

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FMF-10
Pampa de Comas Revisited
Lima, Peru

Av. Eliodoro Yañez 1984
Santiago, Chile
6 March 1968

Richard H. Nolte, Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Just outside the city limits of Lima, a narrow asphalt road runs north along the base of the Andean foothills. Between it and the Pacific Ocean, which is in view on a clear day, is a flat coastal strip irrigated to support extensive cotton fields, now giving way to low, linear industrial plants. On the east side of the road, dessicated slopes document the perennial drought that plagues South America's coast from North Peru to Central Chile; the cold Humboldt Current deprives the strip of all or nearly all rainfall. On the dusty glaxis and, behind, up the stone-strewn ravines straggles the largest slum appended to Lima---Pampa de Comas.

When I first came to this barriada in 1962, it was estimated to have 90,000 population after only five years of existence; revisiting it this year, in February 1968, I was told it now had 340,000. At the time of my introduction to Pampa de Comas, I and two others from the United States formed a film crew to make a 16 mm. documentary about the migration of Peruvian peasants into the city. We chose Pampa de Comas because it illustrated dramatically the end of the trek to the coast. We chose Ayacucho in the Central Andes because it epitomized the primitive agricultural conditions which prompted the exodus from the interior.

The story of Pampa de Comas, therefore, begins in an aerie, some 11,000 feet above sea level. The provincial capital of Ayacucho has an architectural grace and air of dignity sired by its prestige during colonial days when wealthy Spaniards chose it for their summer homes and when it lay on the main route from Lima to Cuzco. Nearby, the Spanish suffered their final defeat which led to Peruvian independence in 1824.

Already dwindling as Lima garnered more and more of Peru's productive capacities, Ayacucho's demise was cinched by the construction of the miracle railroad from Lima to Huancayo; clinging to precipitous mountainsides, piercing through the rock where it could not top it, suspended on high truss bridges like a tightrope walker, zigzagging up and down switchbacks, and steaming through the cold air of a 16,000 ft. pass, this railroad opened up first the rich mineral country of Cerro de Pasco and then the verdant Huancayo valley, "breadbasket of

Peru". Ayacucho waned, access routes fell into disrepair, its university closed, and many of the elegant plateresque churches locked their doors. What once had been elaborate Holy Week processions were reduced to small symbolic retablos made by local craftsmen. A crude wooden reliquary, the retablo's hinged doors swung open to reveal miniature religious scenes composed of a maze of tiny figures shaped from plaster of Paris and glittering with bright paints and glaze. Today this work of Ayacucho artisans has traveled down to Lima and even to Fifth Avenue, often depicting profane subjects---a hat shop, a harvest scene, etc.

To reach Ayacucho we rode the famed Huancayo railroad which took us up the steep east face of the Andes through cheerless mining towns---grisailles of weatherbeaten company houses like military barracks, exposed bedrock and mounds of charcoal dross. At the pass a barrel-chested attendant scurried up and down the aisle administering oxygen to the faint from the goatskin-like container at his side.

The day's journey by bus from Huancayo to Ayacucho was likewise a test of human endurance---but more of the nerves than of the body. Styled as a school bus, our ancient vehicle had wooden floors worn smooth and shiny with the years---so were the tires. Its paintless roof was piled high and top-heavy with motley boxes, baskets and rope-girded suitcases. Similarly, the interior was utilized beyond capacity. The seats were pancaked so closely that the knees of even the shortest adults ground against their metal backs. Most of the passengers were Indians, wearing bulky wool clothing, and many of the women held babies on their laps. In fact, even older children piled atop their parents, the whole taking on the appearance of the Grimm's motif of Bremen. A few extraneous stoics remained standing in the narrow aisle throughout the journey, and miscellaneous specimens of livestock and produce were wedged in the interstices.

