Jabonera, and its facilities were flanked by several of the storehouses where the seed obtained from the cotton was stored. There were several cottonseed storehouses, one of them with a roof, the Muskogee, but thanks to the dry weather of Mexicali, several of the storehouses lacked a roof and the seeds were outdoors.²⁴

In the oil mill, the cottonseed was cleaned, delinted and broken to separate the shell seed, and finally extract the seed oil, which was subsequently refined. According to Enrique Ante, who was a superintendent in this area, the mill required a swarm of workers, divided into several departments, who worked all year day and night without rest, with the help of the machines that used vibrating screens and air suction to remove the seed and most of the impurities, and delinting to remove the lint in the seeds²⁵ in addition to mechanical presses and crushers named expellers, the seed became oil. The mill had a solvent plant, pots and a laboratory.

By the half of the past century, La Jabonera processed a daily 400 tons of cottonseeds. The oil obtained was stored in huge tanks, while the chaff was used to make a paste which was sent to the forage department where it was powdered and became cottonseed meal, an excellent food for the cattle (Grijalva, 2008, p. 199).

A four-story, brick and concrete building was the plant for finished products, also called refinery, which became the most prominent and expensive property of La Jabonera. There, the new machinery and equipment were installed to, besides the refinement of cotton oil, carry out the deodorization, bleaching and hydrogenation of oil and product packaging. Since the early years, La Jabonera produced soap, vegetable fats and cottonseed oils, refined and hydrogenated. The vegetable fats were packed in plastic bags and oil was packaged in plastic bottles.

In the interior of this complex were pens for the fattening of cattle, which was taken to the site to take advantage of the cottonseed meal that was produced with the seed chaff. In the vicinities were the houses where the workers and their families, especially those who had arrived in 1925 with Brittingham, lived. La Jabonera was a closed space, kind of a camp, enclosed by a fence, which was accessible only by footbridge and car, and was closed at night. Many of the workers in La Jabonera worked and lived there with their families. The director and the two senior officials lived in three houses built by the three sons of Brittingham.

The concentration of most of the activities of this agricultural enterprise in the urban space and the natural movement of this industry, eventually caused a chaos that

²⁴ The fires in the storehouse of seeds was a common phenomenon.

²⁵ The mill came to have 84 delinting machines.

affected the daily activities of the Mexicali population. As superintendent of cotton gins, James Griffin faced a difficult situation because it was very clear to him that it was impossible to efficiently operate the twelve cotton gins of La Jabonera. "Nowhere in the world had so many plants together," he reflected 45 years later. "Beyond that, most of these plants were very old, some would say obsolete" concludes (Grijalva, 2008, p. 39).

Because of this, and the initiative of the former superintendent, a program for the modernization of the installations in order to establish new gins plants in various parts of the Mexicali valley to gradually close the existing ones was approved. In the late 1960s, La Jabonera had 17 cotton gins distributed in the Mexicali valley. In the City, only two of the original facilities remained.²⁶ The decentralization of cotton gins eased the delivery of cotton harvested in the fields of common lands and colonies, and prevented farmers from traveling to the city for that purpose, where they would remain during several days, even weeks, to deliver the cotton.

A brief conclusion

The case described here, the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico, is a cotton agribusiness company which had significant control over the agricultural production process in the Mexicali valley, from the 1940s until the early 1970s. From the funding of farmers to grow the Malvaceae, an effective mechanism to ensure raw material, to the establishment of an appropriate infrastructure for the industrialization of the cottonseed on one side, and the marketing of the fiber for the foreign market on the other side. This company carefully supervised the various stages of cotton production, managing to reproduce mechanisms for the corporation to which it belonged, the Anderson, Clayton & Company, "La Clayton", carried out in other parts of Mexico and Latin America.

La Jabonera was already the largest marketer of cotton in Mexicali in 1941. In November of that year, it recorded a production of 38,680 bales against 20,000 of the Algodonera del Valle and eight thousand of the Despepitadora Mexicali (Aboites, 2013, p. 252), during the year in which the total obtained was 65,000 bales (Zamora López, 1977, p. 63). By the middle of the next decade, in the 1954-1955 cycle, La Jabonera garnered 47.81% of the entire harvest and in 1965-66 and 1966-67²⁷, —which set production records—, its share of production was 37.89% and 34.26% respectively (Grijalva, 2008, p.129).

