

# American Friends Service Committee

20 South Twelfth Street



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## BULLETIN ON RELIEF IN FRANCE

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*This bulletin continues the story of village rehabilitation described in Bulletin No. 41 and describes the second resettlement program.*

# PENNE

In the Department of the Tarn, some sixty-five kilometers from the city of Toulouse, there is a clearing in the forest of "La Gresigne" where the road comes out at the edge of the plateau. From this vantage point the view down into the broad valley cut by the Aveyron river is magnificent. In the distance the ruins of an old chateau crown the summit of a high rock jutting up precipitously from the river valley floor. The little village of "Penne du Tarn" clings to the slopes of this rocky promontory around the base of the castle.

Penne is a medieval village dating back to the eleventh century and dominated by an ancient feudal chateau perched on the summit of a rock rising some 800 feet above the Aveyron river valley. The village clings to the slopes of this rock, its uppermost houses, semi-demolished, running up close to the ruins of the castle. Thirty years ago Penne was a fairly important township of 2,860

inhabitants. By 1940 its population had shrunk to 926. The average age of the inhabitants was over 70 and only two children played in the streets.

Surrounded as it is by forests of oak, chestnut, walnut, beech and poplar and with a large acreage of good farmland, the village seemed ideal for resettlement. Young families who would work with imagination and enthusiasm, new capital for machinery and raw material, promised to bring to a dying village new impetus for community life. The conditions of a generation ago which isolated villages no longer prevail, improved roads and radio bringing small communities into the main currents of national life.

### Skilled Workmen

Recently a group of nine Spanish refugee families were moved into some of the abandoned

houses of this village. The Service Committee selected a designer of resourcefulness and artistic ability, a former radio journalist, an engineer, and a group of skilled masons and carpenters to form the nucleus of this new village. Since wood was one of the few readily available raw materials, a shop for the manufacture of toys was chosen as an appropriate industry. The selection of both project and men turned out to be a happy one for now the "Toys of Penne" show promise of becoming well-known throughout the south of France.

A month after the first families had moved in, the men, working with new enthusiasm, had already lowered the basement level of an old barn which was chosen to serve as shop, reinforced and cemented the wall and installed woodworking machinery. Although the electric current was turned on the 23rd of October, the "atelier" could not be ready to begin producing toys for another week or two. This left but a scant month and a half in which to fill some of the Christmas orders in hand; but designs were already agreed upon and all hands were willing and ready to go to work. The project should have got under way in May, 1941, but there were inevitable delays. As it is, home repair was postponed until the slack period after Christmas, 1941, and the little Spanish colony is working feverishly to "put Penne on the map" as a production center of toys for children.

### Good Farmland

Penne fortunately has much better agricultural possibilities than Puycelci. Two farmers and their families were selected as part of the first contingent of settlers. Soon after their arrival five acres of good farm land were offered rent-free for two years. Other generous offers followed, but it was felt advisable to accept only that land which the



Principal square of Penne with interesting old clock tower in shown

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proprietor was willing to have cultivated as vegetable garden for at least five years. After this



background. Henry Harvey, one of the American delegates, is right.

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spring it is felt that the supply of vegetables will be adequate for the present settlers.

The inhabitants of the village have welcomed the newcomers and have cooperated in helping them settle. Chickens, vegetables and even a layette for the town's first new baby have been generously given. The advent of new residents has stimulated many of the older inhabitants to the point that they are recultivating fields which they had long left fallow.

Writing from Penne, a Quaker correspondent gives a picture of Christmas celebration in this little village:

"I must tell you a little about the new settlers at Penne. They are all Spaniards, some are engineers, one a radio specialist, two peasants, one joiner, etc., and they are working together as one team, completely devoted and completely loyal, and working like galley slaves. They could only start real work about five weeks ago and had three thousand toys ready for Christmas and are finishing the next thousand tomorrow for distribution—by order of Mary Elmes—at Rivesaltes to the interned children there on the 6th, the Feast of the Three Magi. I spent Christmas day with them, and it was beautiful. For the first time for five years for some of them they spent a Christmas under their own roof and with a right to be there and with a prospect of earning their own living. They are already accepted in the village by the old inhabitants to such an extent that they had been asked by the mayor to organize a Christmas tree for the whole village, a thing that had not been done there for years and years. It was lovely. They had even made toys for all the French children invited from four other villages. The whole commune had turned up. Afterwards they had a tree for themselves and us. After a while they began to sing, so beautifully that we all cried. Then they danced the sarabande and I was sure the floor would fall in. I cannot tell you the joy it is to make some people really happy, instead of just making them a little

less unhappy. That little village will thrive for these people have great generosity.”

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Such projects as those described in the foregoing pages have presented difficulties in organization, delays which have stretched from days into

weeks and months and will need continuing responsibility on the part of all cooperating groups to insure their final success. It is hoped that some of the funds invested in these villages can be repaid so that more families may be settled, new life brought to other villages. The Committee is at the present time engaged in preliminary arrangements for the resettlement of a third village.



New residents renovating the barn which now serves as factory for the "Toys of Penne."

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