

Castañer Newsletter

BRUMBAUGH RECONSTRUCTION UNIT

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LAS NAVIDADES EN PUERTO RICO

The Christmas Season in Puerto Rico is quite extended, covering three holidays --Christmas, Day, New Year's Day and Three Kings' Day. The season's festivities begin about the last day of school before the vacation with a program and gift exchange at school. The children, of course, have had to spend extra time for two or three weeks in advance of this preparing for the Christmas program which includes a drama of the Nativity scene, and also shorter dramas on how Christmas is celebrated in Latin American lands. The program also includes a great deal of poetry which is always presented with the excited and expressive zeal of an orator. And, especially in Puerto Rico, it could not be a good Christmas program without music. Many Christmas carols both in Spanish and English are sung, with perhaps one or two sung in Latin. Some of our more familiar carols are sung in Spanish translation to our familiar tunes. Their carols are known as aguinaldos and are usually accompanied by the music of a guitar. The words are in four-line stanzas and are joyous, but the music is high-pitched and melancholy and sorrowful, yet its rhythm is rather light-hearted. During this season one frequently encounters along the mountain roads, and occasionally even in the city streets, two or three clownishly costumed men, singing aguinaldos to the accompaniment of a guitar played by one of the group. They go about the countryside, stopping before stores in the cities, and before people's houses in the country, singing and presenting short skits and thus providing a bit of merry entertainment.

Christmas Day itself is not the customary day of gifts as in the north, except in the cities where many families have changed more or less to continental ways. Instead, the Day of the Three Kings on January 6th, commemorating the visit and bringing of gifts by the Wise Men, is the usual day for gifts to be exchanged.

New Year's Day is celebrated much as in the States, with many people staying up till midnight to see the New Year in. The New Year is often welcomed by the sound of horns and firecrackers. Some people like to ask questions of others which they cannot answer, then tell them it was the Old Year. This is somewhat in the form of April Fool in the States.

The climax of this season of holidays is the Day of the Three Kings. Although the children are acquainted with Santa Claus because of their school programs, they particularly look forward to the visit of the Three Kings. Likewise, since there are practically no chimneys or fireplaces here, the children hang no stockings at Christmas (they often have no stockings, anyhow), but, rather, they leave some fodder for the camels of the Three Kings under their beds or hammocks, or at the doorstep, hoping this thoughtfulness will be appreciated if the Three Kings come, and they might leave a toy as a gift for the children.

And this is the day of feasting at least once in the year, in such manner as the family can afford. Whenever possible the family and relatives gather together to have a lechón asado (roast pig) dinner. By getting together thus they are sometimes able to afford such a feast and everyone has a good time.

Since few homes have anything but open charcoal fires for cooking purposes, using tin cans for kettles, and large lard tins for ovens, it is quite obvious that the lechon will not be over-roasted. A very young pig, weighing about 75 pounds is selected, killed, and cleaned, but left all in one piece. Garlic, onion, salt, pepper and spices are put into small incisions in the meat, and a strong wooden pole about eight feet long is put through the pig from end to end, the pig is nailed to this pole and his feet tied. Then he is turned slowly for many hours over a hot charcoal fire in the backyard. After several hours the pig is done, and it is carved with a machete and served with other favorite Puerto Rican dishes such as arroz con pollo (rice with chicken), baked platano (plantain) which is something like a banana, and the inevitable rice and beans. Not to be overlooked, are the pasteles which are the Island's equivalent of Mexican tamales, though they are usually not so hotly spiced. These are made of meat and vegetables molded into a dough of banana, platano, potato or yautia, then wrapped in a wilted banana leaf and boiled.

Such is the celebration of the Christmas season by our neighbors and fellow American citizens on an island having no snow, no chimneys or fireplaces. The Christmas tree is rarely seen here, and in its place many homes have a decorative reproduction of the Nativity Scene.

THREE KINGS' DAY PARTY

Because the practice of continually giving things to the people of the community has in some ways had a retarding effect on their growth in responsibility, the Center staff decided not to give toys and gifts to the children at their Three Kings' Day party this year. As a result we received a few packages of gifts from interested churches in the States. These gifts we were able to use more effectively in our club groups. Each club drew names for a Christmas party, and then each one paid a small fee to purchase their gift to give in the gift exchange. The money from this was used to buy candy for the children's party.

