

A Friendly Service

in **MEXICO**

**FOCUS ON
UNDERSTANDING**





Volunteers build friendship and good will.

Dasenbrock

The American Friends Service Committee represents the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in national and international fields of social action. The Committee was founded in 1917 to carry on relief and post-war reconstruction in Europe. It has since been engaged in many projects here and abroad to promote international and industrial understanding, and to offer opportunities for constructive service, participated in and supported by Americans of all faiths.

The Mexican projects described in this pamphlet are part of a larger program of voluntary service for young people. For many years men and women of different nationalities, religions, and races have participated in the Committee's work camps and community service units, in their seminars and institutes, and in interne and institutional service programs.

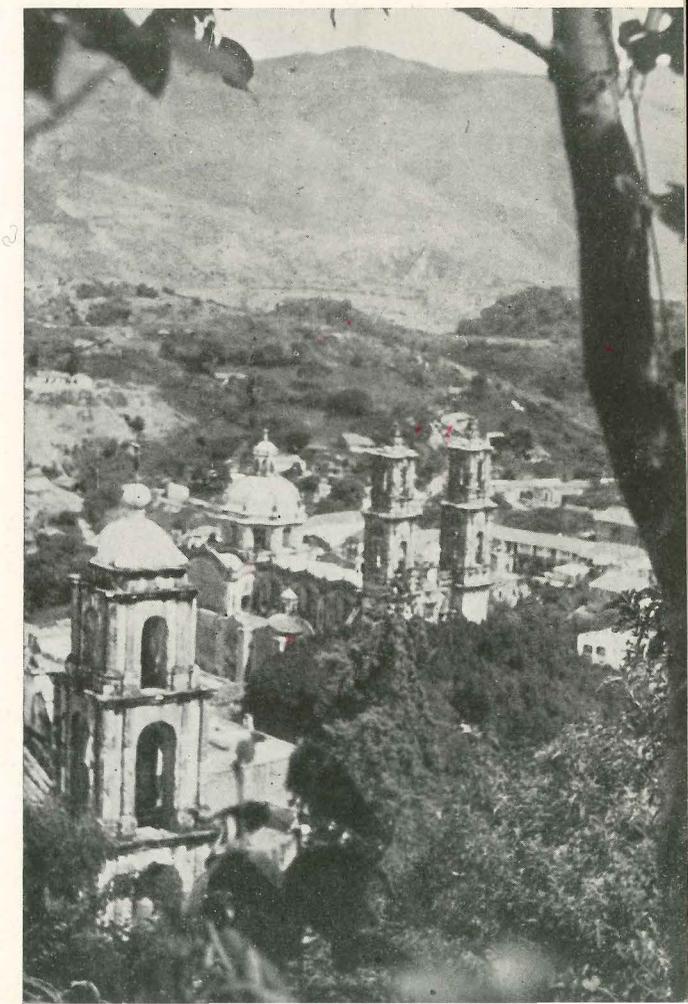
All of the Committee's work is rooted in two fundamental Quaker principles: respect for the personality of the individual which springs from faith in the divine possibilities in man, and confidence in the creative power of love to remove prejudice and suspicion and "take away the occasion for war."

A FRIENDLY SERVICE IN MEXICO

The Mexico of the tourists is beautiful. Floating gardens, Aztec ruins, ancient churches and modern works of art, snow-capped mountains delight the eye and capture the imagination. There is another Mexico: the Mexico of the people who live in the villages, the *ejidos* or collective farms, and in the towns off the visitors' path. This is a country of privation—and of laughter; of simplicity—and of song; of disease—and of warm friendliness. This Mexico is beautiful too, and it reaches the heart. It is this Mexico that people from many countries have come to know and love through the service projects of the American Friends Service Committee.

They have learned to know it by digging in the malarial swamps beside Mexican laborers, by lifting adobe bricks in the broiling sun to build a school where a school is so much wanted that even women and children help to carry the water and sand for the mortar. They have played games with the dark-eyed, shy, merry children, and have joined in the village fiestas. They have ex-

changed English lessons for Spanish lessons and have sung in Mexican church services. They have vaccinated and inoculated hundreds of people, young and old. They have visited primitive homes and helped the people to understand some of the primary rules of health. Living in the villages, the doors of their houses open to all their friends, they have demonstrated a way of life that is simple, cooperative, friendly, and wholesome, and not without grace.



