

## THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF BEGGARS

The social history of Mexico is replete with stories of ill-fated attempts to solve the problem of beggars. In the foregoing section of this monograph attention was centered on the history of the efforts to suppress begging by legal fiat. In the following pages will be set forth the facts relating to various endeavors to deal with the problem by placing the beggars in institutions.

It may be said at once that with the possible exception of three institutions every attempt which has been made to solve the problem of mendicancy in Mexico by gathering the beggars together in an asylum or home has failed.

For example, in Mexico -- Its Social Evolution (1), the writer, in speaking of the original purpose of the Hospicio de Pobres as an "asylum for old people and beggars where the viceroys ordered all vagrants about the town to be brought," says: "The efforts to clean the town of this plague have met with little success, since such laws have always been dead letters soon after being issued and public charity has continued to be exploited by persons who find begging the means of maintaining themselves in the easy life of vagrancy and idleness."

Again, we read in Juan de Dios Peza's La Beneficencia en México (2), in the section referring to the establishment of the Asilo de Mendigos Díaz de León (1879): "Señor Díaz de León must have feared at times to be described as one deluded... So many projects relating to the problem of begging had come to naught; so many governmental measures dictated in previous epochs had proved fruitless...."

And again, in Señor Díaz de León's own and famous letter wherein he launched his campaign for funds for the beggars' asylum he was proposing to establish, we find reference to the fact that at one time a señor Castillo Velasco, then Minister of the Interior, ordered the establishment of asylums where beggars were to be fed, at the same time issuing orders prohibiting them from seeking alms in the streets. Señor Díaz de León then goes on to point out that the failure of Velasco's asylum was inevitable (3), for although "the institution was excellent...the idea was not properly carried out; instead of appealing to the hearts of the destitute persons, the police agents approached them with threats and treated them as if they were criminals."

The three asylums for beggars which may be regarded as in some measure an exception to the general rule, and which more or less fulfilled their stated purposes, are as follows: (1) the Hospicio de Pobres, founded in 1774 by the Preceptor of the Cathedral of Mexico (today the Hospicio de la Beneficencia Pública); (2) the Asilo de Mendigos de Díaz de León, established in 1879 by Francisco Díaz de León (now known as the Asilo Francisco de León); and (3) the Asilo de Mendigos, first opened in 1919 by the Beneficencia Pública (organized public charities of the Federal District supported by the government and by the national lottery) and at present called the Asilo de la Beneficencia Pública.

In selecting these three institutions for more detailed treatment in the following pages, it should be noted that (a) these institutions are only three out of a large number of others (less successful) of a similar nature which have been established at one time or another, and (b) that many small asylums or homes (supported

usually by private funds) which have been established only for gente decente pero menesterosa (decent but poor people) have been excluded from consideration since the stipulation "decente" obviously rules out beggars.

#### The Hospicio de Pobres (The Poor House)

In the year 1760, the place which was later to be the site of the Poor House was a mass of miserable hovels, inhabited by the most destitute outcasts of the city. Through this section of the city, it so happened that one day the preceptor of the Cathedral of Mexico, señor Ortíz Cortéz, a man known for his charitable works among the sick and poor, passed, and as he drew near one of the hovels he heard the mournful wailing of a child which so distressed him that he ran to see if someone was mistreating it. On entering the hut, he discovered the infant, starvation stamped on its little face, avidly searching for life and sustenance at the breast of a dead woman. On ascertaining that the mother had died of hunger, the preceptor resolved then and there to found on that site a house for the poor.

Construction was begun on the Hospicio de Pobres on September 12, 1763. The Ordinances of Interior Regulations were signed by the King of Spain in 1765, but señor Ortíz Cortéz died in April 1767 leaving the far-from-finished work to be carried to completion by his testamentary executor, Dr. Ambrosio Llano y Valdés, and so it was not until some two years later, December 16, 1768, that the Hospicio was declared finished.

However, it appears from the historical records that the building was not put in use immediately but that at the instance of the viceroy of the time, señor Bucareli, a committee composed of

the Deacon of the Royal Audience, two dignitaries of the Church (Iglesia Metropolitana), two representatives of the Most Noble City (la Nobilísima Ciudad), the Attorney General and the Prior of the Royal Tribune of Consuls, was called together to discuss the regulations, the funds for operation, and lastly, whether the building should be opened immediately or later. Apparently the committee decided to postpone the inauguration of the asylum, for it is not until six years later, according to Juan de Dios Peza (4), that "at a meeting ~~held~~ (March 1774) it was decided that the Hospicio was to be put into use, a decree to that effect being published on March 5, 1774 announcing the opening of the Hospicio on March 19 and designating a period of eight days following the opening of the establishment during which beggars of both sexes were to report there, those not obeying said order of their own volition being subject to being gathered up by the police."

