

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Volunteered Library

"If you were to assemble such diverse ingredients as a monastery turned slaughter-house, a state governor, a ranch party, assorted Americans, Mexicans and Canadians, and a large dose of cooperation, you would be unlikely to predict that the outcome would be a library. But the Biblioteca Publica de Allende, Insurgentes 9, is a result of just such a mixture," writes Guy Curtis, who, with Mrs. Curtis, is traveling in Mexico for the third or fourth time and enjoying every minute of the time away from their Monterey home.

It was not quite that simple of course, but to state the story briefly, it began five years ago in San Miguel Allende, where the Curtises have been for the past month, when Mexican children who loved to look at pictures gathered in even greater numbers at the home of one of the American senoras with many magazines. They gathered in such quantities at the home of one of the American senoras that it became necessary for either the Senora or the children to move out. It was then that the American colony here got together to establish a Public Library, wrote Mr. Curtis, who sent along a booklet to give us an idea of what these folks did and what they accomplished.

"Last Saturday," he wrote, "Mr. Robert C. Hill, the American ambassador and the ambassador to Columbia, made their first visit to San Miguel de Allende and their formal reception was held in the library.

"The American and the Canadian colonies went all out to put on a top-flight party for them. The ambassadors were to arrive at 11:30 a. m. and they were right on time as were the people. Mr. Hill made a very good impression; he is well liked and has been doing a good job. Kay and I had, the opportunity to talk to him and he said he was familiar with the Monterey Peninsula and Del Monte Lodge as he had been there quite often and had met Mr. Morse. The party lasted until 3 p. m. There was very little speech making but a lot of refreshments and all very good, so everyone had a good time.

"This next Saturday, June 20th, the same people who arranged the party for Mr. Hill are having a garden tour along the same lines that the History and Art Assn. follow and they also will finish the tour at the library. The charge for transportation, entry to the gardens and

the refreshments at the library will be 15 pesos (\$1.20 in U.S. currency) and whatever profit there may be will go to furnish breakfasts for the undernourished small school children. As everything is donated there will be plenty of food for the small children."

Mr. Curtis goes on to tell more about the library's beginning. When the senora's home became too crowded, she arranged to rent the little house next door to hers. American ladies and their husbands made themselves useful by cleaning, painting, making shelves, setting up tables and chairs and soon turned the little adobe building into clean attractive rooms where the children could read, paint, draw, cut out paper, watch marionette shows and sometimes attend parties on special occasions.

Books in Spanish and in English were donated, and the Spanish translations were pasted into the English books. In San Miguel, lawyers, teachers, and laymen helped in this work, and as far away as the Chicago suburbs, high school students of Spanish undertook to translate one Little Golden Book apiece so that the Mexican children could enjoy them.

"Last year," reports Curtis, "the governor of Guanajuato offered to donate the "building that houses the slaughterhouse, soon to be moved elsewhere, for a community center which would be shared by the library, the trade school, and Los Desayunos, an organization that provides free daily hot breakfasts for the poor children.

"To raise funds for all these activities, someone suggested a ranch party. A famous retired bull fighter provided his ranch, his hacienda and his bulls for testing. It was a sunny Sunday, July 13, 1958, that a caravan of cars and trucks bearing license plates from all over North America set off from San Miguel on the winding road toward Celaya. Along the field rode dozens of horsemen from the town. Six hundred persons showed up and 600 pounds of meat was served.

"The library has just begun Spanish classes in reading and writing for illiterates, taught by a Mexican teacher, with the help of an experienced American teacher, both instructed in the excellent four day course given by the United States Information Service for the purpose. Next, it is planned, to start classes in beginning English for such students as the boys from the banks or girls from the telephone company.