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MASS EDUCATION IN MEXICO.

A Survey of the Work of the Federal Rural Schools.

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On the thirtieth of May 1911, one day before the disillusioned and dishonored Porfirio Díaz sailed for France never to return, the National Congress of Mexico passed a law authorizing the federal government to establish and maintain throughout the nation "escuelas rudimentarias" (elementary schools). By this act, for the first time in the history of Mexico, the federal government accepted moral and economic responsibility for the education of the masses of the Mexican people. The law provided that 300,000 pesos (afterwards reduced to 160,000 pesos; i.e., about $80,000) should be expended each year to establish and maintain schools for "elementary instruction in speaking, reading and writing Spanish, and in the fundamental and most usual operations of arithmetic". Almost the last act of the Díaz government, this feeble gesture in the interest of education was indeed pathetic. What a sop to throw to an ignorant, landless, hunger-ridden people, a people already in arms to break the thirty years peace of death! And yet, though it came too late to stem the rising tide of revolution, this law remained on the books and laid the foundation for what is today Mexico's proudest boast and most distinguished achievement-- her 3,000 federal rural schools.

Inadequate in educational theory to meet the real needs of

the people, and uncomprehending in its financial provisions of the magnitude of the problem to be dealt with, the law of 1911 did little more than to make legal recognition of the social responsibility of the national government. In the ten years of revolution which followed the downfall of the Díaz dictatorship, as might be expected, much more was said than done in the field of education. However, these years are not without their importance in the history of Mexican education, for if they served for nothing else they at least gave time for a prolonged discussion of Mexico's educational needs and the social aims of the revolution. During this period the inadequacies of the law of 1911 became apparent to all. The leaders of thought, notably Pino Suarez and Albert J. Pani, Secretary and Sub-Secretary of education respectively under Madero, pointed out the social inutility of an educational program which proposed to give the stones of abstract learning to a people crying for bread. The glowing promises of the revolution were not to be redeemed by merely teaching the people "to read and write Spanish and to perform the more usual arithmetical operations". Clearly a new conception of the meaning of education, a conception at once more simple and more inclusive than that of the traditional "three R's", would have to be achieved if the ideals of the social revolution were to be realized.

By 1921, with the re-establishing of the Secretariat of Education as a separate department of the federal government and

the return of relative peace and stability with the administration of Obregón, such a new conception had in its main essentials been worked out. The actual work of "reclaiming the neglected rural masses of Mexico for civilization" began and in the last six years, first under the leadership of José Vasconcelos and then under the present Secretary of Education, Dr. Puig Casauranc, advances unparalleled in the history of Mexico have been made in the field of rural primary education.

Some idea of the rapidity with which this work has been carried forward may be gained from an examination of the statistics contained in the 1927 annual report of the Secretary of Education to the National Congress.

Number of rural schools founded and sustained to date by the Federal Government	2,952
Number of teachers serving these schools	3,450
Number of children enrolled in Federal rural schools	158,909
Number of adults enrolled in Federal rural (night) schools	47,474
Expenditures of Federal Government for rural schools during the year 1926-1927	3,001,590 pesos (c.$1,500,780)

The full significance of these figures cannot be appreciated without constantly holding in mind the fact that they represent a clear gain in Mexican education. At the beginning of the Obregón administration, federal rural schools outside of the Federal District were practically unknown. Under Obregón 1,105 rural schools were established. In the last year of the Obregón regime (1924), 1,540,128 pesos were spent in the interest of rural edu-

cation. As the above table indicates, in something over three years President Calles has increased the yearly budget for rural education by 1,461,474 pesos, or almost 100%. In this same period (1924-27) the total number of students (children and adults) enrolled in the federal rural schools has increased from 76,076 to 206,383 and the number of schools has almost been tripled.

