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BUILDING A BETTER HEMISPHERE SERIES NO. 16

More Than ABC's

By
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THE INSTITUTE OF INTER-AMERICAN AFFAIRS

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INTER-AMERICAN REGIONAL OFFICE

TECHNICAL COOPERATION ADMINISTRATION

more than



As in all schools, recess is playtime. Teamwork and fair play find their root in this type of supervised activity.



◀ *These children work together in collecting material for the adobe benches for their new school building.*



Young student brings shy little sister to school while parents work in the field. ▶

ABC's

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THE BROWN ROAD, lying straight as a measuring stick across the endless, rock-strewn fields of the *altiplano*, was dotted irregularly with moving bits of color. It was Corpus Christi time, and all along our route from La Paz to Achacachi, groups of Aymarás made their way, brilliant with festival costumes in every hue of the rainbow, flourishing long poles decked with gaily-colored streamers. Some were swirling in a dance as they went along, the women's black skirts billowing out above petticoats of orange, blue, red, yellow, and green. Most of the pilgrims greeted us as we passed. They did not know us; but they are a courteous people. Besides, although they might not be able to read the Spanish legend on our car—"Servicio Cooperativo Interamericano de Educación"—many of them knew the *Servicio's* emblem.

On our left, the rock-walled fields, surrounding scattered adobe homes, sloped gently upward to the low hills that screened Lake Titicaca from our view. Far to the right, against a clear blue sky, the peaks of the Cordillera Real kept pace with us. A banner of white cloud floated from the white cone of Iliampu. Peaked-capped boys, whirling their slingshots, chased their herds of llamas and alpacas out of our path.

It was my first glimpse of rural Bolivia, and I asked endless questions of my companions, to whom the scene was a familiar one. For several years they had been living in the rarified highland atmosphere of the *altiplano*, working day by day and month by month in a cooperative program with Bolivian teachers and officials.

Like other Latin American republics, Bolivia is engaged in a reorganization and reorientation of her rural education system. And like several of her neighbors, Bolivia invited the United States Government, through The Institute of Inter-American Affairs, to collaborate with her in the program. Each country pays the salaries and expenses of its own technicians and specialists. Each also contributes its fair share of the funds for direct expenditures on project activities. Now the Chief of the Institute's field staff, and one of his specialists were pointing out to me, as a representative of the Institute's Washington Office, what was being done.

Before long, we would be driving along the shores of Titicaca to the rural normal school at Santiago de Huata. A narrow road branched off to our left, toward a village. "That is the *comunidad* of Batallas, over there," said Ernest, the field chief, as we passed the road junction.

"One of our central schools is there."

"I should like to see it, if there is time," I said.

We turned the car around and took the road to Batallas. It was just an unscheduled deviation from our plans for the day; but it turned out to be one of the most interesting experiences of a long trip through several countries. Ever since then, Batallas has been to me a symbol both of international collaboration and of a rural community's sturdy march of progress.

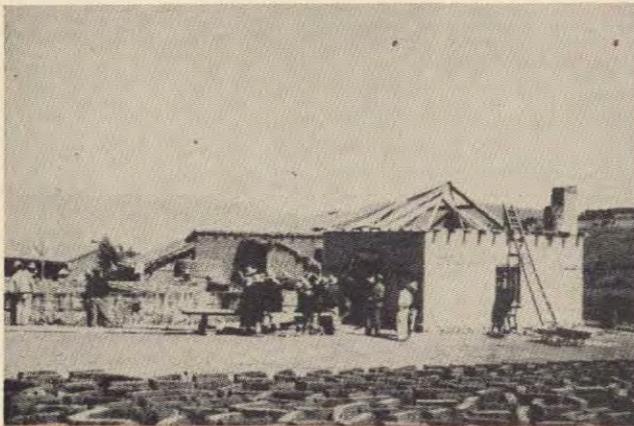
"Before we get to Batallas," said Ernest, "I want to explain what it was like before we and our Bolivian colleagues started to work here, for the school has brought about many changes in the last few months. The school-



Bolivian rural teachers in action at summer institute in Santiago de Huata.



Garbage disposal in pits is a health protection measure Batallas students are learning about.