Mexico is beautiful



They work under Mexican direction, doing the jobs the Mexicans want done, in the way they want them done.

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They have worked hard without any pay, and in return they have had the joy of new vistas and new friendships, of comradeship with like-minded young Americans in work and play and household life. They have had opportunity to help directly and simply where help is needed; they have had a share in building understanding between the people of Mexico and the people of the United States.

THE WORK

The young men and women in the service projects work under Mexican direction, doing jobs the Mexicans want done, in the way they want them done. This principle is important. It has carried weight with the Mexicans, who, after their first amazement subsides, see in it incontrovertible evidence of the unselfish motivation of the working groups and the sincerity of their desire to help.

The first summer project started in 1939 with eighteen men from eleven different colleges and universities. For five weeks they worked with Mexican peasants helping to build a school on the *ejido* of Santa Ana del Pilar; the sixth week was devoted to an inten-

sive seminar in Mexico City. From this modest beginning the work expanded. Long term projects were developed, continuing throughout the year. Recently, in one year there were more than 200 students in Mexico under the sponsorship of the American Friends Service Committee. War conditions halted the sending down of men of draft age, but girls went on with recreation and public health work, while some more individualized projects of social service took shape. Opportunities are now open to both men and women.

In all of these various projects the volunteers have been able to give assistance in three general types of work: building, recreation, and public health work.

BUILDING

American college boys, doing unskilled jobs under the direction of Mexican foremen, helped to build two village schools, a model village, and a cooperative cotton gin in the Laguna region, where one of the world's largest attempts at collectivized agriculture on a voluntary basis is going forward.

The Laguna region occupies the bed of an ancient lake in the high north central plateau of Mexico. Here in a hot and dusty land,

watered by irrigation, almost half of Mexico's cotton is grown. In former days two landowners held two thirds of all the land, which was worked by peons who were all but serfs. By the decree of President Cardenas in 1936, a large part of the land was turned over to the workers, who formed 285 *ejidos*, or cooperative farms. Now 31,000 families share the land, the work, and the returns.

Along with the division of the land has gone a new and far-reaching program of education and medical service. The peasants of the region, through their Central Committee of *Ejidatarios*, take an increasing responsibility for the administration of the new system and cooperate with the federal education and health departments. The North American volunteers have been privileged to see a great cooperative movement at first hand, and have had the opportunity of hearing discussions of all aspects of the question by Mexicans of all shades of thought.

Emergency aid in building was given by the Service Committee after the earthquake of 1941. In the little town of Tuxpan, Jalisco, in an agricultural region west of Mexico City, 966 out of the 1716 houses were completely destroyed and all but 90 of the rest damaged. The rainy season was about to begin; to get the crops planted was the first necessity,

and the people could not stop even to erect temporary shelters for themselves, to say nothing of clearing away the debris or rebuilding their homes. The Service Committee, after a careful survey, sent down 44 volunteers. From June to January, they lived in the one schoolhouse that was habitable, and worked at carting away debris and building temporary shelters for the neediest of the people, helping to rebuild the two ruined schoolhouses and working on an aqueduct to increase the village water supply. Materials and tools were supplied by the local relief committee, the local Catholic Church, and the families themselves.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Malaria, hookworm, tuberculosis, dysentery, and typhoid are some of the diseases most prevalent and most devastating in Mexico. They are fostered by lack of sanitation, by mosquito-breeding swamps, and by inadequate knowledge of preventive measures. The Department of Public Health has launched a far-sighted and vigorous campaign of hygiene and education, and the volunteers work under the direction of Mexi-



They play games with the dark-eyed, shy, merry children.



The market holds an important place in village life in Mexico.

can public health doctors and officials. The men have been occupied with strenuous operations for the improvement of conditions that foster disease, and the women work in hospitals and clinics.

