PORTO RICO AS IT IS

RANDOM JOTTINGS OF AN AMERICAN TRAVELER.

Chances for Settlers or Investors—Sugar Cane, Coffee Fruit and Tobacco—A Study of the Inhabitants—The Spanish Language.

I have seen nothing prettier on the whole island than the road from Rio Piedras to San Juan. It is lined with a wide variety of handsome tropical trees, fronting picturesque cottages. Flower gardens are plentiful, and occasionally one is laid out with some skill and taste. These evidences of culture are indeed rare and no American can visit the island without a feeling of disappointment at the lack of outward as well as inward home attractions.

San Juan, Ponce, Mayaguez, Aguadilla and Arecibo are all seaports and are really the only places of much consequence on the island. Arecibo is some fifty miles west from San Juan. The journey may be made by rail, although it is about as bad a railroad as I ever saw. The train conductors, however, were always considerate enough to delay the cars four or five minutes at the various stations, in order to give me such time as I needed to explore them, or to buy a drink of cocoanut milk from the peripatetic vender. Arecibo has some extremely picturesque environs. Five or six miles east of the town is a vertical rock that rises some 350 feet. About half way to its summit is an entrance which leads into a grotto that has a number of caverns, arches, stalactites and other curiosities. It may be added that this with the hot sulphur springs about five miles from Coamo on the military road in the southern part of the island, are really worth a visit from every American tourist. The hotel accommodations at the springs are the best that can be found on the island, Aguadilla, at the extreme northwestern portion of the island, is extremely picturesque, and Mayaguez has to my mind better opportunities for investment than either San Juan or Ponce.

Chance for Investment.

But what chance does Porto Rico offer to settlers or investors? The answering of this question is beset with difficulties because facts there are elusive as will-o'-wisps and as slippery a eels. This may account for the fine imagination and deft diction shown in so much that has been written about the island. To depend upon the native for information is to become bewildered by elaborate contradiction. The truthseeker will be told, for instance, that the rainy season begins and ends at periods varying acording to the number of natives he consults. Superficial candor will assure him that social life is a stream of unpolluted innocence and that its bestiality can be parallelled only by the worst days of imperial Rome; that life and property are fairly secure, and that villainy and outlawry stalk broadcast over the land. It is reported that before the Spaniards evacuated San Juan they released several hundreds of the worst types of criminals—murderers and brigands—from the island prison, sending them out broadcast through the country to resume their vocations of murder and rapine. Whilst this report is confirmed by our own soldiers, I have traveled all over the island alone, night and day, without molestation, or witnessing any crime flagrant or otherwise.

Thus when I turn to the prospects for labor and for capital, to the chances for the incoming investor and the worker, I soon learn to be guided only by facts acquired by observation, though not until it had cost me something in time and Spanish pesos. For illustration, it has been reported with a good deal of sincerity that there are good placer gold mines up in the mountains back of Rio Grande; that the women make six or seven dollars a week panning it out from the beds of the streams. Soldiers at Caguas told me they had seen the dust in possession of their comrades at Fajardo, but when I arrived at that town the gold had somehow flown back to Caguas. But yet the claim was still that there was plenty of gold in the mountains. "Mucho oro," said the native; "plenty of gold dust," said the American soldier. A twenty mile journey, however, a careful sifting of the story, and a much more exhaustive sifting of the sand in the beds of the creeks, demonstrated to my mind that there is only here and there a gold color in the locality. Possibly we may yet hear of rich Porto Rican gold mine companies, however, cash capital one unit and ciphers ad lib.

Coffee Culture.

But let us take less speculative enterprises—coffee raising, for example. Undeveloped coffee land can be purchased for twenty dollars per acre, provided a native does the buying. Americans will be charged twice that sum. Four years of hard work are required before any return whatever can be secured. Unless already wooded, trees must be planted to shade the coffee shrub, and the curcoa tree, which brings a profit in itself, is best for this purpose, although the more quickly maturing banana will answer. It is claimed that coffee can be grown without shade, but I am unable to find any thus produced under the hot Porto Rican sun. After the fourth year some berries may be picked, and the year when it is at its zenith. Eight production increases until the tenth hundred pounds of coffee is a good yield for an acre of ground, twenty cents Spanish money, per pound, is an average price, and sixteen dollars to the acre a fair estimate of the cost of cultivation and harvest. The coffee bloom is white, of a pleasant perfume, and the berry is attached closely to and encircling the branch. The berry is first green, then red, and lastly white. Like most tropical productions it ripens at such varying periods that several pickings are required. The best coffee shrubs are about six feet high, and the branches spread widely.

