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WHM - 13
Cuzco: The Look
of the Land

Hotel Ferrocarril
Cuzco, Perú
July 18, 1955

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

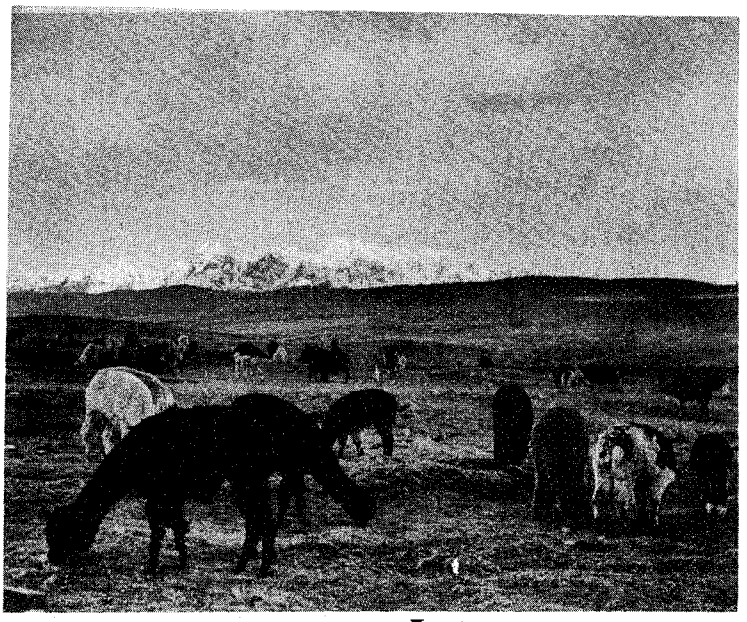
The trip from Arequipa to Cuzco covers over 600 kilometers of high passes, gaping quebradas and improbable altiplano. From a gentle altitude of 7,500 feet, the road snakes up the face of the volcano Pichu-Pichu and over the pampas to the plain of Lago Salinas, close to 14,000 feet. There the wind bites deep, and you have to breathe very slowly in the thin air. The altitude knocks sense of depth and distance all out of proportion, so that the Indian walking the lonely trail on the slopes is the giant of the land, and the islands of flamingos standing a mile offshore in the shallow salt lake appear to be a scant hundred yards from the car. In a land of dull yellow hills, true color is visible for miles; against the flat white of the alkali, the pink of the massed flamingos leaps and flames as the birds move.

Beyond the Salinas basin, the road climbs the sheer face of the Cuesta de Paty to the Pampas de Confital. In this expanse of coarse, brown sand ringed with the torn mouths of the volcanos, nothing moves except the wind and the planing hawks. To the south, the crater of Ubinas gapes like a frog. To the north, the sand and the distant peaks of the Cordillera Occidental. You pick your own road across the pampa, being careful to study the ground ahead for drifts of loose sand. Then, after perhaps an hour of jolting and coughing in the thick dust, the road dips down from the pampa into a country of rolling hills covered with yellow pasto de puna grass and clumps of wiry ichu. This is the country of the vicuna.

You have seen plenty of wildlife since leaving Arequipa. First, the flamingos sitting in their dead lake at 14,000 feet. Then, the pack trains of mewing llamas on the trails winding among the slopes, each animal bearing its small load with obvious disdain, working his stinking cud with camel lips as he lopes and jogs in a neck-swinging trot. Then, the herds of alpacas grazing on the valley floors, twisting their silly faces around to follow the car. In the steep places where the road thins down to a trail, you have seen the viz-cacha, that cross between rabbit and rubber ball, bounding straight up the rock walls and flaunting the gray shaving brush at the end of his ridiculous rat's tail. But the vicuna is something different again. He is neither ugly nor comic; he is neither tame nor trusting. It takes sharp eyes to pick him out among the rocks and the yellow grass. You look closely at a brown patch off on a hillside. There is a slight movement, and you can make out the long, quick neck and the slim body the color of honey. All along the slope, shapes that were rocks come alive as the herd gets on its feet. Ears go back, the white-aproned fronts wheel away in flight, and the herd heads for cover running the way deer do when they're not too scared but figure they've seen enough.

