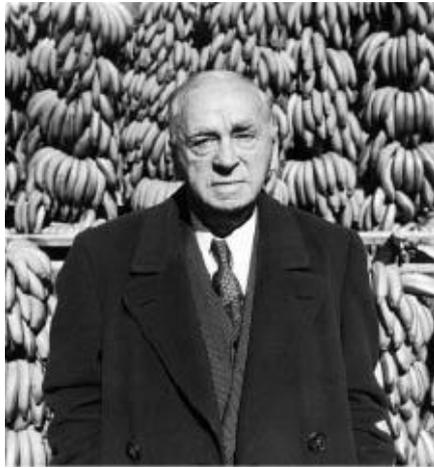


THE FISH THAT ATE THE WHALE
The Life and Times of
AMERICA'S BANANA KING



RICH COHEN *author of* TOUGH JEWS



Sam “the Banana Man” Zemurray and the fruits of his labor

The **Fish** That **Ate** the **Whale**



The **Life** and **Times**
of **America's** **Banana** **King**



Rich **Cohen**



Farrar, Straus and Giroux **New** **York**

To my sister, Sharon, for thirty-five years of New Orleans

Power is based on perception. If you think you got it, you got it, even if you don't got it.

—**Herb Cohen**, *You Can Negotiate Anything*

In my beginning is my end.

—**T. S. Eliot**, “East Coker”

There's always a guy.

—**Jerry Weintraub**, in conversation

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Preface

Samuel Zemurray, who led the United Fruit Company for roughly twenty-five years, from the early 1930s to the mid-'50s, was an emblematic figure of the American Century—those decades that saw the United States grow from a regional power into an empire. In *Sam the Banana Man*, as Zemurray was known to friends and enemies alike, the story of the age is collapsed to the scale of a single life: the ascent from humble origins, the promise and ambition, the sudden, dazzling, disorienting wealth, the corruption, brutality, propaganda, wars, and overreach—and the grinding late-day melancholy.

When he arrived in America in 1891 at age fourteen, Zemurray was tall, gangly, and penniless. When he died in the grandest house in New Orleans sixty-nine years later, he was among the richest, most powerful men in the world. In between, he worked as a fruit peddler, a banana hauler, a dockside hustler, and the owner of plantations on the Central American isthmus. He battled and conquered United Fruit, which was one of the first truly global corporations. United Fruit, in its day, was as ubiquitous as Google and as feared as Halliburton. More than a business, it was the spirit of the nation abroad, akin to the Dutch East India Company, its policies backed by the threat of U.S. gunboats. As the president of United Fruit, Zemurray became the most important man in Central America—he could change the course of history with a phone call—a symbol of the best and worst of the United States: proof that America is the land of opportunity, but also a classic example of the Ugly American, the corporate pirate who treats foreign nations as the backdrop for his adventures. In South America, when people shouted “Yankee, go home!” it was men like Samuel Zemurray they had in mind.