The Three Kings' Day party was held at 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, January 3rd. The community children began arriving soon after dinner, and before two o'clock a few games were organized for them on the playground. However, on this day the majority of them were more interested in being certain that they got inside the Center as soon as the doors were opened.

Our program began with a short movie (with the new movie projector) about a circus. After this movie, Father Bauza of the Episcopal Church at Bartolo about four miles away, told the story of the Nativity in accompaniment to slides. He also told the story of "When the Littlest Camel Knelt" which was illustrated by slides.

Immediately after the slides Santa Claus (portrayed by Knight Webster who was recognized in about 30 seconds by all the children) came in from the stage with a large bag filled with sacks of candy. The children then were formed into three lines (with the much-needed assistance of other unit members) and each child received his sack of candy as he passed out of the door of the Community Center. By the number of sacks of candy that were given to the children, there were at least 500 children in the Center for the party, and many of them had their parents with them. It was jammed way past its rightful capacity.

AN ALUMNI EVALUATION

Stanley Harbison came to Castaner on July 31, 1943, followed by Jean on August 27th. They worked here until after New Year's of 1946 when they established the Presbyterian Project at El Guacio between San Sebastian and Las Marias. On December 5, 1947 they left the busy and now well-established project of El Guacio to return to their home at 1018 West 38th Street, Kansas City 2, Missouri. After four and one-half years of service in Puerto Rico they have written the following evaluation of their experience and the general situation in Puerto Rico.

1. Puerto Rico has always been a colony of an empire--first, Spain, and now the United States. We had no real appreciation before of what such a status does psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually to a people over hundreds of years. Specifically, we have seen how imperialism (1) slowly deadens a people's initiative and spirit of self-confidence, (2) makes a people suffer a national inferiority complex which involves the necessity for setting up a continuous self-apology, and self-defense, (3) accentuates pride. Calls it forth more predominantly as its only effective defense, when political domination by others deprives it of other, more effective alternatives, (4) cultivates lack of responsibility, the idea that since others are running the show, why should we concern ourselves, (5) creates an intense emotional hunger for a sense of freedom and liberty. These traits we see in the Puerto Rican community as a whole and they, today, in our opinion form the greatest obstacles in the way of those Puerto Rican leaders and reformers who are struggling heroically to break them down and arouse in the people their native qualities, so long made dormant by dominating imperial powers.

2. Puerto Rico is a highly civilized part of the world, with which the over-all continental American community would be proud to be associated, if the people were informed as to the island and its people and its life. Its people, in their effort to achieve economic prosperity, social justice, and political equality are at this moment carrying on social experiments of a daring nature, which may offer great help to the United States in our similar battles with poverty, disease, ignorance, etc. By working with Puerto Rican educators, social experimenters, and technical experts we have gained an insight into how a people can attack severe human problems such as over-population, poverty, ignorance, inadequate housing, sickness, etc. and make strides toward their solution. These techniques have value in the Christian concern for the abundant life of all people.

3. Puerto Rico is courageously striving for political freedom and will be free even if this entails political separation from the United States. A great many of its people wish freedom within the framework of the North American political system, but are beginning to doubt if such freedom can ever be achieved in the light of continued American colonial practices that involve an attitude of superiority, coupled with the political chains of being governed by a political power in which the Island has no representation. The United States threw off its colonial system because its people would not tolerate government without representation. Puerto Rico will do likewise--and sincerely wants to do so peacefully, and for the greatest mutual benefit of all concerned, maintaining throughout friendship with the United States. Personally, we sympathize with Puerto Rico's struggle for independence and feel such independence must evolve, complete with political autonomy here, accompanied by a favorable economic stability necessary to maintain such political autonomy.

4. Christian young people (although unspecialized yet in skills, and serving for the most part as volunteers) in their desire to throw modern light on the ancient precepts that God is love, and that love is the most powerful force in the earth, have established projects of Christian service in four sections of the Island which are fundamentally transforming human life and circumstance and have gained the sincere appreciation of the Island's government and people, to whom they are a solid, forceful witness of Christ in this modern age.