Building an adobe school, part of the cooperative U.S.-Bolivian education program.

Below: making boats from balsa reeds high on the altiplano



house was too small to accommodate the students. You see, children came here from many kilometers' distance, walking all the way, frequently without breakfast, to join with the children of the village itself. The school was dark and uncomfortable, with almost no furniture. There was not even a blackboard to help the teacher in her work. The curriculum was the same as in the city schools of La Paz, with no bearing upon the daily lives of the children and their parents. The method of instruction was memorization—the teacher read or recited to the children their lessons in anatomy, in geography, in arithmetic. The pupils copied faithfully in their notebooks what the teacher read to them; then they learned it all by heart.

"Of course, many children of the *comunidad* did not come to school at all, in spite of the compulsory education laws. There was not room for them, for one thing. But even if there had been, one can scarcely blame their parents for feeling that since the youngsters were learning little that could be useful to them in later life, they might better be at home learning the tasks of farming and home-making. The teachers are hard-working, and they were doing their best . . . but here we are at the school."

The cluster of school buildings stood in a walled compound at the near edge of the village. As we approached the gate, a group of men came toward us. We were pleasantly surprised to see that one of them was Sr. B., Bolivian Director of Rural Education in the Ministry of Education, who was working closely with us in the cooperative program. He promptly took charge of our visit and acted as our interpreter, in Spanish, with the Aymara-speaking villagers.

Before we entered the compound, I noticed a ring of armed men, irregularly spaced in a circle around the walls of the school grounds. "What are they doing?" I asked Sr. B. He smiled grimly.

"That is an interesting story," he replied. "You see, the laborers on the nearby haciendas have taken to arms against the landowners. In other days when such disturbances occurred, the villagers were accustomed to make common cause with the laborers. But this year the men of Batallas kept aloof because, they said, men from La Paz were transforming their school, and the school was transforming the *comunidad*, and all that would be lost if Batallas were to join in the uprising. When the laborers threatened to destroy the school, the villagers set up this cordon of guards. Batallas is safe."

We looked thoughtfully for a moment past the silent line of guards toward a distant eucalyptus grove on a hillside, where discontent was ruling. Then we turned in to the school grounds.

My first impression was that the whole community had gathered at the school. There were dozens of children in all parts of the grounds. But there were also many adults, some mingling with the children, others gathered in a group before the main building. As we approached, we could hear the voices of students and teacher, discussing the lesson. "They are studying nutrition just now," said Sr. B., "finding out what they should eat each day to keep them well."

"But what are the adults doing, standing by the door and windows?" I asked.

"They are learning, too," replied Sr. B. with a smile. "You usually find several parents here every day. What the children are learning is of great importance in the

home. These are intelligent people, and they are not wasting an opportunity which lies at their very doors."

The parents made way for us, and we entered the school. Instantly all the pupils rose in greeting. We were introduced to the teacher and gave her our special congratulations, as this was *Día de los Maestros* (Teachers' Day). Proudly the teacher—a graduate of the rural normal school at Santiago de Huata—showed us the classroom and the handiwork of her students decorating the neatly whitewashed adobe walls.

"A few months ago," she explained, "this was the school's only building. There were no windows—only the door for light and ventilation. The walls were unpainted and undecorated. The pupils sat on the earthen floor, or on stones they brought from the fields. Now the children and I have worked together, with some help from the parents, to make the windows, paint the walls, build adobe benches and desks. They may not look as comfortable to you as wooden furniture, but there is no wood here, and this is much better than anything the children have had before. And, see, we have even made a blackboard! The men and women of the *Servicio Cooperativo* showed us how to make a smooth surface on the adobe walls and cover it with lampblack and egg-white. It is wonderful to be able to work with a blackboard!"

"Now," said Sr. B., "I want to show you that this lesson in nutrition the children are studying is not mere theory." He led us outside through an archway into a courtyard between two new buildings. The aroma of food drifted from an open doorway. Inside, over a simple but effective adobe stove, the school lunch was being prepared by two teachers and a group of children. "The children no longer come hungry to school, and go home hungry," continued B. "Their diet, based on foods available in this locality, is carefully planned in accordance with the principles they are learning at this moment."

