

AMERICAN DEMAND FOR RUBBER OPENS AFRICAN EMPIRE

Progress of Plan to Create Our Own Source of Supply in Liberia Foreshadows Freedom from Foreign Control

The business of building a new empire in Africa is well advanced. American energy and American methods are converting one corner of that primitive world into something like a miniature America. Before long the far land of Liberia will have modern schools, power plants, motor roads, chain stores and other familiar institutions of American life. Already our movies afford the natives a glimpse of us at home. Engineers, agricultural specialists, medical men and more of many crafts make up this army of empire builders. All of this is possible because, for the first time in the march of the centuries, organized progress has come to a land that endures almost as it was in the beginning.

Even the name of Liberia falls strangely upon the ear in this hurrying world of ours. But the man with a smattering of his geography still in mind will recall that the country lies a degree or two above the equator, almost at the western tip of Africa. If his history is as clear as his geography he will remember that Liberia was the first and continues to be the greatest of the negro republics. Colonized a hundred years ago by some of our freed slaves, it was soon to become the scene of the black man's original experiment in self government.

That he has justified many hopes is proved by the position of Liberia today, a country stirred by the touch of Western progress. Its resources are a guarantee of future development. Politically it is well established. When the League of Nations convenes Liberia has a seat at the round table. Relations with our own country have been especially close; in fact Liberia looks to America as its best friend. But in spite of old ties and natural friendship, we never took an active part in Liberian development until the last year or two.

Thus the little republic founded under such stress has gone along its way, doing as best it might. Beginning with nothing, a great deal has been accomplished. Descendants of the colonizers have brought a measure of civilization to the 2,000,000 natives. But the task was a huge one indeed and progress limited to the means at hand. Doubtless the history of Liberia, of all western Africa, would have continued its slow evolution if the needs of modern America had not turned interest that way.

Indirectly the automobile was destined to alter the course of history. With the automobile came the world need for rubber. Although this precious substance was first found in the Amazon valley, control and development long since passed to the Middle East, where British and Dutch planters now raise practically the whole supply. In an effort to "corner" this supply the British government passed a restriction measure that has cost the American automobilist untold millions since 1922.

Apparently there was no means of relief; certainly no early relief. It takes five years for a rubber tree to become productive and such trees can be cultivated only within a few degrees of the equator. Seemingly the American consumer could do nothing but pay the bill. Yet there was something that might be done. Harvey S. Firestone, president of the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company, sat down in his private office at Akron, Ohio, and wondered now he should undertake the job.

Mr. Firestone was one of the pioneers in tire manufacture. He probably knows as much about the subject as any other man. And he reasoned that the increasing need for rubber meant complete surrender to foreign growers unless a new source could be found. But how to find it? The answer involved a world search of more than two years, which ended in Liberia. Climate, soil, government, people—everything invited to the biggest industrial enterprise known to western Africa. It really is much more than that—the conversion of the primitive.

In this way the empire builders turned eastward, instead of westward, as the course of empire has been said to travel. They were a force of young men, carrying surveyors' chains; of young doctors, bearing their instruments; of experts in soils, digging everywhere; of trained "rubber men" and every trade needed to hew the empire from its pristine fastness. Surely American business never knew a richer romance. Not since the winning of the west have we engaged in such an enterprise. Where the west was won by many men, a generation of men engaged in a national effort, the new empire is to be the creation of a single organization.

Once convinced Liberia met American needs Mr. Firestone launched the task with a vigor that has achieved much in a short time. The

beginning was not made without ominous predictions. Voices overseas and at home pronounced the climate "impossible," the labor supply unobtainable, the plan visionary. Yet the facts were plain enough. Climate, soil, government, people, were friendly. Only that long five years lay between the first planting and the first rubber. Then the Firestone plantations would be a whole month nearer to New York than the Middle East rubber ports. An American-owned American-raised supply would replace one arbitrarily controlled, subject to foreign dictation at any time.

It is now almost two years since the rubber pioneers went into Africa. They took over 2,000 acres of trees planted some years before, a plantation that has yielded well. This small acreage merely proved the possibilities of the Liberian concession, granting 1,000,000 acres anywhere in the republic's boundaries. The real task was to locate suitable plantations and get them started toward cultivation.

The statement conveys no hint of the difficulties. We must think of a country without railroads, highways or river craft big enough to serve any worth while purpose. A few miles from the coast lies the jungle; the jungle that was in the beginning of time, a place of mystery, vast depths, unknown things. It even encroaches down to the coast, awaiting the white man, ready to mock him.