Dipping down out of the altitude, the road follows the shoreline of Lake Saracocha. I remember passing this place last November when the shallows were boiling with trout fry hatched from the eggs of the previous June's spawning season. Big trout were feeding on the fry, and the shore was dotted with Indians snaring fish. They would cast in a small, square metal sheet with a hook attached to it, point up. Then they would sit for hours, barely moving, watching for a trout to come in through the weeds from the open water looking for fry. When the heavy body passed over the snare, there would be a yank timed just right, and the hook would sink deep in the flesh. Although I have

never seen a trout landed in this manner, I have been told that Indians have caught fish weighing over 20 pounds in this lake and 30 in Titicaca. To a people who rarely have an opportunity to eat meat, even in the cattle raising district near Titicaca, the trout is an immensely important addition to the diet. In the clear waters of Titicaca's river system, rainbows grow beyond 20 pounds. In the Lake itself, no one really knows the size which Arco Iris can attain, but I've heard it said that the Lake steamer from Puno to Guaqui went hard aground on the back of a trout one night and had to wait an hour before the fish made up his mind to sound. Of course, that could be an exaggeration.



Alpacas grazing on the altiplano

Photo CHAMBI Cuzco

The road follows the Cabanillas valley down onto the altiplano and the city of Juliaca. The place is typical of altiplano towns. Houses and huts of dark brown unbaked adobe; the market where the Indians swap chicha for potatoes, corn for coca; the mongrel dogs fighting and mating in the dirt. Being a large town, Juliaca has a large percentage of mestizo inhabitants. You see them standing in front of their tiny stores, talking the highland castellano with its slurred "rr", dressed in western suits made of national cloth. There are only a handful of whites or blancos here, so the mestizos are lords of the town. Beneath them are the Indians, the numberless Quechua-speaking, barefoot people who drift in and out of Juliaca. In the market, among themselves, they are laughing and friendly people. But the laughter goes out of them quickly in the presence of mestizo or blanco. Four hundred years of unreasoning oppression have left their mark in the shy ducking of the head and the obstinant silence of the indio before his taita, his "master". To the blanco, the Indian is an annoying and unworthy member of the population. To a mestizo, perhaps because his social position places him in jobs which put him in close contact with the Indian - jobs such as hacienda manager or storekeeper - or perhaps because of the "taint" of the blood that flows in his veins, the indio is an animal lower than a dog, a thing to be worked and not to be pitied. In Juliaca as in other sierra towns, there are several and notable exceptions to this generalization - men who sympathize with the problems of the Indians and who would help to alleviate them if they had the time, money and popular support to do so. But as yet the cards of public opinion are stacked against them.

From Juliaca north it is all altiplano, a great tawny cat stretching northward with the fangs of two sierras ranging back to the horizon. Everything here is extreme - no trees, no familiar plants to make you feel comfortable and at home. Only the tawny ichu grass and the thin sky and the great shards of rock jutting up from the collapsed flesh of the hills. Nameless and numberless streams loop and snake toward Titicaca. If you stop on a bridge when the sun is high, you can see the trout feeding on the surface; not making dainty dimples like the trout of the Esopus or the Beaverkill, but throwing themselves clear in curving jumps and landing with the smack of heavy side against water.