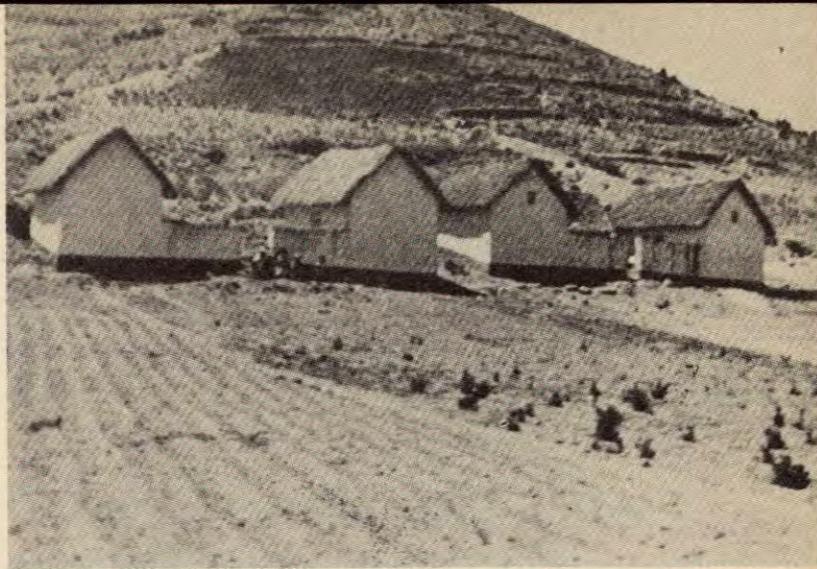
"Who supplies the food?" I asked. (My part of the conversation at Batallas always ended with a question mark.)

"We must buy a little, and the children bring in some of it. As for the rest—follow me."

He led the way around the buildings to the rear of the school. Here more children and a sprinkling of adults were cultivating an extensive garden divided into neat patches, each the particular responsibility of a group of children. Some of the produce, he explained, was used in the school lunches. The rest was taken home by the children or sold for the benefit of the school. The children had been organized into school agricultural clubs (*Clubes Escolares Campesinos*), and the work in the gardens was part of both their school instruction and their club activities. "The club members," said Bravo, "make it part of their duty—and pleasure—to learn how to improve their tools and cultivation methods. Then, in cooperation with the organized Parents' Association, they carry their new methods to their own farms."

At one corner of the garden, a small group was working busily with shovels, adobe bricks, and a mixing trough. "Those boys and the two men who are helping them with the heavy work are building an inexpensive but effective row of latrines for the school. Until the Cooperative Program entered Batallas, neither the latrine nor the necessity for it was known here. Now the instruction in sanitation and hygiene is showing results."

"But we are aiming also at community education," I

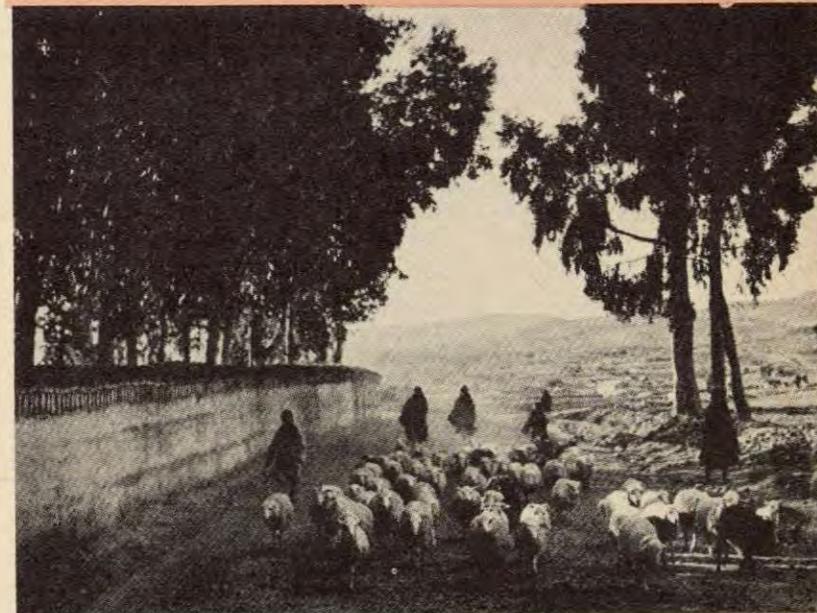


Some of the homes Batallas youngsters helped renovate



Teachers pitch into making home improvements during summer vacation.

