

From JHW 2/17/41

Re Wallace's idea that the Foundation should support only three things in Mexico, - health, nutrition and agriculture.

1. Public health. Of course things are bad here by American standards but they are improving nearly as fast as can be expected. The chief obstacle is economic and political. Medical science is not in bad shape wherever doctors can make a living. Consider that the minimum official wage (which is not observed in some sections) is 33¢ American a day. The majority of Mexicans don't earn enough to pay for medical service, even when it is very reasonable. The government requires every candidate for medical licensing to spend a season at his own expense in free public health service in a district lacking medical facilities. What they need is socialized medicine, but the finances of the government will not permit it. The first people paid are the military, who constitute the gendarmerie that keeps the country in order and the government in power. Pay the generals and their staffs first. Now it looks as though Mexico was going to militarize more strongly, which will mean less for other things.

Emphasize poverty rather than ignorance. Mexicans take nicely to concrete tasks like medicine and surgery. There is an imposing group of European (German) refugees, trying to get established in practice. Drugstores are very well equipped. You are likely to find a well-stocked refrigerator with Lilley products in towns of ten and twenty thousand. German aniline derivatives are available in full lines, including the latest developments.

Mexican cities cannot use water as we do. Mostly it rains about three months out of the year and there simply are not the rivers of water available to be run through sewers and for the flushing of street dirt. Often water must be turned off at night. If there are weak spots in the pipe lines these then (when empty of water) receive contamination by drainage into them from the ground. Mexico City, e.g. has an excellent water supply as to quality. But when the water is turned off filth from the city gets into the pipe lines here and there (pipes sink and joints crack in the unstable ground, pipes become corroded and funds are not available to keep them constantly overhauled).

Mexico is short of fuel. Hot water, boiled water is a luxury. The country has almost no coal. Fuel is primarily charcoal, which is costly and slow. Soap is expensive. Provide cheap hot water and soap in the American manner. They'd love to use it, if they could afford it, and a lot less babies would die. Milk is a growing hazard. American influence (as by returned Mexicans) has greatly increased milk drinking (formerly only infants and the old). The government has tried to control its quality by the usual methods, but sterilization is difficult to carry through: a) it raises the cost directly, b) the cost of maintaining adequate inspection is prohibitive.

Meanwhile the sun is the great antiseptic. There having been no revolution for a dozen years, the population has increased as never before in Mexican history, and hence there are more poor people who can afford none of the protective measures to safeguard their health. The major problem is economic. Find the funds for public hygiene and the Mexicans will make good use of them. Beware the attitude that if we instruct them, they will learn from us.



2. Nutrition. Same line of argument. They do amazingly well, considering what they have to spend. A Mexican is short of calories or of vitamins only if he is too poor to buy them. Watch the purchases in the markets and the way in which the family's expenditures are distributed. They get an amazing lot for what they spend and dietary deficiencies are economic, not cultural. Cook, of our physiology department, has made nutritional studies down here in the past year in different localities. He finds the greatest shortage in animal fats (too expensive). But don't get the idea that they would eat better if they had nutrition experts to advise them. I've had a good deal of interest in the Mexican kitchen and if there is any other country in which sordid nutrition is better practised as far as the pocketbook permits, I don't know it. And I don't know how the fruits, vegetables are lugged so far and marketed for so little. Aside from inability to buy - alcoholism is the principal thing wrong - again quite variable from district to district. I'd say that checking the inordinate consumption of cheap and bad molasses alcohol would do more to put the family budget in proper shape than anything else. The government knows it.

3. Agriculture. A grand job to be done or to be messed up beyond making good. The first step would be in economic geography. Identify the occurrence and usage of every domesticated plant form together with its utility in the kitchen and in agricultural practise (soil, climate, seasonal labor in planting and harvest, tolerance of extreme weather, of pests). Secondly, make sure that every genetically fixed form is preserved and grown in adequate quantity for experimental purposes. Thirdly, set up breeding centers for the development of better strains. Remember that the gene range of maize, beans, etc., is enormously beyond that available to the American plant breeder, that an individual "plant" like "maize" has much more varied uses than in our commercial agriculture, that a large stock of native species is present which do not exist in the U.S., that a large number of old world Mediterranean plants are established. The possibilities of improvement by selection are enormous, but such selection should proceed from the local materials. A good aggressive bunch of American agronomists and plant breeders could ruin the native resources for good and all by pushing their American commercial stocks. The little agricultural work that has been done by experiment station people here has been making that very mistake, by introducing U.S. forms instead of working on the selection of ecologically adjusted native items. The possibilities of disastrous destruction of local genes are great unless the right people take hold of such work. And Mexican agriculture cannot be pointed toward standardization on a few commercial types without upsetting native economy and culture hopelessly. The example of Iowa is about the most dangerous of all for Mexico. Unless the Americans understand that, they'd better keep out of this country entirely. This thing must be approached from an appreciation of the native economies as being basically sound.

(Sgd.) C. O. S.