The viceroy Bucareli took great interest in the Hospicio. It was he who arranged to have three houses adjoining the original building added to the establishment; he also donated a plot of vacant ground on which buildings for the infirmary and maternity ward were constructed at a cost of some seventy-five thousand pesos. These new improvements and additions were inaugurated on November 4, 1776 as part of the solemn celebrations in honor of the Days of Charles III. It should be added that the just mentioned additions to the asylum were made as the result of the urgent appeals and petitions of Llanos y Valdés, the testamentary executor of the founder, who, in his report for 1777, "manifested that the number of inmates was already so great that no more could be admitted and those already living there were subjected to great discomfort due to reduced space." (5)

The financial support of the Poor House came, in the beginning, largely from alms collected by the Royal Poor House Commission (Real Junta del Hospicio) and from citizens who gave donations regularly from their private funds. One of the chief backers of the enterprise was bishop Alonso Núñez de Haro y Peralta who practically from the date of the founding of the Hospicio in 1774 until his death in 1800 contributed some 200 pesos monthly, or a total of 62,000 pesos during the six years. The Dean and Cathedral Chapter gave 600 pesos yearly, and it appears that at one time the donations from private individuals other than those mentioned reached the amount of 19,000 pesos. The city government during the period July 1774 to August 1787 gave 100 pesos monthly in addition to granting the Poor House all proceeds from the leases on butcher's blocks and from the sale of goods with no known owner.

Nevertheless, so great was the number of inmates in this institution that the sum indicated did not begin to cover its needs and we find the testamentary executor of the founder writing to the viceroy in March 1781 that the Poor House owed him then some 28,806 pesos and since ~~he felt~~ he could no longer make further loans he felt that the Hospicio must either be closed or new measures adopted for its support. Several petitions concerning the matter are to be found in the municipal archives and it appears that the board of aldermen (Regidores) met this crisis by establishing two special lottery drawings in benefit of the Poor House in addition to allotting it a percentage of the already existing lotteries.

About this time, one captain Francisco Zuñiga, a rich miner, became interested in the Poor House and more specifically in the fact that delinquent and normal children were being quartered together. Captain Zuñiga proved one of the greatest benefactors of

of the Hospicio de Pobres, establishing in connection therewith a Patriotic School which was inaugurated in 1806, eight years after his death. The building housing the Patriotic School cost some 400,000 pesos. It was to be maintained with the proceeds from some of captain Zuñiga's mines which the founder placed at the disposition of his executors for the special purpose of educating poor orphans and giving them a trade by which they might help themselves and be useful to the state.

The Hospicio and the Escuela Patria were united in 1819, the new regulations dividing the institution into four departments: that for children, the Patriotic School; that for the aged, or the asylum for the poor; that of correction, where minors were admitted for pay; and, finally, a maternity ward.

In 1819 the Poor House again suffered one of its periodic financial crises and this date seems to mark the beginning of the dissolution of the institution. Parts of the immense double edifice were leased on mortgages, and in the end lost. Providence street was opened through the property. To quote Juan de Dios Peza, "the decadence of the Poor House in 1820 was extraordinary; the employees were no longer receiving salaries and the food of the inmates was of the most miserable imaginable." (6)

Many years passed and the situation of the Hospicio de Pobres remained unchanged. In 1843, a lieutenant-colonel in the artillery forces, Mariano Ayllon, knowing the difficulties and poverty of the Hospicio, sought permission to establish there shops for the manufacture of goods from flax, contracting to pay the inmates of the institution a daily wage for their labor. For a time the plan was successful; canvas goods, ravens' duck and sail-

cloth superior to the imported product were manufactured in the Hospicio de Pobres. However, all was lost when on April 7, 1845, an earthquake reduced the entire edifice to ruins.

A certain Francisco Fagoaga donated the money to repair the Poor House out of his own funds. In the years following the Hospicio suffered the varying fate which was the lot of all charity institutions during the long period of political anarchy covering the years from Independence to the Reform (1821-1857), a period ending in a foreign invasion, when all the live forces of the country as well as all available funds had to be devoted to the political struggles tending toward the definite establishment of the Republic. In 1863, the Sisters of Charity were placed in charge of the Hospicio; in 1865, the General Council of Beneficence paid 6,000 pesos toward its expenses; in 1876, the city government again took charge of it; and, finally, in 1877, it was put under the jurisdiction of the so-called Commission of Beneficence.