5. Life in its essence is the organization for human survival of but a few simple necessities. In the extreme poverty we have struggled with here in the mountain area, we have marvelled that people can live with so little,-- a simple shelter from the rain, wood for fuel for cooking on a few stones, tin cans, gourds, or clay crocks for vessels to cook in and eat from, a hammock to sleep in, a long knife (the macheto) and hoe to work with in the woods and fields, a few clothes, a tiny sea chest to hold one's total possessions. As far as we are concerned, our life has been reduced to these more simple aspects: food to sustain normal health, simple clothing, and a simply furnished room to sleep and study in have comprised the essentials here. Beyond these, books and music have been necessary to feed our minds which differ from those of rural friends here only in the fact that ours have had the privilege of going to school. The "frills" which modern society had taught us to want and have, have become quite unessential, and we have learned, are sometimes inhibiting to the kind of life we want to live. For lack of pre-occupation with them we know we have had more time and opportunity to concentrate on real values of a spiritual nature, which in time have aided us to become useful in the difficult task here before us. We did not come by this naturally. The poverty of the people we came to help forced it upon us. We could not expect to flaunt in their thin faces the superficial richness of the American life and at the same time gain their respect and confidence in their battle to stay alive. We have seen great nobility among the poorest. We have seen great generosity where people have almost nothing. We have been inspired by the finest courage existing among what we formerly might have scorned as the "down-trodden". We bow humbly before these simple folks, thankful that they have led us a few steps closer to a simpler life, thankful that through them we have gained some measure of freedom from "things" that are no longer essential. Just as we had to learn to live simple in order to earn the respect of those we wanted to help, we are sure our nation and its people must find the way to great simplicity of life, if we would gain the respect of other nations and lead them to peace.

SOMETHING FOR THE BOYS

The Women's Embroidery Industry has received some response to the article that appeared in the October 1st Newsletter. It is hoped that more of you will be interested enough to write for a price list and information concerning the work that is being done by the women in this community. If you know of a gift shop in your community, approach them about handling this Puerto Rican needlework. If you do some entertaining in your home, why not buy a luncheon cloth or a tablecloth from Castaner? It would serve two purposes--that of giving you pleasure in using it, and also advertising this needlework to your friends.

Tablecloths for six, eight or ten people are now being made in white Indian-head 54" wide. Tablecloths in linen will be made upon order.

The needlework industry is now making good neckties for men with a Puerto Rican design embroidered on them. Another new item is the 36" square head scarf.

When writing to the Industry, please address all letters to Mrs. Waler Haag, Castaner, Puerto Rico.

HEIFER NUMBER SEVEN

Over two and a half years ago, on the 25th of May in 1945 a shipment of fifty heifers for relief arrived in San Juan. Half of these were assigned to the Farm Security Administration for distribution and the other half to the PRRA. Of the PRRA assignment, six heifers and a bull were allotted to each of the then-CPS-operated hospitals at La Plata and Castaner. These six Holstein heifers are good milk producers. And since their arrival at Castaner they have had eight live calves (two others were born dead). But all eight of these calves were bull calves. These have been sold to various places as they are excellent breeding stock. One of them was sold to El Guacío Project. Now at last, the day has arrived when we have here a second generation Brethren heifer, for one was born on December 30th, 1947 and the latest reports are that it is doing very well.

CO-OP REPORT

In the August 1st Newsletter there was an article on the Consumers Cooperative Store at Castaner, along with its first quarterly report. Now the first semi-annual report is ready. A correction should be made in the August article. At that time the co-op had 180, not 80 member families. This has now increased by six families to 186, and other families are also buying a share (which is \$5.00) gradually by paying 25¢ every week or month as they are able until a full share is purchased. So the share capital has risen from \$2370 for the 1st quarter to \$2422 at this time. The co-op has equipment worth \$986 including scales, a Norge refrigerator, a Kelvinator bottle cooler and a cake display box. There is also an ice cream cabinet on loan from a dealer. The total sales for the first six months period have been \$33,181.80 yielding to the members a net benefit of \$2280 or nearly 7%. The employees have also been granted a raise in salary.

CHRISTMAS SUPPER AND PARTY

On the evening of December 23rd the unit had the pleasant surprise of a round-robin dinner. At a recent unit meeting a paper was passed asking which people would prefer salad first, the main course first, dessert first, or whichever you could get first. All people met in the Casa Grande at supper-time on the 23rd and on the basis of the paper filled out at unit meeting they were divided into three groups. The names were read off, and the first group formed and went to the Burkes' home where they enjoyed the main course of chicken dinner. A second group was formed which went to the home of the Myers where they had the salad course. The other group went to the director's home where the Wolfes served the dessert. After about a half hour at these homes the groups rotated so that eventually everyone had enjoyed a delicious three-course dinner.

