Adventuring for Christ in the Andes

Travel Diary of Dr. Talbot and Mr. Davis

ON SUNDAY, March 18th, our Editor in Chief, Dr. Louis T. Talbot, accompanied by the Assistant Business Manager of the Bible Institute, Mr. J. Russell Davis, started on a two-months' missionary journey into the jungles of South America, for the purpose of making an investigation of the work carried on by graduates of the school, and of photographing their work. This is the first report and others will follow.

Monday, March 19, 1951

We’re on our way at last! Our American Airlines Flagship got away from Los Angeles International Airport at 12:40 a.m. We have said goodbye to our families and the faithful friends that stayed up to this dreadful hour to bid us Godspeed. It was a fine smooth flight to Dallas, where we arrived early in the morning. We were met by a few friends and relatives who knew we were passing through, and spent a half hour with them. It was a surprise to have Evangelist Tom M. Olson there to meet us with the others. Soon we were on our way again, and a few hours later stopped at Birmingham, Alabama, where it was cold and rainy. Still later it was colder and raining harder at Atlanta, Georgia. We were held up two hours there, but we finally got away for Jacksonville, Florida, and then on to Miami, Florida. It was cold and rainy all of the way. So this is the Sunny South!

After a short stop of two hours in Miami, we were again away to Panama on a giant DC-6, of the Pan American World Airways. Again we had a fine smooth flight, and arrived in Panama shortly after midnight. The first day of our trip is gone, and we have covered about four thousand miles. What a change from the old days when missionaries took weeks for the same trip!

Tuesday, March 20, 1951

We were called early at the beautiful modern Hotel Panama for the half-hour ride to Tucumen Airport, where we soon were aboard a DC-3 of the Panagra division of Pan American and flying off to the south for our first glimpse of Colombia, the Gateway to South America. After a beautiful flight over the northern end of the great Andes range, we arrived at the city of Cali located in the heart of the beautiful Valley of the Cauca, and surrounded on all sides by peaks of the Andes. Customs officials were a bit doubtful about the amount of film we had with us, but after some discussion with the help of the excellent translation of Mr. Ray Zuercher (Biola ’46), we were allowed to take out our film. We spent the next few hours with Mr. Zuercher being taken through the routine of police registration, onward reservations for next week via Avianca (the Colombian division of Pan American), and other necessary formalities of entering a foreign country.

At about four in the afternoon we drove out to Palmira, about 45 kilometers from Cali, where we were welcomed at the Instituto Bíblico of the Gospel Missionary Union, where Ray and Carol Zuercher are working. Here we met a fine group of missionaries, had dinner with them, and spent several hours discussing conditions of missionary work here. They call for much prayer from our friends at home, so we cannot wait until we return to tell you about them. For the past few years the power of the government has been vested entirely in the Catholic Church, and they are using every bit of the vast power they wield to stamp out evangelical work. This power extends into every field of life so that a man cannot live or die without the sanction of the Church. Marriages must be performed by the priest, babies must be baptized by the priest, children cannot go to school unless they attend confession and mass in the Church, the dead cannot be buried except on holy ground that has been consecrated by the priest. Into every other function and activity of life the power of the Church and the priest are wielded over the lives of these unfortunate people. The persecution against those who stand out against this system is very severe. Beatings are common, death for Christ’s sake is on the increase, and many means are used to attempt to force the evangelicals to return to the Church. Churches have been burned, evangelists have been beaten and killed, believers have been persecuted, and all this is done at the instigation of the priests who use liberal supplies of hard liquor to get their gangs drunk enough to go out and commit these crimes!