In the state of Vera Cruz, in 1942 and early 1943, a group of men helped the peasants of a village to dig a two-mile drainage ditch through a swamp in a low-lying coastal region where almost 100% of the population had malaria. Besides the heat and the back-bending work, they had snakes, tarantulas, scorpions, dysentery and malaria to contend with. It was, perhaps, the most taxing of all the projects that the Mexican service has undertaken, but it was deeply satisfying to the men who took part in it. Most of them were conscientious objectors who were deeply under the weight of the war and the world's suffering; they welcomed constructive work and they had no wish to avoid either hardship or danger.

After the ditch was finished they turned to the building of privies as a measure against hookworm. From their headquarters in a reputedly haunted house in the ancient village of Paso de Ovejas they carried on the building of privies in five neighboring villages. During the year and a half of their

sojourn at Paso de Ovejas they entered fully into the life of the countryside. Mexican students from the university in Mexico City came down to work with them; Mexican neighbors became their friends, and came to them for help in emergencies.

The volunteers also completed a trench for the sewage system in Xico, made screens for a cooperative hospital in the town of Gomez Palacio, and built some privies in Miacatlan.

In 1941 and 1942, American girls worked as nurses' aides in a cooperative hospital in Torreon, which is the largest city in the Laguna region, and went out with mobile hospital units to *ejido* villages to give vaccinations and inoculations. The following year they started the year-round-work in the villages of Miacatlan and Tetecala which is still continuing.

Tetecala is a small town with a population of about 2500, with narrow cobbled streets, and white, yellow or pink houses over-grown with Bougainvillea vines; it lies in a farming country about a hundred miles southwest of Mexico City. Both here and in Miacatlan, nine miles away, the Department of Public Health of the state of Morelos, as part of its expanding program, has estab-

lished clinics which serve the people of five or six neighboring hamlets. The volunteers work five days a week in the clinics under the direction of the Mexican doctor and nurse keeping records, receiving patients, and giving vaccinations and injections.

After working in these two villages for three years in 1946 two other villages not too far distant in the same state were selected for a long term program—Tetecingo near Cuautla and Yautepec. To the health clinic work has been added teaching of English, craft and recreational programs. In Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo and the distantly located mountain village of Taxhay there have been parallel clinic programs of giving injections, keeping health records, house visits, constructing a playground and cooperative store. Mexican women some with medical training and Mexican men join the work finding here a wished for opportunity to serve their people.

For several years, now, Toluca and Nativitas, near Mexico City and Lerdo in the great Laguna area, have offered new and continuing opportunities under sponsorship of state education and health departments.

RECREATION

Mexican children have to be taught to play. In their new physical education program they need more leaders to organize games and start the fun going. The American girls have gone to the *ejido* villages and the cities of Torreon and Durango in the Laguna region, and to Tetecala and Miacatlan

in the state of Morelos, and have taught the children how to play American games and learned from them in exchange the national folk dance, the *Jarabe*. In Durango, where there is a good municipal swimming pool, they give swimming lessons.

INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL SERVICE

The Rural Cultural Missions which the government has established to further the development of the life of the peasants are another vitally interesting feature of Mexico's awakening. Each mission is staffed by a group of skilled leaders—a musician, a mason, an engineer, a social worker, a nurse, a carpenter, a recreation director—who work among the people in the backward regions, bringing to them both help and stimulus. Two American Friends Service Committee volunteers spent about a year in Cultural Mission No. 30, at Tlahuelompa, Hidalgo, giving and receiving in full measure.

