

# Sisal and the Relationship Between the United States and Mexico in 1915

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## Research Process

James Sasko

Library Undergraduate Research Contest

3/8/17

In the Fall semester of 2016, I signed up to take a research and methods class for my major in history. The class was History 302A “Mexican Borderlands.” This was a topic I had never had much familiarity with. The most important part of the class was the lengthy research paper over a topic of our choice. I had no idea what I would write about that corresponded with the topic of the class. Dr. Hartch showed us what we would be using on our papers as the largest chunk of our sources: microfilm. I decided I would try to write my paper over something that no one else would ever think of doing. A topic that took up a myriad of the microfilm was sisal, which is fiber used in binding twine. I didn’t have any idea what this was or how I would write a paper over it; however, the ECU Library provided various opportunities to collect sources. The library on campus helped me become an expert on a subject that not many historians had even studied before.

To begin with, I began searching through the rolls of microfilm which contained documents on the subject of the sisal trade between the U.S. and Mexico in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It took multiple sessions of reading documents for hours before I could even begin to develop ideas for topics. There was so much information on this little-known topic provided within the library on the microfilm. Once I found a specific time frame and topic I wanted to write about, I began to search for secondary sources on the subject. The subject of sisal is not well-covered in history, but luckily, the ECU Library contained numerous books, articles, and

other sources relatable to my topic. By using the search engine on the ECU Library website, I could use keywords to search through the books and articles that the library held. To my surprise, I was able to find very good sources. I went to get the hard copies of books articles in the library and when grabbing them from the shelves, I noticed even more on the same subjects surrounding the books I wanted. I collected a plethora of books and articles in the library just by coming across them.

Furthermore, I used the sources I collected within the ECU Library to find other sources for my topic. I looked in the bibliographies of the books and articles I came across and found suitable sources I could also include; however, some of the further sources I discovered were not available in the library. I started taking advantage of requesting items from other libraries across the country. I did not know how this would work or if it would, but I tried it. I received conformation very quickly that books were on their way. The library helped me get my hands on materials I needed for my research even if they were not in the library's possession. To find the sources I ultimately requested on the library's website, I searched for them on the multiple data bases and the search engine. The data bases were very useful because I could narrow my searches to collect the type of sources I wanted. I had collected so many books in the beginning and needed to diversify my sources. This could be done by narrowing searches to include only scholarly articles or whatever type of source I wanted. Once I found the desired source, it was easy to fill out a request form and get my sources within a couple weeks.

The experience I gained from this research process has influenced my research in other classes and will continue to help me with my writing when I move on to law school and get a career. I learned how to make use of the available sources that our library provides and that I could ask the library for help in obtaining nearly any source I need. I wrote my research paper

over a topic that does not come up in history very often and I had my doubts that I could really accomplish writing a good research paper on it. Luckily, Dr. Hartch led me in the right direction and opened my eyes to the world of research that the ECU Library serves as a door to. I learned how to use microfilm, find sources in the library, use data bases to find sources, and use sources I already have in order find more. In the end, I know that I created a great work with immense research on this subject. I am now an expert on the sisal trade between the U.S. and Mexico in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This feat was accomplished through assistance by the library and its employees and the sources it provides to help the students of ECU to write research papers. I am confident that this paper could be useful as a source for future students who would choose this topic. Also thanks to the ECU Library, I am aware of ways that I can share my work and be recognized for it. I am thankful for the experience I had while writing this paper.

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# Sisal and the Relationship Between the United States and Mexico in 1915

By James Sasko

In January of 1915, the Mexican president, Venustiano Carranza, placed an embargo on the exporting of sisal to the United States. He ordered the gunboat, *Tamaulipasto*, to sail from Veracruz to Progreso “to make effective the closing of the port.”<sup>1</sup> The blockading of Progreso caused immediate reaction in the United States’ cordage industry and Carranza lifted the blockade two months later in March. There were many reports that Carranza did not stop attempting to put a halt to the exporting of sisal from Mexico; it was suggested that he began leading armies in March of 1915 toward Yucatan, the Mexican state that was responsible for the majority of exporting this fiber plant. He ordered his army to tear up railroads and destroy sisal plantations. The threat of the prevention of sisal imports to the United States caused a great deal of concern for industries who manufactured binding twine for farmers from the sisal fiber plant. There were countless letters sent to the Secretary of State, William J. Bryan, detailing the possible outcomes for farmers, industry, and the economy in the United States. The situation evolved into a crisis. The men writing to Bryan demanded action to be taken to prevent any harm to the sisal crop and the trade of it with Mexico. There were profound efforts by Bryan and President Woodrow Wilson to ease the situation, even the suggestion of military action against Mexico to protect American interests. Not many people today understand what sisal is and much less the importance of it. Why would sisal be so important to Mexican-U.S. relations in the early 20th century?