Below: practical education program is designed to make a better life for these Bolivian country people





At summer school session for rural teachers conducted by Servicio in Huarisata, Bolivia, pupil in demonstration school, after washing hands, dries them on her own towel before she has her hot lunch, which is served daily.



Teachers, parents and school children cooperate in constructing and improving present school facilities.

pointed out. "If that instruction is put into effect only at the school, will it really have any permanent effect as far as the children are concerned?"

"Ah," said Ernest, "we shall have to show you the answer to that."

We made our way once more to the compound gate and walked toward the village. I was doing some thinking. "But Ernest," I said, "we think of a school primarily as a place where one learns reading, writing, and arithmetic. From what I have seen so far, this school teaches only agriculture, health, and—"

Sr. B. broke in. "No, no! Our children must be taught to read and to figure, of course. And you should see how interested they are in it! For they are taught to read about things that are familiar to them—their fields, their school activities, their homes. They work out arithmetic problems which deal with the measurements of their fields, the census of their farm animals, the weight of their produce, the prices in the marketplace at Achacachi. It has meaning for them, and that kind of learning is not a burden."

Four or five villagers were approaching us at a dignified and formal pace. At their head walked a man carrying an impressive-looking staff. His wife was beside him. "Here is the *alcalde* of Batallas," whispered B. "He has been informed of your visit and has come to welcome you."

The *alcalde*, or mayor, and his following stopped before us, making gentle gestures of greeting. Sr. B. stepped forward and explained to him in Aymará who we were and

why we had come. First the *alcalde*, then his wife, advanced and gave each of us a dignified but friendly embrace. Then the *alcalde* made a brief speech in Aymará. "He says," translated Sr. B., "that it is a fortunate omen that brings you to Batallas on the *Día de los Maestros*, for it gives him the opportunity he has long desired to express to you and to the *Servicio Cooperativo* the sincere appreciation of his people for the work that has been started here. He says the *Servicio* has made every day a *Día de los Maestros* in Batallas. He asks you to accept the hospitality of his people and to permit him to show you the changes which are taking place among them under the cooperative program. He adds," B. continued with a grin, "that he must make a confession. He accepted the cooperative program with reluctance at the beginning, because it seemed dangerous to meddle with the ancient ways of doing things. But now he wishes to be considered a colleague in the Program."

My brief reply was less eloquent, for the *alcalde* had a natural gift of oratory, but it was no less sincere. Our two groups joined, and we proceeded toward the nearest houses. On the way Ernest explained that the school children had formed teams, to each of which one or two members of the Parents' Auxiliary was attached. The teams moved from one household to another in the *comunidad*, helping the owners to improve their homes and fields and teaching them how to maintain them as pleasanter, more comfortable, and more healthful places to live in. The *alcalde* had decided to take us first to two homes not yet reached by the school, and then to two or three which had been "transformed," as B. translated it.

As we approached the first house, a woman who was standing in the low doorway twirling the inevitable spindle of wool stepped forward shyly to greet us. The *alcalde* apparently explained the nature of our visit and asked permission to enter. Sr. B. translated her reply under his breath. "She says we are welcome, and asks the *alcalde* when the children will come to her home, for she wishes it to be like that of some of her neighbors."

