

Castañer Newsletter

BRUMBAUGH RECONSTRUCTION UNIT
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Castaner, Puerto Rico

BRETHREN SERVICE COMMITTEE
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CHRISTMAS IN PUERTO RICO

By Gilberto Claudio #

Can you imagine Santa Claus visiting a land where there is no snow and where very few chimneys exist?

The season starts a day or two before Christmas Day when the schools are out and the people begin to prepare for the holidays. The season continues through New Year's Day and ends with Three Kings Day. This is the traditional day when the children receive their gifts. It is celebrated on the 6th of January which is supposed to have been the day when the Three Wise Men arrived at Bethlehem with their gifts for Jesus. This day is also known as Epiphany or Twelfth Night. On the eve of Three Kings Day the children place hay, corn and water under their beds so that the camels of the three wise men will have something to eat. This is supposed to encourage the three kings to leave gifts for the children. This day is the most important one of the Christmas season, especially in small villages and in the country.

Pupils and teachers usually exchange gifts on the last day of school before the holiday. Programs are prepared which include Christmas carols, dramas and poems. Some of the churches have special programs, and some church groups go around the streets singing Christmas carols and presenting different dramas, especially that of the Nativity scene.

The housewives usually decorate their homes and prepare special foods such as pasteles, asapao, and lechon asado. A pastel (pie) is a mixture of vegetables and meat wrapped in a dough made of bananas or yautias or potatoes or platanos (plantains). This, in turn, is wrapped in a green wilted banana leaf and is boiled. Pasteles are the Puerto Rican equivalent of the Mexican tamales, and are spiced similarly. Asapao is a special preparation of rice with chicken. Lechon asado (roast pig) is a young pig roasted whole on a pole over a charcoal fire, out of doors

In this season a group of persons will gather to sing aguinaldos (Christmas carols) with the accompaniment of a guitar as entertainment for the community. There are dances in the community centers of each village where everybody may go to have a good time.

In the Castaner Community Center a party is given each year for the smaller children of this community. Songs are sung, a drama is given, and Santa Claus presents gifts to all the children. These gifts are being sent by church people in the States who are interested in Puerto Rico. Over five hundred children are expected to attend the Christmas party this year.

#Gilberto has lived near Castaner most of his life, and this year will graduate from the high school in Adjuntas.

ANNUAL CHRISTMAS PARTY AT CASTANER--1946

It was 11:30 a.m., Friday, January 3rd, when word finally came that the shipment of toys from the Brethren Service Committee had arrived at the docks in Ponce, Puerto Rico. A fast truck trip brought the ten huge wooden boxes of toys to the Community Center at Castaner before the evening meal was finished. Within a short time Unit members and Puerto Ricans were opening boxes, dumping arm-loads of toys and clothing on tables for sorting. It was a regular bedlam with boys' toys here, girls' toys there, scrapbooks, crayons, paints, tablets and pencils at the end, marbles in this box, baby clothes on one table, girls' and boys' clothes on other tables.

After the sorting was reasonably accomplished some 500 (cheap colored cloth) stockings were filled with candy, marbles, toys, crayons, paint books, jump ropes, etc. and separated into huge boxes according to age groups. By ten o'clock Friday evening everyone was tired, but most of the work was done.

As early as 7:30 a.m. Saturday, January 4th, anxious children were already waiting around the Community Center for the party that was to start at 2:00 p.m. As the slow hours dragged along more children flocked to the Center. By two o'clock over 200 children were tensely playing games on the playground while another hundred or so were excitedly pushing each other to get closer to the Center door. Then the door opened and in poured children by the score; in fact, no less than 580 lively and highly emotional children finally jammed themselves into the Community Center. Boys and girls of all ages crowded and pushed, mothers did their best to protect the younger ones, but to no avail.

Promptly the program started with Puerto Rican Christmas songs and the children sang lustily. Next a flash photograph was taken of the children as they smiled for their friends in the States in hopes that their joy might be partially seen by the donors of the gifts. Then a short Christmas play was presented which dramatized the plight of a poor little blind girl. At last came the great surprise! Santa Claus walked in amidst the bedlam of cries, shouts and screams, and slowly pushed his way to the front of the gathering. While some children tugged at his colorful suit, little ones were terror-stricken, and others simply looked. He told his story, and then led the line of highly excited children through the hallway to obtain their gifts. The anxiety displayed by the multitude of children was no less than terrific. Each could hardly contain himself. With agonizing slowness the crowd trickled through the hallway, and some children even let fall watery tears thinking that the toys would all be gone by the time they would arrive at the head of the line.

