Costa Rican Friendships

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/homemaker/vol33/iss4/7
Since the time when she first struggled with Spanish verbs in high school, Linda Nelson, home economics education graduate of 1950, had hoped she would someday be able to put her Spanish to work. Upon graduation from Iowa State she realized that goal by enrolling for graduate study in the Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Sciences in Turrialba, Costa Rica.

Conducting a survey of kitchen facilities in Costa Rica was one of Linda’s projects while working for her Masters degree at the Institute. She carried on her research in Atirro, a small farming community organized in the feudal system. Under that system all land is owned by one man, called the patron, living in his own home in the village. The other 80 families of the community lived in ceded homes, meaning they could live in them rent-free as long as they worked on the farms. When she finished the survey, Linda turned over her findings to the community development program carried on by the Institute.

The Institute itself is sponsored by the Pan American Union as a research center for graduate students from any country in the Union. It is set up much as the graduate school at Iowa State, but places more emphasis on conditions in a tropical climate. Linda did her work in the division of economics and rural life, though study in animal and plant industry are also offered by the school.

A highpoint of the Costa Rican Easter festival is the parade. Three young girls dressed as the three Virgins walk ahead, while the younger girls dressed as angels are carried beside the statue of Christ.

Linda spent several weeks preceding her home interviews teaching school in Atirro for the purpose of gaining a broader outlook on the community. Her first attempt in winning the confidence of the local families began by translating popular English nursery rhymes for the children. She taught them the Spanish versions of “Farmer in the Dell” and other such rhymes.

The fact that school and church are often taught in the same building gave classes there a different atmosphere from our own. Linda says she never quite became used to seeing a blackboard with first grade reading sentences such as “This is a dog” placed next to the cross and candles left from Sunday service. However, she said it did serve to emphasize the close ties between church, school and community life.

Interviewing

Making her interviews, Linda found, was much easier after the teaching experience. By that time she had mastered the language, and many of the people knew her. The word soon passed around that “the lady who teaches English songs in the school” was coming.

The attitude of the Costa Rican people toward being interviewed is much different from the people in this country, she discovered. We usually wish to get it over quickly to get back to our own affairs, whereas in Costa Rica an interview provides a break in the woman’s daily routine. Frequently such an interview ended as a turnabout affair, with the housewife questioning her about family life in the United States. Linda was frequently asked to describe apple trees and snow, since Costa Ricans never see these things.

Religious holidays

Holidays in Costa Rica place much greater emphasis on religion and are not as commercialized as ours. The universal Christmas decoration is the manger scene or “portal,” which even the poorest homes have. These “portals” are beautifully decorated with plants and flowers native to the country.

A bull fight in San Jose was on Linda’s entertainment plans for New Year’s Day. Bull fights in Costa Rica, however, differ greatly from those in Mexico, she found. Anyone who cannot pay the fee to get into the arena may get in free if he agrees to enter the ring with the bull! Often as many as 150 people mill around together inside the ring. The sport, Linda says, reminds her of a game of dodge ball, since all the people are trying to dodge the bull. There is not much danger, but it offers plenty of excitement for the spectators. The bull is not killed as in Mexican fights.

On Easter Day a statue of Christ on the cross is carried through the streets, while small girls dressed

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International Social Whirl

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Although each student has a story all his own, the basic elements are the same in many instances. A promising young student is picked from all the others; he is the fortunate one to be sent abroad to study. He comes to Iowa State for technical know-how to pass on to his countrymen. Most such students miss their home lands very much and are anxious to return home and use the knowledge they have gained to help their country solve its problems, whether they be about irrigation or malnutrition.

Social activities at the M.U., churches and elsewhere help the student from another country fill the weekend hours when his American classmates are at home with their families or dating. The students don’t date much, due probably to attachments at home, different courtship practices or lack of countrymen to date. Some date and a few marry Americans, of course. Most students from outside the U.S. love this country, but the thought of home nags them to work hard so that they can return to their own family and friends.

Costa Rica

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as angels are carried on litters alongside, as if to protect the statue. To illustrate the strong religious feeling which prevails during the days preceding Easter, Linda describes the ceasing of mail delivery, public transportation and store business. Any cars driven through the streets at that time are stoned.

Linda found the Costa Rican people receptive to visitors who come in good faith and willing to share what they have. She feels that an experience such as hers is far richer than that of a tourist because she had the opportunity to live with the people and become a part of their rural life. As Linda Nelson describes her view on studying in a foreign country, “No one can ever take away the friendships I made or my new understanding about life and people in other parts of the world.”

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NOVEMBER, 1953