The year 1915 saw an increase in American dependence on the sisal crop. This was at the beginning of World War I, and the European war effort put a strain on the importation of agave

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<sup>1</sup> Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 96.

plants that could be used in the United States to be transformed into twine. Other fiber plants from the Philippines were imported into the United States during this time; however, in 1915, the Philippines underwent immense drought and the crop failed. Yucatan was the only place that sisal could be imported from during this time. The threat of losing sisal imports for the year 1915, and perhaps many more years, enveloped fear into many in the United States who were dependent on the sisal trade. There were a plethora of companies who were focused on developing sisal into binder twine, and these companies employed thousands of people. If the sisal industry was shut down by Carranza, these companies would no longer be able to exist and thousands of people would lose their jobs. In Mexico, farmers depended on the sale of sisal to make money to live on and much of the Mexican government's profits, used to purchase weapons during the revolution, came from the sisal market.<sup>2</sup>

Sisal played an important role in Mexican-U.S. relations in the early 20th century because of its importance to American industry, farming, and the economies of both nations. The blockade by Carranza and the threats to burn sisal plantations encouraged responses from American industrialists and government leaders, which demonstrated how important sisal was to the United States. Mexico and the United States had a relationship built on the foundation of the sisal industry. A plethora of people in the United States and Mexico were dependent on the importation of sisal during this time. It served as the greatest source of income for Yucatan and as the primary source of fiber to be turned into binder twine for farmers. The industries turning this fiber into twine were dependent on sisal to make money and the farmers needed twine to bale crops. With the risk that sisal importation would come to a halt in the U.S., several

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<sup>2</sup> Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950*, 96.

suggested military action be taken to prevent it. Sisal was necessary to maintain good relations between the United States and Mexico and many people depended on it.

Not many historians who have researched the period of the Mexican Revolution have given much consideration to the topic of sisal. The majority of scholars who have studied the effects of sisal on the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico in this time period agree that sisal played an important role in the relationship of these nations. Sterling Evans suggests that the United States had become dependent on Mexican sisal to supply its farmers with binder twine. Michael Yonder discusses the Yucatan state's economic dependence on the sisal industry. Anthony Andrews, Rafael Burgos Villanueva, and Luis Millet Cámara together developed a claim that the wealth of Yucatan was based almost solely on the sisal industry. It would be nearly impossible to find any historian that claims sisal did not play a tremendous role in the Mexican-U.S. relations from 1915-1917.

There was no question that sisal was important in the U.S. The raised concerns by several individuals and industrial companies made that very clear. Sisal became an important factor in the relations between the United States and Mexico by the late 19th century and maintained its influence in foreign affairs for a long time. Sisal and other agave fiber plants were originally grown as garden plants by natives in the Yucatan area. At the turn of the 19th century, the Spanish discovered its usefulness for marine roping.<sup>3</sup> Originally, the Yucatan state in Mexico produced cordage materials and exported them to the rest of the world, especially the United States and the rest of North America. By 1900, the Yucatan state comprised 85% of the world's

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Yonder, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* Vol. 16, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), 319.

binder twine.<sup>4</sup> This binder twine was necessary for mechanically harvesting wheat on the American frontier. Binder twine was used in power-reaper binders, a harvesting implement that cut grain stalks and then tied them in bundles that could be hand-gathered into shocks to await threshing.<sup>5</sup> The sisal market was also a key part of the Yucatan economy during this time. Yucatan became a producer of a single product by the 20th century and the United States was its biggest client. A double agricultural dependency developed between the Great Plains region of the United States and Yucatan. Historian Sterling Evans suggests that “the dependency on this Mexican commodity is illustrated by the fact that for the first two decades of the twentieth century, the U.S. and Canada consumed an estimated 230,000 tons of the fiber a year for the production of binder twine.”<sup>6</sup> The farming economy of the United States’ plains region relied on Yucatan sisal and Yucatan’s economy was almost entirely dependent on the binder twine market from North America. Beginning in the latter part of the 1800s, “the [Yucatan] economy was dominated by a new plantation system dedicated to a single crop, henequen.”<sup>7</sup> By 1915, nearly 90 percent of the binder twine used in the United States, about 200 million pounds annually, was made from Yucatecan fiber—a trade that had made Yucatan arguably Mexico’s wealthiest state.<sup>8</sup> Sisal and the cordage industry emerged in the beginning of the 20th century to become a key part of the relationship between the nations of the United States and Mexico.