* * *

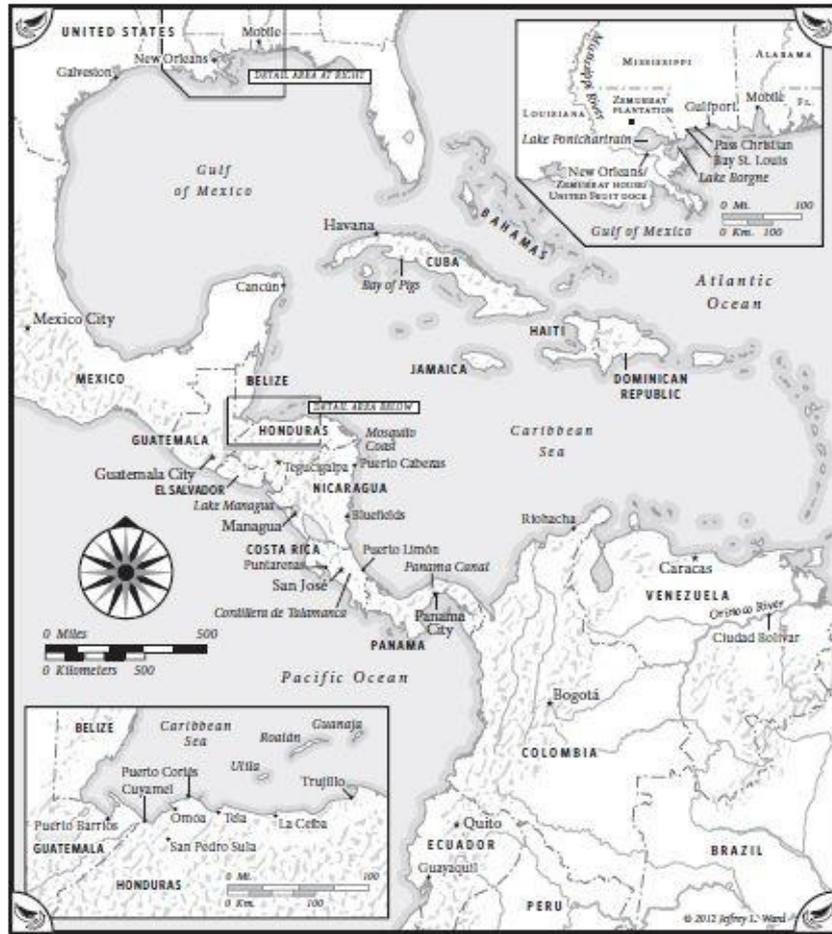
I first learned about Zemurray as a sophomore at Tulane University. The Banana Man had been a generous donor to Tulane, and many of the buildings on campus are named for him or members of his family; the university president lives in the mansion on St. Charles Avenue where Zemurray spent some of his best years. I was transfixed by the story the moment I heard it in a seminar taught by Joseph Cohen, a relation to me in spirit alone. Unlike lectures in other classes, this was an epic, gaudy in character and incident, filled with mercenary soldiers and dirty wars, financial battles and the sort of political shenanigans familiar from the smoky back rooms of my hometown, Chicago.

Zemurray’s life is a parable of the American dream—not history as recorded in textbooks, but the authentic cask-strength version, a subterranean saga of kickbacks, overthrows, and secret deals: the world as it really works. This story can shock and infuriate us, and it does. But I found it invigorating, too. It told me that the life of the nation was written not only by speech-making grandees in funny hats but also by

street-corner boys, immigrant strivers, crazed and driven, some with one good idea, some with thousands, willing to go to the ends of the earth to make their vision real. It meant anyone could write a chapter in that book, be part of the story, vanish into the jungle and reemerge as a figure of lore. Of course, you would not make the mistakes Zemurray made. You would harm no one, and disturb nothing, and never pay off, and never kick back, and never compromise or lose your bearings. You would do it in a new sin-free way, win-win, which of course is also part of the American character, perhaps the most defining part: the notion that, if we were only given one more chance, we could finally get it right.

It's what people mean when they speak of American exceptionalism: unlike the Europeans, we do not yet know you can't be both powerful and righteous. So we set out again and again, convinced that this time we'll avoid the mistakes of the previous generations. It's this kind of confidence that gives a people the strength to rule abroad; the moment that confidence goes, the empire is doomed. When Zemurray was young, he seemed to believe he was different. He would make an honest fortune in a way that benefited the impoverished people of the South. His tragedy was not that he was worse than other businessmen, but that, despite all his brilliance and good intentions, he was no better.

In the end, what I took from Zemurray's story, and what made it redeeming, was not the evils and excesses of United Fruit but the optimism that characterized his life, the belief that he could indeed be both triumphant and loved. It's this infuriating faith that made him such a quintessentially American figure. If you want to understand the spirit of our nation, the good and bad, you can enroll in college, sign up for classes, take notes and pay tuition, or you can study the life of Sam the Banana Man.



Prologue

Sam Zemurray spoke with no accent, except when he swore, which was all the time. He was a big man, six foot three, rangy, nothing but muscle and bone, with the wingspan of a condor, hooded eyes, and a crisp, no-nonsense manner. If you saw him in the French Quarter, walking fast, you got out of the way. He lived uptown. If he was down here, it meant he was working.

