

Mexican Idyll: Peons Into Padrones

By Bessie Beach Truehart

Mexico is dispensing the abundant life to her 90 per cent of under-privileged. They are making big farms into little ones down there below the border, and many of those big ones belonged to Americans.

Any Mexican citizen, under the present set-up, may claim four hectares (ten acres) of farm land, and a still larger share in the village commons, or grazing lands. A large family, consisting of father, mother, and several children of eighteen (the legal Mexican age) or older may thus acquire quite a sizeable ranch. And there is a government loan bank to finance the beginning of proprietorship for these former peons, who never before owned so much as the shadow under their sombreros, on the land where they were wont to labor as virtual serfs. These far-flung haciendas, some of them larger than European states, are now beginning to look like waffle irons; by law they are being cut up into minute sections and parcelled out to their former employes.

Under the law, President Cardenas may limit any farm to 150 acres of irrigated land. Most persons might figure that they could worry a living out of a garden patch of those dimensions, but when the holdings of some Americans down there are considered, 150 acres look like a dinky corral.

William Jenkins, for instance, owns—or did, until the cutting-up began—272,000 acres in the state of Puebla. Similarly large tracts are owned in Sonora by Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney, the John Hays Hammond estate, and other prominent Americans. William Randolph Hearst counts his holdings in the tens of thousands. Our own state department, called upon to bolster its citizens' foreign interests, is wondering how it can consistently flay Mexico for doing what we ourselves advocated, putting the farm laborer on land of his own.

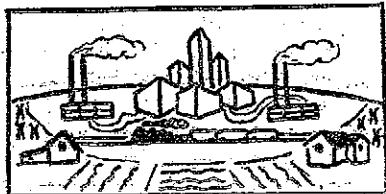
The Mexicans courteously offer to reimburse the dispossessed landlords. But here again Americans are floundering

in a ditch of their own digging. It is an old Yankee custom to report property for assessment at only a small part of its rental value. Americans transplanted this canny custom into Mexico, and it worked profitably for a while. But now, alas for Yankee acumen, Cardenas says, "You stated the value of your lands; we will pay you that amount." He then proceeds to pay in bonds which have no immediate, and (Americans say) a doubtful future, value.

Even the courts, traditional refuge of the privileged class, have had their claws clipped. Cardenas has gone Roosevelt one better in his Supreme Court reorganization plan. Terms of judges have been limited to six years, and they must run for office right along with the president. They are as dependent as any other politicians upon the favor of their constituents; whether or not their decisions are more just, they must at least be more popular than formerly. They recently refused to hear a test case of the constitutionality of the current seize-and-divide law.

The latest wholesale seizure of American owned lands under the Mexican socialization plan to be reported to Washington is that of Agua Caliente, California frontier resort, late playground of the movie stars.

What a pity that Mexico, shaking off the shackles of generations, is so destitute of intellectual leaders with real economic understanding! Professor R. B. Brinsmade of San Luis Potosi, one-time economic adviser to the Mexican government, was a Georgist of singular insight, and did splendid work in that country. He inspired the organization of the Union de Veteranos de la Revolucion, advocating the socialization of economic rent and the abolition of taxes. But Professor Brinsmade has



been dead over a year, and present leaders tend more to Marxist ideas.

Standing at the crossroads of economic change, it would be easy for Mexico to choose the right road. She has already burned her bridges behind her. But she is laying no genuine foundation for the future security of her people. This generation has benefitted by the changes growing out of her revolutionary land policy, since more citizens may own their homes and produce their living from the soil. But this very widening of the base will serve to establish absolute private ownership of land on a firmer foundation. When all the land of Mexico again has been taken up, who will provide the next, and the next, generation with land?

Mexicans can understand that the laws which gave virtually all their land into the hands of a few were unjust. But will they understand, at a later date when the shoe begins to pinch, that the principle is equally wrong, even though the land be monopolized by many instead of few, so long as some are born there who yet have no land they may call theirs?

Another disturbing feature, to counteract the growing Mexican freedom, is that, instead of drawing its necessary revenue from the natural source, land values, the state is penalizing industry heavily in taxation, just as in the United States. Capitalists are fearful of Mexico's future.

Mexico is in an evolutionary, as well as a revolutionary, stage. With her newly awakened faith in democracy, with the rapid spread of literacy and education, she may yet grow from a despotic into a free society. But such a transition needs careful nurturing—and her leaders with real economic understanding are pitifully few.

See: "Progress and Poverty," pp. 321-327; "Teachers Manual (P. & P.)," L. VI, Q. 33.

What a Man!

An economic royalist must be the man who can get a job without governmental assistance.