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<sup>4</sup> Yonder, 325.

<sup>5</sup> Sterling Evans, *Agricultural History* Vol. 80, No. 1 (Winter, 2006), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Evans, *Agricultural History*, 48.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony P. Andrews, Rafael Burgos Villanueva and Luis Millet Cámara, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* Vol. 16, No. 1 (March 2012), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950*, 104.

When Mexican President Carranza placed a blockade on the port of Progreso in Yucatan in early 1915, it seemed like a very bizarre thing for the leader of Mexico to do. Historian Gilbert Joseph suggests “Carranza closed the port . . . to prevent the export of a large quantity of sisal hemp that American manufacturers of binder twine for reapers desperately needed, in order, it seemed, merely to spite the United States.”<sup>9</sup> In any case, it led to “sisal hemp tied up at Progreso.”<sup>10</sup> This blockade at the port of Progreso led to a myriad of complaints from industrial leaders in the U.S. who were concerned with this situation. The Hatfield and Palmer Co. implored the Secretary of State, William J. Bryan, to “use your best efforts . . . to make [sisal] available for this year’s harvest.”<sup>11</sup> The embargo did not last long; by March of the same year, Bryan reported that “Venustiano Carranza has recalled the order which closed the port of Progreso to commerce.”<sup>12</sup> This was only the beginning of the sisal crisis in Yucatan. The fiber manufacturers in the U.S., such as the Peoria Cordage Co., wrote to the Secretary of State saying “The advance of Carranza’s army from Campache to Yucatan is a more serious menace to the supply of sisal fiber . . . than the blockade . . . because of the declared intention to . . . burn plantations.”<sup>13</sup> If the blockade had served as a threat to the importation of sisal into the United States, the complete destruction of it would only be worse. Manufacturers, whether from companies or penitentiaries who took part in producing binding twine, constantly wrote to

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<sup>9</sup> G. M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: The Mexican Revolution in Yucatan, 1915-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Hatfield and Palmer Co. to Secretary of State William J. Bryan, 16 March 1915, Records of the Department of State, Records of the Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Mexico, 1910-1929, Record Group 59, Microfilm 274, (hereafter site as SD) file 812.61326/20.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> William J. Bryan to William E. Thompson, 24 March 1915, SD 812.61326/49.

<sup>13</sup> Peoria Cordage Co. to William J. Bryan, 19 March 1915, SD 812.61326/12.

Bryan, detailing the implications of the inability to receive sisal imports. The warden of the Kansas State Penitentiary, J.D. Botkin, wrote to the Secretary of State claiming “failure to get [sisal] will cause enormous loss to our farmers.”<sup>14</sup> A representative of the Columbian Rope Co. wrote to Bryan explaining the “world need of sisal” and how it “could not possibly be replaced in many years thereby inflicting on the farmers and manufacturers of this country.”<sup>15</sup> Those who wrote to the Secretary of State during this crisis of 1915 often explained their concern on the behalf of farmers in the United States. Not many introduced concerns on behalf of their companies, but a few did. The Whitlock Cordage Co. wrote to Bryan and said that “manufacturers will have to close factories.”<sup>16</sup> Companies were suggesting that their concern was with the American farmers; however, it was obvious that their companies would collapse. Therefore, at least some of their concern was for their own sakes. These companies began to display immense concern for the situation. The Wall Rope Works of New York expressed its concern with the situation to Bryan by explaining how “we are without stock of sisal and sellers refuse to sell because they have no confidence in establishment of order.”<sup>17</sup> The inhabitants of Yucatan were upset with the Mexican government that was emerging from the Mexican revolution. Their well-being, which relied on the sale of sisal, was being threatened by leaders in Mexico who had threatened to burn the sisal plantations. The sellers of sisal then would not sell because of the situation, which ultimately hurt American manufacturers and farmers. Alfred Gilbert Smith further attempted to get the U.S. government involved by writing to Secretary

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<sup>14</sup> J.D. Botkin to William J. Bryan, 19 March 1915, SD 812.61326/14.

<sup>15</sup> Columbian Rope Co. to William J. Bryan, 19 March 1915, SD 812.61326/18.

<sup>16</sup> Whitlock Cordage Co. to William J. Bryan, 19 March 1915, SD 812.61236/15.

<sup>17</sup> Wall Rope Works of New York to William J. Bryan, 20 March 1915, SD 812.61236/22.

