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THE GOLDEN BANANA AND THE BANANA FESTIVAL STORY

Christine J. Batts

When asked to name the fresh fruit America eats the most, almost no one mentions bananas. The fact is, however, the banana holds this distinction. Each man, woman and child in the United States consumes about eighteen pounds of bananas every year.

The banana is a relative newcomer to American fruit bowls. Bananas began to catch on in the United States only during the latter half of the 19th century. They made their official debut here in 1876 at Philadelphia's Centennial Exhibition — where bananas wrapped in tin foil were sold for 10 cents each.

Unfortunately, the demand that was triggered by the popular banana could not be met. Bananas grow best in tropical climates — a long way from major northern markets. As a result, the highly perishable banana had to be transported relatively long distances.

Another problem faced by the young banana industry was a marked lack of coordination between growers, shippers and marketers. Tons of cut fruit might have to wait on a dock, simply because ships were not available to transport the commodity to market.

That was yesterday! Today, banana shipments to the United States and many countries of the world run on precise, even computerized schedules. In fact, so steady is the supply of this tropical fruit to our shores that most Americans are not even aware that bananas are not grown commercially in the continental United States.

Commercial bananas don't reproduce from seeds. Established banana plants grow from the same root year after year. Banana "seeds" are really sections of root (called a rhizome) cut from growing plants. These sections are planted at regular intervals. The buds — like "eyes" on potato seed — sprout quickly and within several weeks a rolled, pointed leaf emerges.

Banana plants sometimes grow an inch or more overnight. Oldtime banana growers even claim to "hear the plants growing". When mature, the plant will reach a height of 15 to 30 feet. Its trunk is thick, and the leaves are nearly two feet wide and up to 12 feet long.

The plant looks like a tree. It is not, though. The banana plant is a gigantic herb, the largest plant on earth without a trunk or root of wood. Actually, the structure of a banana plant's "trunk" resembles that of a stalk of celery . . . a tightly wrapped cylinder of sheaths. As the plant grows, young leaves grow up through the stalk's center, pushing out the wrappings left by older leaves, making the stalk thicker.

After eight or nine months' growth, a single bud pushes its way to the center of the plant's leaf cluster. The spike or bud elongates and bends toward the ground. The yellow flowers it produces eventually become the "bunch" of 50 to 150 individual banana fruits or "fingers".

Banana fingers are grouped in clusters called "hands" and each hand has 10 to 20 "fingers." At first, the small green fingers point downward, but as they grow, the bananas begin to turn upward. Three to four months after the flowers appear, the stem will be ready for harvest.

To be successful in producing his crop, the grower must constantly be on guard against a number of banana enemies, including insects and extremes of heat and cold. Bananas on the stalk are protected against scarring and

insects by perforated plastic bags. This results in unblemished, plump bananas.

Winds are a difficult problem for the banana grower to control because of the weakness of the pulpy banana stalk. Even a moderate wind of 20 to 30 miles per hour can blow down fully grown plants. A really bad storm can destroy an entire crop in minutes. Some banana growers protect crops against wind by propping the plants with bamboo poles. These poles also help to prevent the considerable weight of the bunch from toppling the plant.

Many a banana aficionado has dreamed of the day he could visit a plantation at harvest time and sample endless supplies of tree-ripened fruit. Like many a dream, this one has a sad awakening. This is because the banana — unlike most fruits — ripens best off the plant. Consequently, bananas are harvested while still green. If allowed to remain on the plant, the bananas will yellow to a golden hue, but they will also split open and become mealy and tasteless.

Seasoned banana cutters know when to harvest a green banana. Bunches that are just right are cut with a sharp curved knife on a long pole. The cutter reaches up just under the bunch and nicks the banana stalk. As the entire plant bends, the cutter steadies it with his pole while a second man called the backer waits for the bunch — still enveloped in its plastic bag — to settle on his shoulder.

A single banana plant bears only one stem of fruit and at harvest, the plant is cut down. Fortunately, each root produces many shoots or suckers. Banana farmers will allow one or two of the suckers to grow and cut away the rest. Consequently, another shoot almost as tall as the main plant is always ready to take over as soon as the old stalk has borne its fruit. This way, each banana root will bear a bunch of fruit every 10 months or so. No winter season interferes with the cycle.

The banana's first stop after cutting is the washing and boxing station. Here, stems hung on a moving cable are run through a shed where a fine spray of water cleans off dirt and insects. Workmen cut the hands into clusters which are dipped into tanks containing various treatments to protect the fruit against disease organisms during its voyage to market. The clusters are inspected, labeled and packed in protective cardboard boxes.

After a careful inspection, fruit is loaded into waiting boxcars and carried to port. Here, the boxes are transferred into the holds of ships going to both coasts of the United States and to European markets. If necessary, flood lights are turned on and loading is continued into the night. A shipload can be on its way in twelve hours. These modern ships are especially designed to protect the delicate fruit from bruising, even in heavy seas.

Bananas must be refrigerated on their trip to market. The job of keeping bananas cool is complicated by the fact that bananas themselves give off heat as they ripen. To check banana temperature during the voyage, men will poke thermometers into selected bananas. The temperature must be within a 4° variance — 63° to 67°F. They are then either iced or heated to maintain the proper temperature.

At the pier, the boxed bananas ride electrically powered gantry conveyors out of the hatches and into a shed where the fruit is checked again before shipment to wholesalers.

When the bananas reach the wholesalers, they are processed with gas to the ripeness required by the consumer. Then — just peel and eat this delicious fruit or make a one-ton banana pudding like the one served at the International Banana Festival.