It was a brisk night in the winter of 1910. Zemurray stood under the clock in front of the D. H. Holmes department store taking in the cheap twinkle of Canal Street. He wore a dark overcoat. At thirty-three years old, he was already a colorful figure. People passed around Sam Zemurray stories as if they were snapshots: in this one, you saw the town he left in Russia; in that one, the ship that brought him to America; in this one, the train that carried him to Alabama; in that one, the first bananas he purchased on the wharf in Mobile; in this one, the Central American isthmus where he cleared the jungle and made his fortune. After ten years in the South, he was known by a variety of nicknames: Z, the Russian, Sam the Banana Man, El Amigo, the Gringo.

He'd arrived on the docks at the start of the last century with nothing. In the early years, he'd had to make his way in the lowest precincts of the fruit business, peddling ripens, bananas other traders dumped into the sea. He worked like a dog and defied the most powerful people in the country. By 1905, he owned steamships, side-wheelers that crossed the Gulf of Mexico, heading south empty, returning with bananas. It was said he had traveled the breadth of Honduras, from Puerto Cortés to Tegucigalpa, on a mule. Because he wanted to know the terrain, get his hands in the black soil.

A few minutes before midnight, three men came around the corner. The obvious leader—you could tell by the happy flash in his eyes—was Lee Christmas of Livingston Parish, a onetime railroad engineer who had gone wild on the isthmus. It was Christmas, the most famous mercenary in the Americas, who turned “revolution” into a verb. As in, *Let's go revolutin'!* *The New York Times* called him a real-life Dumas hero. Wherever he went, he was followed: by hit men, by police, by foreign agents trying to fathom his next move. Why, look here! Two such men lurk in the shadows across Bourbon Street—members of the United States Secret Service, with shiny shoes and flat faces, with lumps where their pistols dig into the fabric of their government coats. When Zemurray needed an army, he went to Christmas and Christmas did the rest, gathering a crew of exiles and adventure seekers in the dives of the French Quarter.

Christmas was in the company of two friends, key players in what was a conspiracy: Guy “Machine Gun” Molony, a veteran of the Boer War and a former New Orleans cop who could assemble a Vickers repeating rifle in under three minutes, hence the

nickname, and General Manuel Bonilla, a tiny man, as brown as a bean, with a hawk nose and black eyes.

Zemurray was in the process of overthrowing a foreign government—he had been warned by Philander Knox, the U.S. secretary of state, who ordered federal agents to tail him and his cohorts in New Orleans, but didn't care. If Sam failed, he faced ruin. But if he succeeded, he would become a king in banana land. General Bonilla had been president of Honduras. With the right kind of help, he would be president again.

Zemurray studied the Secret Service agents across the street. Pulling a bankroll from his pocket, snapping off tens and twenties, he told Christmas, “You've got to lose them.”

Then, just like that, Zemurray crossed Canal Street and disappeared uptown.

Christmas and his men went the other way, into the rabbit warren of the French Quarter, with its wrought-iron balconies, saloons, and hotels, all the gut-bucket joints where mercenaries waited for a job. They crossed Rampart to Basin Street, the entrance of the Tenderloin. In earlier times, the houses of ill repute had been scattered throughout New Orleans. A dozen years before, at the urging of the reformer Alfred Story, they had been relocated in a defined district, a neighborhood of once grand houses gone to seed. These blocks, running a mile in each direction—from Basin Street to Custom House, from Custom House Street to Robertson, from Robertson Street to St. Louis, from St. Louis Street back to Basin—had become the most notorious red-light district in America. Much to the fury of the reformer, it was known as Storyville. The best houses, mansions with front porches and plush couches and piano players in the parlors, were at the front of the district on Basin Street. Farther back, the houses took on a seedier aspect. Bordellos gave way to single rooms, each with a window where a girl beckoned. On the edge of the district, the women performed in hallways, even in thresholds. Each year, a company printed a blue book that mapped the houses and rated every whore in various categories, from deportment to personality to stamina.