Into this jungle went the "rubber men." They ventured two years ago, but the span of their effort is hardly longer than a year. And in monumental year it has been, filled with achievement, golden in promise. So far they have established two plantations. One of them includes 50,000 acres about forty miles from the Liberian capital of Monrovia, a city named for our own President, James Monroe. This plantation on the Du River has a flourishing American town as its center.

The visitor might think himself in any typical western camp of the "boom" days. But it is rather better than a "boom" camp. A central power plant supplies light and current and operates a refrigeration and pumping system for the community. The

American staff has a recreation field and comfortable quarters, living in the counterpart of American bungalows transplanted to Africa. A hospital serves American and native workers; hygiene goes hand in hand with industry. Here it is that the American staff comes in the evening to read last month's papers and talk about home. But their new home is not so very different from those left behind in America. It is not hard to foresee gravel streets and traffic policemen for this town by the Du. Already a system of chain stores operated in connection with the larger enterprise supplies every need that one may have in a far land. Thing-like American soap, tooth paste, matches that really strike, with hundreds of other incidentals necessary to the art of living, can be bought over the counter on the Du as easily as on Main Street. In the past Liberia's cost of living has been somewhat high. English and Dutch traders have set the prices just about as they pleased and always with a liberal profit to themselves. The new stores will soon make it possible to buy almost any ordinary article at American prices. This intervention has been of wide benefit to the Liberian population.

Laying out a rubber plantation involves more human effort than any simple description could convey. First the land must be cleared of its great old trees and undergrowth. Then comes the burning and the stumping—just as a farmer clears new ground. Next the ground must be leveled and prepared for planting. After overcoming these varied difficulties the American forces have planted 15,000 acres within the year, a record for any organization in any country.

Five years from this writing the rubber seedlings will be sizable trees, and the rubber fluid (latex) will soon be converted into tires for the American automobilist, right from his own farm, so to speak. Next year it is hoped to raise the record several notches higher. But how many years will be required to plant 1,000,000 acres is a matter that nobody guesses about. The point of importance was planting the first 15,000—a long step toward the greater goal.

About 150 miles from the Du plantation is the second big field of opera-

tion, at Cape Palmas, twenty-five miles inland on the Cavalla River. Although the average cleared and the organization engaged is somewhat smaller this operation practically duplicates the other. Additional plantations will be established and each time there must be stores, power plants, hospitals and all the other essentials of life—created in the wilderness.

With both of the new plantations on rivers, but considerably removed from one another, it became necessary to join their activities by water transportation. The first of the Firestone fleet is the Duvalla, a hundred-foot schooner to ply along the coast. Others will follow as needed and the day seems not far distant when a trans-Atlantic service must be opened. Progress has arrived in Liberia; the past gives way rapidly to the present.

The staff of Americans carrying on this empire building has direction of 15,000 natives, a number certain to be largely increased as the work has hardly begun. Every article used in development up to this time has been transported thousands of miles. Scarcely a tool could be bought in the country. Each nail and screw had to be brought from home. In the work of hygiene these problems are multiplied and intensified. Everyone knows that tropical countries have a large quota of diseases. Liberia is more fortunate than many, though beset by common ailments. A Firestone endowment fund granted to Harvard University has made it possible for D. A. W. Sellards of the Tropical School of Medicine to study the Liberian problem. Instruction in hygiene, fever control, adequate hospitals are in prospect.

For some time American missionaries have contributed largely to education, as their funds and workers made it possible. But a comprehensive plan was needed, beginning with the youngest youngster and advancing to the adult. Representative educators and organizations are cooperating to that end. Meanwhile the Firestone interests have sent an experienced vocational instructor to Liberia for the purpose of establishing such education. The present year should see the first of the trade schools founded.

All observers agree that the Liberian native is reliable in character and quick to learn the white man's ways. The possibilities of uplifting the native population are considered exceptionally favorable. Each step lays its own special burden on the pioneers. Text books have been prepared for elementary instruction covering the principles of physiology, arithmetic, geology and a suggestion of history. This instruction must be fitted to the native mind. Suppose we should tell a native child that Jack Frost came in the night and blew his breath on the window pane. That would be a meaningless bit of pleasantries as the Liberian youngster never heard of Jack Frost or saw his breath frosted on the glass or even a window pane itself.