The photographer managed a front seat which put him alongside the driver and two other passengers, peering over the hood at the road ahead. This position seemed ideal during the first hour or so through the scenic valley, but then the pavement ended and the dirt began, the flatland ended and the precipices began, the two lanes ended and a narrow ledge began, the straightaway ended and the hairpins began. And they continued for six hours over a perilous route twisting high above the gorge of the Mantaro River, on a road so narrow that regulation allowed traffic in only one direction, alternating the flow every other day. We hoped everyone had checked his calendar. Our driver, using one hand on the steering wheel, preferred to speed up rather than slow down as he approached the interminable blind curves, daring the pockets of soft dirt and gravel to grab the spinning tires. On U-curves the two of us toward the back of the bus could see that on tight bends the back wheel on the side of the gorge was not only off the road but in some cases beyond the narrow shoulder, dangling in air; we repeatedly reminded ourselves that a tripod is a very stable structure.

As the heat of the day permeated the crammed bus, a potpourri of odors filled the air. And eyelids drooped, including the driver's ---as we could see in his rear vision mirror. Noticing our concern, the mestizo next to us assured us that the road was so familiar to the chauffeur that he knew it by heart and so could doze a little. Not at all relieved, we called up to the photographer---who spoke no Spanish---to make light conversation or at least offer a cigarette at critical moments. Arriving weak-kneed in Ayacucho that evening, we agreed to avoid a repeat journey.

The center of Ayacucho follows the classic Spanish city plan, its grid of narrow streets radiating from the plaza mayor. This all-important main square had a bandstand at its hub surrounded by a symmetrical garden interlaced with walkways. The quadrangle was bound by somber two-story buildings forming a graceful arcade around three sides. On the fourth stood the ubiquitous cathedral of all Spanish plazas.

Through this center of Ayacucho there came each day two trotting Indians urging on an unusual retinue: a herd of llamas numbering some two dozen. At the very tip of their two long ears over long nose atop long neck were balls of bright red wool. The drivers also wore bright red as sock shoes on their small feet. On the back of each llama were saddle bags containing salt from the mines further east. We were told it was packed by llama train to the west slope of the cordillera from where motorized vehicles carried it on to the coast.

We found that our own situation vis-a-vis motorized transport was also somewhat laborious. We needed to get out to the countryside to film the peasants at work. We soon learned that there were only three vehicles in Ayacucho: one was out on a week's trip, one was broken down, and one belonged to the rural extension service whose several agents perforce spent most of their time desk-bound because one truck could not meet their logistical needs. Even so, Latin American hospitality persevered, and the pick-up truck was assigned to us for the next two days. We were accompanied by the driver and a charming, capable social worker---two riding in the cab and three on the bed. It was the month of May, and they advised us that the harvest was in full course around the village of Huamanguilla.

During the two-hour drive over the rock-ridden countryside, we noticed farmers wielding flails to thresh the barley. In Huamanguilla we had to detour around a block of cobblestone street because three men, pants rolled above their knees, were treading straw into a great mound of mud, all in the middle of the street. They were preparing mud and wattle to construct a typical earthen hut of the Andean highland.

The farm which was our destination lay on the eastern slope of a mountain looking across a deep valley to a distant cordillera. Beyond, we were told, was the montaña, land of Amazonian headwaters and antechamber of the great hylean basin.

Leaving the truck on the road far above, we tramped over rocks, mud and streams far down the mountainside, the photographer dizzy and nauseous with altitude sickness. In an upper field, ox-drawn plows furrowed heavy soil, their wooden moldboards turning up small, ill-shaped potatoes. Behind trailed the Indian women, bent to gather the crop into loose squares of gunny which when filled were dragged to the side of the field and dumped on a growing pile. The brown dirt, their bare feet and the ankle-length wool skirts blended as one drab hue. But the blouses, though faded, flashed turquoise, pink and red in sharp contrast to the ochrous landscape. Most topped their long hair with narrow-brimmed fedoras.