Through the years, the Hospicio de Pobres gradually lost its original character and came more and more to take on the character of an orphanage, and an old people's home. However, almost one hundred years after its founding, the Poor House still sheltered a few old people (albeit, few indeed) and they were still given to begging when opportunity afforded, we learn from the report compiled in 1864 by José María Andrade and published posthumously in the works of Joaquín García Icazbalceta in 1907. (7) This report states that:

"There are thirteen old men in their respective department. They have no obligation other than to attend to the cleaning of their ward and they are permitted to leave the Hospicio frequently

although, according to the regulations, such permission is supposed to be given only on Sundays and holidays. The restruaction not to beg is imposed upon them but they frequently disobey without meeting with any punishment. It seems only just that, once such infraction of the rules of the house is proved, some penalty be imposed."

As regards the old women in the Hospicio in the year 1864, Andrade's report states:

"The old women number thirty-five. Formerly a matron was in charge of them but there is no longer money for this post and one from their own number fulfills these duties. Like the men, the women are subject to no obligation other than to keep their ward clean; they may go out providing they do not beg but they disobey this prohibition with even greater frequency than the men and no punishment is meted out to them."

The same report, in a later section, shows quite clearly the almost complete deviation from the original purpose of the Hospicio de Pobres as an asylum for beggars. It even appears that the first aim had been entirely forgotten through lack of usage, and we find Andrade making the following plea:

"The establishment within the Hospicio of an asylum for beggars is of utmost necessity so that the capital may be liberated from this plague. We must rid the public of this pest and wipe out this cause for discredit to our country.... to tolerate begging is in a certain fashion to authorize and encourage vagrancy. The great majority of beggars are not really poor people; rather are they men who have found in this profession an easy way of making a living without working and the sum these imposters are able to collect yearly from private citizens and indirectly from the charity institutions is enormous. There are others who are really in need and help-



less, but to prove this we must gather them all into the Poor House and accord each the place corresponding to him. Those found to be really strong and healthy might be put to hard labor, not only in compliance with the duty common to all mankind to earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow, but also as a special punishment for the crime of having evoked the voice of charity in the name of God in order to obtain the help to which only the destitute have a right. Those really in want should find a remedy for their needs in the Home for the Poor; and, that this may be so, we should see that our asylums for beggars are not, as they have been heretofore, horrible and infected prisons, but rather comfortable and clean quarters where misery is alleviated and where the helpless may find food, clothing, and work according to their abilities. Otherwise, we but sanction the horrible mistake of imposing a punishment upon misery instead of remedying it... Neither should we be frightened at the thought of the large amount of space such a new department might need in the Hospicio and the possible great cost of supporting it, for it is certain that nine-tenths of the poor people who now assail us on the streets will disappear at the mere prohibiting of begging and those picked up by the police will be very few indeed."

Further proof that the Hospicio in its later years had lost its original purpose is found in the decree of 1881 which officially enumerated for the first time the various charity establishments and the special purposes of each. Herein we find the Hospicio de Pobres described as "an educational home for boys from 7 to 10 years and for girls from 7 to 14 years, and an asylum for old people." (8)

The Asilo de Mendigos Díaz de León (Díaz de León Beggars' Asylum)

The Díaz de León Beggars' Asylum was inaugurated on September 1, 1879. Named for its founder, Francisco Díaz de León, a modest typographer who by honest, hard work had accumulated a fortune, the asylum was originally designed only for beggars.

Juan de Dios Peza writes in his "La Beneficencia en México" (9) concerning the Díaz de León asylum:

"Until not long ago, Mexico was obliged to suffer the repugnant spectacle presented by the presence of countless beggars (pordioseros -- literally, "for-God's-sake-ers") in her principal streets. In former epochs orders had been issued that all beggars should be gathered into the Hospicio but it was found to be a very difficult task to force compliance with these orders on the great numbers who exploited the public charity more from a spirit of perversion and love of vagrancy than because of any legitimate and dire necessity.

"Díaz de León conceived the noble idea of ridding the city of a repugnant plague, thereby doing a direct good service to the really poor and unmasking the false beggars who with feigned sighs aroused to their own advantage the compassion of the passers-by who heard their groans and gazed upon their apparent state of profound misery... Díaz de León gave much thought as to the most effective manner of curing the terrible social sore known as begging: time and again he studied his project, repeatedly changing and reforming it according to the demands of his constant observations until finally the day when he was to put it into practice arrived. He had the support of persons highly respected in the society of the day, persons who not only comprehended his high motives but who

actually authorized his project with their names and influence."

