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MEXICO MAKES FARMERS OUT OF PEONS.

A Review of the Work of the Agricultural Schools.

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## MEXICO MAKES FARMERS OUT OF PEONS

### A Review of the Work of the Agricultural Schools

"Work them hard; teach them what we can; and then, send them back to the farm"- thus the director of the "Escuela Central Agrícola" in the state of Guanajuato summed up the educational theory of the new regional agricultural schools in Mexico. And the main impression which you carry away from a visit to one of these schools is that, this common sense, work-a-day, philosophy is actually being put into practice. There are no social or educational "frills" to these "Escuelas Agrícolas". Like the federal rural primary schools, which they are intended to supplement, they have been conceived in all seriousness to meet the exigencies of a very immediate and definite social problem. They represent the third and last link of the new chain of agrarian life which is being forged in Mexico's social revolution. "The partition of landed estates"- "Agricultural Banks"- and "Agricultural Schools"- these are the prosaic, practical, institutional translations of the revolutionary cry for "Tierra y Libertad"!

The idea of establishing regional agricultural schools was presented for the first time by General Calles, during his campaign for the Presidency in 1923. And one of his first acts after assuming office was to delegate "Diputado" Manlio Fabio Altamirano to make a survey with a view to determining the best place to locate educational institutions of this type. Before the end of 1926 four schools were under construction and the first quarter of this year (1927) witnessed the inauguration of an "Escuela Central Agrícola" in each of the following states: Guanajuato, Michoacán,

Hidalgo, and Durango. In round numbers the average total cost of each one of these schools is estimated by the Secretaría of Agriculture at \$ 1,000,000 pesos (c. \$500,000). At the present time there are enrolled 675 students, or an average of 168 per school. (The capacity for each school is 200 students). The amount of arable land assigned to each school varies between 500 and 600 hectáreas (1 hectárea = 2 1/2 acres).

The physical equipment of the "Escuela Central Agrícola" in the state of Guanajuato, which we may select as typical of the rest, is of the most modern and up-to-date type. The barns, stables, shops, dairies, chicken runs, and pig pens compare favorably with those found in any of the "Agricultural and Mechanical" colleges in the United States. In fact, the director of the school, Ing. Enrique Muris, spent eleven years in the States and received his professional training in the Mississippi "A & M" College. It should be noted, however, that the organizers of the Mexican Agricultural schools have tried to avoid the mistake of imposing bodily the techniques worked out to meet the needs of other lands. "Every effort has been made", Señor Muris will tell you, "not to follow slavishly the models set by the United States or Germany or any other country. What we are seeking to do is to take the "best that has been said and done" in other lands and adapt it to the agricultural problems of Mexico. The great mistake of Mexico in the past has been that she was always too ready, especially in educational matters, to take over the theories of other nations, not realizing that these theories may not, and usually do not, meet the peculiar needs of Mexico".

The administration offices, classrooms, and student quarters are housed in a very large old "hacienda" which has been remodeled for the purpose. Here, again, one is struck with how well the shoe fits. The dormitories are large and airy; the kitchens are outfitted with modern, steam-pressure boilers (also-wonder to behold!- there is an ingenious machine for making and cooking "tortillas"); the "social halls" and classrooms are comfortable and clean. Convenient to the main building is a beautiful outdoor theater built of concrete and decorated with native tiles. Not far from the theater is a sizable, concrete, outdoor swimming pool and a number of shower baths supplied by an artesian well.

The most interesting aspect of the program for these regional agricultural schools is the plan to make them entirely self supporting. The one in Guanajuato, for example, although established less than one year ago, is, according to the director, already paying its own way to the extent of 75% of its annual budget of 200,000 pesos. Furthermore, not only is tuition free, but each student participates in the profits of the farm. One half of the student's share is given to him for his expenses while he is in school; the other half is put in the co-operative bank and the whole amount (anywhere from one hundred to four hundred pesos) is turned over to him at the end of the three or four year course as a nest egg to start out his career as a farmer.

There are three essential requirements for a boy to enter an "Escuela Central Agrícola": (a) he must be the son of a small land owner (or the son of an "ejiditario- i.e. one who lives in a group holding its land communally); (b) he must

have completed at least the four year course of the rural primary school or its equivalent; (c) he must be between the ages of 15 and 20. (At the present time, conditions being what they are in Mexico, it is unwise to enforce rigidly all of these requirements- especially the last two). Finally, in addition to these requirements mentioned above, the prospective student must also measure up to the test of "being really interested in farming and not afraid to work".