Sugar-cane plantations can be started in far less time, but while coffee is largely grown on the hillsides and clear to their tops, bottom lands are the best for cane, and these are not so easy to secure in Porto Rico. Cane requires but little cultivation, and it grows ten years in this country without replanting. The cost of extracting the sugar from the stalk is about twenty dollars on the gross product of over three hundred dollars per acre It may be added that in Louisiana, sugar cane must be replanted every three years. The cost of machinery for extraction—the engines, the boilers, the vats and the crushers—is heavy, but the grower of small means can take his cane to the mill very much as the farmer in the States used to take his corn, the miller returning the finished product after deducting toll. Good sugar cane land is easily worth one hundred dollars an acre and is usually held at a far higher value.

Tobacco land is worth quite as much as cane land, and no better tobacco can be grown on earth than on the island. For the man of small means fruit raising offers far greater attraction than anything else he can engage in. Fine oranges grow abundantly without cultivation, and the experienced grower who introduces the California navel fruit on the island will make a fortune. Land suitable for fruit can be had at a comparatively low figure, and with low freight rates and a line of steamers making the distance from San Juan to New York in three days, there can be no competition from other sources of supply.

Native Stores.

The general merchant will do well to keep away from the island at present. Almost every other house on the military road from Ponce to San Juan is a general store, and while the principal article of traffic is rum, they all carry a supply of such goods as are of common use and the consumptive capacity of the average native is at present woefully limited. It is noticeable that the average native buys his sugar, coffee, rice, and indeed, most of his groceries, by the single penny's worth.

The country needs a railway system to assist in its development and future prosperity, but it will require a Jim Hill or a Vanderbilt, with the patience of Job, to wait for its successful operation. A good deal has been said about a railroad around the island. The present status of Porto Rican railways is this: In 1878 a report was presented to the minister of the colonies embodying a study made by the engineer and head of public works, with the view of constructing a railroad which should start from the capital, and passing through all the chief towns near or on the coast, return to the point of departure, thus encircling the island. The provincial authorities finally let out the contract and gave the exclusive franchise to a French company for ninety-nine years and the guaranteed interest of eight per cent on the cost of construction. The company promised to complete the line in six years, but it did not carry out its contract, nor has the island treasurer paid its promised eight per cent interest. At present there are one hundred and twenty-seven miles of completed railroad under this contract and considerably more partly constructed. The roadbed is fairly good, but the running stock is of extremely inferior quality, and the rails in many places are well consumed or made badly defective by the damp climate. Coal for fuel is imported from the United States. The speed of trains is twelve or fourteen miles per hour. There are first, second and third class cars, and the fare is five, three, and two cents respectively, Spanish money, per kilometer. A fleet of light draft fast steamers around the island would prove far more remunerative at present than the railroad but the time is coming when the latter, with spurs to the smaller towns and in the hands of American operators, will pay handsomely.

Military Road and the People.

The construction of a railroad across the island from Ponce to San Juan would be an engineering feat quite as difficult as that of crossing the Alps or the Rockies. Twenty miles back from the coast on either side are successions or networks of sierras and hills of varying height, some of them rising almost perpendicularly. The military road switches back and forth for miles at angles so sharp that the pedestrian can often save time and effort as well as distance, by climbing on his hands and knees from one turn to the other, a distance of not more than fifty feet.

After careful observation and study I am unable to see anything to admire mental, moral or physical, in the average Porto Rican native. It must not be forgotten that he is either a product of darkest Africa or of Spain or a mixture of both, and it has been my experience that the better citizen is the one of Spanish blood.

Although the island is of marvelous fertility, prodigally watered, and warmed by such an ardent sun that vegetation is of wonderful luxuriance, yet the average native is too lazy to cultivate it. Hence poverty is on every hand. All this may be changed by educating the rising generation. An American school system, with teaching entirely in English—the Spanish language is of no use except it be to read Don Quixote—will accomplish wonders. As for the adult—ignorant, low, cunning—his blood often tainted with foul disease, there is no hope for him.

