

# The stone balls of Palmar

## Las esferas de piedra de Palmar

Clyde STEPHENS

**Abstract:** The United Fruit Company arrived in Palmar in 1937 to develop banana plantations on the alluvial soils deposited by the Río Térraba. There was almost no human habitation except for a few Boruca Indians. As land was cleared for planting bananas, numerous stone balls were exposed on or near the surface of the soil. Some of these spheres measured 2.5 meters in diameter and weighed 15 metric tons. Many of the balls were removed and placed in home patios and public places as status symbols. Two of these giant monoliths were stolen in 1974 but were later returned to Palmar by court order. In 1980, the spheres were loaded for the second time on to a truck bound for San José. This time, they only crossed the river to Palmar Norte where they were unexpectedly unloaded and mounted on the grounds of the high school.

**Key words:** stone balls, United Fruit Company, banana plantations, Palmar

**Resumen:** La United Fruit Company llegó a Palmar en 1937 con el fin de desarrollar plantaciones bananeras en los suelos aluviales depositados por el Río Térraba. En ese entonces, casi no existían asentamientos humanos excepto por los indios Boruca. A medida que se iba desbrozando el terreno para la siembra de bananos, aparecieron numerosas esferas de piedra a nivel del suelo o próximas a la superficie. Algunas de estas esferas medían 2.5 metros de diámetro y pesaban 15 toneladas métricas. Muchas de las esferas fueron removidas y puestas en los patios de casas y lugares públicos como símbolo de estatus. Dos de estos monolitos gigantes fueron robados en 1974, pero luego fueron devueltos a Palmar por orden judicial. En 1980, estas mismas esferas fueron cargadas por segunda vez en un camión destinado a San José. Esta vez, solo llegaron a cruzar el río hasta Palmar Norte, donde inesperadamente fueron descargadas y montadas en los terrenos del colegio.

**Palabras clave:** esferas de piedra, United Fruit Company, plantaciones bananeras, Palmar

In south-western Costa Rica on the Pacific, there is a flood plain called Palmar. Alluvial soils deposited by the Río Térraba completely silted in an ancient bay that originally came up to the foothills. When the United Fruit Company entered this region in 1937 to plant bananas, only a few Boruca Indians, plus a handful of new settlers, lived along the river. The rest of the area was a vast tropical wilderness. Soon, the forests were felled and the Palmar banana plantations were started.

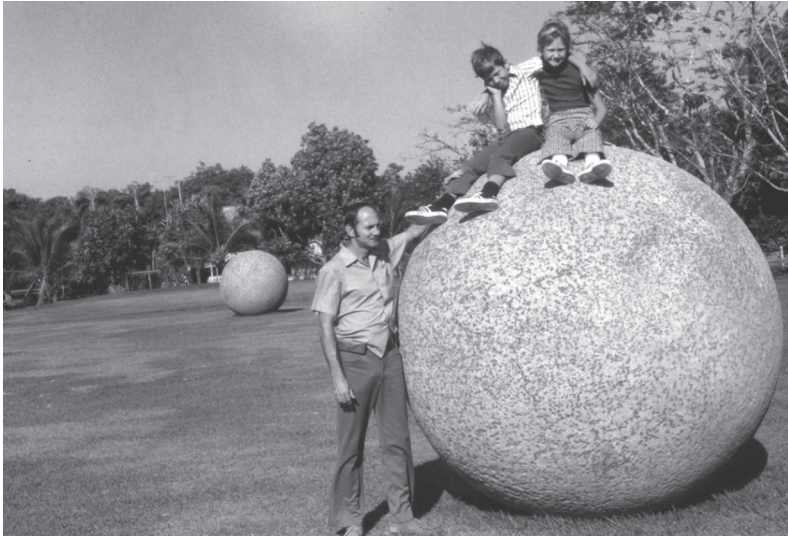
As the area developed, an outstanding feature on the Palmar landscape became famous. I refer to the large stone balls that were scattered over the flood plain and along the base of the foothills. These spheres ranged from the size of bowling balls to 2.5-meter monoliths weighing 15 metric tons. The stone is granite but there is no natural granite in this region.

Dr. Doris Stone, anthropologist-archaeologist and daughter of Samuel Zemmurray, chairman of the United Fruit Company, was one of the foremost scientists who studied these artefacts. Many theories were propounded

about the origin, original positions, patterns and uses of these balls, but the mystery remained unanswered. Neither Dr. Stone nor anyone else could clearly define a meaningful pattern of distribution, although many people imagined that the stones were in triangles, lines, or formations relating to celestial bodies or pre-Columbian burial grounds. As an exception, several balls had been mounted on cobblestone platforms at ancient burial grounds. This demonstrated the engineering abilities of the Indians and also suggests ritual use.

Since the Palmar area is rich in pre-Columbian artefacts, most people believe that indigenous peoples skilfully shaped giant blocks of granite into almost perfect spheres, then rolled the balls from the far-off site of Las Bolas to Palmar. After all, these same ancient people had mastered the art of making intricate gold pieces, polychrome pottery and handsome stone sculptures found profusely in thousands of hectares throughout the Palmar banana zone.