Indeed, a boy who was afraid of work would have a rather unhappy time of it, for the daily program is nothing if not strenuous. The agricultural schools, like the rural primary schools, are "escuelas de acción"; the role played by books and theories is of secondary importance as compared with the role assigned to "learning by doing". Accordingly, the student body is divided into two groups. One group spends the morning (the morning begins at 5:00 o'clock) working in the fields, orchards, barns, carpenter shops, or whatever. At the same time the second group is attending classes. In the afternoon- viceversa. In this way each boy spends half of his time in the actual practical work of a farm and the complete equipment of the school is constantly in use.

The simple purpose of these agricultural schools is to transform benighted Mexican peons into intelligent, self-respecting farmers. Or to put the matter in the words of the director of the Guanajuato school: "We do not hope to perform miracles. But we do hope slowly to transform the life of the 'campesino'". We hope to create a youthful farmer - rough and hard working- a future producer of cereals, meat, vegetables, honey, fruit, milk- all in sufficient quantity

to satisfy adequately his new necessities acquired through a simple, practical education".

In this brief survey there is no intention of painting too rosy a picture of the agricultural schools in Mexico. Like almost everything else that is modern and progressive in Mexico, these schools are significant as tendencies. As yet, they are only straws in the wind. What can one school with a capacity of 200 students do to meet the needs of the 10,000 sons of "campesinos" in the state of Guanajuato? What, indeed, are four agricultural schools in the whole Republic over against an ignorant, backward, tradition-bound, rural population of 10,000,000? What, in any case, is the wisdom of teaching the sons of small farmers the uses of the most modern agricultural machinery and the care of pure bred live stock, only to send them back to their poverty stricken villages to practice the art on wooden plows and mangy burros?

No, the agricultural schools have not ushered in a Mexican millenium. Much remains yet to be done. The agricultural schools are not simply an experiment in education. They are part and parcel of that much larger and more significant social experiment to which latter day Mexico has committed itself--the reform of the whole range of agrarian life. Knowledge without lands and tools is worse than useless. The adequate functioning of the agricultural schools waits upon the establishing of agricultural banks and the return of the land to the peasants. The battle for the liberation of the peon, if it is to be won, must be fought on all fronts simultaneously.

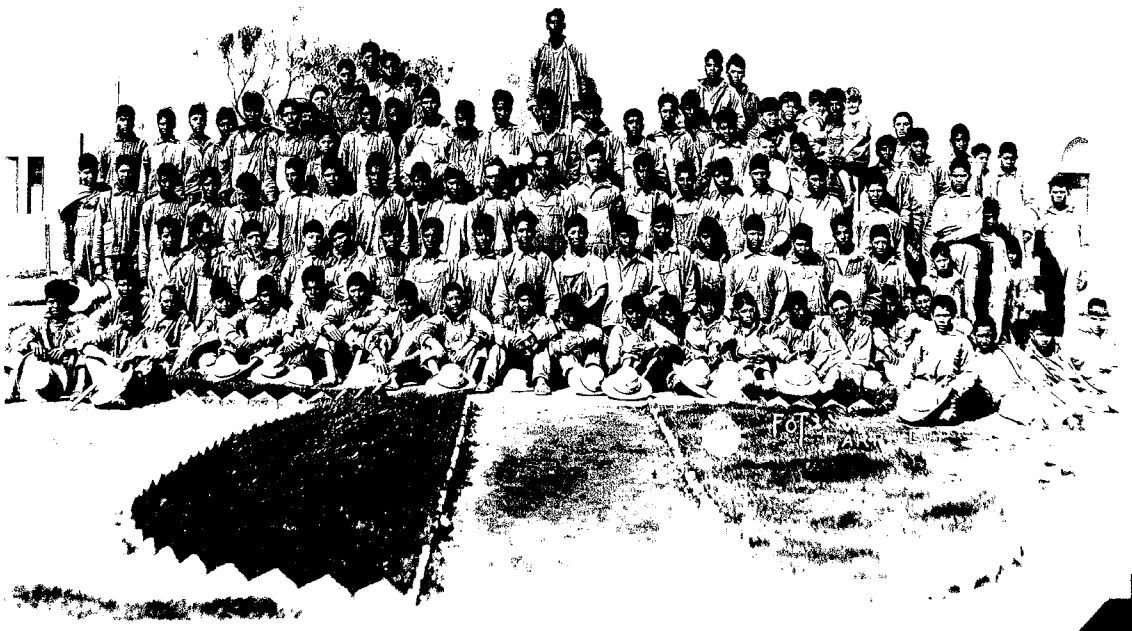
What the final outcome of the agrarian movement in Mexico will be, no one can predict. The present observable fact,

