

CASTANER

NEWSLETTER

BRETHREN SERVICE PROJECT
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Castaner, Puerto Rico

BRETHREN SERVICE COMMISSION
January 1, 1949

VANILLA, - ETC.

It was about eleven years ago that the PRRA (Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration) decided to organize the vanilla growing farmers into a Cooperative. This situation was a consequence of the very efficient extension work conducted by the Vanilla Unit, centered at the PRRA Castaner Project, which distributed among farmers throughout the island, thousands of seedlings for propagation through their field workers. The vanilla plantations grew beautifully on the highlands and semi-lowlands of Puerto Rico and the time ripened for the organization of the Vanilla Cooperative. One sunny Sunday morning about 30 farmers met at the Project and Organized the first and only Cooperative for Vanilla Growers in the world. In the meantime, PRRA executives decided that a Curing Plant to process all the vanilla coming from the farmer-members was necessary and consequently they appropriated \$45,000 to build one; a solid concrete structure about 100' x 45' constructed in the heart of Castaner and unquestionably the only of its kind in the world.

The Cooperative started business in 1939; about 500 pounds of cured beans were sold that year in the New York market at about \$8.00 per pound. The years went by and the Cooperative was growing steadily in membership and economic importance. The green beans input rose to 30,000 pounds and selling prices went to \$10.00 per pound, the highest sale being during the 1942 crop. War emergencies and other factors such as difficulties in transportation for other vanilla growers in the world, such as Madagascar, Mexico, etc., enhanced our vanilla prestige in the mainland during the period from 1942 to 1946 and the Cooperative which started with 30 members rose to a new high: 165 members sending their product from all parts of the island into the Plant. The undisputed quality and commercial packing of our product did the trick. Now, the Cooperative is on its own feet and the Curing Plant and equipment, as well as the land, has been leased from the Federal Government for ten years.

The Vanilla Curing Plant has been an asset in the economic situation of the Castaner community in so far as we steadily employ a certain number of laborers during the year and train them in the difficult work of vanilla curing. In passing, we should say that we have developed, after some experiments, our own curing technique which in no way resembles the Mexican and Madagascar curing, these two nations being the pioneers of the trade for more than a century. Also we have contributed to the actual rating of the local Post Office in handling a great volume of mail and packages throughout the year. We have repeatedly cooperated in whatever way we could with the Castaner Brethren Unit by loaning laboratory equipment and various reagents which we do not actually use, for which we are very proud. The Plant has been time and again a potential storm-proof

quarter for the hospital patients during the hurricane season of the island. All visitors to the Castaner Project and members of the Castaner Unit are always welcome to inspect all our premises and the management has explained the whole vanilla curing process to no less than 200 people during the past 4 years.

Speaking of Cooperatives, it is unfair if we do not mention the valuable cooperation we received year after year from the Castaner Unit during our annual conventions, when about 200 visitors gather in our Plant for business discussions and entertainment. They (the Castaner Unit) willingly loan all their table ware and kitchen utensils, as well as their personal help, during the convention for which we now publicly acknowledge.

We firmly believe that these two organizations, the Castaner Brethren Unit and the Vanilla Curing Plant are the two principle attractions to visitors from the island and abroad, and both have contributed to set Castaner on the map. Some of them have even hinted the possibility of constructing a hotel and other tourist attractions in the project, taking advantage of the delicious climate and beautiful scenery all through the year.

The PRRA Project itself grows coffee as a main crop with other supplementary and cash crops. It is self-supporting and the budget for its maintenance runs to \$70,000 yearly from Federal funds. It stands about 1200' above sea level and the average temperature is 74 F; precipitation averages 60 inches, heavy rains usually falling during September and October, but with a more or less steady dry season during the beginning of the year which lasts for three months. At this time picnics, hikes, dances in the open, moving pictures, in the open and the like are scheduled. It has a concrete basket-ball and tennis court with bleachers and artificial lights for night playing, a standard baseball field and track field. Castanerites buy their groceries and commodities from a General Store, cooperatively owned by them. There is a restaurant for passers-by and visitors; also a privately owned boarding house for the school teachers during school days and special meals are served to special guests. There is a bus terminal and quite a few public cars to take passengers to and from Castaner from near-by towns.

