

On Pilgrimage - April 1961

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Summary: Spends a few days in Arizona desert towns describing work being done with the Papago Indians and Mexican children. (DDLW #781).

March 5 – Spent night at the Las Cruces, New Mexico, retreat house, a most beautiful place. March 6th, arrive at Tucson where I stayed at Jim and Eileen Allen's (both New Yorkers and he working for the Univ. of Arizona and two of his oldest children going to school there.) They have ten children, and only Barbara and the six-year-old Michael are not in school. The house is big, seven bedrooms, and I had a little room in the wing of the house where it was quiet. Betsy, the oldest girl, gave up her room to me and bunked in with Nancy, her next sister. The house is always filled with the smell of home-made bread, which Eileen bakes in batches of ten loaves, with a big pan of rolls. March 7th, I wrote all day. March 8th, to the university to hear a lecture by Frank Sheed on St. Augustine. He also talked about the Evidence Guild. He wore high laced shoes, pants were baggy at the knee and slightly short, and he had a rumpled look. Very alive and happy and talking about what he loved. March 9th – Reception at Jane McGuire's for Mr. Sheed and met lots of old friends. March 10: spoke to the second grade, two rooms full, with a hundred children in all, about the saints. They talked more than I did, all of them wanting to tell of their favorites, and then when I went on to speak of how the saints love the poor, all the hands were raised to tell of how their mothers or fathers helped the poor, and one little boy said his father was a poor boy who only had beans to eat when he was small.

March 14. I drove with Alberta Beeson whom I had met in California twenty years before, at Carmel. She is supervisor of Catholic schools or something like that and she was on her way to visit the mission schools in southwestern Arizona and to give a few tests to the pupils. The Papago Indian reservation is the largest in the world and there are many scattered villages of a dozen houses or so over the desert. The houses are made of adobe, not plastered or painted so they last only about twenty years, "which is long enough," one of the priests told us, "since every time there is a death in the family, the people move away and demolish the house, slowly but surely. The church in one of the villages is already out of town."

Fr. Lambert is a Franciscan who has lived in the desert thirty years and knows the Papago language and has made a written language of it, giving the Indians

the Gospels in their own tongue. “The Papago is unrelated to any other tongue,” Fr. Camillus, also a Franciscan, told us. “It does not follow the tradition of any other language.” They are a communal people and like to work in groups, so that when one man is hired many other members of the family come to work with him. There are even Franciscan schools in the reservation and one priest serves a number of the churches and schools. At Sells, Arizona, there is a government hospital and school, and at the church there, with its wonderful wall murals of missionaries to the Indians and martyrs among them, there was a pamphlet rack with Image books, and two copies of my **Long Loneliness**. Fr. Lambert lives at Covered Wells, and to get there you go off the highway and down a gully and up a little hill and there is the church that melts into the desert around. The desert gives the appearance of being as flat as far as the eye can see, but there are many little dips in the ground. There was a beautifully tended little garden, not much larger than a yard, and in the center a fountain with a figure of St. Francis in the center. There was just a little drip to the fountain, which Fr. had constructed himself, but it was most refreshing to sit around it, almost as one would sit around a fireplace. Both refresh the spirit. While we sat there under the olive trees with him and talked, a lovely little yellow bird came and perched on the shoulder of St. Francis. Fr. Lambert is a great rock hound, as they call them, and spent his day off in the desert.

Our destination was Ajo, which was 125 miles from Tucson, and is a company town of the Phelps Dodge people who mine the copper in southern Arizona. The two diocesan priests in the town are Fr. Reinweller and Fr. Stromberg. The latter had a belated vocation. He had formerly been an anthropologist in Mexico when his vocation suddenly descended upon him, as it were. He was much concerned this night with a “rumble” that was slated for the evening around the square of the little town, between the Anglos and the Mexicans from a neighboring town, and sat up rather late to forestall any trouble in a little coffee shop down the street from the church where the Anglos hung out. We saw some of the outposts of a gang of kids, armed with staves, hoping for something to start. As usual all over the country, the teenagers have nothing to do, no work to absorb their energies, nothing of importance, no philosophy of work, as Peter would say when he told people “to fire the bosses” as he used to say in the depression, advising young people to find some work that they wanted to do and study for it, train themselves for it – but where are those who have a philosophy of work and can convey the idea to others, and who have the gift of leadership? And what kind of work is there in a company town that is not just “made work.” The story Sheldon Weeks tells in this issue is of a training in work.

Company Town

The Phelps Dodge people dominate the towns of Douglas, Bisbee, Globe, Clifton, Morency and many other places. I shall look up a history of the company which I can probably find in the files of **Fortune** magazine. A movie, “Salt of the

Earth,” was made in New Mexico, of a strike of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers’ Union. An injunction was gotten out against picketing, so the women took up the job, leaving the men to stay home and do the chores, drawing the water, cooking over little wood fires and washing for the babies. The picture was taken with local people with only a few imported actors, and it was a true and valid picture, and with humor, until the “capitalist bosses from Wall Street” came on the scene, looking like big blond German Nazis, driving around in limousines that were more fitted for Wall Street than the desert. Since it was a Communist-inspired movie, it did not get much of a showing through the country but we saw it in New York.