If these figures lose some of their impressiveness when they are set over against the gross ignorance of the overwhelming majority of the adult rural population and the fact that at least a million and a half children of school age in the rural districts are still without schools to attend, they yet remain as evidence positive of the federal government's determination to grapple with this tremendous problem. It is, perhaps, no exaggeration to say that more has been accomplished for the education of the peasants of Mexico in the last seven years than in the whole preceding hundred years and more of Mexico's independence. When President Calles said in his inaugural address in 1924: "The problem of the education of the masses will be one which above all will claim my attention....Concretely my constant pre-occupation will be to extend the rural schools to the very limit of the nation's economic capacities".. he was not uttering empty words. For good or for bad, in matters educational at least, Mexico has taken unto herself the democratic dogma. She is out upon the high road and John Dewey is her guide. A good greater than gold and oil may yet come out of Nazareth....

Generalizations and statistics must needs be relatively meaningless unless one has some sort of a picture of the concrete reality which lies behind them. When all is said and done, there are schools and schools; what is important is not their number but what they teach and how they teach it. The following description of a typical rural school taken from notes made by the present writer while on a tour of inspection in the state of Tlaxcala may serve to give some idea what manner of thing these "Escuelas Rurales" are.

"In the heart of the mountains of the state of Tlaxcala, two hours by horse-back from the automobile road between Mexico City and Puebla, is the little school of Villa Alta. As we approach we can see twenty five or thirty children standing in line in the diminutive, sun-baked garden in front of a small, low-lying, adobe building. We dismount and are forthwith greeted with a prolonged clapping of hands followed by a lusty singing of the Mexican national anthem. It is very apparent that our visit is an important event. And why not? Is not the "Jefe" of the rural schools himself present, to say nothing of the "Americanos". Every little bare-footed boy is dressed in his Sunday-best white cotton trousers and shirt. Many of these pajama-like suits have been patched over and over again; others quite frankly allow the brown skin beneath to peep through the ragged holes. As we look at the little girls, those of us given to sentimentality, feel the tears rise in our eyes even as we smile. One hardly knows whether to laugh or cry in the presence of a being at once

child and old lady. Here in the front line is one typical of the rest: scarcely three feet tall; big black eyes set in a round, fat little face; short black hair braided into pig tails and tied with a bit of red ribbon-- so far the child; but all this contrasts strangely with the serious expression of her face, almost mask-like in its grave, brown impassivity, and the long calico dress reaching almost to her bare feet.

After another song during which our attention is divided between the music and watching the beaming faces of some of the proud parents who have come up from the village, we are taken to inspect the building. This is quickly done, for there are only two small rooms in the whole school. One of these contains an assortment of rather crudely fashioned, unpainted pine desks and benches. These have been made by the teacher with the help of some of the village fathers. In this room the students are taught to read and write Spanish (some of the little Indians must also be taught to speak Spanish), a little arithmetic, and something of the geography and history of Mexico. The other room has scattered about it the materials for the teaching of the "pequeñas industrias" (small industries). Here in one corner at a work bench the boys are taught how to make simple pieces of furniture. In another corner is a table and the materials for manufacturing soap. In still another is an exhibit of the fruits and vegetables which the children are being shown how to preserve. Some the boys proudly display paintings and the girls the products of their sewing classes.

The teacher-- a young woman who has been trained in one of the normal schools-- is obviously enthusiastic about her work. She is especially proud of the fact that she has been successful in making her school a social center for the little mountain community. There are a dozen or more adults attending the night school and every week there is a social gathering or "fiesta" of some sort in the school building.

As we walk around back of the building to see the rabbit pens and chicken runs, we are told that the school house was at one time part of the old church now unhappily crumbling into ruins on the adjoining lot. Here in the yard, where priests in days gone by paced off the beads of their rosaries (or, perhaps, they sat in the shade of this great old tree and drank wine), now are garden plots where the students raise vegetables and flowers....

Here, then, we have before us a picture of a typical rural school in Mexico. But what of it? What is all the "shooting" about? This little mud-baked, white-washed building with its crude, inadequate equipment and its curious curriculum wherein soap making, rabbit raising, and flower gardening take equal rank with reading, writing and arithmetic-- is this an example of Mexico's great educational progress? What do the Mexicans mean by education?