One by one these difficulties are being overcome. Hardly any other enterprise of this scale ever advanced

so far with such good fortune. We may instantly recall the first failure at the Panama Canal, followed by the struggle of later years later years to complete "the big ditch." Or we may think of the first tunnel under the Alps. We have yet fresh in mind our difficulties in the Philippines, in Porto Rico. Never before has an American industry undertaken foreign pioneering on anything like this scale. It is empire building in the first person singular.

This latter day pioneering goes forward in the way of a big business enterprise. It is just another department of the industry. One of these days radio communication will be opened between Liberian plantations and the Akron factory. Then the head of the business may well say to his operator, "Just get Mr. Jones for me if he is in his office down on the Du." If Mr. Jones himself cannot be transported by any sort of magic we know, yet his words, his thoughts, his personality, can be whisked across those thousands of miles by the magic of the speaking wave.

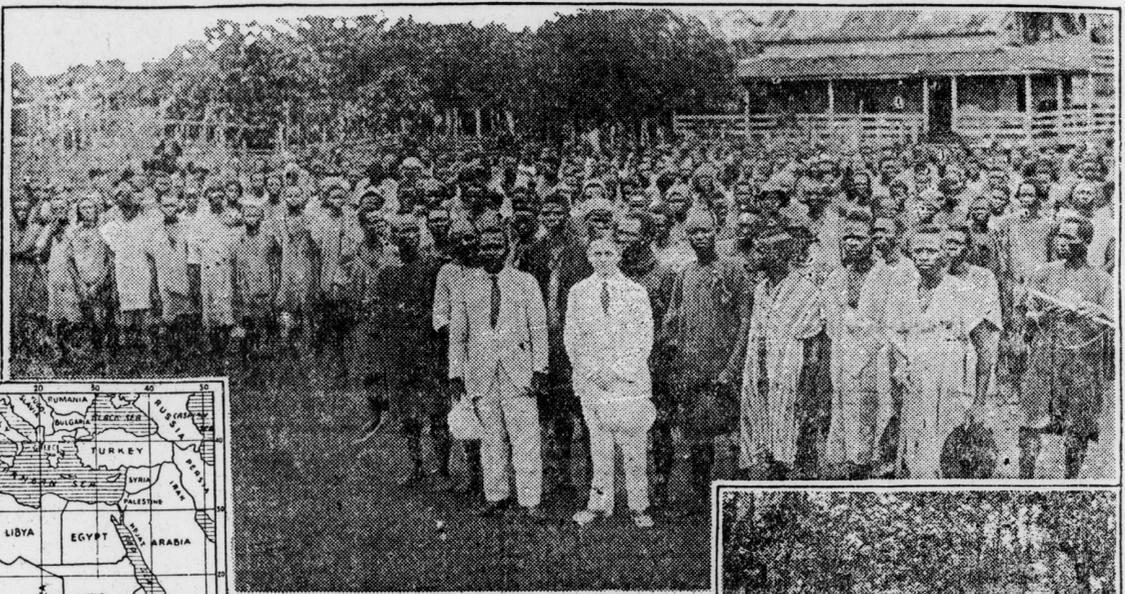
It is interesting to note that the Liberian government has embarked upon a series of improvements, along with those of private enterprise. The pioneers, having laid miles of good roads and planting many more, are encouraged to find the government working upon a system of its own. Then we may expect the busy motor car to flit along African roads in the way that we see it on our own. This public and private co-operation extends to education and public works of many kinds. The heaven is at work, Liberia is on the move.

Here, then, behold the miracle that rubber wrought. If it had not been for the automobile there would have been no need of tires. Without tires there could have been no vast store of wealth in Eastern rubber. Then we should have had a British restriction act and no occasion to open the latest empire. But since each of these things had to be in the course of progress it has brought much good of light, of the new day to a far land.

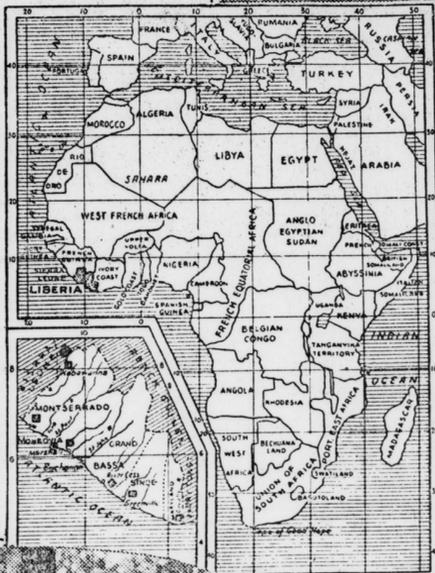
During the week Harvey S. Firestone, Jr., who has personal direction of the Liberian development, sailed for Monrovia on a tour of inspection. Mr. Firestone expects to return in about two months, ready to carry on and broaden the undertaking.