The school situation is progressing steadily. The local Second Unit school is a modern structure built by PRRA and donated to the Insular Department of Education, which takes care of an enrollment of 300 all-day students up to the ninth grade, including Vocational Courses in Agriculture and Manual Arts. The Castaner Brethren Unit also sponsors a High School for all-day students who otherwise would have to attend nearby towns' High Schools. This High School (Brethren Academy) is one of the outstanding achievements in the school situation.

We cannot finish this article without acknowledging the wonderful social work that the Castaner Brethren Unit is doing for the community. Their Hospital is one of two such sponsored on the island and the health of the natives, especially school children, has improved a lot. They handle everything from a simple bruise to a complicated major operation, without expecting anything in

return but the good-will of the community and the pleasure of serving their neighbors. This hospital is God-sent to this community and no other rural section can boast of one except possibly La Plata section near Aibonita.

We firmly believe that Dr. Burke and his co-workers are really doing miracles with their small income and we also feel that another doctor is deemed necessary to let the Doc have a few hours to relax in his own home before the next shift. It seems to us that if they could have 4 doctors at a time during the past, the authorities at Elgin could appoint just one more now, more so, when the unit has acquired from PRRA some of the buildings and a huge piece of land to make their Unit a permanent affair.

The reader please note that the undersigned was trying to discuss the Vanilla Plant topic, but other very important items, although out of the main discussion, have flowed into our minds and we simply could not disregard them when we were sitting in front of our typewriter, so, we apologize and humbly ask for your indulgence. Nevertheless, you are lucky enough that we did not start talking about ham-radio.....

By Rafeal Santiago Esbri, BSA
Manager Vanilla Growers Coop.

NEW WORKERS

Since the third of December we have had six newcomers added to our staff of workers. Five Brethren Volunteer Service workers, Paul Cheeks, James Morgan, Harold Mason, Charles Messamer and Vergean Birkin, arrived by plane from New York on December 3, after having completed three months training at New Windsor.

Paul Cheeks is from Union Bridge, Maryland. He was graduated from high school in 1947 and since that time has been farming. At home he is active in young peoples work. His hobby is reading.

James Morgan from Anderson, Indiana has several hobbies; radio and collecting stamps, coins and novelties. Before going into training at New Windsor, Jim was janitor in a dairy for eight or nine years.

Harold Mason from Dawn, Missouri was graduated from high school in 1946. He has been doing farm work. His interest is photography.

Charles (Duke) Messamer from Minburn, Iowa was graduated from High school in 1946. Since then he has taken cattle boat trips to China New Zealand and spent one year at McPherson College.

Vergean Birkin is a pastor's son and consequently has claimed a number of places as home. At the present time he claims Haxtun, Colorado where his father is pastor. He was graduated from high school in 1948. His hobbies and special interests are radio, photography, woodworking, physics, chemistry, English and Latin.

At the present time these boys are spending their energies in our construction and moving program. We appreciate the lively spirit they have brought to Casa Grande and the musical talent they have added to our worship services.

On December 16 Martha Cocanower from Pioneer, Ohio arrived via plane from New York. Martha was graduated from Manchester College in 1930. She did office work for a number of years. In 1944 she received her Masters Degree in Religious Education from Bethany Biblical Seminary. Since that time she has been teaching religious education in the schools at Bryan, Ohio. She likes to collect good poetry and helpful sayings and thoughts. At present she is working in the Unit office.

We welcome each of these new workers.

Ruth Ebey

CHURCH NEWS

December 2 was our regular quarterly church council. Dale Roesch's resignation as S. S. Superintendent was accepted and Martha Rupel was elected to take his place.