"What we mean by education," answer the leaders of Mexico's rural schools, "is nothing more or less than teaching people how

to live". Or, as one authority has stated it: "If the school only serves to teach the people to count, to read and to write and does not at the same time give to its students a knowledge of how to meet the problems of daily life, does not give ideas that will be useful for increasing the productivity and happiness of the people-- then the school is ill adapted to its purpose.... And such a school is that which has for its motto: 'Here One is Taught to Read'... The school which Mexico needs at the present time, the school which the people demand, must have as its motto: 'Here One is Taught to Live'."

Such a statement of educational aims as this is only a reaffirmation of the simplest and most fundamental of all definitions of education, but its acceptance as the basis of Mexico's new educational program is highly significant. It means that the shackles of traditional theories of education have been broken and that the rural schools have been orientated with reference to the actual needs of the peasant population. In other words, the program of rural education now being put into effect in Mexico derives its importance and significance for the future of the nation from the simple fact that it represents a sincere and honest attempt to teach a better way of life, to raise the standard of living of a people hitherto neglected and forgotten.

For the casual visitor in Mexico, seeing only the larger cities, it is difficult to sense the real nature of the social fabric of the country. But if one takes the trouble to visit the rural districts, especially those parts away from the railroads

or other means of communication, the picture which one gets is something like this: About 75 % of the population of Mexico lives in small, scattered farming communities. Because of isolation in the mountains, because of years of neglect by the state and federal government, because of lack of funds, because of revolutions-- because of any number of reasons, the vast majority of this rural population is from the point of view of modern civilization steeped in the densest ignorance. This means in the first place that they are almost completely illiterate. But, also, and what is perhaps at the present stage of Mexico's development much more ~~important~~ significant, it means these people are ignorant of all but the simplest kinds of agricultural techniques and hence that they are constantly on the verge of starvation (one Mexican writer has said "49 out of every 50 inhabitants in rural Mexico never completely satisfy their hunger"); it means that their notions of hygiene and how to care for their health are of the most rudimentary type; that they have only the slightest understanding of the advantages of social existence and cooperative living; that their homes are little more than hovels, "jacales" shared with pigs and dogs; that their ideas of diet are restricted to an eternal round of beans, "tortillas," and pulque,-- in a word it means that the standard of living of millions of Mexicans is something less than what the economists would call a "subsistence level."

To say, therefore, that the federal rural schools have been

orientated with reference to the actual needs of the peasant population, if it means anything at all, must mean that these schools have been conceived as instrumentalities for dealing with the social problems of rural Mexico, as these have been briefly sketched above. A more detailed examination of the program and the pedagogical procedure now in force in the rural schools reveals the fact that this is indeed the case. In the first place, as was suggested in connection with the description of the "typical school" at Villa Alta, the federal authorities are seeking to make the rural schools centers for the dissemination of a practical knowledge immediately available for increasing the productivity and insuring a greater degree of comfort and security in the agrarian communities. This is the explanation of the amount of time and attention that is given to gardening; the raising of rabbits, chickens, and bees; the preservation of fruits and vegetables, the making of soap and the various other "pequeñas industrias" (tanning, weaving, carpentry, pottery-making, etc.); and the whole range of activities classed under the head of hygiene. All these activities are obviously directly related to raising the standard of living. In order to make this part of the program even more effective, an executive order has just been handed down (October 1927), granting to each rural school five hectares (12 $\frac{1}{2}$ acres) of land. This land is to serve the double purpose of providing each rural school with a model demonstration farm and with an additional source of revenue from the sale of the products raised by the students.