Plans are well underway in the twin cities of Fulton, Kentucky, and South Fulton, Tennessee, for the 17th Annual International Banana Festival to be held August 15 through August 19, 1979.

The Latin American students who come to the festival each year and stay in "host homes" are counting the days until they can visit Kentucky and Tennessee.

Razzy Bailey, with two top ten hits on the Country Western charts, will be the Country Western headliner. Cameo Productions of New York City will present "Musical America", along with this year's Grammy Award winner — the Goodman Family Gospel Singing group.

There will be a carnival, Kiddie Parade, street dance, Arts and Crafts exhibits, Summer Salute to Agriculture, Latin American Friendship and Governors' Day on Friday, with the Grand Parade on Saturday, featuring the famous 1-ton Banana Pudding, which is served free. Many other interesting activities are also in the making.

The pudding is quite simple to prepare. First, take a bowl from your cupboard. The bowl should be about three feet tall and five feet across. Slice 3,000 bananas by hand, take 250 pounds of vanilla wafers and spread in alternating layers with 950 pounds of boiled custard. Now, invite 10,000 of your friends to help you enjoy this delicacy.

The border-straddling twin cities of Fulton, Kentucky, and South Fulton, Tennessee, are located in a fertile agricultural area deep in the heartland of the United States. Why would citizens of those twin cities be so dedicated to the glorification of the banana — a fruit coming from the tropics of Latin America, thousands of miles away?

Across the land, there are festivals. Community celebrations are held to honor the commercial properties of the strawberry, black walnut, soybean and tulip, the peanut and the pumpkin, horseradish and hog. Choose a princess, have a parade and a dance, give away samples.

Then there is the INTERNATIONAL BANANA FESTIVAL! There's nothing in the world quite like it! It is a fiesta with a purpose far greater than that of publicizing a product or attracting tourists. It is an experiment in human relations that has achieved remarkable success. This has been accomplished, too, without taking one bit of the fun away from it. In fact, at fiesta time, the two Fultons really swing!!

When the Banana Festival was conceived in 1963, most bananas were shipped by rail, and Fulton was a checkpoint. There, they were recharged with ice or heated as the weather dictated, and the bananas generally refurbished. Even though most bananas are now shipped by refrigerated trucks, the Festival has endured.

The whole thing started almost a hundred years ago when Fulton, the railroad town that ties New Orleans to Canada, became the center for the redistribution of bananas to all of Mid-America. The focus on the banana industry in the twin cities earned the flourishing community the title of "Banana Crossroads of the United States," or even more expansively, the "Banana Capital of the World."

The Illinois Central Railroad (now Illinois Central Gulf), was the first to develop refrigerated cars and began shipping bananas out of New Orleans in 1880. Suddenly, Midwesterners could have the same tropical fruit that only the masses in port cities had enjoyed for years.

Far surpassing the commercial aspects of the program is the dedicated effort of the twin-citizens to make sincere friendships on a "people-to-people" level with our neighbors to the south of us. The theme, "Project Unite-us," was devised with the ultimate goal to "fight communism with bananas", surely a better choice of weapons than the hydrogen bomb.

Since its inauguration, the International Banana Festival has spread its wings from a modest celebration of city pride to a spectacle of brotherhood continental scope. The Festival brings together the peoples of two Americas, joins them in an atmosphere of friendship and understanding and blends their interests in composing the festival "Project Unite-us."

Latin Americans from all stations of life have been brought to the festival so that they might see and believe in the kind of people who inhabit a small, but typical, town in the United States.

Each year, the AMIGO program has brought from fifteen to thirty young Latin American students to spend a week or two as houseguests of Fulton-South Fulton families. They visit schools and churches, party and gather for fellowship and exchange of teen-age ideas, tour the surrounding countryside, business places, clubs, universities and community centers.

For the most part, these young people are seeing the United States for the first time. Whatever their concept of the United States and her people might have been before their arrival, the genuine friendliness of the twin cities has done more to enhance understanding and goodwill than a hundred textbooks and a thousand lectures could provide. The local teenagers have studied Spanish in their spare time so that they might communicate more easily with their Latin American guests, and many of the Amigos have returned to the United States to further their education in our area universities.

The Twin-citizens take their festival seriously, despite all of the fun it involves. They chose to view the banana business as a link between people — the

people of Fulton-South Fulton and those of the remote countries where the bananas are grown. Those countries no longer seem remote to the Fultons, nor does the United States seem like a distant impersonal colossus to the hundreds of Latin Americans who have been so warmly received during the annual celebrations.

Out of the vast experiences from the past sixteen Festivals, the people of Fulton and South Fulton have concocted an amazing recipe using the banana industry as its chief ingredient for people-to-people diplomacy.

Take a typically American community of 7,000 persons, add a bunch of Latin American youngsters who have never been outside the boundaries of their country, and begin to stir gently.

Throw in a pinch of Americana, such as football and hot dogs, and a dash of democracy, such as a Circuit Court in action.

Season to perfection with care, then let things simmer on their own while you stand back and sniff the aroma of understanding which generates.

Serve with a main course which features the meat of diplomacy — people-to-people relations — and a little of the milk of human kindness.

Garnish with spices of "coincidence of interests," "hands across the border," and "Project Unite-us."

For color and attractiveness, add side dishes of tasteful entertainment and decorate with enough bananas to emphasize the reason for a fiesta.

Top off with a dessert of beauty pageant "peaches" and serve to millions of people of the American continent awaiting a taste of inter-American friendship or "amigo-ship."

That's the INTERNATIONAL BANANA FESTIVAL!