On the 29 of March, 1879, Díaz de León directed a circular letter to all commercial houses in the city as well as to private citizens, urging them to contribute to the establishment of the new institution. This letter is well worth reading. From the following extracts, one may obtain an idea of the nature of the problem of begging at that time and of the way in which Díaz de León thought the problem should be solved.

"Our beggars, in addition to loitering about the streets, have selected one day out of the week -- Saturday -- for almsgiving. This practice is virtually an agreement between the beggars and their benefactors and is so old among us that few indeed are the persons who do not have a few pennies set aside for 'the poor' on this day.

"I estimate that the commercial houses and private offices which each Saturday (in addition to their special gifts on other days) distribute a fixed sum among the beggars, number more than one thousand, perhaps even two thousand. Let us suppose the number to be one thousand and assuming that each place gives on the average fifty centavos per week, the sum collected then amounts to 500 pesos. If we would gather into one fund these 500 pesos, we could, with 300 of them, feed three hundred persons daily and with the remaining 200 provide clothing and education for those who need it as well as cover the cost of a place in which to house these unfortunate people and the necessary staff to care for them; for not only must these people have food but a place to live as well, so that, once assisted, they will not continue to beg...

"In order to insure the success of this project, a commission of persons of education and humanitarian sentiments,

including women who, because of their talent and fine education, understand the needs of the unfortunate, shall be named for each district of the city...

"Concerning the method of collecting the funds for the asylum, I propose that you and all those who second my idea, give to the person who shall be appointed collector, weekly, for the space of two months, the quota decided upon (from 50 centavos up, according to your means) and at the same time, during this same period, continue to give your accustomed alms to the beggars so that they will not suffer during the time the asylum is being established: This period of two months once passed, you shall continue to give your quota, but only to the asylum. The double donation during this time will serve the additional purpose of keeping the beggars unaware of our plan, for in their ignorance they would ill receive that which is meant only for their own good...

"Another interesting aspect of my project is that it will not be confined solely to the alleviation of begging; it will also be extended to young girls and to poor families who should be cared for entirely apart from the others and in a manner befitting their special cases. In this way, we shall be able to put a bound to prostitution which unfortunately is growing in our Capital, encouraged for the most part by poverty. Moreover, the project will be of benefit to public hygiene, in cleaning out the beggars from their miserable hovels where to the great prejudice of the rest of the inhabitants they infect the air about them and are perhaps the cause of the entire city being the victim of constant epidemics.

"Moreover, it is possible that some of the beggars are abusing the public charity but we shall be able to find this out

when they refuse to be subjected to the regulations which persons versed in matters of such nature will draw up...

"The proposed House of Beneficence will not be one of idleness insofar as persons physically able to work are concerned. The establishment of shops and of a primary school should be, later on, or perhaps immediately, the objective of the committee, for we must from the beginning take steps so that the evil we are trying to extirpate, namely, the habit of idleness, shall not be encouraged within the asylum itself. By giving them work, the poor will, later on, be mutually helpful one to the other; some making bread, others shoes, others clothes, etc., etc., thereby educating themselves and educating their children."

During the months of July and August of the year 1879, a total of 24,732 pesos was raised for the Asilo de Mendigos Francisco Díaz de León, 15,666 by ordinary subscription, 5,000 pesos by special donations, and some 3,532 pesos from benefits given by private societies and by the theatrical companies. Smaller contributions were derived from lottery premiums, and from alms boxes placed in public places. (11)

The institution was inaugurated on September 1. There were 100 beds and 48 beggars were fed on the first day. For the time, the building was a model in the matter of spaciousness, comfort and hygienic conditions. The beggars lived their entirely unmolested and, judging from the following rations, were not badly off: Breakfast, Coffee with milk and four ounces of bread; Dinner, broth, rice, seven or eight ounces of meat, chickpeas, potatoes, cabbage, carrots, chile sauce, beans, four ounces of bread and ten of pulque; Supper, beans and four ounces of bread. On Sundays a soup and extra

meat dish was added. Each person who was in the habit of smoking was given 10 cigarettes daily.