A second and equally important part of the rural school pro-

gram has for its aim what for convenience we may call the "socialization" of the rural population. Under the head of "socialization" may be distinguished two separate objectives: (a), the passing on to the agrarian population the social heritage of the nation and their induction into Mexican civilization, or in other words as Dr. Puig Casauranc has said, "la formación de una verdadera alma nacional" (the formation of a true national soul); and (b), to instruct the people in the methods and techniques of cooperative endeavor and the advantages of a social existence. As a means to achieving the first of these ends, every effort is being made to combat illiteracy. Obviously, the people must be taught to read, write, and speak the Spanish language (there are some 2,000,000 Indians who still speak only their native dialects-- it is estimated that there are more than 100 separate dialects spoken in the Republic--- and in some states the percentage of illiteracy runs as high as 88% while the average for the whole Republic is around 62%). But the possession of common means of communication will not alone insure the "formation of a true national soul." The isolated and provincial minded peasant groups must be made to feel that they are part of the great Mexican family. Hence the emphasis in the curriculum on teaching the children the meaning of the symbols of nationhood-- the flag, the national anthem, etc.-- and the important place assigned to Mexican history and geography.

In order to attain the second objective of socialization

mentioned above, two main lines of endeavor are being followed in the rural schools. The first of these has to do with propagating the idea of cooperative societies. In each school the students are organized into a number of different cooperative groups. Some of these groups have charge of the agricultural activities, others divide the responsibility of the various "small industries", while still others take over the direction of the athletic and social activities. The societies are formally organized with officers and charters and derive their funds from the sale of their respective products. In the second place, with respect to the idea of cooperative production and marketing as well as every other activity, it is a fundamental principle of the rural schools that the success of the school shall be measured by the extent to which the teacher is able to spread these ideas and activities throughout the whole community. In other words, to quote from one of the official publications of the Secretariat of Education, "the rural school teacher must realize that his most important labor is not inside the four walls of the school but outside of them." In part this work of "incorporating the community in the life of the school and the school in the life of the community" is carried on in the night classes for adults, but the teacher is not expected to stop here. He must visit the homes of the people, organize social gatherings in the school; in a word, he must make the school the center of the community life.

Finally, no summary of the program of the federal rural

schools of Mexico would be complete without some reference to the principle of "acción". In current Mexican educational theory the principle of "acción" advertises still another way in which the educational leaders are trying to break away from the "escuela tradicionalista." In the past the emphasis in Mexican schools has been placed almost entirely upon learning by listening to the words of the teacher or reading from books. The result has been an over development of rote memory and the divorce of "learning from living." The "escuela de acción" proposes that its students shall "learn by doing" ("aprender haciendo"). By this it is not meant that books are to be neglected. On the contrary, the principle of "acción," like the familiar "project method" in the schools of the United States, simply holds that the student should learn by active participation rather than by passive transmission and that books and knowledge should be regarded as means to an end rather than ends in themselves.

In the foregoing review of some of the recent educational developments in Mexico it should be noted that only the work of the federal rural schools has been described. There are other types of schools being established by the federal government (normal schools, industrial schools, agricultural schools, etc.) and it must be remembered that the states also have their own schools (e.g. the latest statistics list over 6,000 state supported rural schools). However, because of the limits of space and as a matter of convenience, a discussion of these other developments can, perhaps, best be left for another time and place.

With these qualifications, what can we say in conclusion of the effectiveness and the significance of Mexico's federal rural schools? Are these schools really achieving their purposes? And, if so, what will they mean for the future of Mexico?

The distinguished American educator, John Dewey, wrote during his visit to Mexico in 1926: "Practice falls short of ideals and the program is much better executed in some places than in others. But I believe that the brightest spot in Mexico of today is its educational activity. There is vitality, energy, sacrificial devotion, the desire to put into operation what is best approved in contemporary theory, and above all, the will to use whatever is at hand." The present writer, after visiting Mexican schools in a half dozen different states, and after talking with Mexican educational leaders both high and low, finds no reason to modify this judgment. That practice is falling short of ideals in the federal rural schools no one would deny. Half of the schools are not yet properly housed; less than half of the schools have established cooperative societies; in only a third of the rural schools is the "labor social" of the teachers judged to be "satisfactory"-- and so on for every item in the program. But even when these shortcomings have duly been charged off on the negative side of the ledger, there still remains to the credit of the Mexican government a very considerable achievement of which it can justly be proud. As Sub-Secretary of Education, Moises Saenz, has said, the rural schools have under-

taken no less a task than that of "integrating Mexico." That the achievement of this ideal is not yet an accomplished fact goes without saying, but the seed is being planted and the harvest is in the making.