But the more festive harvest lay below in the barley fields. When we arrived it was already cut and piled in a great mound with the threshing underway. About three dozen women, garbed as those in the potato field, joined hands to form a human corral around the barley; inside, men, knee-deep in straw, ran in circles driving a galloping herd of horses. And so chaff, grain and straw were tramped to be separated. At intervals the horses were freed to graze, and the women swept the scattered barley back into a heap. They used crude brooms of scrub limbs, always so short that they had to stoop far over to reach the ground; many supported babies tied to their backs in woolen shawls. Then the equine threshing began again.

Pivotal to this activity was the chanting of two weathered Indian women, toothless but uninhibited in their vigorous voicing of ancient Quechua harvest songs. The ordinary participants subsisted throughout the day only on potatoes which were baked between hot stones lining a pit dug into the earth. But these two vestigial priestesses had unlimited access to the chicha, Andean firewater distilled from corn. As the day wore on, their incantations reached a shriller pitch, seeming to slice the thin air and echo from the distant cordillera. By 4:00 the sun's last rays slanted across the valley, and the cold night wind came up. Now the two of them were squatting with ponchos pulled over their shoulders, roseate and vermillion set against the dusky blues and purples in the distance, the whole aglow like a stained glass window at the end of day.

Now friends of the landowner, we returned the next morning invited to partake in a Pachamanga, a meal typical of the Andes in both content and preparation. Presuming it would be at mid-day, we brought no food, and when it was finally ready at 4:30, we were more than set to be enthusiastic about it. However, objectively, I do believe it was superior in flavor as well as atmosphere.

Indian women had first dug a large pit, at least a cubic yard. The rocks with which they lined it were heated by filling the pit with debris, setting it afire and then letting it smolder under a cover of loose dirt. The first contents burned down to ashes. A second stuffing was composed of meat, potatoes and beans, again covered with earth and left to simmer among the hot rocks. We



Peruvian Village Woman

could never ascertain to our satisfaction what kind of meat it was. The owner claimed it was a deer he ordered killed the day before; we always suspected it was llama. In any case, the three of us and about a dozen of the supervisory field workers stood around the pit, digging into the steaming foods with our hands to satisfy our hunger. It was delicious.

Afterwards, as it was dark and very cold, we went inside a windowless, mud hut, and the Indians finished off by passing the chicha bottle among themselves. Then we were called when someone saw one set of headlights coming around a distant mountainside; we dashed as best we could up the long, steep grade to hail the truck before it passed us by. Carrying our camera equipment, we struggled upward, our lungs painning, and even some of the thick-chested Indians fell behind.

During the two days, we interviewed several of the Indians. We came upon one, typical of all, as he dug potatoes from a small plot with a short-handled mattock. His hands were caked with dirt and wrinkled from hard use. His jowl protruded, holding a cud of coca leaves and lime. He told us that he had five children, and the oldest boy had already left for the coast because he knew he had no future with his father. He himself considered taking all the family and joining the son. He just could not produce enough food on his small bit of land to feed them.

All over the Andean highlands we saw Indians boarding trucks, buses and trains apparently carrying all their belongings. In Huancayo the train left for Lima at 6:30 a.m., and in the blue light of the early morning we filmed them coming down the tracks, through the station, from all directions, converging on the second class cars and stacking their bundles on and under the wooden benches. At the railroad station in Lima, behind the presidential palace, we saw them pile out, now looking disoriented and strangely costumed.

In the slums of Lima the women continue to wear their long skirts. And their Andean origin is revealed by their hats—the shape of the crown and the width of the brim—wide and stovepipe for Ayacucho, low and roundbrimmed for Huancayo, etc. Some, however, have not come directly from the mountains to Lima, but have passed through one or more intermediary locales and so arrive in a metropolitan barriada somewhat more sophisticated. Such was the case of the heroine of our film, Señora Jesus.