The previous five nights, Christmas, Molony, and Bonilla had gone to the same house, the grandest of them all, a Victorian mansion on Basin Street run by Madam May Evans. The federal agents followed as far as the opposite corner, posting themselves in a circle of lamplight. The first nights, the agents stayed till dawn, when the mercenaries staggered to rooms they rented near the river. But the last few nights, when the music stopped and the house went dark, the agents returned to headquarters to write their report, which was sent to the Department of State. Secretary Knox believed Zemurray was up to no good in Honduras.

Lee Christmas knocked on the front door, then vanished into Madam May's. From somewhere in the district came the sound of a spasm band, street urchins playing homemade instruments for nickels and dimes. The men took their positions in the house: Bonilla in a dark room upstairs, where he sat and looked out the window, eyes never leaving the agents; Christmas and Molony in the parlor, in deep chairs, drinking with the girls as a man in a dinner jacket played piano.

They told stories about mercenary heroes: Narciso López, who left New Orleans with a hundred men, landed in Cuba, and nearly reached Havana before he was caught and strung up in a public square; William Walker, who captured Nicaragua with eighty-four soldiers, “the Immortals,” but was later stood against a wall in Trujillo,

Honduras, and shot full of holes. After each story, Christmas would raise his glass and say, “That son of a bitch was a man!”

The agents quit at three a.m. “It’s nothing but a drunken brawl in the district,” they told their superior.

When Bonilla saw them leave, he hurried downstairs and told the others the police had gone.

Christmas looked out the window, and then, in his rough cowboy way, said, “Let’s go.”

A car was waiting on a side street. As the men climbed in, Christmas said to Bonilla, “Well, compadre, this is the first time I’ve ever heard of anybody going from a whorehouse to a White House!”

The car headed west on Canal Street. Past the old cemetery and through the swamp—swamp the way all of this had been swamp before the Frenchmen came with compass and chain. The road deteriorated beyond town, became rutted and bumpy, more Indian trail than highway. The countryside was spooky, huge magnolias, bait shops, houses on stilts, water lapping at the supports. They drove along Bayou St. John, past inlets, tributaries, green peninsulas. The smell of the bayou—crawfish, tidal marsh, vine—was overwhelming. The car stopped near the old Spanish Fort, where the bayou spills into Lake Pontchartrain. A ship was waiting—a forty-two-foot yacht. The men went aboard, ducked into a cabin. Within minutes the ropes had been pulled and the ship was speeding across the lake.

* * *

The bayous have always been the back door into New Orleans, a smuggler’s paradise where the brackish waters are dotted by islands that vanish in flood tide. Take out a map and you can trace the route followed by Lee Christmas and his men that morning. They sailed to the Middle Ground, the shipping channel in the center of the lake, then continued along the shore opposite the city, slipping in and out of bays, the captain on the lookout for navy and coast guard. They went through the Rigolets, a corkscrew of marsh that dumps into Lake Borgne, the entrance to the Mississippi Sound. They passed Grassy Island, Cat Island, Bay St. Louis, and Pass Christian in the dark. On December 24, 1910, they dropped anchor off Ship Island, a sandbar near the center of the sound. The church towers of Gulfport, Mississippi, were visible in the distance.

“What now?” asked Molony.

“We wait for El Amigo,” said Christmas.

It was one of Zemurray’s conditions: he wanted his involvement in the operation kept a secret. With this in mind, he was to be identified, if he had to be identified at all, only as El Amigo.

A boat appeared on the horizon, a speedy little craft that zipped across the sound, reaching the yacht in a spray of white water. A man reached out a hand, pulling Christmas aboard, then Molony, then Bonilla. It was Zemurray, in his long black coat.

He led the way to a cabin filled with weapons—grenades, rifles, a machine gun, enough ammunition to fight a war—then stood in the galley, cooking breakfast. Steak and eggs, a bottle of whiskey. He drank a shot himself—to ward off the cold—then went to the pilot house. The engines started and the boat glided into Pass Christian, a

fishing village on Bay St. Louis.

Zemurray walked into town, leaving his soldiers to play poker on an overturned rifle case. Bonilla won the big hands. “Sometimes, boys, you have to lose with a winning hand so that later you can win with a losing hand,” he told them.