Rural School - State of Oaxaca.

Students in Rural School - Nogalera, Hidalgo

Opening of a Rural School - Hidalgo.

Rural School Master and His Flock. - Oaxaca.

Class in Physical Culture - Rural School in State of Hidalgo

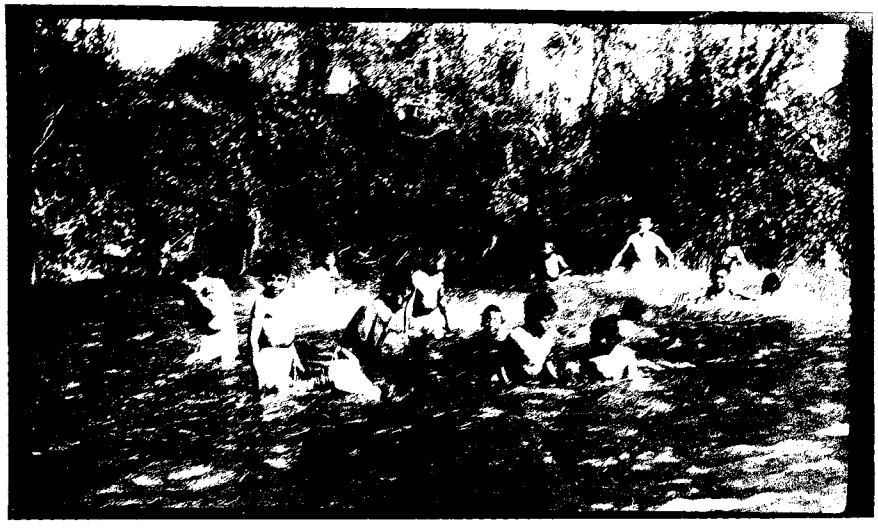
Class in Physical Culture - Rural School State of Hidalgo.

-"Some of the Proud Parents"
School at Villa Alta-Tlaxcala

Rural School at Villa Alta - Tlaxcala -

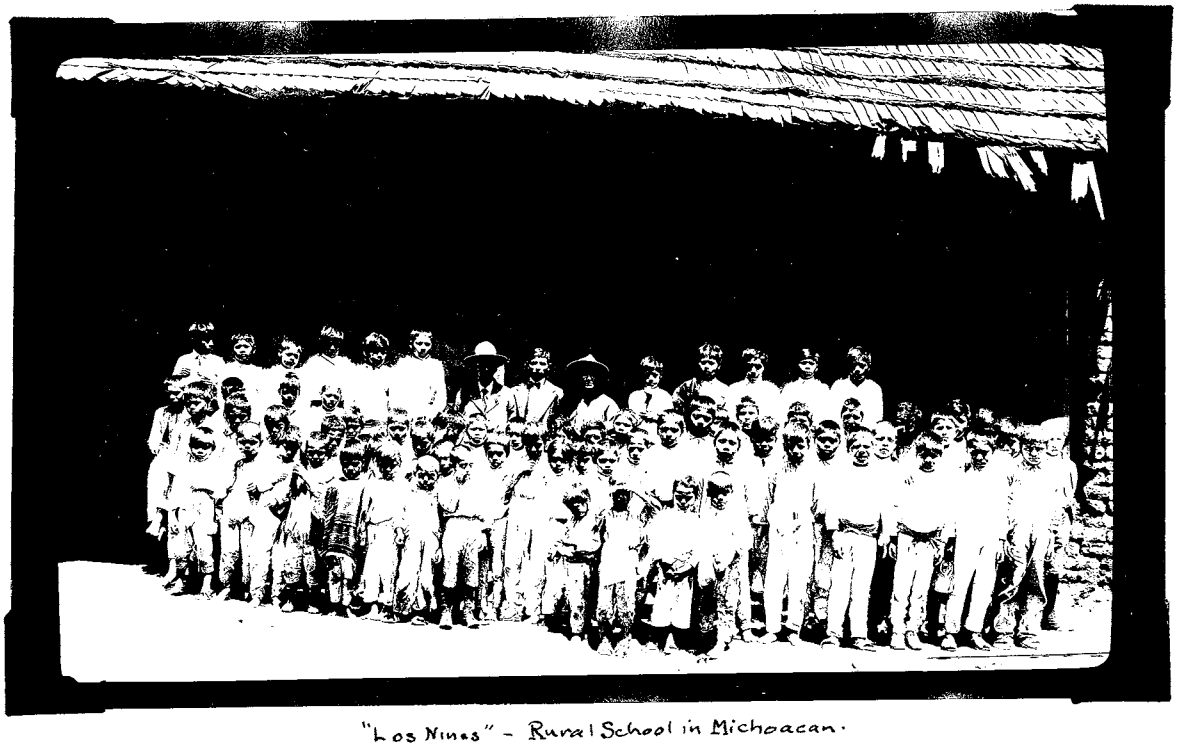
-" The Diminutive Sun Baked Garden"
Rural School-Villa Alta - Tlaxcala.