However, outside the exit door the picture was completely different. Boys were furiously playing with newly acquired marbles, for keeps! Girls were eating candy, little sisters and brothers were also. Boys bounced balls, pulled their little cars, tractors and trucks, peered at picture books, crayons, paints, etc. while girls feverishly mothered their dolls, dug into their sewing kits, displayed a new skirt, blouse or sweater, or used their jump-ropes. Mothers carrying their babies walked away smiling with a bundle of baby clothes, soap, a towel, and toys, knowing, though not completely understanding, that somewhere someone had taken the time and effort to send them such gifts.

IN THE GARDEN

Early in the afternoon of New Year's Day the members of the Unit and many Puerto Rican friends gathered on the first terrace of the garden to witness the wedding of Alys Lickel of Altoona, Pennsylvania and Walter Haag of Whittier, California. Fifteen minutes of quiet organ music preceded the ceremony. The tiny reed organ, hidden by long fern-like branches from the flamboyant tree, was played by Dr. Francis Helfrick. The music consisted of two Back chorales, "Juanita", "Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes", and Handel's "He Shall Feed His Flock".

The strains of the Wedding March from Lohengrin began, and Alys, lovely in her long white eyelet-embroidered gown and prayer covering, walked the length of the first terrace and ascended the steps to meet Walter. The garden was perfect in lending itself to the simple sincerity of the occasion. Rufus King performed the double ring ceremony. After exchanging vows, Alys and Walter knelt while Edna Eller and Ruth Idleman softly sang,

"Breathe on us, breath of God;
Fill us with life anew
That we may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do."

Following the wedding there was a reception in the Casa Grande living room. Cake and chocolate ice cream (Alys' favorite) were served. Then the bride and groom were taken away in a manner fitting to newly-weds--in the black ambulance, appropriately decorated and painted, with the siren going full blast--to spend a week at the McLean Conference Grounds near Comerio about 15 miles south of San Juan. Upon returning, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Haag will take up residence in the Casa Grande.

IN THE HIGH ANDES

On December 10th, Cruz Maria Lopez of Lares, Puerto Rico, the nurse in our public health dispensary for nearly a year, began her flight of several days to La Paz, Bolivia, where her husband-to-be, John Groel, former Castaner Unit member from Maplewood, New Jersey, awaited her. In response to her parents' request that she be married in their home in Lares, Cruz and John were legally married "by proxy" before her flight to Bolivia.

A recent Christmas message from them states that she arrived safely, and they have happily begun their life together. We send our best wishes to the "matrimonio nuevo". They are located at Instituto Americano, Cajon # 9, La Paz, Bolivia. John is now teaching there, and Cruz will be teaching domestic science.

CHAIRS FOR THE LIBRARY

Through the generosity of Dr. and Mrs. Everett Myer, a dozen steel folding chairs were donated to the Unit for use in the library. These chairs arrived in December along with another dozen which have been donated by anonymous sources.

These gifts are meeting a very needy situation. It is in the library where meetings for worship, business sessions and various other conferences are held. For some months till now the seating accommodations have been quite handicapped. The chairs were shipped from the Peabody Chair Company, North Manchester, Indiana by way of the Relief Center in New Windsor, Maryland. The Unit is very grateful to those who have so kindly made these donations.

A VISITOR FROM UNRRA

On the evening of December 9th, the Castaner group had as a visiting speaker, Mrs. Lincoln D. Kelsey, formerly with the UNRRA in Greece. Mrs. Kelsey told of the work with UNRRA in Greece where her husband is also serving, as a director and consultant in the field of agricultural planning. Mrs. Kelsey served as a home-visitor, giving relief to civilians crippled by the war. She compared conditions there to those in Puerto Rico. There are no longer people dying in the streets, but the general malnutrition weakens the entire Greek population. The reconstruction program in Greece should soon surpass the need for relief from UNRRA. Industry and agriculture are coming back, slowly, with more tools and materials to build a strong economy. The informal talk by Mrs. Kelsey left no doubt that the UNRRA is engaged in a highly essential work of love for the rest of the suffering world.

WATCH NIGHT

George Furse, former Unit member now studying social work at the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras, began the evening by speaking to the Puerto Rico Study Group on the social problems of the unemployed, disabled, and diseased people of the Island. He also conducted the question period that followed.

