## The Pineapple Fields: What Makes a Luna Tick?

World War II brought many changes to Hawaii as it did for the rest of the country. When the eligible young men were away fighting the war, someone had to do the jobs they left behind. There were jobs that needed and had to get done. The classic example is "Rosie the riveter," the symbolic female who was able to take over from men in the aircraft industry making the bombers and fighter planes. The other industry that required many hands to do the job was agriculture.

Agriculture in Hawaii in those years was sugar cane and pineapples, not the gourmet coffee it is today. Teen age kids were the answer to the labor problem and were chosen to work in the labor intensive pineapple crops. Each of the schools on Oahu sent the older kids to the fields for two weeks out of the school year. The work week was five days and was split over the week end so we did not work five days straight. The second week of work came several weeks after the first so as not to tax the kids and interrupt the school year any more than necessary.

It is necessary to have a bit of knowledge about the growing of pineapples to understand the nature of the jobs that were given to us. The pineapple plant is about waist high or slightly less with stiff "U" shaped leaves that come from the center of the plant. The ends of the leaves have a needle like tip. The flower that becomes the pineapple is in the top center of the plant. When the fruit emerges from the flower, there are a group of "slips" that surround the base of the fruit. Theses slips are twisted off and when put into the ground grow into new plants.

It's time to work! We are required to wear a wide brimmed had, long sleeved shirts, long pants and work shoes. The sun is not kind when you are working out in the fields and one needs protection from the unforgiving ends of the leaves of the pineapple plant. I found an old set of clothes and for my hat I used my brother Bob's old wide brimmed Scout hat that he had taken on the 1939 Boy Scout National Jamboree. We were loaded into stake trucks that had been fitted with a canvas top and benches, boys in some of the trucks, girls in the others. In the fields the boys and girls did not work together. They apparently knew teenagers! We clung to our lunch boxes and bumped along the roads, chatting and singing on our way to the fields. Because we would be given a minimum wage, we are given a "bango" number. I'm not sure of the origin of the word; most likely it's Filipino. When we arrive with our faculty advisor, (record keeper, and police officer,) there is a large Hawaiian man who spoke in the typical Pidgin English who will be our boss and instructor. In Hawaiian he is known as the "luna." That of course resulted in the many references to the luna and what makes him tick, i.e.: lunatic.

After checking the roll, we were issued gloves and wire mesh goggles to protect us from the sharp plants. The jobs that we were given were three: picking pineapples, picking slips, and putting carbide in the center of the plant to protect the flower.

The picking of the fruit was not what you see in today's fields with the conveyer belts suspended over the rows and workers simply placing the picked fruit on the conveyer. We were given canvas slings. There was a webbed belt loop at each end; one loop over the shoulder and across the chest. The other loop was held up with the non-dominant hand. You picked the fruit and put it

into the canvas pouch. When it became heavy it was walked to the end of the row where it was deposited.

Picking slips was a two part job. You either picked them and placed them on top of the plant, or you collected them from the rows after someone else had done the picking. In the latter case we used the same type of sling as for picking.

Putting carbide in the center of the plants needs some explanation. The shape and stiffness of the leaves allows the rain to run to the center of the plant. In the center is the flower, and if too much water is allowed to stand, the flower rots out and there is no fruit. Carbide is the same stuff that was used in the old miner' lamps. When it comes in contact with water the combination of the two forms acetylene gas. For pineapple growers it was a fast way to evaporate off the excess water without damage to the plant. For the miner of course it provided the gas for an open flame lamp.

We were given leather gloves and an old gallon can full of carbide tied around our waists with some rope or cloth belt. We dipped into the can and sprinkled a bit on top of the flower. It quickly dispersed the standing water, or if there was little or no water, it protected the flower from the next rain.

Now the fact that you have a group of young boys and that there is a potentially explosive gas being generated itself is as dangerous as the chemical mix. Putting a little extra carbide on the plant was the first task. Putting water on the plant for maximum gas production of course is no problem. Relieving ourselves on the plant did that. And with an added lighted match you got a magnificent "Whoomp!" with a barely visible blue flame. Make sure the luna doesn't see you!

The older more enterprising youth learned a trick from the lunas. You took a very ripe pineapple, sliced it lengthwise, and hollowed it out. It was then carefully tied back together with string and allowed to sit out in the sun for a couple of days in a secure place. Upon retrieval it was carefully opened and the juices that had filled up the center were fermented and was the basis for a cheap drunk.

We could eat all of the pineapple we wanted to in the fields, but were not allowed to take any home. They had had difficulty with some students throwing them from the trucks and endangering others. They went so far as having the faculty advisor check all of the lunch boxes. Every once in a while someone would manage to stow one in the undercarriage of the truck or in the tool box mounted under the truck bed.

The lunas were quick to slice up pineapple for us at breaks or lunch time, however. They took the fruit and shaved off the crown of the fruit with a very sharp machete. They then grabbed the de-thorned crown and deftly sliced off the tough skin of this aggregate fruit. It was easy then to slice long pieces away from the stringy core.

The rich red soil of the fields worked its way into boot tops, hair, ears, and almost every pore of one's body. It was also just as well that the work week was split, because fatigue and dirt was with us at the end of the work day. A bath took care of the dirt, as you could see the mud running down the drain. The fatigue in its own way rejuvenated you, and strange as it may seem, we were glad to get back to the classroom. In our small way we had helped in the war effort.