–"Here in Front Is One Typical of the Rest"–
Rural School – State of Oaxaca



The "Baño Diario" – Rural School State of Hidalgo.

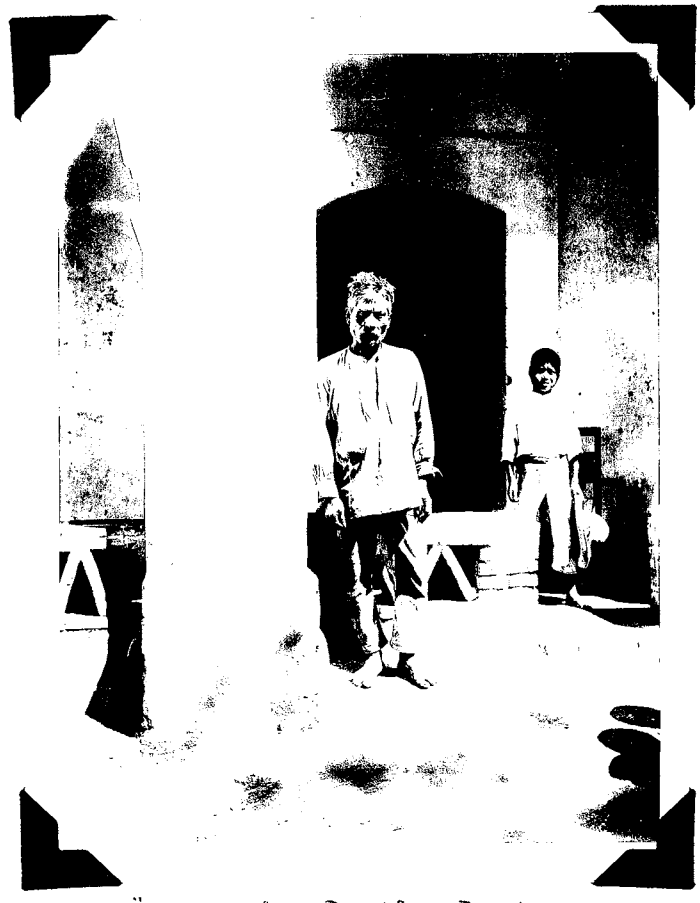
Rural School Building - Guanajuato.



"Los Ninos" - Rural School in Michoacan.

The "Presidente" of the Village - Oaxaca

A Rural School - State of Oaxaca



A "Presidente" of a Rural School Board - Oaxaca.