As a girl she left the mountains near Cajamarca in the north and grew up in the coastal city of Chiclayo. Unique among Pampa de Comas residents, she claimed a high school education. Her husband also seemed above average in that he held a regular job at a factory making corrugated asphalt sheets. Therefore, their

two-room home was also superior, constructed of the factory discards. The ordinary house of Pampa de Comas in 1962 was a flimsy one-room box sided by loose weave reed mats, esteras, attached precariously to crooked support poles. Surely healthier than the damp mud huts of the Andes with only door for entry of light and air, still the chozas of the barriada were little protection from the clouds of dust driven up the slopes by the ocean winds, nor from the saturating mists (not rains) of the damp season, nor from the wind-transported mosquitoes which bred in the stagnant waters of the irrigated fields below.

Our entrée to the slum was through the Oblate Fathers who had come to Pampa de Comas soon after the first settlement in 1957. We were put in the charge of Father Edward Leahy, a cheerful young Canadian, and each morning we left our "city car" in front of the parish house, piled ourselves and equipment into his battered jeep, and started up the ungraded rocky slopes of Pampa de Comas. Within minutes the jeep was overrun by young boys who came vaulting over the rocks and ledges, popping out from the chozas in order to mount the bumpers, running boards, fenders and hood of the vehicle. The jeep was transformed into a living float of laughing, yelling urchins---these the Lilliputian autocrats of the barriada, ranging over its wastes like wild animals. A survey by the Oblates had found the average family numbered between five and six. The national government had set up a couple of schools on the lower level, along the road, but there was always the problem of keeping teachers who had to commute from the city and instruct under adverse conditions. Above this lower strip was sort of a no-man's land for all services---no schools, no water supply, no sewerage system, no garbage collection, no electricity.

Contributing to the marauding habits of the youth was the absence of parental control. The priests estimated that about half of the homes were headed by "abandoned mothers", their men unable or unwilling to bear the responsibilities of the family. To make a living, many of them spent long days in Lima, often as domestic servants; in season they also picked cotton in the nearby hacienda, earning about 30 cents a day. There had been an instance, only a week before our arrival, of a mother who had to work and so locked her three small children in the choza during her 10-hour absence; but one day, they found the matches and she returned to find children dead and home destroyed. Señora Jesus' major ambition for her neighborhood was to build a nursery to care for children whose mothers had to leave them throughout each day.

Infant mortality in Pampa de Comas was very high. Because many parents did not call the priests for the last rites and even buried surreptitiously, it was difficult to gather statistics on this matter. However, there was little doubt that about half of the babies up to the age of one were lost. The major cause, in conjunction with intestinal parasites, was dehydration, either as a result of the mother's