While the foregoing explanation of the origin of the stone balls is interesting and amazing, another con-



**Fig. 1:** Stone spheres on the golf course at Palmar, Costa Rica. Each ball weighs about 13 metric tons and is two meters in diameter. Clyde Stephens (standing), his son Carl and daughter Linda marvel at the balls in April of 1974. Photo by Phyllis Stephens.

cept must also be mentioned. Articles by National Geographic and geologists have illustrated similar stone balls found in Mexico and Africa. Geologists explained that large blobs of molten material were blown out of volcanoes into the sea. When water cooled these volcanic masses, a sphere was formed, as occurs when hot lead is dropped into cold water to make round pellets of buckshot. This theory is unacceptable to most of the local citizens.

Regardless of the true origin of the Palmar stone balls, modern man has reverted to some primitive behaviour regarding these monoliths. Gravediggers looking for pre-Colombian gold figures speculated that gold was under these balls. Consequently, they dug around the balls, causing them to roll into a hole in order to have a look underneath. Of course, they found nothing. As a result, only the very tops of several such balls are visible in Palmar's Farm Six. Other irresponsible gold seekers blew open several balls with dynamite hoping to find treasure inside. These mindless acts only revealed a heart of solid stone inside.

When banana people first settled in the area in the late 1930s and 1940s, a new status symbol became popular. It became fashionable to have a large ball displayed in one's yard. Banana engineers carefully extracted the giant spheres and loaded them onto banana rail cars for delivery to an employee's yard. The bosses usually had the biggest balls and some yards had more than one ball. Soon, balls were scattered from their original sites in Palmar to the port of Golfito, the plantations of Coto and even up to the capital city of San José. Some of the spheres were exported on a banana ship to a New York

museum. As the supply of balls diminished, the value increased. Eventually, the ultimate happened – a sculptor in Cartago started carving giant replicas to sell to status-conscious people in San José. Poured concrete balls also appeared.

Beginning in 1974, a series of bizarre events befell two of the largest balls ever found in Palmar. An entrepreneur from San José approached the General Manager, Fabio Campos, in Golfito asking permission to buy the two large balls buried in Farm Six. Don Fabio denied permission, explaining that the balls were considered artefacts and property of the government. Since the man was to sell each ball for 10.000 Costa Rican colones, or about 1.200 US dollars, he was very displeased and reacted arrogantly.

In less than a year, the indignant entrepreneur engineered a most amazing feat. On a Saturday afternoon, a large, low trailer loaded with a D-6 Caterpillar tractor and a gang of men went into the middle of Farm Six to the site of the two coveted balls and began to extract them from the soil. This was a tremendous task because the two-meter in diameter spheres weighing 13 metric tons were almost completely buried, with only the smooth tops showing near the surface. In the process of extracting, moving and loading the balls, numerous banana plants were trampled, irrigation pipes cracked and monorail cableways were broken. It was a well-organised operation because no one in the banana plantation saw the thieves leave with the two monoliths hidden under canvas covers.

Although the local escape was a great success, their luck ran out while going up the steep mountain to San José. The heavy truck broke down before reaching the 3,400-meter Cerro de la Muerte. Fortunately, a motorist passing by stopped to help. He was curious to see what the two humps were underneath the canvas and had a look. Thus, the two treasures were discovered.

By pure coincidence, the motorist knew about these stone balls and immediately reported his discovery to Fabio Campos. Don Fabio took legal action and had a judge order the balls back to Palmar immediately. Although the outraged ball bandit severely threatened don Fabio with scandalous blackmail, the culprit was forced to comply with the judge's order. The balls were returned and ceremoniously placed under the watchful eyes of District Superintendent Fernando Paniagua on the golf course in front of the Paniagua house. Fernando took great pride in displaying these artefacts and henceforth, they became known as "Fernando's Balls." These spectacular monoliths were truly a sensation and were photographed by numerous admirers.

Afterwards, banana company lawyers made a case to prosecute the ball thief. The truck driver confessed to everything and agreed to testify as a chief witness. The trial started but the truck driver never showed up in court. The judge dismissed the case for lack of evidence, and that was the end of the prosecution of the stone ball bandit.

The balls laid in peace for several years until the Minister of Culture, doña Marina Volio Trejos, advised the banana company that the balls were to be placed in the new “Plaza de la Cultura“ next to the “Teatro Nacional“ in San José. Even fortified mounts had already been constructed in the plaza to support the balls. Banana people and citizens of the Palmar area were outraged that these balls might leave their native habitat again. “Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica“ lawyers and General Manager Jöern Weber appealed to the highest authorities for an injunction, but the minister’s orders prevailed.

In 1980, the two balls were once again loaded onto a truck destined for San José. After the truck crossed the bridge over the Río Térraba, it was abruptly stopped in front of the local high school in Palmar Norte. Local citizens and students had organised a blockade by lying down “en masse“ across the Pan-American Highway to block the truck. Local and Central American traffic was also blocked all day and night. The “Guardia Rural“ was called out to keep order, but none of the protesters were removed. The Minister of Culture was outraged but helpless. The truck driver gave up after two days and unloaded the two giant balls in the patio of the high school. There was great cheering and celebration and everyone was happy except the Minister of Culture. Now, these two famous stone spheres are resting in peace in Palmar Norte (STEPHENS 2002).

## References

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