

Henry Ford's Dream for Agriculture

By Stewart Truelsen

The locavore movement, urban farms and green products all seem like relatively new ideas, but they are reminiscent of Henry Ford's grand design for agriculture nearly a century ago.

Ford transformed American life and the workplace with the Model T automobile and the factory assembly line. He was a proponent of farm mechanization, but a number of his ideas for agriculture never took hold during his lifetime. In fact, he felt so stymied by politicians and critics in America that he took his plans to Brazil instead.

Ford was among the first to see the agriculture potential in the Amazon jungle where he cleared land for a rubber tree plantation. Unfortunately, he didn't see the ecological problems and dangers lurking in the rain forest. His farm managers and workers were bitten by pit vipers, chased by crocodiles, swarmed by insects and contracted tropical diseases.

The account of Ford's misadventures in South America is captured in a new book, *Fordlandia*, by Greg Grandin. It chronicles the rise and fall of Henry Ford's forgotten jungle city named Fordlandia.

The story picks up in the 1920s after the American Farm Bureau Federation supported Ford in his efforts to acquire the World War I nitrate munitions plant at Muscle Shoals, Ala. Ford wanted the unfinished defense project on the Tennessee River in order to produce fertilizer and hydroelectric power. As his offer to buy dragged on in Congress, Ford became frustrated and abruptly dropped out. Farm Bureau persisted until Muscle Shoals emerged as part of the Tennessee Valley Authority under President Roosevelt.

Author Grandin reported that Ford spent tens of millions of dollars and two decades in building two American-style towns and a rubber plantation in Brazil, remnants of which still exist. Walt Disney visited Fordlandia in 1941 and released a documentary about it. Later he would develop plans for his own namesake towns.

Ford's great vision was to meld agriculture and industry. He believed the factory worker should have a few acres of land to grow fruit and vegetables for his family and market the rest nearby. Instead of residing in a circular metropolis, workers would live in long, thin cities alongside farms.

Ford was an advocate of small hydroelectric projects to loosen the grip of the energy trust—similar to the renewable fuels push today to lessen dependence on oil. His scientists experimented with new uses for soybeans and even built a car body out of plastic made from soybeans. The project was scrapped because the process required formaldehyde—not a desirable new car smell.

“With one foot in agriculture and the other in industry, America is safe,” said Ford. No doubt he would embrace mainstream agriculture, city farmers, gardeners and locavores today, not just for the food, but the lessons he thought farming taught people. Fordlandia was a bust, but Henry Ford's firm belief in agriculture was not.