The film "Los Rabanos", written by Stan Sobel and filmed by Henry Dasenbrock in the early summer of 1945, having recently arrived here for several showings, was shown to the Unit members, most of whom were seeing it for the first time. It is a 3-reel, 40-minute color movie of the work of the members of the Project here at that time, and it helped us to get a better perspective of our present work. In it we saw a few of the present members of the Unit, those former members which have left since our arrival, and many of those other alumni whom we have never yet met. The film is available through BSC in Elgin for showing to groups.

At eleven o'clock the Unit members gathered together for the watch-night service. We were privileged in having Rev. & Mrs. William Hastings, pastor of Union Church in Santurce, to conduct this service. Rev. Hastings led the opening worship after which Mrs. Hastings spoke of the closing of the old year and the beginning of the new year as the walking down the hallway of life with old opportunities closing forever behind us, but yet the new opportunities open up before us. Rev. Hastings then added the thought that in order to be more effective workers for the kingdom of God on earth we must show our love for people, and go out among them and experience their experiences to gain a better understanding of them. In this he used for illustration incidents from the life and work of Paul the Apostle and of Frank Lauback, the noted linguist. The service closed with sentence prayers, and with silent prayer as the new year approached.

FOR THE BOOK SHELF

THE STRICKEN LAND, by Rexford G. Tugwell (Doubleday) \$4.50. The long-awaited book on Puerto Rico by its last continental governor. Long, but interesting. It discusses the war, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Puerto Rico--all of course from Mr. Tugwell's own particular point of view. It is the latest additon to the Unit's library and we recommend it. Reviews of it appear in Time magazine for Dec. 30th, page 50 and in The New Yorker for January 11th, 1947 on page 78.

PERSONNEL NEWS:--Walter Keiser, construction foreman for the three new houses for the doctors, left by plane on December 21st to spend the Christmas season at home with his family in Lakeville, Indiana. He returned on Three Kings Day, January 6th, bringing with him Mrs. Lucy M. Burke of Bremen, Indiana, who is Dr. Homer Burke's mother. This was her first plane trip, and she enjoyed it in spite of the misgivings of many of her friends in the States. She also enjoys our tropical weather (in contrast to the near-zero weather of northern Indiana at the time she left), as well as the bananas and oranges.

Lois Mae Graybill of Wenatchee, Washington arrived on Christmas Eve to visit Maurice Click. Near Baltimore her Universal plane was overtaken and run into by a faster plane of the Eastern Airlines causing both planes to make forced landings without injury to any of the eighty-five passengers and crew members. Consequently she was three days late in arriving, but finally arrived at Castaner about 5:30 Christmas Eve, badly shaken but happy.

Howard Long, Byron Shearer, Robert Stanley and Cecil Wickline received their CPS discharges on December 10th. The only person now left in CPS is Paul Snaveley.

On December 23rd the Burkes held open house in their new home--the first of three houses for doctors to be completed. The work had progressed enough to permit them to begin moving in by November 15th. The second house will soon be ready for occupancy by the Helfricks, and the third house's foundation has been laid.

DECEMBER VISITORS:--Mr. & Mrs. H. W. Gilbertson of the Extension Service of the U. S. Dept. of Agriculture in Washington, D. C.; Antonio Atilas of the Extension Service at Rio Piedras; Mr. Suarez of Jayuya, promoter of cooperatives for the University of Puerto Rico; Toro Calder of Adjuntas, also a cooperative promoter; Emilia Figueroa, superintendent of nurses for the Dept. of Health in San Juan; Maria Pemental de Pey, superintendent of local nurses at Lares; Constancio Vargas, public health nurse of Lares; Luis R. Ramos, medical director at Lares; Jennie C. Walker, Mary Jo Rust, Mrs. Lucile Rust of Manhattan, Kansas (Kansas State College), Bernice and Lucy Huff of Chapman, Kansas, Martha L. Foncke of Saratoga Springs, N.Y., Mary Beth Loshbaugh of Westphalia, Kansas and Maurine Carver of Crookston, Nebraska, all teaching at Robinson School in Santurce, Puerto Rico; Dr. and Mrs. H. Clair Amstutz, and Barbara, Vivian, John and Carolyn, medical director at La Plata Project; George L. Furse, former Castanerite, now graduate student of social work at the University of Puerto Rico (he was Santa Claus at the Christmas party in the Community Center); Mrs. Lincoln D. Kelsey of UNRRA in Greece (see page 4); and Rev. and Mrs. William Hastings, and son Charles, pastor of Union Church in Santurce; and Jean Alexander of the El Guacio Presbyterian Project.

Latest Addresses of Castaner Alumni
(Corrections or Changes from the October 1st Newsletter)

George Furse, Box 786, Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico
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Addresses of Castaner Young People in the States

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