The next evening was Christmas Eve, and of course the Unit members had a big party. There were many games, most of them of the active type, although some demonstrated the artistic ability of the party-goers. The party took place in the large living room of the Casa Grande. After a considerable amount of these games, which were quite varied and received most enthusiastic participation, the group was ready to rest up a bit by singing all the Christmas carols they knew by memory. Then suddenly the tension mounted again as Santa appeared--and a right jolly Santa, too, was Thelma Strite. After the fun of the gift exchange the refreshments were served. Thus ended a very lively and successful party in a well-decorated room with also a Christmas tree of tropical pine.

HERE AND THERE ABOUT CASTANER

A Dedication:--Upon the invitation of the Mayor of Adjuntas, Jose B. Barcelo, several Unit members attended the dedication of the new Fire Station in Adjuntas, which took place on the afternoon of Saturday, December 20th. There were many long and flowery speeches, one was practically an oration, and there was a considerable political content to the speeches (after all, 1948 is election year in Puerto Rico, too). A Catholic priest gave his blessing to the building, which is a bright yellow with red trimming. There were many official visitors from other cities and towns around the Island. After all the speech-making the visiting fire department from Ponce gave a very interesting demonstration in a nearby street along the plaza of the use of their equipment.

A Wedding:--On Sunday afternoon of December 21st Virginia Vera and Enrique Guzman were married in Adjuntas. In the evening many of the Unit members attended the reception held at the bride's home. Virginia has worked in the hospital and in the clinics as a nurse-aid for about a year.

CASTANER VISITORS FOR NOVEMBER:--Mr. and Mrs. Efrain Mestey and Blanca Mestey, of Santurce. Mr. Mestey is a clerk in the Naval Base in San Juan. Governor of Puerto Rico, Jesus T. Pinero, and his secretary, Mr. Emilio Lopez and Mr. James P. Davis, head of the Division of Territories and Possessions of the Department of Interior of the United States (see page 1 of December 1st Newsletter); Mayor of Adjuntas, Jose B. Barcelo; George Furse, ex-Castanerite now doing social work in Las Marias; Prof. Robert Carlson, director of the Masa Coral (a capella choir) of Polytechnic Institute; Dr. and Mrs. Elliott, he is chaplain of the college as well as professor of religion and philosophy; and Mr. and Mrs. Boyd B. Palmer, he is dean of men and biology professor and she is English professor--all are from Polytechnic Institute at San German; Ruth Idleman, special student and school nurse; and Wanda Brown, freshman, both Castanerites and studying at Polytech this year; Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Lauver, director of the Mennonite Project at La Plata; and Mr. and Mrs. Ezra C. Bender, secretary of the Mennonite Church with headquarters at Elkhart, Indiana.

CASTANER VISITORS FOR DECEMBER:--Ivan and Thelma Chatham, director of the Zalduondo Project of the Congregational Church, with their daughter Jeanne; Miss Freda, sister of Mrs. Chatham and a nurse from Piney Creek, Ohio; Miss Chalcea White, professor of Home Economics in Parksville College of Prksville, Missouri; Dr. Marianne Goettsch of the School of Tropical Medicine in San Juan; Miss Mary Aguayo, clerk of the Supreme Court, and her adopted son, Felix; Paul Stucky, a former member of the La Plata Project; Rev. E. A. Kreider, secretary of the General Mission Board of the General Conference Mennonites; Roy Henry, a teacher at the Baptist Academy at Barranquitas.

Rev. C. E. Eller of Salem, Virginia, father of Edna Eller, one of our hospital nurses. He arrived unexpectedly, hence no one was able to meet him at the airport at the end of his first plan trip, but he was quite successful in finding his way out here from San Juan, nearly 100 miles. Rev. Eller preached at our morning worship on Sunday, January 4th. He will be returning home on January 10th which is his 78th birthday.

On December 30th John and Cruz Maria Groel visited the Project. In the evening John spoke to the unit about his experiences and impressions of Bolivia. John has been teaching English at the American Institute in La Paz for over two years and for the past year Cruz Maria has been teaching home economics there. After a short visit at Cruz Maria's parents' home in Lares they left for John's home in Maplewood, New Jersey. Both are former unit members.