Beyond Ayaviri, the land slants sharply up to the pass at La Raya. The hills close in, and the air grows thin and hard. There is ice on the swamplands that cover much of this poorly drained land. At the pass (13,500 feet) a cavalry company is waiting on the railroad siding. The horses steam in their boxcars; the troopers, Indians for the most part, sit hunched against the cold waiting for the night train to take them to Juliaca. The Peruvian-Bolivian border near Puno and the

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Street scene after 1950 'quake.
Note buried truck in center
.....

photo CHAMBI Cuzco

Lake is a potential trouble spot because of its nearness to the centers of the Bolivian land reform movement and because of the constant threat of campesino agitators moving across the border into the towns of the rebellious Aymara. In all probability, this cavalry company is going down to the Lake for a stint of border duty.

A few kilometers beyond the cut in the hills, the road slopes sharply down, and you pick up a small stream which widens and deepens until it becomes the Vilcanota river. The Vilcanota broadens out to become the Urubamba, then the Ucayali. At the jungle town of Nauta, Ucayali and Marañon join to form the Amazon. Along the sweep of vertical hills above the stream the Indians are harvesting barley, wheat and quinoa, a grain far richer in proteins than wheat. In each community or ayllu, mules and burros are being driven over the circular mounds of grain, and the Indian women bend and glean the kernels as they lie among the chaff. This is Inti Reymi, the season of the solstice, a time of chicha drinking and threshing and the singing of songs that begin nowhere and end nowhere.

The Vilcanota valley twists down into a country of terraced strips of land - the andenes - some of them built by pre-Incaic tribes. In the dusk you pass towns with the liquid Quechua names: Quiquijana, Andahuaylillas, Saylla - and towns named by the vociferously religious Spaniards: San Pablo, San Pedro, San Jerónimo. There in the windowless adobe huts, the women are cooking in the smoke and the flickering light of dung or perhaps, if the family has a few soles to spend, eucalyptus or willow wood. Despite the fact that eucalyptus was imported in the not too distant past from Australia and now stands in most of the valleys, wood is still a scarcity. You have to be a clever thief or a moneyed man to get it.

In the last light when the intense cold of night is settling in the high valley, you come into Cuzco, riding the last kilometer on a modern cement highway built by the Junta de Recontrucción del Cuzco. The cement soon turns to cobbles and dust, and you are within the city. The lights of the car pick up the rough adobe houses bounding the narrow streets, and sometimes the smooth geometry of an Incaic dry wall. Near the center of town you see the results of the 1950 earthquake: churches propped up with eucalyptus logs, gaping cracks in adobe walls, piles of rubble in the streets.

On Sunday, 21 May 1950, at 1:39 p.m., the quake hit Cuzco. It lasted six seconds and registered 7 on the Mercalli scale. In those six seconds, 3,000 houses and huts were destroyed, leaving only 1,200 habitable dwellings standing. According to the U.N. commission which investigated the damage in 1951, " The loss of housing affected between 30,000 and 40,000 people" (the city's population in 1950 was reckoned at 80,000). "Of these, 15,000 have since been accomodated in provisional shelters erected throughout the city, while 20,000 people left Cuzco during 1950. The material damage is estimated at 300 million soles (in 1951 the Peruvian sol was worth 15 to the U.S. dollar) in private property alone. Among public buildings, the damages are valued at 100 million soles. All told, and including the destruction of goods and means of production, the earthquake damage is estimated at 500 million soles."

The U.N commission goes on to say, "It is evident that three factors contributed to the catastrophic amount of the damage. In the first place, the earthquake was a major one. Secondly, the poor construction and ruinous neglect of most of the city maximized the effects of the shock; for the fact that two-thirds of the city was rendered uninhabitable, many put the chief blame on poor construction. Thirdly, the clearing operations by highway crews immediately after the shock have been blamed for about 20 per cent of the demolitions."

Surprisingly few people were killed by the quake. Luckily, a futbol match was going on at the time, and most of the cusqueños were out rooting for their favorites. Nevertheless, over one hundred persons perished in the ruins and over 200 were hurt.