Wednesday, March 21, 1951

Up early this morning and off to Popoyan, a very famous town to the south of us that is the destination of thousands of pilgrims who flock there for the special Holy Week festivities. After a most interesting drive through the country and up into the Andes mountains, we arrived in Popoyan in the late afternoon. As we had hotel accommodations, we went right to the hotel to get cleaned up, only to find that they knew nothing about our reservations. When shown our telegram to them, and their reply to us, the manager assured us that someone at the telegraph office would be fired for sending a cable to us without the hotel having sent it! The town was crowded to overflowing, but finally the half-drunk manager of the hotel said he would put us up at his “country estate” for the night. We went with him and found that it consisted of a small house about a mile from town with a few empty rooms. He did have cots put in for us, so we had a place to sleep anyway.

After dinner at the hotel, we visited the Catholic College of Priests to get some accurate information about the ceremonies. We found that there would be no day-
time processions at all, but as there was one that night, we accepted their very kind invitation to photograph it from the balcony of the College overlooking the street below. We had a wonderful view, and it was a never-to-be-forgotten sight. Our only regret was that it was so poorly lighted that we could not get as much of the wonderful color and glamour of it in the pictures as we would have liked to. As thousands of people lined the streets in respectful silence, the great procession wound its way through the streets, flanked by several thousand school children, carrying long candles. These children marched along the two curbs, holding back the crowds, and giving some light for the procession.

Images of the Apostles, Mary Magdalene, Christ, the Crucifixion, and in the most prominent position, the Virgin Mary, were carried on the shoulders of groups of men. Between the images were dignitaries of the Church, groups of singers and bands playing. The great procession took hours to pass our position, and all this time the crowds stood in respectful silence, or knelt when the Virgin went by. It was a sight we shall never forget as long as we live. The terrible hold this system has on the people of this land has made on our hearts an indelible impression.

Our second day in South America has been a busy one, and we have seen sights that have made it well worthwhile to travel these thousands of miles. We will have a real missionary message to bring back to you at home.

Thursday, March 22, 1951

As there were to be no daytime processions in Popoyan, we decided to look for some place that would have one, so we could get good color pictures of this wonderful sight. After much inquiry, we found that no one seemed to know for sure where there would be one, so we decided to go back to Cali to make inquiries there. Driving back to Cali, we were amazed at the great number of images of the Virgin Mary along the route. Every town had a large image, and many homes had small ones. If they could not afford an image of the Virgin, they erected a simple wooden cross. We saw a few images of Christ, but the great majority were of the Virgin.

In Cali we found a very helpful Catholic priest again, who told us that the very next day, Good Friday, was the two hundredth anniversary of the Seminary of San Francisco, so they were having a great daytime procession to celebrate. He promised to meet us tomorrow at the entrance of the Seminary and to get us a place on the balcony, where we would have a good view of the procession.

With our arrangements completed, we returned to Palmira in time for a great gospel service in the Evangelical Church. After seeing all of the pomp and ceremony of Catholic processions and idolatry of their worship, it was a real joy to sit again in a gospel chapel and hear the wonderful gospel message proclaimed in all of its simplicity and power. A fine group of around two hundred and fifty met in this service. We both said a few words of greeting by means of the excellent interpretation of Mr. Wm. Schillingsberg, the Director of the Instituto Biblico. The pleasure of this country’s Christians at meeting us warmed our hearts. We realized anew the wonderful bond of love that binds us to all those in every land who know and love our Lord.

After the service we again discussed conditions with the missionary group, and were amazed at the terrible idolatry, ignorance, illiteracy and illegitimacy that prevail among the people here. Under the leadership of the Catholic Church, schools have been closed, and the country has retrogressed as far as education and the welfare of the people is concerned. Moral conditions are so bad that it is estimated that more than half of the children born in this land are illegitimate. A local director told a missionary that in his circle of friends he could not count more than two men who were living faithful to their own wives! What a terrible indictment of the system that has power over lives, but no power to enable men to live!