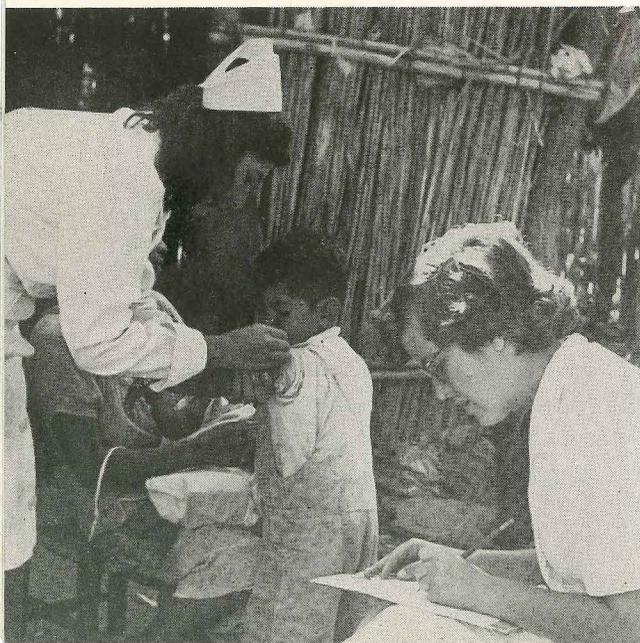
Other volunteers have taken part in the work of the Camomihla Rural Center, which is an organization of the YMCA engaged in a program of rural reconstruction under the direction of Dr. C. Spencer Hatch. They helped Mexican masons and carpenters to build a house in the Center which was to serve two purposes: to be a model dwelling house for Mexicans to see and copy, and to provide quarters for themselves and other students in the future. They also studied local crops, the water supply, and other conditions, helped to organize games, a weaving program, and other activities.

MEXICO CITY SEMINAR

An important part of the experience in Mexico is the seminar held in Mexico City every summer in August. This serves to gather together the experiences of the volunteers into an integrated whole and to interpret to them the Mexico which they have learned to know. For a week or more they stay in the capital, see the sights which it has to offer, make short trips to nearby places of interest, and hear a series of lectures by Mexican leaders on the problems of Mexico and the methods being used to solve them.

THOSE WHO GO

Most of the volunteers are either college students or recent graduates who wish to have a part in constructive service in a foreign country, although for the summer projects a few high school boys have been accepted. The directors are mature men and women, or married couples, who have had experience in the kind of work and the kind of living that the projects involve.



The volunteers are carefully selected from a number of applicants. Physical health is essential, and the ability to work in a hot climate. A speaking knowledge of Spanish is important. Previous training and experience as playground leaders, public health or social service workers and the like, are desirable. Still more important are the ability to understand and appreciate the gifts as well as the needs, the aspirations as well as the problems, of our Mexican friends, and a sincere desire to promote friendship between the two countries and to interpret them sympathetically one to the other. Above all qualifications, however, is the purpose of mind and spirit that eliminates the possibility of conflict, and the way of life which forwards the cause of peace by the small, steady, daily service of good will and harmony.

HOW THEY LIVE

They have their quarters in schools in the summers, or in teachers' houses, or some other unused building that may be adapted to their use. In Tetecala their house is a small one, set back from the street, with a yard back and front in which grow banana and papaya trees and flowering shrubs. The front room is a screened porch, with a kit-

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Volunteers do house-to-house rural health work under direction of the Mexican doctor and nurse.

Learning to make tortillas. The volunteers have found their Mexican neighbors to be hospitable and friendly.



chen at one end and a living room at the other. They sleep on cots, and they share all the work of the household, including the cooking and the laundry. Cooking is more complicated there than it is at home, for all the water has to be boiled and the vegetables soaked in chlorinated water, and the stove is a primitive affair that uses charcoal for fuel. The simplicity of their arrangements serves the double purpose of bringing them closer to the people with whom they work and keeping the cost of their living down to a minimum.

Their daily schedule seems rigorous at first glance. They get up at 6:30. A half hour of meditation and the morning housework fill the time between breakfast at seven and the opening of the clinic at nine. They have found it wisest, after trial, to adopt the universal custom of the siesta hour. The late afternoons and evenings are free for recreation and the demands of emergency help or friendly social intercourse. The morning meditation is never omitted, for that has been found to be the necessary stillness at the heart of this very active life.

Visitors are an important part of the pleasure—and at least a considerable part of the work. Mexican students come for a week-end or a week to join in the work; friends from the United States look in to see how things are going. And always there are the much looked-forward-to visits of Heberto Sein, a leading member of the Society of Friends in Mexico and professor of English in the Agricultural School at Chapingo. He is always a stimulating guest, explaining Mexico to the volunteers, helping them to keep fresh in their minds the vision which brought them there and the purposes to which they are committed.