A professional photographer from Lima who happened to be filming the historic monuments of the city on that day was standing within a few blocks of the Plaza de Armas at the time of the shock. He was newsman enough to keep his camera going during those terrible six seconds. The resulting footage of color film is mute testimony of the power of a terremoto. The camera is aimed at the roof of an old house. Suddenly, a crack runs down the wall like a quick snake. A corner of the house breaks off and leans into space, rocking and jumping in time to the spaced jolts of the quake. Then the house dissolves into chunks of adobe and clouds of dark brown dust. From the doorway of another house, a dozen people stagger out into the hail of falling rubble. They clutch their heads, trip on the scattered adobe blocks, run on into the fog of dust. A boy returns for his fallen friend, helps him out of the tangled ruins. The two kids stare at each other and begin to laugh.

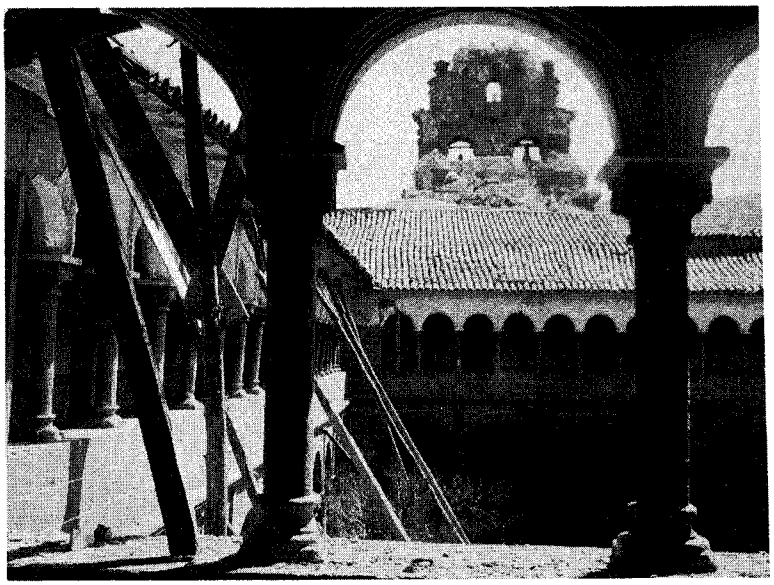
In the Plaza the cathedral stands with its towers gutted and scooped out. Some brave priest has brought a cross out of the wreck, and a crowd is gathering in front of it, kneeling and praying in the square.

The camera moves down the narrow streets, catching Indian cargadores picking their way through the rubble carrying bureaus, beds and coffins. Rescue squads sort the dead from the wounded. Most of the bodies are those of children; their faces are covered with dust and blood. The rescue squads carry them into the street by the hands and feet like so many sacks of potatoes. At the hospital, the camera pauses long enough to show the surgeons cutting away the crushed scalp from the top of a man's head. At the airport, the mercy planes of Faucett Airlines are landing doctor-nurse teams and Red Cross workers, Peruvians and foreigners. Amid the crowd of medicos and political bigwigs, boxes of emergency medical supplies are being unloaded from an Argentine plane into a truck plastered with pictures and blurbs of Eva Perón. The Army has moved in, and the troops have been put on work details making adobe bricks and guarding whatever is left to guard. Everything seems to be a frenzy of efficiency among the shattered houses of the city.

In his efforts to cover the city, the cameraman injects a piece of probably unintentional irony. As his camera records dozens upon dozens of ruined houses, it occasionally scans an expanse of Inca wall. There is not a crack, not a dislocated stone to be seen. Coricancha, the Temple of the Sun upon which was built the ornate Spanish church of Santo Domingo, stands in an unscarred curve of sculpted stone. Above it and around it lie the naked ruins of Spanish architecture and Spanish pride. Santo Domingo is a shattered hulk.