“Shut up and deal,” said Christmas.

Zemurray returned with more weapons. When everything was stowed, he signaled the captain, who raised anchor and motored across the sound, where another ship, the *Hornet*, a fearsome armor-clad cruiser that had seen action in the Spanish-American War, was waiting. Zemurray had bought the ship secretly, through a third party, for his mercenaries.

The men spent an hour carrying weapons onto the warship. When everything was loaded, Zemurray noticed Bonilla shivering.

“Jesus Christ, Manny, what’s wrong with you?”

“Just a little chill, amigo.”

Zemurray took off his overcoat and draped it across the shoulders of the tiny general, saying, “I’ve shot the roll on you, and I might as well shoot the coat, too.”

Zemurray said goodbye to the men, then stood on the deck of his ship watching the *Hornet* pass the barrier islands and sail into the open sea.

Green

1

Selma

Sam Zemurray saw his first banana in 1893. In the lore, this is presented as a moment of clarity, wherein the future was revealed. In some versions, the original banana is presented as a platonic ideal, an archetype circling the young man's head. It is seen from a great distance, then very close, each freckle magnified. As it was his first banana, I imagine it situated on a velvet pillow, in a display alongside Adam's rib and Robert Johnson's guitar. There is much variation in the telling of this story, meaning each expert has written his or her own history; meaning the story has gone from reportage to mythology; meaning Sam the Banana Man is Paul Bunyan and the first banana is Babe the Blue Ox. In some versions, Sam sees the banana in the gutter in Selma, Alabama, where it's fallen from a pushcart; in some, he sees it in the window of a grocery and is smitten. He rushes inside, grabs the owner by the lapel, and makes him tell everything he knows. In some, he sees it amid a pile of bananas on the deck of a ship plying the Alabama River on a lazy summer afternoon.

The most likely version has Sam seeing that first banana in the wares of a peddler in the alley behind his uncle's store in Selma. The American banana trade had begun twenty years before, but it was still embryonic. Few people had ever seen a banana. If they were spoken of at all, it was as an oddity, the way a person might speak of an African cucumber today. In this version, Sam peppers the salesman with questions: What is it? Where did you get it? How much does it cost? How fast do they sell? What do you do with the peel? What kind of money can you make? But none of the stories mentions a crucial detail: did Zemurray taste that first banana? I like to imagine him peeling it, eating the fruit in three bites, then tossing the skin into the street the way people did back then. Tossing it and saying, "Wonderful." In future years, Zemurray always spoke of his product the way people speak of things they truly love, as something fantastical, in part because it's not entirely necessary. When he mentioned the nutritional value of bananas in interviews, he added, "And of course it's delicious." Putting us at a further remove from Zemurray is the fact that the kind of banana he saw in Selma in 1893, the banana that made his fortune, the variety known as the Big Mike, went extinct in the 1960s.

Sam Zemurray was born in 1877, in the region of western Russia once known as Bessarabia. It's Moldavia today. He grew up on a wheat farm, in a flat country ringed by hills. His father died young, leaving the family bereft, without prospects. Sam traveled to America with his aunt in 1892. He was to establish himself and send for the others—mother, siblings. He landed in New York, then continued to Selma, Alabama, where his uncle owned a store.

He was fourteen or fifteen, but you would guess him much older. The immigrants of that era could not afford to be children. They had to struggle every minute of every

day. By sixteen, he was as hardened as the men in Walker Evans's photos, a tough operator, a dead-end kid, coolly figuring angles: Where's the play? What's in it for me? His humor was black, his explanations few. He was driven by the same raw energy that has always attracted the most ambitious to America, then pushed them to the head of the crowd. Grasper, climber—nasty ways of describing this kid, who wants what you take for granted. From his first months in America, he was scheming, looking for a way to get ahead. You did not need to be a Rockefeller to know the basics of the dream: Start at the bottom, fight your way to the top.