While in Liberia, Mr. Firestone will travel by the company's own ship, visiting the several plantations and other sites considered favorable for planting. It is hoped to improve upon the record of 1927 in the year to come. Rubber trees already set out in the first stage of operation are reported as making rapid progress, which encourages the belief that production from the trees will easily begin within the 5-year period. The area cleared in 1927 was about 20,000 acres and the 5,000 acres yet to be planted will soon come under cultivation. Other extensive areas are to be cleared during the coming season and planting pushed forward with all possible speed.

Mr. Firestone will not only inspect and organize the field force, but expects to give special attention to the task of supplying this force through



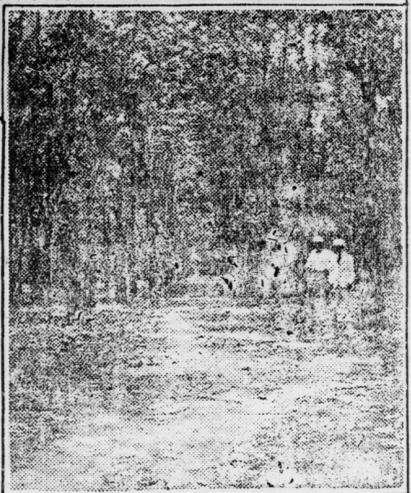
Above—500 natives who heard about the Firestone development and walked from the interior for 10 days to obtain work on a Firestone Plantation. They have just been examined and vaccinated by doctors and are ready to go to work.



Left—Liberia's place in Africa and (in the smaller map) the Firestone concessions, which are indicated by the black areas.



Inspecting opening up of groove in rubber tree to facilitate flow of Latex.



A mature rubber trees on Firestone Plantations in Liberia.

the stores now being established. This later enterprise presents enough a problem, to keep any man busy. It takes a nice judgment to know what sorts of hairpins should be ordered for the Liberian trade, along with the thousand and one articles demanded by natives and Americans. As the stores develop their plan of operation, they will handle almost any article that can be bought in a five and ten-cent store at home, added to thousands of necessary articles sold by the hardware dealer, the druggist and the grocer. In effect, they will be department stores transplanted, on a smaller scale.

An effort to induce hygiene and medicine also will come under Mr. Firestone's attention. So far the undertaking has been attended by little sickness among the white force and precautions will be taken to maintain this record. It is also hoped to improve the surroundings of the native workers and to gradually instruct them in benefits of sanitation. As they are a people quick to learn, this home seems well founded. The medical staff looks to the health of all hands at all times.

Considered from any standpoint, the Liberian development has been well launched and the day of production on a broad scale is a matter of time. The steps taken, having been laid so far towards the goal, it only remains to intensify efforts and bring every acre under cultivation that the field force is able to clear. That force will be increased in the next year as rapidly as the administrative staff can train and accommodate native workers. The 15,000 acres already planted should be measurably increased before another January.

During Mr. Firestone's stay overseas, he will be accompanied by a moving picture operator who is to take a nature record of this adventure in empire building. Films will show a range of Liberian activities; how the natives live and work, the character of the country and the jungles, its towns and homes. Rubber planting in its many stages opens another interesting subject. Glimpses of the country's wild life will be shown upon the screen. There are mountains to be filmed, jungle rivers and their strange denizens, the remote tribes that have hardly more than a white man. Here is an opportunity worthy of the camera. This old globe of ours has but a few spots left where we can encounter the primitive, the unknown. Such a land becomes fascinating indeed when the ax of the pioneer is ringing only a step behind the movie operator.

When it is remembered that Liberia's zoology, its plants and trees, are almost unknown to science, the value of such a film becomes apparent. Heretofore the country has not been examined to any great extent because of remote situation and the difficulty of penetrating its fastnesses. But the new day is bringing changes innumerable to Liberia. Before long its name should be familiar wherever the automobile goes, because a large number of the American people will be riding upon Liberian rubber.