Five years and two months later, ruined buildings still dot the city. Despite special taxes and appropriations levied by the Peruvian congress to finance reconstruction, the city continues to be an invalid. Why? One man to whom I addressed this question gave me an honest if somewhat dramatic answer: "Because, señor, we are a very dishonest people. From the sale of goods - blankets and medical supplies - donated by foreign countries to help Cuzco out of her crisis, several people have become millionaires overnight. And of the annual 20 to 30 million of soles for reconstruction levied by our Congress in the form of an extra tax on tobacco, only about four million have ever reached here. We would like to know where the rest is."

In answering my question, other people have blamed Lima for its policy of centralization. The U.N. commission (see above) sent at the request of the Peruvian government to study the ways and means of getting Cuzco back on her feet as an active Departmental capital as well as restoring the Incaic and Spanish architectural treasures famous from tourist guidebook to museum exhibits, recommended that an Administration for the Development of Cuzco be set up in Cuzco to coordinate all reconstruction activities not specifically under the control of Government ministries. Furthermore, the commission recommended that the majority of the Administration's members be cuzqueños. Not only the public but the chief of the U.N. commission have criticized Lima for its action of placing its watered-down version of the Administración de Fomento del Cuzco under the watchful eye of the Ministerio de Fomento instead of setting it up in situ. A relatively independent commission operating outside the sphere of the all-powerful Gobierno was evidently thought to be too much of a threat to the policy of centralismo, the guiding light of Peruvian administrations. Reconstruction work, therefore, is handled from Lima by men who regardless of how competent they may be, are too far away from the scene of operations to truly know what is going on and what needs to be done. Recently I asked a professor at the University if he could arrange an interview with the chief of the Junta de Reconstrucción (the result of the U.N. commission's Administración recommendation) for me. The man looked at me with disbelief and said. "Why certainly. There's a plane leaving for Lima tomorrow!"



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Walls propped with eucalytpus logs.
In background, tower of San. Domingo
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photo CHAMBI Cuzco

In some ways, the 1950 earthquake may have been a blessing in disguise. The results of the shock brought experts and scientists running in from all parts of the world. As a result of Perú's plea to the U.N., not only the city but the surrounding country of Indian towns and agricultural ayllus are being doctored by both native and foreign specialists. In the town of Chinchero (see JGM -1-54 published by AUFS) a full scale supervised credit program is being carried out by an American technician and a staff of Peruvian agricultural engineers. It is a pilot plan, to be sure, but it seems to be the beginning of a new and higher standard of living for Indians who for centuries have starved on the produce of their heavy, niggardly soil. American experts are planning to drain the swampy Pampa de Anta, a vast tract of land to the northeast of the city. The project will open up hundreds of acres of arable soil in a region where land is hard to come by. Most important of all, however, is the long-term effect of all this study and research. Cuzco has become a natural laboratory for the study of human life in the sierra. Backed for the first time by money which although it may not be adequate is at least sustaining, the scientists have had a chance to work with both the land and the people. If their recommendations are followed, there is no reason why Cuzco, the city and its hinterlands, might not become a model for other sierra regions to follow.

Despite the ruined houses and churches, then, Cuzco is an active city. In the three short weeks we have been here, I have met half a dozen scientists at the University - men who do not believe in the education-by-the-book method so common among Peruvian teachers (WHM - 10) but who are constantly working in the field to broaden their knowledge of what to most of them is the focal point of their studies.

the Indian. Most of these men speak Quechua fluently. And all of them have a great deal of respect for the culture of the Indian. Whatever information they have, they are more than willing to share. It is not uncommon to find a folklore expert and an archaeologist, an ethnologist and an anthropologist working on the same material, each one correcting the other. Perhaps this attitude can best be summed up by quoting the words of a man who is teaching me Quechua, Dr. Andrés Alencastre Gutierrez. "You know," he told me, "I could go to my farm near Sicuani and raise cattle. I'd probably make more money than I do here. But by teaching, I am helping to focus attention on the problems which afflict this country. Perhaps I am even helping to solve them. That is much more important to me than cattle."

Sincerely,

William H. MacLeish

Received New York 8/5/55.