Over time, Sam would develop a philosophy best expressed in a handful of phrases: *You're there, we're here; Go see for yourself; Don't trust the report.*

Though immensely complicated, he was, in a fundamental way, simple, earthy. He believed in staying close to the action—in the fields with the workers, in the dives with the banana cowboys. You drink with a man, you learn what he knows. ("There is no problem you can't solve if you understand your business from A to Z," he said later.) In a famous exchange, when challenged by a rival who claimed he could not understand Zemurray's accent, Zemurray said, "You're fired. Can you understand that?"

Selma, Alabama, was the perfect spot for a kid like Sam: an incubator, a starter town, picturesque yet faded, grand but still small enough to memorize. A manufacturing center in the time of the Confederacy, it had since been allowed to dilapidate. There was a main street, a fruit market, a butcher shop, a candy store, a theater with plush seats, a city hall, churches. There were brick houses with curtains in the windows and swings on the porches—the white side of town. There were shotgun shacks, blue and yellow and red, fronted by weedy yards—the Negro side of town. There were taverns and houses of worship where Christian gospel was mixed with African voodoo. There were banks, savings and loans, fraternal orders. There was a commercial district, where every store was filled with unduly optimistic businessmen.

Though the biography of Zemurray's uncle has been forgotten, we can take him as a stand-in for the generation of poor grandfathers who came first, who worked and worked and got nothing but a place of honor in the family photo in return. Sometimes described as a grocery, sometimes as a general store, his shop was precisely the sort that Jewish immigrants had been establishing across the South for fifty years. Such concerns were usually operated by men who came to America because they were the youngest of many brothers, without property or plans. These people went south because, in the early days of the American republic, it was not inhospitable to Hebrews. Many began as peddlers, crossing the country with a mountain of merchandise strapped to their backs. You see them in ancient silver prints and daguerreotypes, weathered men humping half the world on their shoulders, pushing the other half in a cart—bags of grain, dinnerware, tinware, lamps, clothes, canvas for tents, chocolate, anything an isolated farmer might want but could not find in the sticks.

When they had saved some money, many of these men opened stores, which meant moving all that merchandise under a roof in a town along their route. Even now, as you drive across the South, you will see their remnants baked into the soil like fossils: an ancient veranda, a ghost sign blistered from years of rain—LAZARUS & SONS, HOME OF THE 2 PENNY BELT. These men were careful to open no more than one store per town,

partly because who needs the competition, partly because they worried about attracting the wrong kind of attention. They stocked everything. What they did not stock, they could order. The most successful grew into great department stores: S. A. Shore in Winchester, Alabama, founded by Russian-born Solomon Shore, father of Dinah; E. Lewis & Son Dry Goods in Hendersonville, North Carolina, founded by Polish-born Edward Lewis; Capitol Department Store in Fayetteville, North Carolina, founded by the Russian Stein brothers. Others, having started by extending credit to customers, evolved into America's first investment banks. Lehman Brothers, founded by Henry Lehman, a Jewish immigrant from Bavaria, began as a dry goods store in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1844. Lazard Frères, founded by three Jewish brothers from France, began as a wholesale business in New Orleans in 1848. The store owned by Zemurray's uncle was probably of this variety: having begun as a young man carrying merchandise, it grew into a neat grocery on Broad Street.

Selma closed early. By ten p.m., the bustling of the marketplace had given way to the swamp stink and cicadas, but there was always action for those who knew where to look: in the private clubs where merchants played faro and stud, in the juke joints that stayed open from can till can't. According to those who knew him, Sam did not care for crowds and parties. He had a restless mind and a persistent need to get outdoors. He liked to be alone. You might see him wandering beneath the lamps of town, a tough, lean young man in an overcoat, hands buried deep in his pockets.

He stacked shelves and checked inventory in his uncle's store. Now and then, he dealt with the salesmen who turned up with sample cases. He stood in the alley, amid the garbage cans and cats, asking about suppliers and costs. There was money to be made, but not here. He interrogated customers. He was looking for different work and would try anything, if only for experience. His early life was a series of adventures, with odd job leading to odd job. Much of the color that would later entertain magazine writers—Sam's life had the dimensions of a fairy tale—were accumulated in his first few years in Selma.