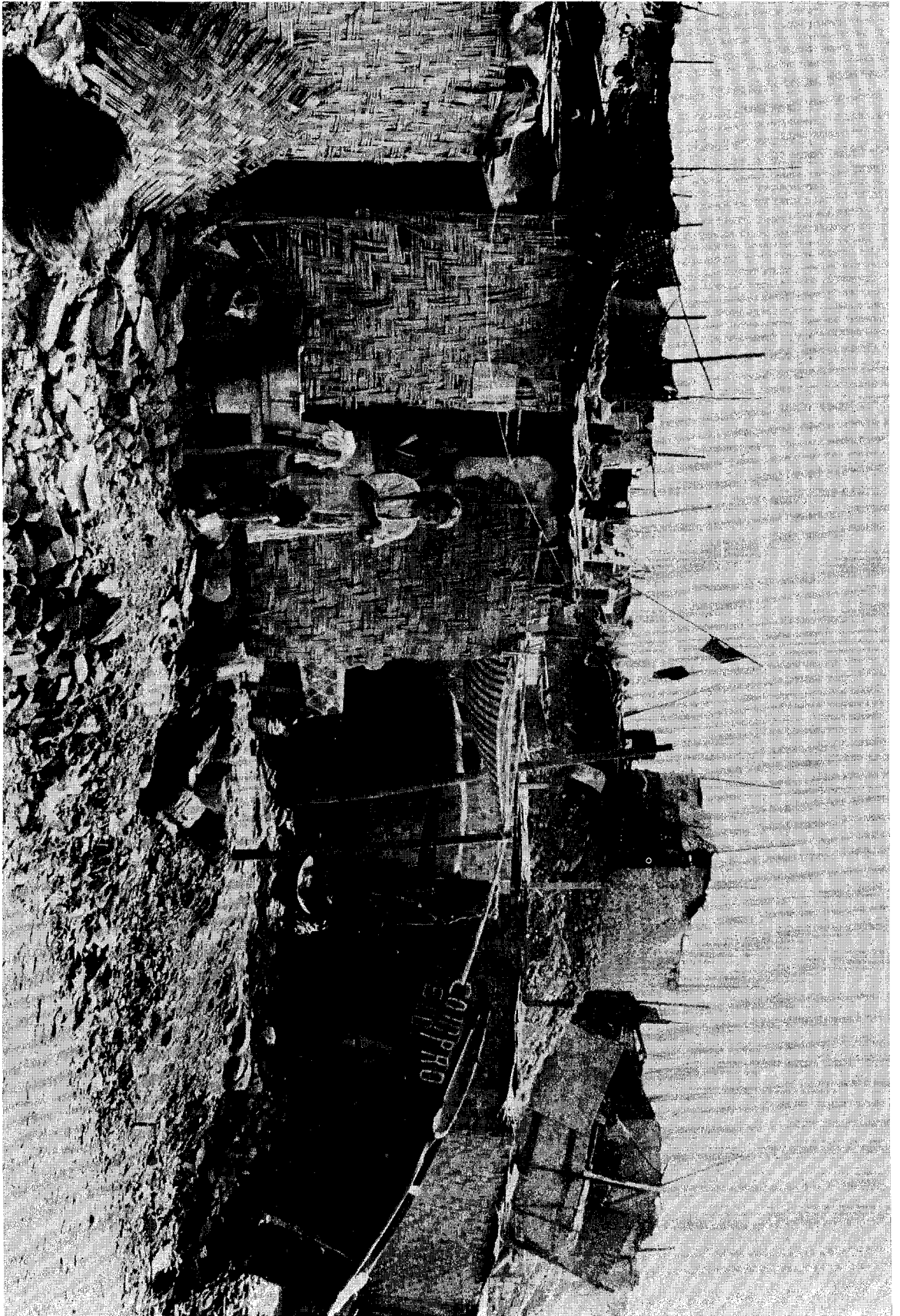
ignorance or of a sheer lack of water. Since there was no water system, it was brought from the city in tank trucks which struggled up the rough terrain to fill the conglomerations of containers at appointed supply points. The residents had to buy the water and guard it in their own barrels and buckets. In the best cases, such as Señora Jesus, the container was a steel drum with its own tight-fitting lid: in others, wooden vessels with haphazard covers of sticks or cardboard. Señora Jesus bathed her three little girls each day, but with great care not to splash the precious water from the white porcelain basin. The trucks serviced the higher reaches but once every two weeks, and the last supply point was still far down from the upper chozas. And even above these houses was one more institution. A well-trod path led up through the barren height---not even a blade of grass defying the desiccation---and terminated in the wind-swept cemetery. During our two weeks of filming in Pampa de Comas, no day passed that we did not see cortèges winding upward, usually bearing small caskets.

Before choosing the primitive conditions of Pampa de Comas, its residents had often tried life in a city slum. Martín de Porras, through which the Pan American Highway cuts in an unglamorous entrance to Lima, is one of the most likely intermediary steps. But the migrants quickly find that their limited agricultural skills gain little employment and that slum landlords demand high rents. Some trickle out individually or as families to throw up their own chozas and live as squatters on government or private lands. More come in large organized groups as part of invasions. In this case, considerable advance planning takes place, often under the guidance of an experienced leader.