One year later, September 2, 1880, the archbishop of Mexico presided at the solemn ceremonies celebrating the first anniversary of the founding of this Beggars' Asylum and laid the first stone on the site destined for the chapel of the establishment. At that time, the Asylum had 206 regular inmates; the number of irregular attendances averaged 290 men and 255 women; during the year, 63,815 meals had been served, at an approximate cost of 13-1/2 centavos each.

The Francisco Díaz de León Asylum is located today in the same building in which it was first established in September 1879 under the title of the Francisco Díaz de León Asylum for Beggars. It is very significant that the word "beggars" was quietly dropped from the institution's name a number of years ago.

Today there are 40 aged men and an equal number of old women in this asylum, and in addition space is allowed for 60 boys and 60 girls -- poor and orphans. The current registry shows that 56 boys and 115 girls attend the primary school established in the building; some of the girls, however, being day pupils only.

The building with its spacious patios and flower gardens still gives the visitor an immediate impression of freedom and comfort, although the need of material repairs of the walls, floors, staircases, and especially the need of more modern sanitary equipment, is patent. The establishment lacks sufficient funds; in fact, it is poor. It supports itself largely from the rents of some few houses charitably inclined individuals have bequeathed to it in past years, but these do not yield a very large income. The establishment



figures its yearly budget at approximately 38,000 pesos.

Like the Hospicio de Pobres, the Asilo de Mendigos de Díaz de León has gradually become more and more respectable and in doing so has lost the last vestige of its founder's original purpose and intent.

If the visitor today at the Asylum, happens to have in mind the history of the founding of this establishment, as did the writer, and has the temerity to inquire, be it ever so casually, if by chance a beggar is ever accepted there, he will be told in surprised tones "Oh no, only decent people (gente decente) are allowed here. No beggars or people from the street are admitted." And the visitor will acquiesce and refrain from suggesting that a search be initiated in the historical archives of the establishment to ascertain just when the name of the establishment was changed. The quiet little attendant, in black alpaca dress, who evidently had served this institution long years, seemed to be unacquainted with the fact that beggars were once its own occupants. The spirit of the place is one of quiet. The inmates are for the most part simply old and worn out; one notes fewer cases of the very evident and horrifying deformities seen in the Public Charities Asylum.

The Asilo de la Beneficencia Pública para Ancianos (Public Charity Asylum for the Aged)

The Asilo de la Beneficencia Pública para Ancianos (originally known as the Asilo de Mendigos -- Beggars Asylum), was founded in January 1919 by the organized public charities of the Federal District. The moving spirits behind the project were señora Virginia Avila de Carranza, wife of the former President of the Republic, the governor of the Federal District at that time, general



Alfredo Breceda, and the Director of Public Charities, señor Sepúlveda.

According to the records existing in the archives of the Beneficencia Pública, the reasons for the founding of this new beggars' asylum were as follows: "To alleviate as far as possible the necessities of the unfortunate; to prevent begging in the public thoroughfares; and to make a home for those who because of their advanced age and the habitual indispositions consequent upon it are unable to secure by working even the indispensable minimum necessary for life."

The Asilo de Mendigos was first installed in the general prison of Belem, but from the beginning it was seen that these quarters would not be satisfactory. President Carranza came to the rescue and arranged that the municipal police cavalry barracks located at San Salvador el Verde square 15 be given to the asylum. Accordingly, on February 13, 1919, after the most urgently needed repairs had been made, the Asilo was moved to this building, where it has continued to the present date.

The building covers some 3475 square meters of ground, the dormitories being constructed around large open courtyards. The total capacity of the asylum is estimated at 200. In addition, there is space for the employees and servants who live in the building -- at present they number 26. Records in the archives of the Beneficencia Pública show that from February 13, 1919, to August 31, 1920, 1,606 persons (1,133 men and 473 women) had been received in the Asilo de Mendigos; a total of 1,397 are listed as having left the institution. The average daily number present for the first 19 months of the asylum's existence was 208 and the average monthly "entrances" and "exits" for this period were

approximately 84 and 74 respectively.

A search through the records fails to disclose the exact manner adopted for the gathering up of the first contingent of beggars housed in the asylum, but the fact that the asylum was first located in the Belem prison added to the high average of "entrances" and "exits" during the early period leads one to believe that the police agents merely gathered in from the streets all people caught begging and turned them over to the asylum authorities. It needs no far stretch of the imagination to suppose that many of the beggars thus corraled were not individuals really in need of institutionalized care and that they did not like the experience of being confined. It would appear that, just as soon as they could, the confirmed vagrants got away. For example, in the month of October 1921, we read that 19 beggars were admitted to the Beggars' Asylum but that 76 left, the destination of only five of them being accounted for. Two were transferred to the General Hospital for treatment; two to the Insane Asylum; and one died. (12)

The comparatively high average turnover of occupants during the first years following the founding of the Beggars' Asylum is in marked contrast to the situation at present. There has been a gradual diminution until today the turnover is practically nil. It would appear that the Asilo de Mendigos was used as a depository for old people caught begging until, by a process of selection and settling, all the available space came to be taken up by persons too infirm to leave even though they might desire to do so. The police have been so often told that there is no more room in the institution that they have stopped sending beggars there.

