



Anti-illiteracy center—Mexican adults learning to read and write.

Mexico and the 3 R's

A year-and-a-half-old effort to reduce illiteracy is put on a permanent basis.

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MEXICO CITY.

CARMEN NAVARRO, 48 years old and a maid in a Mexico City household, was inconsolable. Because she was illiterate, she wept each time another letter arrived from her husband who had gone to the United States to work as a farmhand. As the stacks of unread letters grew larger, Carmen grew sadder. Then one day in the market place she stopped to watch a puppet show in which a poor, uneducated man became rich and famous because he had enrolled in one of the centers of instruction provided for people of all ages by the Secretary of Education in the department's year-and-a-half-old fight to lower Mexico's 60 per cent illiteracy rate.

The next day Carmen followed the example of the Mexican Horatio Alger and, after several months of receiving instruction in the three R's, two hours each day, she successfully passed her "graduating" examination. It consisted of writing her first letter to her husband.

Though Carmen considered the appearance of the puppet show in the market place a happy incident for her, actually it was part of a carefully planned propaganda campaign geared to the minds and milieu of Mexico's underprivileged Carmens and Carloses.

RADIO blurbs inserted between popular programs have caught the ear of many Mexicans—rabid radio fans. Plastered everywhere are arresting posters depicting a proud youth teaching his aged mother to read and write, or another one of the 1,000,000 placards with equally direct appeal that have been distributed throughout the most accessible regions. Where the only communication with the outside world is a mule trail over mountain ranges, army planes have dropped 7,000,000 leaflets upon the startled Mexicans living in tiny remote villages the length and width of the land.

Through these propaganda means 1,730,821 unlettered Mexicans have been lured since August, 1944, to the 45,000 cooperative anti-illiteracy centers. Recently 278,000 of them graduated.

The success of the campaign, which

began as a temporary experiment, has encouraged the President to make it a permanent plan by means of a decree effective next March 21.

Once snared, the culture seekers presented a problem unknown in the Little Red School House in the United States. Before the majority of them could be taught to read and write Spanish, they had first to master their own Indian dialect. In thousands of remote villages fifty-two pre-Spanish Conquest languages are still spoken. It was a huge task that Secretary of Education Jaime Torres Bodet took, but undaunted, he immediately set about bringing in from every region bilingual inhabitants who were instructed in teaching methods and simple history and geography. Then, he sent them back to become the nuclei of education in their communities.

UNDER the anti-illiteracy law each able-bodied Mexican citizen between the ages of 18 and 60 who reads and writes Spanish must impart elementary learning to at least one illiterate. The penalty for avoiding his duty is the refusal of civil servants to provide him with the things he needs. Thus, a lazy literate may be unable to secure a marriage or driver's license, and his house may burn down because city firemen will not rush to his aid. As the thing works out, though, busy Mexicans with a desire to cooperate donate money to the teaching centers in their communities so that indirectly they are educating many more than the one illiterate required by law. Since the Federal budget for the project is only \$200,000, the bulk of the project is carried by the communities and private individuals.

The interest and enthusiasm with which the traditionally impassive Mexican Indian has received the campaign has amazed and delighted the President, whose brain child it was, and the Secretary of Education, who has worked tirelessly to make it a success. Torres Bodet, on one of his propaganda tours, personally taught an Indian mother to write the name of her small son Julio, and confessed to being far from dry-eyed after witnessing the woman's flood of happy tears.

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