We came to know one such organizer who led several invasions, the preceding one of 500 people who, between sunset and the next sunrise, marched out the seven miles from Martín de Porras and, in a sort of modern-day barnraising, worked together to erect the necessary number of huts; by the next day they were settled into housekeeping. The mastermind of this invasion was Rosa, a woman reminiscent of the mythological Brunhild, with a thick mane of black hair, a handsome broad-cheeked face, and the build of a Wagnerian contralto. She seemed to have no means of support and was constantly conniving and organizing the next invasion. But she was a fervent Aprista---member of APRA led by the oft-ostracized Haya de la Torre---and we came to suspect that the party cleverly saw the invasion as one means to gain the political allegiance of a large number of new voters and, therefore, gave all necessary support to Rosa and her activities.

The national government's reaction to these illegal seizures was and continues to be mixed. In 1962 the squatting was still largely limited to public lands. The Pedro-Beltrán administration often ordered out mounted police who, with swinging clubs, tried to dislodge the invaders. More times than not, the determination and group spirit of the newcomers prevailed over the half-hearted attempts of the gendarmes.

Barrada near Lima, where life is "better than ... in the Andean highlands."



It was easy to descry the growth of the city. At its base along the road were adobe cubes, many of them commercial establishments. A few residential buildings just behind were fairly substantial, constructed of adobe or even fired bricks. The next ring was of two- or three-room chozas, their reed mats turned dark by weathering. From there the grade of the slope rose more sharply and the chozas became smaller and newer, the glaucous new esteras at the top gleaming brightly even at great distances.

As Pampa de Comas spread up and out, its residents realized the need for some political organization and delineated about a dozen districts, each with its own governmental structure. For special projects they formed ad hoc committees; Señora Jesus chaired one to organize the community to build and staff a nursery. Since the rooms of her choza were small, she presided over meetings of her committee outside the house, around a crude table dragged out for this purpose.

Señora Jesus' district had already established a school. The residents donated meager funds to buy mats and poles, and the men contributed time and effort to construct a large one-room cubicle. A commission of local leaders to the Ministry of Education did not succeed in getting a teacher assigned to their school, so Señora Jesus, having the most education, took on the job---without pay. She could take her two older girls, three and five years old, and be able to watch over them, but the baby, less than one year, was left behind alone in a makeshift play crib. At every break Señora Jesus hurried home to check on her.

Because of the distance from Lima, the Pampa de Comas residents early formed a cooperative to run their own bus line. Another cooperative administered the central market, bringing the produce from the city and selling it at reasonable prices.

This capacity for self-help and organization has brought Pampa de Comas a long way since 1962. It is now incorporated and elects its own mayor and council. When I asked an Oblate Father if APRA or any other one political party dominated, he said he thought the people were interested in bettering their conditions and so chose leaders whom they felt could best contribute to that betterment, regardless of their affiliation. Therefore, no party or clique had absolute control.

The municipal leaders are currently negotiating with those of Lima to obtain electricity. There is already a water system, installed with the help of the Alliance for Progress, and sewerage drains are available to a part of the area.

The barriada still looks scrappy and barren, the impossibility of irrigation obviating any greenery. However, it no longer suggests a Peruvian version of the grapes of wrath. A few asphalt streets

start up the slope and, though they soon turn to dirt, the bed is graded and runs purposefully in a straight line. Alongside, few chozas remain, houses of more solid construction dominating until the uppermost ring where new chozas attest to the continuing growth of the city.

Pampa de Comas, 10-years old and with 340,000 population, is now an established urban center. Beyond, 13 miles from Lima's city limit, is the young upstart, Collique, two-years old and building up rapidly from its current 50,000 inhabitants. One part of Collique is called "Nuevo Año" because 1,000 people settled there in a one-night invasion on December 31, 1967. Since the barriada blight has now spread beyond public land onto that belonging to the hacienda, the conflict of human vs. property rights has sharpened. The one thousand who celebrated New Year's with new homes all came with one battlestandard which fluttered above each new choza on the morning of January 1. When---as was expected---the police arrived, they did not have the heart to attack the flimsy huts each of which proudly displayed the Peruvian flag.

