

Cinchona Missions of World War II
Colombia & Ecuador
(1942 — 1945)

Purpose Use postal history showing course of persons involved in the vital wartime mission to find cinchona trees that were urgently needed as a source of quinine to save American troops from malaria.

Scope Exhibit spans each Cinchona Mission from 1942 – 1945 represented by personal & official correspondence sent from operational & expeditionary headquarters. Exhibit uses covers addressed to/from Dr. William Campbell Steere emphasizing Mission locations & participating scientists. Wartime political impact on Mission agency is shown. Epilogue gives closure to the Mission & participants' subsequent activities.

Personal Study Through personal research, Cinchona Mission’s postal & philatelic history was analyzed, arranged & fully developed. Reconstruction of the postal activities & interconnections of participants & analysis of rates, routes, markings & historical context was in addition to any related philatelic study. Results of affiliated research into archival wartime sources, archived diaries & letters, botanical history, 18th & 19th century colonial economics & obscure participants are shown.

Personal study of note = 

Cinchona Mission Background

Beginning in October 1942 **U.S. Board of Economic Warfare** (BEW) dispatched teams of botanists, agronomists, forestry experts, & native guides to Colombia, Ecuador, & Peru to find, harvest, & export as much cinchona bark as possible. Those missions involved trekking through miles high rain forests, climbing steep mountains, enduring freezing temperatures at the equator & negotiating w/local governments & indigenous communities.

Why Cinchona?

Malaria is a disease feared worldwide. **Quinine, a treatment for malaria**, is extracted from cinchona tree bark & had been used by indigenous people of South America for centuries. Jesuit priests brought cinchona bark to Europe where quinine became extremely valuable. Native cinchona trees became essential to South American economies & culture while Spain controlled all quinine supply & trade. As quinine increased in price, too many native cinchona trees were cut down leading to shortages & price increases.

Other countries sought new quinine sources. **England & Netherlands purchased seeds smuggled from Bolivia & established plantations in India & Netherland East Indies eventually surpassing South American production.**

By 1938 most quinine was produced from Asian plantation trees.

1858, Peru, 1 d.
Coat of Arms
w/cinchona tree



All scans are @ 75 %

Pre-War European Imports of Cinchona Bark
In Pounds

County of Origin	1880	1911	1938
Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru	6,950,000	35,200	2,137,000
India (English)	1,170,000	458,600	1,984,000
Java (Dutch)	70,000	19,778,000	24,665,000

Organization:

- Prologue 1942
- Missions: 1942 1943 1944 1945
- Epilogue

N.B. Pronounced Sin-Cho-Nah

By 1940 Dutch plantations on Java produced 95% of world’s quinine. US Secretary of Commerce Jesse Jones thought the price of quinine was too high & refused to secure pre-war stockpiles of quinine despite orders of Board of Economic Warfare to stockpile strategic military materiel, including quinine.

In early 1942 Empire of Japan invaded Netherland East Indies & seized plantations & factories used in quinine production.

Caught largely unprepared, United States had no available quinine sources critical for successful tropical warfare. U.S. military projected that 40% of all troops would be hospitalized for malaria alone by end of 1942.

Without quinine the Armed Forces would not survive the Pacific war.

This military crisis made development of new quinine sources an urgent necessity & recovery of lost South American cinchona bark became critical to Allied war effort.

Japanese Occupation of Netherland Indies Postal Card



March 3 1943 Dai Nippon (*Empire of Japan*) postal card 3½¢ rate
Blitar East Java to Surabaya East Java 101 miles
Request for approval & clearance for shipment of certain goods.

 References: American Air Mail Society *Air Post Journal*, Broderick & Mayo *Civil Censorship in U.S. During WW II*, Wawrukiewicz/Beecher *U.S. International Postal Rates 1872-1996*. Other research includes W.C. Steere, Botanical Work of the Cinchona Missions *Science* (1945 & 1946), W.H. Hodge, Wartime Cinchona Procurement in Latin America *Economic Botany* (1946), Nicolás Cuví, The Cinchona Program (1940-1945): Science & imperialism in the exploitation of a medicinal plant *Scientific Electronic Library Online* (2011), Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis, Plants and Manifest Destiny: U.S. Botanists and the ‘Cinchona Missions’ in Latin America (1942-1945), Tome 2: Plants. Botany, Gardens, »Materia medica, Ethnopharmacology; edited by Steven M. Oberhelman, Texas A&M University, USA (2025)