Indicative and significant of the change in purpose and intention which has taken place in the institution is the fact that

the word "beggars" was dropped from the official title in November 1924. Since that date the asylum, as previously noted, has gone under the name of the Asilo de la Beneficencia Pública para Ancianos (Public Charity Asylum for the Aged).

A few years ago the regulations for admittance to the Asilo were also changed. Today, the requirements specify that only those persons unable to secure the absolute necessities of life by their own efforts and who have no relatives who are able to take care of them may be admitted. Moreover, individuals are now admitted only after they have personally applied to the director of the establishment. This official, following a medical examination and an investigation of the circumstances, decides the case according to his own judgment. (13)

The average number of people in the Asilo de la Beneficencia Pública in the year 1928 was 167; for 1929, it was 170. Today (May 1930) there are 74 men and 96 women, a total of 170, attended by a staff of 44 persons (!) including <sup>the</sup> director, administrative personnel, guards, those who work in the shops, those in charge of medical service, wardrobe, kitchens, barbershop, etc., and the servants. The joint daily salaries (May 1930) amount to a total of 99.50 pesos. The annual budget for the upkeep of this institution is figured at 79,691.00 pesos, exclusive of rent, as the building is still legally the property of the city police department and no rent is paid.

From its foundation, all the inmates of the asylum have been provided with three meals a day, the quality of which, at least at present, may be considered good. They are also clothed by the establishment, the men being given kaki overalls, jacket, hat,

shoes, etc., the women, dresses of wool or cotton goods, and sweaters. Old clothes donated to the establishment are distributed, from time to time. The beds (iron cots) are clean and the covering clean and adequate. There is a large laundry department with two electric washing machines and a sewing department for mending clothes; warm and cold showers, a barber shop, a botiquín (small drug department), an operating room, and an infirmary make up the rest of the equipment.

It would appear that no provision was made in the beginning for shops as an integral part of the Asilo de Mendigos, for the reports of the early directors make frequent mention of the fact that the occupants were in complete idleness. In this connection, the following extracts from a report sent by the director of the Asilo to the Central Public Charity Offices on November 25, 1920, are of interest:

"A school was organized during the first days of the month but as we lack even the most elementary supplies with which to impart even the most rudimentary principles of instruction to the few inmates capable of attending the classes and thus mitigating the tedium and idleness in which they live, it is impossible to report any real progress with this project..."

Later on we are told that a teacher had been engaged to "give regular lectures to the occupants of the Asylum with a view to effecting their moral improvement." (All attempts to hold regular classes in the Asilo were given up in the early part of 1921.)

In another report we are informed that "in view of the fact that the inmates of the asylum are in complete idleness, your

director has obtained for them some work to do in the afternoons (the beating of mica into sheets). From the proceeds of this work it is hoped to form a savings account for the inmates so that when they have a little capital saved up they may ask to be released and earn their own living." (14)

It appears that the shops established in the Asilo de Mendigos really began to be of some importance during the latter part of 1921. Successive numbers of the bulletin published by the Department of Public Charities give long lists of the number of objects and articles made in the institution. There were special shops for carpentry; brushes made from roots, brooms and small brushes, palm-fibre hats, kaki hats, shoemaking, fibre mats, etc. The products of these shops were sent to the central offices to be distributed to the other public charity units.

Today the most important shops are those of carpentry and shoemaking. A department for making soup noodles which existed until last year has not been operated this year. The director of the Asilo, however, says that today only a very small number can be induced to work in the shops -- and then only in return for a small sum of money. The majority of the inmates are really too old and infirm and most of the others, according to the director, are lazy. They seem to like best just sitting in the patio in the sun. (The institution has absolutely nothing in the nature of entertainment, such as a moving-picture apparatus or victrola.) Today, When one of the shops, such as, for example, the shoe shop, has a rush order for several hundred pairs of shoes for one of the other Public Charity institutions, the shopmaster is obliged to hire workers from outside, paying them out of the proceeds of the work.