however, is that the movement continues to move. Agricultural banks are being established; the partition of landed estates and the return of the land to the people proceeds apace. And, as it has been the purpose of this article to show, schools are being founded to teach the peons how best to cultivate their land and how to take advantage of the financial aid which the government is offering through the agrarian banks. There are four of these "Escuelas Agrícolas" now operating. For the coming year (1928) the national budget has set the sum of 1,200,000 pesos for the support of the institutions already in existence and to establish three new schools of this type in the states of Chihuahua, Mexico and Puebla.

Experts in agricultural pedagogy might be able to find much to criticize in Mexico's newly created "Escuelas Agrícolas". But, be this as it may, surely in a country where 75% of the population is rural no program which honestly looks to raising the level of life of the peasant masses can entirely fail of its purpose. For the present author the "Escuelas Agrícolas", next to the federal rural schools, represent the most important educational innovation of the present regime in Mexico.



The Main Building - "Escuela Central Agrícola - State of Guanajuato.

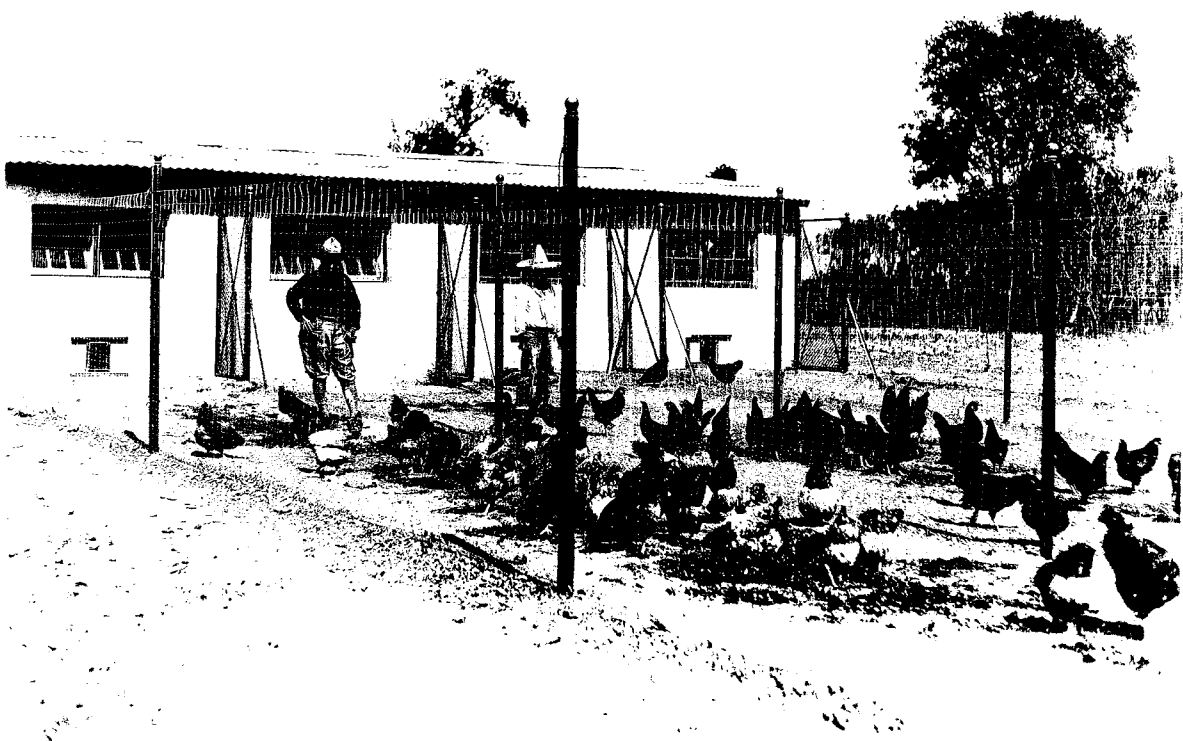


The Student Body - "Escuela Central Agrícola." - Guanajuato.





Open Air Theater - Escuela Central Agrícola -  
Guanajuato.



Partial View of Chicken Runs - Escuela Central Agrícola -  
Guanajuato.



A Class in Plowing - "Escuela Central Agrícola" - Guanajuato.



An Example of Modern Farming Equipment - "Escuela Central Agrícola" - Guanajuato.