Since its inception we have tried to outline, in broad terms, the main features of a cotton company that participated, shared and competed with other similar companies, the prosperity derived from the "cotton boom" in the Mexicali valley, a bonanza in which La Jabonera had a direct involvement. Except for one, whose capital was Mexican, they were all foreign companies. There were up to 17 companies with most companies entering into the regional cotton industry during the decade of the fifties.

They formed the Asociación Algodonera del Valle de Mexicali and through it, materialized alliances to protect the market and restrict investment risks, while playing an active role in local politics. Their managers participated in the regional banking system, acting as members of the boards of local banks. James Stone, the director of La Jabonera, which took the reins of the company from the early 1930s until his

²⁶ These were modernized with dryers, fiber cleaners, boxes with more capacity and high density presses (Grijalva, 2008, p.157).

²⁷ In these cycles, harvest in the Mexicali valley was of 530 226 and 542 279, and the participation of La Jabonera was of 201,094 and 185,774 bales (Grijalva, 2008, p. 129).

retirement in 1966, was chairman of the Board of Directors of the important Banco de Comercio in Baja California.²⁸ The business leadership of La Jabonera was indisputable.

From its origins as a space dedicated to cotton, the Mexicali valley had access to the technological advances of industrial countries. The early mechanization of agricultural processes placed it in a position of advantage over other similar areas. The fact that a portion of the cotton was placed in the international market has led to the speculation by some scholars that have invoked the concept of enclave to explain the agricultural development of the region (Kerig, 2001).

However, we believe that this approach is limited, it would have to consider the strategic position of the Mexicali valley, its situation as a border city and the importance that its geographical position near an economy as advanced as the United States had in its development (Cerutti, 2001, p. 295). This helps us to understand the rhythms and characteristics of its productive expansion, its impact on the expansion of the agricultural border by incorporating new lands and the development of water infrastructure in order to meet the demands of the external market (Cerutti, 1994, p. 113).

The appearance of synthetic fibers, the problems arising from the indiscriminate use of land, the emergence of predatory pests that undermined agricultural production indices²⁹ and increased salinity levels in the Colorado River contributed to the "white gold" ceasing to be a profitable crop in the valley, bringing a collapse.

James Griffin recalls:

From the spring of 1970, the situation became critical in La Jabonera. In the previous three crops, cotton production in Mexicali valley had dropped dramatically and, worse, the percentage managed by La Jabonera was shrinking [...] the decreasing volume in cotton gins reflected in the other units; there were fewer bales to be stored and shipped, fewer seeds in the mill to process and less oil to refine in the finished products plant (Grijalva, 2008, p. 224).

Some companies survived and remain in the region, where they crop between 25 and 30 thousand hectares of cotton. Due to the increase in the international price of cotton in 2011, 39 thousand hectares of cotton were harvested and estimated production was more than 200 thousand bales sent to China, Japan and the United States. "Almost everything is sold to the company Royo Cotton, who keeps 70 or 80% cotton from Mexicali valley and the rest stays in the domestic market" (Ortiz, 2012, p. 14). Some areas of the Mexicali valley were covered again in white, like in the old days, and the roads of the valley were again transited with trucks carrying cotton, which is picked with modern machines instead of manually.

In 2012, Mexicali farmers celebrated the centenary of the beginning of cotton crops in the place. There was joy and gladness among them because they envisioned a

²⁸ Inside La Jabonera, was a branch of the Bank of Commerce. This banking institution, whose director was Manuel Espinosa Yglesias, was the most important of Mexico at that time. In 1963, Espinosa also became the director of the Mary Street Jenkins Foundation, which inherited the shares of the Colorado River Land Company in the Compañía Industrial Jabonera del Pacífico.

²⁹ The cotton pink boll worm ravaged the cotton crop and there was no effective way to control it. The plague lowered production and increased cost per planted hectare due to the price of spraying, making cotton farming unprofitable.

promising future for the increase in the international price of the fiber. Water is the main problem now, there is not enough for everyone, because now the Colorado River not only feeds the city and Mexicali valley, but also, through a modern aqueduct, provides for the populations of Tijuana and Tecate, and in the other side of the border, San Diego County, in southwestern California.

Will the "cotton boom" return to the Mexicali valley? Probably not, because from an economic perspective the structural conditions are not the same. The water, once abundant, is now a restricted commodity. Other crops such as asparagus and scallions have an important place in the international market. The mechanisms for repair and gear are not the same. The future performance of this crop should be monitored.

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