The sanitary and hygienic conditions of the building in which the asylum is now located leave much to be desired. The building is almost in ruins, the cement patios are cold and are filled with puddles of water during the summer rainy season; and the roof of galvanized iron sheeting over the men's dormitory lets in the rain on the beds and makes the room insufferably hot in the summer and equally cold in the winter, thus practically forcing the old men to spend most of their time out in the open patio. The shops are greatly handicapped for space. There are only two small plots free for flowers.

In closing this brief history of the failure of still another attempt to solve the problem of begging in Mexico by the process of institutionalization, it should be added that the Beneficencia Pública has recently bought a new building and is spending 140,000 pesos on its repair in an effort to remedy the present unhappy condition of what is left of the one-time Beggars' Asylum. This building, a beautiful old colonial house located in one of the suburbs of Mexico, will be devoted to the care of the aged. Just how many aged beggars will find shelter there remains to be seen.

### Public Dormitorios

Numerous attempts have been made on the part of public officials and private individuals to establish dormitorios where the City's poor and homeless might find shelter and a bed for the night. Some of these efforts have met with some success; others have failed. As an example of the latter type we may note first the Asilo Nocturno authorized during the administration of President Benito Juárez. This dormitory was planned to take care of young children who sold news-

papers and matches as well as the "graduates" of the public orphan asylum. Apparently many of the later after leaving the asylum managed to find some work but were still without homes or a place to sleep at night. For reasons not known, this project never got beyond the stage of being put down on paper. (15)

Another abortive attempt to found an asilo of the type under consideration was made in 1883. It appears that at this time a number of distinguished citizens -- including among others, the Archbishop of Mexico, Antonio de Labistoda y Dávalos; the Minister of Public Works, Carlos Pacheco; the Minister of the Interior, Carlos Díez Gutiérrez -- formed a committee for the purpose of establishing a "public dormitory, the necessity for which was most urgent."

In order to raise money to carry their laudable purpose to completion, the committee decided to give a benefit performance of the opera comique "Bocaccio." For some reason this performance failed to materialize -- and post hoc ergo propter hoc so did the dormitory. (16)

#### The first Public Dormitory

The first Public Dormitory actually established opened in Mexico City in 1889. The descriptions written by the chroniclers of that day of the evils this institution was supposed to remedy were in part as follows:

"For many years now it has been observed that many persons, women as well as men, old and young, may be found asleep at all hours of the night in the public squares and streets, some protecting themselves in bad weather under the arches of church doors and of the large houses; others seek refuge under the awnings around the poorer eating houses. Those who can afford to pay something for their

lodging gather in the mesones (lodging houses) in the poor quarters of the city where for a tlaco (coin current at the time and worth 1-1/2 centavos) they are permitted to sleep without vigilance or division between the sexes in the corridors, in the doorways, in the patios; for a cuartilla (three centavos) they are given the use of a straw mat which serves as a bed."

And further on, we read that "Such a state of affairs was known by many and even lamented; but no effective step had been taken to remedy it" up to the time of the establishment of the Public Dormitory.

#### Dormitorio Público

The first Dormitorio Público was located at 5 Callejón del Ave María. It was founded with the funds (600pesos) remaining in the coffers of a certain "Patriotic Society of the First District Police," which was about to dissolve and wished to donate its surplus funds to some public good. Díaz de León, on whose initiative the Asilo de Mendigos bearing his name had been founded ten years previously, was the leading spirit in establishing the Public Dormitory and was assisted actively by Miguel Rul who offered to pay 75 pesos monthly rent on the building during the entire first year.

Accounts written at the time show that there was open opposition to the use of the funds of the Patriotic Society for a public dormitory "because previous attempts, made for the same purpose, had been entirely fruitless."

Nevertheless, on the first Sunday in December 1889, heralded by posters hung up on all corners of the city and with the attendance of high dignitaries of both Church and government,



and many other public spirited citizens (who had received invitations engraved on parchment), the first Public Dormitory in the City of Mexico was inaugurated. We read that "the meeting broke up at 7:30 in the evening, leaving installed sixteen pobres who had been especially gathered up that night by members of the Committee."

This dormitory was for men only. Adults were required to bring a ticket signed by the police, but boys were received at all hours of the night without any formality. Entrance was barred only to drunkards. In the beginning, breakfast was furnished to all who had passed the night in the dormitory, but, later on, only persons who did not have to leave early to get to work and who could remain and assist with the cleaning of the establishment were allowed to eat.

