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CARIBBEAN FOOD CROPS SOCIETY



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MARKETING PROBLEMS OF A SMALL ISLAND

by
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Montserrat, the smallest self-contained unit in this part of the world, is an island shaped like a leg of ham and lies some 27 miles south-west of Antigua and some 40 miles north-west of Guadeloupe, and has a total area of 32½ square miles. Of this area, about 9,000 acres are suitable for cultivation. The island is of volcanic origin and is extremely mountainous, the highest peaks being over 3,000 feet.

The climate is tropical, the mean maximum temperature being 86° Fahrenheit and the mean minimum temperature 73° Fahrenheit. Annual average rainfall is about 55 inches, but the range in the cultivable area varies from 40 inches to 70 inches being much drier in the extreme North and South. The wettest period is September to November, with a drier season from December to June. The island is wind-swept for most of the year which markedly reduces the effect of a high relative humidity.

Labour rates have forced the estates out of production of the traditional crop, cotton, and virtually all agriculture is today carried on by smallholders who usually rent their holdings on a year-to-year lease from the estates. The only estate, Agricultural Enterprise, which is at present functioning is an enterprise of some 120 acres of bananas and about 80 acres of limes.

Prior to World War II, Montserrat used to export 1,600 bales of cotton, 100 tons of carrots, 400 tons of tomatoes each year. The cotton all went to the United Kingdom, but the bulk of the vegetables went to Bermuda and Canada.

In 1960 a tomato paste factory was established by a Canadian Company. Unfortunately, due to the company's failure to control a disease problem in their fields and also their failure to pay an attractive enough price to the small farmer, this scheme also failed.

Since the failure of the shipping services, most of the produce that has been exported has gone to the neighbouring islands of Dominica and Antigua. Private small traders who buy from farmers and sell in markets export annually some 1,000 tons of sweet potatoes, carrots, cabbages and other vegetables. However, they buy in small quantities and their prices vary considerably. It is widely believed by the farmers that their profits are large, and in addition, as their handling is very rough they can only sell on an unselective market which does not command a top price.

In the past, our activities were confined to tomatoes, cabbages and carrots. Since April, besides these traditional crops, we have exported shallots to British Guiana and Barbados, mangoes to Bermuda, pineapples to Antigua and hot peppers to the United Kingdom. It has become obvious that there is no shortage of markets.

Montserrat is badly served by ship. Three lines call regularly:

- (1) The West Indies Shipping Service ships - the "Federal Maple" and the "Federal Palm" call twice a month in each direction. These vessels have three grades of refrigerated accommodation. Their rates, in spite of a high subsidy, are not low, and it is essential to ship in their refrigerated space as these vessels take a long time to reach the chief markets of Barbados and Trinidad, four days to Barbados and seven days to Trinidad
- (2) The M. V. Ripon, a locally owned vessel of 1,000 tons carries cargo to St. Kitts, Puerto Rico and Dominica once each month, while the Harrison Line have a monthly service direct to the United Kingdom.
- (3) In addition, government controls a small sloop, designed for fishing but which is now used mainly for short freight hauls between the nearby islands.

¹Director of Agriculture, Montserrat

Air transport is difficult. Our airport is a 3,000 feet grass strip with an angled approach. The largest plane that can land and take off at the moment is a D.H. Heron. This plane has a freight pay load of 1,600 kilos or about 80 boxes of mangoes. This then is our shipping unit and it has to be filled exactly to make air freight a paying proposition. The airline which operates in Montserrat owns only two Herons, fully engaged in passenger services, and a freight charter at short notice is difficult to obtain.

Our potential is great but our present production is about 10% of that potential. Our estate agriculture is practically dead and no foundations have yet been laid to establish a dynamic small-farmer economy. The present volume of produce is such that many orders cannot be adequately filled. However, this problem is being tackled by offering the producer a guaranteed minimum price which is weighted to encourage the producer to spread his production season so that gluts are minimised. A more dynamic marketing policy is being pursued, and by December we hope to be organized to deal with the export in large quantities of tomatoes, peppers, carrots, cabbages, cantaloupes and shallots by sea or air to many points both inside and outside the Caribbean area.

One of our hardest jobs is to obtain reliable up-to-date market information. A request for offers on a certain commodity is cabled in and one has little or no knowledge as to what the current retail prices should be. The inclusion of regular markets reports in radio newscasts would be of immense value and is something that this Society should lobby for.