—A. A. H.

SCHOOLS OF MANILA

WORK ACCOMPLISHED BY REV. FATHER M'KINNON.

At the Start Teaching the Filipinos Was Slow Work—The Simplest Rudiments Are Taught, But the Average Filipino Is Anxious to Learn.

Almost at the beginning of the American occupation of Manila, Padre McKinnon was put in charge of the public schools. The system under the Spaniards was not very extensive nor was the work very thorough, and there was a lot of hard work for the padre in getting things to running again in anything like proper shape. Before he had fairly got started at it, the leper hospital was put in his charge also, and there was a lot more work Then he was made superintendent of the cemeteries, all of those in Manila being under his direction, and that did make his hands full. All this work the padre has looked after steadily since he took hold of it last fall, and, besides, he has found time somehow to go with his boys under fire in their fighting about Manila.

It was in the schools that Father McKinnon was most interested. At the start it was slow work. There were comparatively few pupils and only two schoolhouses. Both of these were conducted by the Jesuits, one in the walled city and the other in Malate. The school in the walled city was the only regular municipal school in Manila; that in Malate was a normal school for the training of teachers, conducted much on the lines of similar institutions in the States. There had been several district schools of little better than primary standing, and these Father McKinnon reorganized and set at work as soon as possible. He was able to employ most of the old teachers, and where these could not be had he found others. This was not a matter of great difficulty, although it required time.

The Filipino as a rule is extremely ambitious for his children. Especially is this so in the matter of education. There was no great lack of pupils when it became known that the new schools were free and that care would be taken of all the children who came. It soon became necessary to provide more room, and Father McKinnon began to spread out. Buildings were rented in various parts of the city, and new schools were opened as fast as was required. Teachers were not difficult to get, although the pay was very small, in very few cases amounting to $20 (Mexican) a month.

The system was in a flourishing condition last fall when Father McKinnon met his first indication of the force of the insurrectionary movement. It came in the shape of a prohibition by Aguinaldo of one of his pet plans. He had arranged for a formal raising of the Stars and Stripes over the Normal school building in Malate. All the native teachers and some of the pupils were to take part in the ceremonies, and an elaborate programme was prepared. Aguinaldo simply forbade any Filipino to have anything to do with the raising of the American flag, and all obeyed him. Nevertheless the flag was raised on the day and at the time appointed. After that the feeling between the Americans and the Filipinos kept growing steadily more and more strained, and its effect was shown in a diminishing attendance at the schools. There were some pupils, however, who were faithful, and even in the most trying times of the first fighting the schools were not shut down altogether.

Sometime ago Father McKinnon decided to begin giving instruction in English. There were a few of his regular teachers who were competent to give the children a start in the new official language and a few Spaniards were found who could and would help them. Then some of the American women here took hold and the English department was pretty well equipped. An astonishing increase in the number of pupils was the immediate result. Men and women applied as well as the children. The Filipinos are eager to learn English and they display an astonishing aptitude for it. They came in such numbers that it was necessary to establish an age limit, and now only children between 6 and 14 are admitted to the schools. There are more than 5,000 pupils, and there is hardly room for them all in the thirty-two schools which have been established since Father McKinnon took hold of the system.

In general the curriculum of the Manila schools is not extended or advanced. The simplest rudiments are taught for the most part but on the whole the work under Father McKinnon has been very successful, and it is almost entirely due to his untiring energy and interest in the work that this is so. The schools have closed now for the long summer vacation, and there will be no effort to select a new superintendent until it is certain that Father McKinnon is not coming back. Naturally he desires to go home with his regiment and be mustered out with the boys with whom he started from San Francisco last summer. But he has become so much interested in his work out here and in the people with whom that work has thrown him in contact that he is more than willing to come back, and go on with the work. The Archbishop of Manila is very anxious to have him return, and will have him appointed his own coadjutor if the padre does come back. Father McKinnon certainly has done very excellent work here, and a lot of it, and it will be extremely difficult to find a man to take his place. Also, but that is of no consequence, it will be extremely difficult for the man, whoever he is.

—N. Y. Sun.

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