All accounts agree that this institution, as long as it existed, was well supported by the public and never failed to meet its monthly expenses. (17) How long it lasted and whether or not it was transferred and perpetuated in one of the other public dormitories to which we find later reference is not clear from the existing records.

Dormitorio Público de la Beneficencia Pública (Public Dormitory of the Associated Public Charities)

The exact date of the founding of the Dormitorio Público de la Beneficencia Pública existing today at Cuauhtemotzín 104 is not to be known. It appears that this dormitory is a continuation of one located on San Miguel street. The oldest employees of the Beneficencia say that the dormitory was already functioning in its present location in the year 1911 and they recall of having heard that the wife of President Díaz donated a rather considerable sum of money for the purchase of the grounds.

That the establishment was originally used especially for children appears likely as records state that a large number of children's textbooks were found there and further add there is also an order from the Ministry of Interior in the year 1915 to the effect that "due to the small number of children now attending the dormitory the said establishment is to be given over entirely to adults."

The Public Dormitory functioned throughout the years of the revolution. We find records showing that during the time Emiliano Zapata's forces held the city it was difficult to find anyone willing to act as director, until finally a woman affiliated with the Zapata movement undertook the job. The building at that time was in very bad condition; the roof of one of the largest rooms was in danger of collapsing at any moment, the rain came through on the sleepers, collecting in pools and making the room damp.

During the later revolutionary years, men, women, and children were admitted to the dormitory and a breakfast of tea and bread was served. The number of blankets was insufficient and there were only 94 sleeping platforms. The majority slept upon the floor. This situation was remedied as soon as possible, however, and in 1922 the Dormitory was opened (after being closed for several months while the roof was being repaired) and ~~it was~~ supplied with 250 blankets and 200 beds. The daily attendance at this time (1922) ranged from 250 to 280 individuals.

Later administrations in the Department of Public Charities made further improvements in the Public Dormitory. Toilets for women were installed in 1924. A shower bath and stationary tubs for washing clothes were added in 1926.

A report of the attendance at the Public Dormitory in 1926 comments as follows on the number in each of the three depart-

ments: "The number of the men is largest; seldom does the number of women attending reach ten and, in general, the number of children falls far short of what might be expected." (18) This report was made when the average daily attendance from July 1, 1926 to June 30, 1927, was 298 persons.

During 1928, the average daily attendance at the Dormitory for adults was 223; for 1929, it was 239. The approximate cost of operation for 1929 was 5,694 pesos.

In the last few years, two important changes have been made in the rules governing the Public Dormitory: a special children's dormitory (see below, p. 129) was opened in November 1927 and, theoretically at least, children are no longer admitted to the Public Dormitory. However, if a child happens to come there late at night, he is not sent away and the women invariably have infants with them. For the first time in the history of the Public Dormitory, an order was passed on November 8, 1929, requiring that each person pay a ten-centavo entrance fee. The regular attendants complained about this and the average daily attendance dropped off to 109 during the following months. The reason given for the entrance fee was that those making use of the Dormitory could well afford and would even profit by being obliged to save ten centavos from the amount practically all of them habitually spent in the saloon nearby on the corner before coming to the Dormitory. Those in charge of the institution claim that the owners of the saloon have made a small fortune out of the clientele of the Public Dormitory.

The Dormitory regulations forbid entrance to intoxicated persons. Those who come regularly are aware of this and are clever in hiding their inebriated state until they are safely inside.

Apparently those who frequent the Public Dormitory take little comfort in the fact that the privilege of using the shower bath is included in the ten-centavo entrance fee, for, according to the directress of the Dormitory, although the shower is an exceptionally good one, no amount of persuasion on her part will convince any of the clientele to take a bath. They are one hundred percent convinced that the cold water would do them irreparable harm. She says that she does not remember a single person using the shower during the period of over a year during which she has been in charge. Neither are the washing troughs used. However, since the inmates possess only the clothes they are wearing, it is difficult to see what they could wash.

In watching the people enter the dormitory at night, one gets the impression that most of them have not yet reached the state of complete destitution. Upon inquiry, it is revealed that many of them have regular work of some sort (earning between 75 centavos and a peso a day) while others manage to pick up a precarious living doing odd jobs.

One other interesting point in connection with this public dormitory is that no provision is made there for persons who are noticeably diseased, with open sores, swollen feet, face, etc. Under the present regulations of the institution, they cannot be turned away, although the other inmates complain considerably. Hygienic considerations would seem to demand that these complaints be heard and a separate compartment be provided for those who are obviously diseased.