Since their beginnings in the late 1950's with a modest parish house and a chapel, the Oblate Fathers have expanded their operations to include vocational schools which train approximately 400 boys and 300 girls. Within sight of Pampa de Comas are small Chrysler and Ford assembly plants; beyond, a thin scattering of factories producing animal feed, beverages, etc.; and at the oceanside, the malodorous fishmeal processors which contribute to Peru's major export. These industries are absorbing some of the manpower of Pampa de Comas, but the Oblate school can train only a small fraction of the young people who distend the labor force of the barriada; concomitantly, the industries take only a fraction of those who seek jobs.

If I had seen only Pampa de Comas, I might have concluded that its inhabitants would have been better off had they stayed back on the farm. However, in balance, life in the slum seems better than the fate in the Andean highlands. On the coast there is at least the possibility of getting an education, earning an income, receiving medical assistance, bettering the opportunities for the next generation. I came to consider the slum-dwellers as the modern-day pioneers---the stronger members of a traditional agricultural society who had the initiative and courage to break from it and seek out a new life. Though they tended to accept that their own lives would be difficult and poverty-stricken, parents were optimistic that their children's would improve if they could give them one thing: an education. This was the fetish of the barriada.

Rapid urbanization in lesser developed countries is a phenomenon of this generation. It brings an upward social mobility and embodies the promise of something better to come. Therefore, the hardships of this phase will be borne; but if the hopes of the parents are not fulfilled, if their children are denied schools and refused jobs, then acute frustration may set in. The city is a last frontier, beyond it there is no place to migrate to seek out the better life.

In the now developed countries the phenomenon of urbanization accompanied industrialization in the 19th century. The process contributed directly to economic development because the rural-urban migration 1) brought into the city the needed labor force to man the machines and 2) reduced the agricultural manpower and so expedited the transition of that traditional sector to a modern one. The birth rate was moderate, and the mortality rate in the cities was relatively high.

The underlined words above indicate critical differences between urbanization today in a country such as Peru and the former process in a country such as Great Britain. Lima is suffering a glut of laborers and is daily falling further behind in the struggle to provide employment. The migration is not reducing the agricultural force; as in the city, it continues to grow and outstrip its resource base. The process is not contributing to a modernization of agriculture but rather, in many cases, is depleting its meager goods---trained men and capital---without alleviating the progressive exhaustion of its soils or the uneconomic work methods.

The increase in the population of the barriadas, such as Pampa de Comas, is not just the result of rural-urban migration; two adults may have migrated, but they have added three or more children to the slum count, besides those who have died. Though health conditions are poor, they are better than in the disease-ridden interior. The Oblate clinic at Pampa de Comas treated 64,000 patients in 1967. Food for Peace is available to those who are desperate and willing to do chores to improve the community. And, with education, the people learn better how to care for themselves.

At the current rate of growth, cities in lesser developed areas will double their population every 15 years. As epitomized by Pampa de Comas, the proliferating slums far outstrip the increase of the city as a whole.

Although the human tolerance for misery and despair is amazing, it is hard to imagine that this process can continue ad infinitum. The modernization of agriculture would relieve the country's increasing reliance upon food imports but also reduce farm labor. Industrialization can strengthen the country's economy and absorb some of the manpower, but automation dims it as a definitive solution to the unemployment problem. The service sector is already turgid in most countries experiencing excessive urbanization. And so there is left the reality of a burgeoning population which exceeds the bounds of the economy's capabilities.

Sincerely yours,



Frances M. Foland

Received in New York March 11, 1968.

Photo courtesy United Nations.