He worked as a tin merchant. Well, that's how it would be described in the press. "Young Sam Z. bartered iron for livestock, chickens and pigs." According to newspaper and magazine accounts, he was in fact employed by a struggling old-timer who was less tin merchant than peddler, the last of a vanishing breed, the country cheapjack in a tattered coat, sharing a piece of chocolate with the boy. Now and then, he might offer some wisdom. *Banks fail, women leave, but land lasts forever.* He combed trash piles on the edge of Selma, searching for discarded scraps of sheet metal, the cast-off junk of the industrial age, which he piled on his cart and pushed from farm to farm, looking for trades—wire for a chicken coop in return for one of the razorbacks in the pen. After the particulars were agreed on, Sam was told to get moving, *Catch and tie that animal, boy.* It was Zemurray's first real job: racing through the slop with a rope in his hand. "In those days," he told a reporter from *Life*, "I could outrun any pig in Dixie." Paid a dollar a week, he kept the job just long enough to know he would rather be the man who owned the hog than the man who collected the junk, and would rather be the man who discarded the sheet metal than the man who owned the hog.

A series of jobs followed, tried on and thrown off like thrift-store suits. He was a housecleaner and a delivery boy. He turned a lathe for a carpenter. By eighteen, he had

saved enough to send for his brothers and sisters, half a dozen pale young Jews who turned up in Alabama in the last years of the nineteenth century.

But his real life began only when he saw that first banana. He devised a plan soon after: he would travel to Mobile, where the fruit boats arrived from Central America, purchase a supply of his own, carry them back to Selma, and go into business.

2

Ripes

Zemurray took his money and went south. Wisteria bloomed along the railroad tracks. Towns drifted by. He could smell the ocean before he could see it. He was like a kid on the frontier, who, a day after the harvest, folds his savings into a roll and goes to try his luck in town.

Mobile was a seedy industrial port filled with all the familiar types: the sharpie, the financier, the scoundrel, the chucklehead, the sport. Sam was a bit of everything. He could be shrewd, but he could also be naïve. He was greedy for information. He took a room in a seamen's hotel near the port. The waterfront was crossed by train tracks—dozens of lines converged here. Boxcars crammed with coal, fruit, cotton, and cane stood on the sidings. The railroad conductors were the aristocrats of the scene. They drank coffee in the station house, smug in their checkered caps. The docks were crowded with stevedores, most of them immigrants from Sicily. The train sheds were crowded with peddlers, most of them Jewish immigrants from Poland and Russia. They bought merchandise off the decks of ships and sold it from carts in the streets of Mobile.

One evening, Sam stood on the wharf watching a Boston Fruit banana boat sail into the harbor. The Boston Fruit Company, which would become United Fruit, dominated the trade, with a fleet that carried bananas from Jamaica to Boston, Charleston, New Orleans, and Mobile. Zemurray would have seen one of the smaller ships that made the trip to the Gulf ports, a cutter with sails and engine. The funnel sent up black smoke. The pier strained under the weight of unloaders who appeared, as if out of nowhere, whenever a ship landed. As soon as the boat was anchored, these men swarmed across the deck, ants on a sugar pile, working in organized teams.

In the South, in the days before mechanical equipment, bananas were unloaded by hand, the workers carrying the cargo a stem at a time—from the hold, where the shipment was packed in ice, onto the deck of the ship. A banana stem is the fruit of an entire tree—a hundred pounds or more. Each stem holds perhaps a hundred bunches; each bunch holds perhaps nine hands; each hand holds perhaps fifteen fingers—a finger being a single banana. It was backbreaking work, and dangerous, not just for the shoulders and arms but also for the central nervous system. As any banana cowboy would tell you, banana plants are prized nesting places for scorpions. When the stems are cut down, the killers go along for the ride, from the banana plantation to the jungle railroad, to the wharf, to the ship, across the Gulf to Mobile, or New Orleans, or Boston, where they spring out, stinging the first stevedore they happen upon.

Most workers on the banana docks were West Indians who arrived in the southern ports on the ships that carried the cargo. Early last century, newspaper reporters looking for local color often wrote about these hired hands, painting them in barbarous