Bryan about Carranza's attacks on the interior of Mexican infrastructure. He claimed that "railroads by which the hemp is conveyed from inland places of manufacture to Progreso for shipment will be damaged if not destroyed."<sup>18</sup> This would have prevented all exportation of sisal, even if the port was opened, because sisal would not have been able to be transported to the port. With the sisal crisis in Mexico, it would seem probable to look elsewhere to find the necessary stock of sisal. There were a plethora of problems around the world in 1915 that made Mexico the only source of sisal for the United States. The Hooven and Allison Co. wrote to Secretary Bryan and explained the "shortage of other fibers [on] account of European war."<sup>19</sup> The sources of sisal in the eastern hemisphere were strained due to the war in Europe. When Americans looked to the west, there wasn't any sisal or hemp to be found there either. "A threatened drought in the Philippines, which will seriously affect the manila production,"<sup>20</sup> came from a letter written by William Stafford, a U.S. congressman, who detailed the problems with obtaining necessary fibers, such as sisal, and further discussed the implications if sisal were not obtainable in 1915. During this time period, sisal was immensely important to the economy and farmers in the United States and it was necessary for the government to do everything possible to maintain its affairs with the Mexican government to be able to obtain sisal in a time when it was already hard to come by.

This sisal crisis had the capabilities to cause devastation to farmers in the United States and industries responsible for manufacturing binder twine. The most striking letters to the Secretary of State demonstrating concern about the sisal crisis in Yucatan are from cordage

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<sup>18</sup> Alfred Gilbert Smith to William J. Bryan, 19 March 1915, SD 812.61326/25.

<sup>19</sup> The Hooven and Allison Co. to William J. Bryan, 20 March 1915, SD 812.61326/26.

<sup>20</sup> William Stafford to William J. Bryan, 20 March 1915, SD 812.61326/35.

manufacturers explaining how this crisis will hurt the American farmer. The Peoria Cordage Co. wrote to Bryan that “should Carranza burn the sisal... it would be utterly impossible to produce the binder twine needed for the grain crop of 1915.”<sup>21</sup> Several of these industries who made their profits off selling binder twine to farmers wrote letters on behalf of the American farmers. These companies chose this stance in their concerning letters in order to better persuade the government that it was necessary to take action. Peoria Cordage wrote, “We are taking an interest in this matter for the commonwealth, and not in any way for a protection of our industry”<sup>22</sup> when asking for the Secretary of State to give the matter serious attention. Concern for the farmers was not the only concern that many presented to the Secretary of State. The president of the Chamber of Commerce, J.M. Walsh, wrote to Bryan requesting “prompt action of your department in seeking adjustment of present differences.”<sup>23</sup> The fact that the Chamber of Commerce became concerned with the sisal situation demonstrates the possible effects that the crisis could have had on the U.S. economy in this time period. The importance of the cordage industry to the U.S. economy in the early twentieth century was made evident by the individuals and companies writing to the Secretary of State who wanted the U.S. government to resolve the issue. Bryan received a letter from the Cupples Cordage Company of Brooklyn, New York requesting “immediate and positive action” to resolve the crisis. The letter states “failure to receive hemp soon will cause rope mills to shut down thus adding to the army of the unemployed besides seriously embarrassing harvest reaping.”<sup>24</sup> Aside from the damage that the failure to receive sisal would cause to the farmers, it

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<sup>21</sup> Peoria Cordage Co. to William Stafford, 18 March 1915, SD 812.61326/30.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> J.M. Walsh to William J. Bryan, 23 March 1915, SD 812.61326/37.

<sup>24</sup> Cupples Cordage Co. to William J. Bryan, 24 March 1915, SD 812.61326/41.

would force industries who employed thousands of workers in 1915 to close. The unemployment rate in 1915 was the highest percentage in the entire 20th century, including 3,840,000 people which made up 9.7% of the workforce and 14.3% of non-farmers in the U.S.<sup>25</sup> The possible effects of the sisal crisis in Yucatan were drastic to the U.S. farmers, capitalists, and the economy. Aware of these possibilities and pressured to take action, the United States government made great efforts to fix the situation in Yucatan.

When the Secretary of State was notified that Mexican President, Carranza, had placed an embargo on the exports at the port of Progreso, he took immediate action to resolve the issue. Within a couple of months of the beginning of the blockade at Yucatan, Bryan was able to tell Senator William E. Thompson that “the Mexican commandant at Progreso has given assurance that the regular order of affairs would be resumed on March 22nd.”<sup>26</sup> The blockade in the port of Progreso was short lived; however, the bigger situation regarding sisal was just beginning. When they learned about the threats made by Constitutionalists to burn sisal fields, the initial thoughts of the leaders of the United States’ government was that it did not make sense for Carranza to burn the sisal fields. In a letter to the U.S. embassy at Vera Cruz, Secretary Bryan wrote that “it is impossible to believe that General Carranza would either authorize or tolerate such action on the part of his followers.”<sup>27</sup> This possibility was enough, however, to trigger response from the United States to protect its interests in Yucatan. Secretary Bryan began writing letters to officials and U.S. Consul in Yucatan. In a letter to the American Consul at Yucatan, Bryan detailed the

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<sup>25</sup> The Measurement and Behavior of Unemployment; a Conference of the Universities-National Bureau Committee for Economic Research (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 211-242.