We stooped to follow the *alcalde* into the one-room house. After the bright sunlight, it was several moments before we could see. The doorway, which we could not help blocking for lack of standing room, was the only opening. I was startled by the sudden rush past my legs of two chickens, which apparently resented our intrusion and slipped past me, squawking into the farmyard. By that time, the room began to take shape in the darkness. At one end, three stones supported a blackened pot. This was the kitchen. The walls and roof were blackened by smoke, and some of the acrid fumes that had not yet found their way through the roof made our eyes smart. At the other end of the room, a pile of thick blankets on the earthen floor marked the family bedroom. Between the "bedroom" and "kitchen," much of the tiny floor space was taken up with neat little piles of food—one of meat, another of potatoes, and so forth. A few earthen dishes leaned against the farther wall. Two cords strung from one side of the room to the other bore a few articles of clothing. We stepped again into the sunlight, with some difficulty as a sheep chose that moment to try to enter the house, and the doorway was not wide enough for two-way traffic. We thanked our hostess and promised that the children would come soon. Her smile would have done credit to a diplomat's lady.

At the next house, the woman was courteous but not

cordial. She explained that we were welcome but that she hoped the school would not interfere with her home. "Old ways are best," she said—or the equivalent adage in Aymará. Except for the difference in greeting, this house was much like the first. Then the *alcalde* smiled. "Now I show you the new day," Sr. B. translated.

Our third visit showed a startling difference. This house had been whitewashed, inside and out. The next thing I noticed was two windows cut through the adobe and flanking the doorway. Inside, I got the impression of spaciousness, in contrast to the two interiors we had visited. This was no doubt partly due to the whitewash and the light; then I noticed that there was no "kitchen." The pile of blankets occupied one end of the room—but they rested on a neat platform of adobe, some twenty inches above the floor level. Next I realized that none of the floor space was used for food storage. A series of niches had been cut into the back wall. Here the food was stored, the few dishes were neatly stacked, and some clothing was folded into piles. The floor was of bare earth, but carefully swept, and there was no evidence of farm animals or fowls. We stepped outside, and the *alcalde* led us to one end of the house to a lean-to shed. Here was the transplanted kitchen, from which the smoke could not enter the house. Yet the fire gave some warmth to the sleeping quarters on the other side of the wall. Behind the lean-to were several small pens, separated by adobe walls, where the farm animals were kept. And beyond was a new, sanitary latrine, exactly like those at the school. The master of the house explained proudly that he himself had helped the children build it.

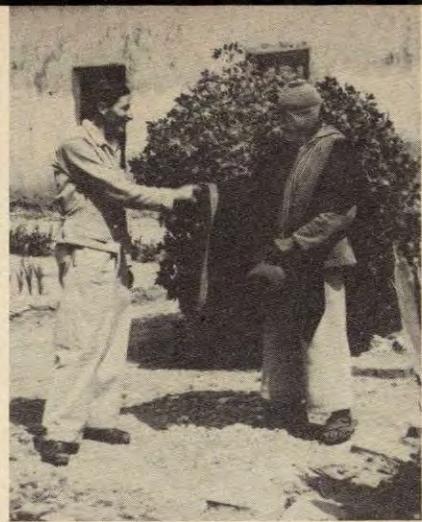
Twice more the *alcalde* led us to homes where the school had been at work. The last was his own, with the added dignity of an attractive adobe wall, neatly whitewashed, surrounding home and field.

It was time for us to go, and the *alcalde* walked with us back toward the school and our waiting car. I was silent, thinking of what these people were doing for their own benefit, and happy that in some measure the people of my country, through The Institute of Inter-American Affairs, had had an opportunity to work with Bolivians through their schools. I was thinking of the teachers who had done their work well, of the parents who had worked so hard beside their children and who were not afraid to try something new, of the children themselves, who were already proving themselves in citizenship.

At the school we stopped, while the *alcalde* cleared his throat and made another brief, easy address. He repeated his appreciation and emphasized once more his change of attitude—from tolerance to active support for the Cooperative Program. Near the end he smiled, and an almost mischievous look came into his eyes as he spoke his last sentences. Sr. B. roared with laughter. "He says, 'I was born in an evil time, as you can see! When I was young, I had to keep silent and listen to my elders, and I longed for the day when I should be grown and able to speak with all authority. Now I am old, and lo! I must be silent and listen to my children!'"

HAPPY CHILDREN WAITING FOR THE SCHOOL BELL

The alcalde (right) shows his interest and appreciation for the help supplied by the Servicio.



Typical scene showing a herd of llamas gathered in a school yard. These domesticated animals are used as beasts of burden and a source of wool.





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