Local friendships are warm. The volunteers have found their Mexican neighbors to be hospitable and friendly, full of charm and dignity, vivacity and leisureliness. They invite the *Norteamericanos* to their funerals and their weddings and to the christening of their babies.



North American college students translate interest and good will into community service where help is needed.

RESULTS

In actual work, the results are small. Mexican labor could—and would—have built the schools and drainage ditches, the model village and the cotton gin, and the public health program would go forward, without the help of a handful of American college students. There is, nevertheless, another way of estimating its usefulness, in terms of the imponderables which work as leaven in the vast dough of international relations. Individual Mexicans learn to know and trust individual North Americans; their friends and their friends' friends, hearing about it, spread wide the word. Newspapermen come from Mexico City to write about the work, and the pattern of their reactions is always the same: amazement that university students should be willing to do manual labor and housework, astonishment at the genuinely un-self-seeking spirit in which it is done, and recognition of the values of good will and understanding which the service presents.

Occasionally there has been an initial misapprehension of the motives of the volun-

teers, but always that has been cleared up. In one small village it took seven months to persuade the father of a Mexican boy who worked with the volunteers that the Americans had not come to find oil, but in the end he was convinced and became an enthusiastic friend. In another village the dominating lady got all the doors closed against the volunteers on the ground that they had come to proselytize, but a closer acquaintance with the girls soon put that straight.

In general, the relationship with the Catholic Church has been a happy one. One priest wrote of the work of the American students: "I have seen the self-denial of the young men who left their university studies or worthy occupations and, condescending to our humble methods, work sweating beneath our sun. I am extremely thankful, and my heart overflows with the love I have for them."

A Mexican in one of the villages expressed the hope that some day a group from his *ejido* could go to the United States and help us with some of our projects. To some extent this wish has been realized. Several young Mexicans have come to this country to take part in the summer work camps sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee.

WHEN THEY RETURN

For the American volunteers the experience has been a rich one, suggested best, perhaps, by the words of one of them:

"The Mexican skies are so clear. The desert dust is so white and deep. The faces of our friends are brown and contented. The sandalled feet tread fields of toil and promise. The guitars lift life high in song and dance. The friendships of these new friends have penetrated our souls and we are grateful for our six weeks here south of the border. For which we thank you." (Winifred Barrett, August 2, 1944.)

But the work of the volunteer is not finished when he returns home. The important aspect of interpreting Mexico and her people to the people of this country is his responsibility. For the teacher there is the class of children eager for the colorful portrayal of life below the border; for other professional workers and college students there is the wide circle of friends and acquaintances who heretofore have not had an accounting of first hand experiences in this neighboring country. They listen with new interest to the story of the cultural life of Mexico and of the national and international problems confronting her people.

PRESENT PROJECTS

Nativitas continues as the site of a year-round project. Volunteers are developing programs in the schools including games and art classes and are setting up children's libraries. They participate in a health education program which includes movies, lectures, and latrine building and also work in the new health center in Xochimilco.

AFSC units have been working in the region of Valle de Bravo since 1949. Volunteers work in the local hospital, are developing the children's loan library, and conducting classes in recreation, arts, and crafts.

A new project has been begun in Campo de Colorines, a village for the workers in a new hydro-electric plant. Strangely enough, the major problem of the village has been to develop a source of fresh pure water for their own use. The unit working there now is digging a ditch and reservoir which will make it possible for clear spring water to reach the village.

Since September, 1949, more than 75 AFSC unit members have been able to work in the state of Nayarit, helping to forward the Pilot Project in Basic Education being carried on by the Mexican Government. This plan, approved by UNESCO, was begun in September, 1948, and the AFSC was asked to send units to help carry out the proposed work. Volunteers have built and painted schools, planted gardens, laid drainage systems, organized recreation activities, worked in clinics.

The newest development of the program is the extension of village-type work into El Salvador. In February, 1951, the government of El Salvador signed agreements with the UN and its specialized agencies for a technical cooperation program in the San Andres Valley. The AFSC was invited by El Salvador Department of Public Health to send a unit to work in the Rural Demonstration Project area and a small unit is now at work there.

INFORMATION

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The Mexicans invite the Norteamericanos to their fiestas.