It was decided to set aside \$75.00 for the use of our Social Workers to help needy families. The Unit members English S. S. class decided to divide. Part are using the International lessons with James Morgan as teacher. The other group is studying the harmony of the Four Gospels with Alys Haag as teacher.

John Kidwell

PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAM

A. School and Home Visitation

The jeep stopped. Mrs. Burke shifted into the four wheel drive, nodded toward the mountain side and said that we were going up the road. Altho being used to the mountains, I couldn't see much of the road, but we went anyway, for a short distance then crept thru mud holes, jolting over rocks and rills until finally we arrived at a very small school building. "What are all those people standing around for?" "Those are some of the parents who have come to be sure their children take the treatment." "For that is what it is all about. Worm treatment today! Nobody likes it, but each one takes it because he knows it is good for him (or because his mother says so). So each has his glass, and an orange on which is suck quickly after taking the nasty medicine.

The Public Health program includes the work in the schools, the clinics and home visitations, which is usually the follow-up of cases found in the schools and clinics. Of the 8 schools that are being visited, half cannot be reached even by jeep, so a more primitive method must be used. The worm treatment is given in each one for a least 95% of those who have had stool examinations have one and sometimes two kinds of worms. Often others who are not in school come to receive the treatment also. Besides the worm treatment, there is immunization against diphtheria, typhoid, and small pox, and a T.B. patch test given. This fall, because of lack of materials and funds, much of the immunization has had to be limited to the first grades, with a booster shot to some of the second graders.

The vicious circle of hookworm infection, treatment and re-infection will continue as long as there is a lack of proper toilet facilities. It is hoped with added personnel the work of providing privies may be continued. It seems the greatest problem facing the Public Health program is that of Tuberculosis. It is necessary not only to help the sick person, but also to protect the rest of the family from contracting the disease. With the small poorly furnished houses, large families, insufficient food, economic conditions and few sanitariums and hospital beds, the prospects of helping much seems almost hopeless. The most that can be done is to visit in the homes and continually teach how to care for the patient, and the family for the greatest protection of all. This is a great challenge, but just now the language difficulty seems to loom up in the way. One would wish that those who built the Tower of Babel had not been quite so ambitious.

Martha Rupel

B. Clinics

Since Miss Selpa left the Public Health Clinic last August to study in San Juan, I have been trying to take over. We have cut the clinics down to just two mornings a week to Rio Prieto. On Wednesday one week we give worm medicine, and the next week is parental clinic. Every Friday morning is the well baby clinic. Due to the fact that it is quite a hike from Rio Prieto to the hospital, I would say that at least half of the babies that come are sick, malnutrition, worms, and many skin infections.

The clinic across the street at Bartolo is more active. Monday morning it is for the school age children up to 14 years of age. Monday afternoon you can still find Dr. Burke pulling teeth. He has from 20 to 40 patients in one afternoon. Tuesday morning is T.B. clinic. We keep checking those who have T.B. and take X-Rays on new patients. Tuesday P.M. is parental again. Wednesday afternoon is well baby clinic. It is a great joy to see the difference in the babies who have closer supervision than those who do not. New borns and up to one year come in once a month. When they are six months old they all get their first diptheria shot. I would say that the most of them respond just like any normal baby would - cry. Friday afternoon in GYN clinic where the mothers come back for their post natal exam. Early Saturday morning I am found giving worm medicine again. Most of these patients are adults and pre-school children. The school age group get their pregnates in school.

When there is no work in the clinics I work in the hospital.
Fern Kring.

MOVING PROGRESS

The hospital is two thirds under roof. The petitions are going up, the sewage pipes are placed, electric wiring is started, ready to start the foundation on the 120 foot living quarters. The shop has been moved and equipment arranged.

Marguerite Burke

VISITORS

Dec. 5. The Walter Keiser Family spent Sunday at the unit, with them came Mrs. Marshall K. Powers. Her husband is a teacher in the Social Science Dept. at Poly Technic Institute. The Powers' came here from Colorado.