Ajo is a neat, orderly, well laid out town. For vast miles across the desert, as we approached it, there was the equivalent of the slag heaps of the coal mining towns of the north. At the top of this dead white palisade runs a little train with a few cars, cauldrons of burning molten waste which is dumped out to lengthen the long mountain which rises up over the desert. The mine itself looks like a great amphitheater, terraced in many-colored rocks of pastel shades – turquoise blue, rose and pale pink, green, russet. Men and machines look like ants and toys in this vastness. How many men? A few thousand perhaps. There is segregation in housing in this company town – first an Indian village, for the many Papagos who work in the mine, and it is here we found Fr. Camillus, a warm Italian, very youthful, originally from Oregon where his family has a fruit farm. He loves the Indians and took me into the kindergarten, the only school, where doll-like children sang for me and prayed for me, and then during recess played like other children with guns and cars, imitating police sirens and fire trucks and ambulances.

Fr. Camillus

Fr. Camillus is proud of his church where the Papago sings the Mass in Papago chant set to the music of the **Green Rainbow Song**. Brother Robert had made fifteen rattles like the medicine men use, with metal disks which the altar boys, fifteen of them, shake during the singing of the Gloria and the Creed, as gourds are shaken to give rhythm. The candlesticks on the altar are carved of mesquite wood, and the holy water fonts and cruets are of lovely russet pottery made by the Indians. There are beautiful Navajo rugs under foot and on the benches sheepskins and goatskins and a buffalo hide. Papagos are highly skilled in leather work. They do no weaving and when I asked what the priests wore, he said when it was cold they used to wear skins and in hot weather they used to wear nothing at all. The pictures of the early missionaries, riding over the desert on their horses, show the Indians with nothing but a loin cloth.

Father Camillus preaches in Papago and his sermon is in three parts, he says, first the sermon, then the explanation of liturgy, then Scripture.

Everywhere there are the beautiful baskets of the Indians, made by the women from the materials collected by the men from the desert. Even the Monstrance

is part basket woven, and the metal part is inlaid with semi-precious stones collected and polished from the desert. (Fr. Lambert polishes stones in tumblers which revolve for weeks, and one can get little motor-driven tumblers as big as coffee pots, for twenty dollars in the Woolworth stores.) Many of their baskets have plain round designs, surrounding, or basing the figure of the legendary hero, E-E-Toi. Stones, roots, branches, cactus, everything is used in the desert. A cactus syrup is made from the Suhuara fruit which tastes like a refined blackstrap molasses. The fine seed of the fruit is pounded and made into a paste-like candy, or the seed is sprinkled like poppy seed on bread. All the fruit of the cactus is eaten, and there is a wild spinach called evak and acorn nuts and wild onions and chile and so on. Fr. Camillus goes out with the Indian boys and they gather the fruit when it is in season and then there is a great boiling down rather like the sugaring in New England.

Mexicans

Further down the side of the mountain is the Mexican village and since I was with a teacher who had a specific job to do, I did not visit the houses but the school instead, where I talked to the seventh and eighth grades, some of them the very students who were looking for a “rumble” the night before. The Sisters of Charity of Mother Seton, from Seton Hill, Pennsylvania, teach here and they invited us to their convent on the top of a high hill for dinner, where they ate with us and the two priests and we had a very pleasant discussion.

Traveling in the desert is most fascinating and I was amazed to hear Father Lambert talk of the actual farming some of the Indians were able to do. They raise corn, squash and wheat, and have both wheat and corn tortillas as their “bread.” They cook and bake in big outside ovens as the Pennsylvania Dutch do. “But they do not buy and sell,” he said. “They have no business sense. They give their surplus away.”

He is the true Lamb, who by dying has destroyed our death, & by rising again has bestowed new life on us.

Wandering Monks

I was interested to learn that one of those St. Benedict terms “wandering monks,” Stanley Becker, who had spent a summer with us when he came up from New Orleans, and who when he departed left a painting on wood of St. Francis Xavier, had spent some time with Fr. Camillus a year before. St. Francis Xavier is a favorite saint of the Papago, and Fr. Kino, the Jesuit, was the one who brought Christ to the Indians centuries before and built up many missions in southern Arizona and northern Mexico.

Another wandering layman was Tom Carstairs who came as a volunteer and helped, and I do not know whether it was he or some other who gave music

lessons, too, to the Mexican boys. There is much to be done in these small Indian schools throughout the country, and a peace army could be at work there right now, without waiting to be drafted. There would be no pay besides a living, and so no bother about income tax, and so no contributing to war in this way. It would be a test of courage, too, for city youth to go wandering through the land, learning more of their country, and the work to be done in it. And what a field for anthropologists, geologists, botanists! I can still hear Peter Maurin say, "Fire the bosses!"

At another mission church way off the highway in the desert, we saw a beautiful unfinished painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Juan Diego gathering roses into his tilma, kneeling at her feet. It is the drawing of Juan Diego which remains unfinished and perhaps some wandering monk will drop by and finish it. It was started, the sisters said, by one who was obviously not in the "wandering monk" class, since when he started back to Chicago to report to a parole officer, so the story goes, he was shot and killed in a holdup in a liquor store in some town on the way.

Next month, more about Tucson and a housing project there, and a visit to El Centro, Calif., where the recent lettuce strike took place, and then to San Diego and Los Angeles where I am now. A few weeks more, and I will be starting home, with notebooks far fuller than the brief notes have given here. What with letters and writing, my manual labor these days consists in pounding on the typewriter. So now up and out to a special showing of **The Hoodlum Priest** with Frances Langford, faithful friend of the CW almost since we began. It is the story of Fr. Dismas, S.J., of St. Louis, and the showing tonight is sponsored by the Quakers and we have been invited to attend at Sam Goldwyn studios.

To be continued. . .