<sup>26</sup> William J. Bryan to William E. Thompson, 24 March 1915, SD 812.61326/30.

<sup>27</sup> William J. Bryan to U.S. Embassy at Vera Cruz, 20 March 1915, SD 812.61326/29.

situation and implored that “the differences between General Carranza and the people of Yucatan should be adjusted... without destruction of merchandise” and explained that the U.S. government was “using [its] influence with Carranza for the protection of the industrial interests of Yucatan.”<sup>28</sup> The U.S. government began to reach out to other nations for assistance in healing the sisal crisis in Yucatan. A man writing to the Secretary of State from Mexico, perhaps a member of the American Consul, described a meeting with the Cuban President, Menocal. The man, only known as Gonzales from the letter, writes “[Menocal] said he would immediately make every effort to get sisal protected.”<sup>29</sup>

The United States was doing everything it could to resolve the issues surrounding the sisal situation. President Wilson had demonstrated throughout his presidency his lack of abilities in dealing with foreign relations. He had sent troops to Veracruz and Tampico, oil-producing cities important to U.S. commercial interests, which resulted in increased resentment to the United States by Mexicans.<sup>30</sup> Wilson liked to play the military card and did just that to deal with the sisal crisis in March 1915. Although the threats regarding the burning of sisal fields and destruction of railroads were not plausible due to Carranza’s need for profits from sisal, Wilson “ordered the U.S. Navy to commission another gunboat off the coast of Yucatan for a few days as a backup to the Des Moines for ‘protecting foreign interests.’”<sup>31</sup> The Wilson administration took every effort thought reasonable to deal with threats in Mexico related to sisal. This situation

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<sup>28</sup> William J. Bryan to American Consul at Vera Cruz, 20 March 1915, SD 812.61326/42.

<sup>29</sup> Gonzales to William J. Bryan, 29 March 1915, SD 812.61326/56.

<sup>30</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950*, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950*, 109.

had the potential to become a tremendous crisis for farmers, industries and the economy of the United States. The potential disasters that could be a direct result of the sisal crisis led the government to take action.

The efforts taken by the Wilson administration in regards to the threats of a sisal crisis in Yucatan could be predicted at the time, while also being surprising. Although Wilson had a history of being impulsive in his dealings with Central America, the nature of his Secretary of State would suggest a different approach for the situation that was at hand. In his political career, William J. Bryan was known for implementing tighter government regulation of corporations and terminating government subsidies for private industries.<sup>32</sup> Although he was against big business, Bryan's efforts in resolving the sisal situation helped the private industries involved in the sisal trade. This demonstrates his understanding of the vast importance of the sisal industry for the United States' farmers, industries, and economy. Bryan went against his beliefs when resolving the sisal crisis in Yucatan for the better good of his country.

In conclusion, by the early twentieth century, sisal became a key component of building the relationship between the United States and Mexico. This fiber plant developed into a necessity for the farmers of the United States because of its widespread use as a binding twine manufactured by several industries which also relied on this plant. In Yucatan, sisal became the primary export and source of profit. The United States received the majority of its imports of sisal from the Mexican state of Yucatan and in 1915, the European war and drought in other sisal growing countries led to an increased demand for Yucatan sisal. The blockade at the port of Progreso in Yucatan caused fright in several Americans and the threat of the destruction of sisal,

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<sup>32</sup> Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950*, 98.

in a year that produced the best harvest in decades, encouraged immediate response from the U.S. government. It is in these efforts by the Wilson administration to persuade Carranza and threaten military force that demonstrates the importance of sisal to the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. Wilson and his administration understood the importance of sisal to the U.S. economy and did everything in their power to resolve the threatened crisis. It required a great deal of diplomacy between the two countries to protect the interest of American farmers and business. A Nebraska newspaper from the time possibly gives the best analysis of the situation, stating “This is another instance showing how closely the world is knit together commercially; even the efficient harvest of our crops may sometimes be dependent upon diplomacy.”<sup>33</sup> Sisal was definitely one of the most important aspects in maintaining a good relationship between the United States and its southern neighbor, Mexico.

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<sup>33</sup> *Nebraska Farmer*, 24 March 1915, 383.