Dec. 16. Mrs. Lucy Burke, mother of Dr. Homer L. Burke arrived by plane from Miami. It is her second visit to Puerto Rico, but she can scarcely be classified as a visitor, for she is already busy mending hospital linens, making new mattresses, etc.

Dec. 21. Dr. Cesar Negretti, Public Health Officer of Las Marias and Mayor of Las Marias.

Dec. 26. Harland Gibson, former Unit member, his friend Daisy Crooke from East Orange, N. J. and Ilo Steward a teacher from Robinson School in Santruce spent the night with us.

Dec. 28. Justus Holsinger, director of the La Platta Mennonite Unit brought seven of their newer workers to see our unit. They were Mr. and Mrs. O. J. Stucky, Issac Fredrick, Addona Nissley, Ezra Peachy, Emma Showalter and Orin Kaufman.

Also on the 28th Dr. Rice-ray who is the public health supervisor for this area called in for a short visit. With her was her teen age daughter and friend.

Dec. 29. We were honored by the visit of Governor Ernest Gruening of Alaska, his wife Mrs. Dorothy S. Gruening, Delegate E. N. Bartlett, and Sr. Guillermo Esteves were with him. The Governor had several interests in his visit to the Island. He had served as the first PRRA Administrator on the island and he is a very good friend of Munos Marin and so he is here for the latter's inauguration, Jan. 2.

Dec. 30. Ermalinda Selpa, our former Public Health Clinic nurse spent several days visiting here. The record is not complete without mentioning Carmen Flores who is here with her parents for a vacation and is seen often about the project among her friends. (See "A Visit to Castaner" in this issue). The Dr. Myer's family from Adjuntas has been out several times on business and pleasure trips. And last but not least, Mayor of Adjuntas, Sr. Jose Barselo, has been here at the Project several times bringing patients to the hospital and helping the Unit in some of our many difficult problems.

A VISIT TO CASTANER

It has been one year and six months since I went away. Really many things seem different to me. Now, I feel I would like to stay down here and work in the project rather than go back to the States.

I do enjoy the S. S. in Spanish and Prayer Meeting on Thursday night in Spanish too. Oh yes, the new hospital up in Llinas looks very nice and it is very important to this community. The same as the new academic school up on the Grillasca Road. It is wonderful for those who can't afford to go to the other schools.

I am very happy the Kingdom of God is being builded in this community too.

Carmen Flores

Ed. Note: Carmen is a local Castaner girl who took the nurse aid course at the Unit. She worked for two years in the Out Patient Dept. before going to West Milton, Ohio where she has worked in the hospital for 18 months.

SOCIAL EVENTS

A. The Unit

The month of December 1948 held two successful socials for the members of the Castaner Project.

Dec. 25 "por la noche", our new school witnessed its first unit gathering by lantern light. In one corner was a Christmas tree with ornaments strung between the pine needles. The rest of the large room was practically filled with guests and all seemed to enjoy the games, gifts, and pop corn balls. Santa Clause was not able to come so Paul Cheeks acted substitute. His reward for helping Santa at such a critical time was a nice full bunch of almost ripe bananas.

The night of Dec. 31st found a group of unit members waiting up to bid the old year farewell and the new year in. They pulled taffy and had fun in general. At 11:30 they went to the baseball diamond where they sang songs and listened to poems around a camp fire. At the close Rev. Ebey gave a short talk and dismissed the group with prayer, followed by a short period of silence before the bells and whistles began their announcing of the New Year's arrival.

Chester Peckover

B. The School

On the afternoon of Dec. 24 the Brethren Academy celebrated its first Christmas at the Llinas House. Pupils and teachers exchanged names for gifts. There was a tree which the pupils had decorated with home made ornaments. There was a short program of music, vocal and instrumental and poetry. Then a few games were played. Then one of the boys acted as Santa's helper and passed out the gifts. Then there were slides of local people and places. After refreshments of ice cream and cake and orange juice, every one said "Merry Christmas" and went home.

Lynn Burke