Good Friday, March 23, 1951

We drove into Cali in the early morning and went right to the Seminary of San Francisco, where we were welcomed with open arms by the priests. As we wanted to get pictures for you folks at home we took all their kindness just as it was offered, but we knew their desire was to have their ceremonies shown to the world for the glory of the Catholic Church. As it was their two hundredth anniversary, and as it had never been photographed before, they surely did everything to help us out. First we were taken up to the balcony of the Seminary, where the camera was set up right beside the announcer with a mike who was making the announcements to the vast crowd below. He even announced to the people that photographers had come all the way from the United States to take pictures of their famous celebrations, so everyone was to behave and to do nothing that would not look well in the pictures. These announcements were repeated many times throughout the day along the route of march.

As soon as we were on the balcony and ready to go, the images were carried out of the Church across the street as the crowd knelt in respectful silence. The procession formed, and with thousands of people forming in the line of march, and with a military escort in attendance, it moved down the street toward the plaza of the city. The priests rushed us across town, and again we took up our stand on the balcony of the Hotel Europa, and had a wonderful view of the procession as it came to the Cathedral of San Pedro, and was joined by other thousands who had been waiting there for it. In solemn procession they filed by us, walking a few paces, kneeling to join in prayers said in unison, rising to go a few more paces, and then repeating this idolatrous worship over and over again. In all that solemnity, it was a bit of comic relief to see a small boy kneeling before the image of the Virgin, and eating an ice cream cone as he worshipped!

When the images of Christ on the Cross and of the Virgin Mary had gone by, we again rushed back to the Seminary of San Francisco to see the return of the images to the Church there. Again we were set up on the
this magnificent image of Christ on the cross was found in the city called Buga. Here we saw and photographed the home who are praying for us on this trip.

Saturday, March 24, 1951

Spent the morning getting films ready to mail home, but found we could not mail them from here, so we will take them with us to some place where we can mail them. We also found that our flight to Bogota on Monday is cancelled, but we can go Tuesday. This should give us time to get a report written up for the good friends at home who are praying for us on this trip.

In the afternoon we drove to a famous and fanatical city called Buga. Here we saw and photographed the second largest Church in all Colombia, the home of the Milagrosa, or the Miraculous Christ. It is claimed that this magnificent image of Christ on the cross was found hundreds of years ago by an Indian woman. It was very small, but when she took it home she insisted that it grew larger. After awhile it got so large that she could not keep it in her humble home, so sent for the priests to take it to the Church. There it grew until it reached its present size. It is said to have performed many miracles of healing and other wonderful things.

We also visited a Mission school for girls and the Evangelical Church in Buga. Work in this very fanatical town is difficult. Only a few days ago the priests incited a gang of boys to throw stones at the missionaries, but when they came to do so, the boys in the neighborhood of the Mission got together and drove them away. These neighborhood boys are not Christians, but they respect the good work the Mission is doing. We enjoyed our fellowship with the faithful missionaries who are carrying on for the Lord in the midst of real difficulties.

Easter Sunday, March 25, 1951

What a blessed contrast this day was to the past days of this week! All that we have seen of hopeless idolatry and ignorant superstition only makes the blessed privilege of worshipping our Risen Lord with this group of believers all the more precious. Very little, if anything, is made of the resurrection in this land, but to this group of believers the presence of the Risen Lord was a very real thing. After a very active Sunday School, which met at 8:30, we joined with about 300 Christians in a wonderful Easter service at 9:30. At that early hour, they were all gathered in their places, and we sang together of the joy that was ours in the Risen Lord. Dr. Talbot had the privilege of speaking at this service, and as the message went out in English and Spanish, we were all blessed in the realization of the meaning of the coming into this world of the Saviour, of His death for us, and of His resurrection.

In the afternoon groups went out from the church for country evangelistic work. In the evening there was another great gospel service, when about 300 folks gathered in the chapel. In view of the opposition and persecution they are enduring, it is a modern miracle to see the wonderful response there has been to the gospel here.

Thus ends our first week of Adventuring for Christ in the Andes. It has been the most wonderful week we have ever known. Our hearts burn within us as we think of the great privilege that has been ours. We have been conscious of your prayers so continue to remember us before the throne of grace as we leave for Venezuela, then into the Brazilian jungles.