

# The Story of Puerto Rico

## "Isle of Enchantment"

By JOSEPH M. SINNOTT

ON the nineteenth of November 1493, an armada of seventeen ships under Christopher Columbus skirted the coast of a mountainous palm-fringed island and dropped anchor in a wide, placid bay. Columbus immediately went ashore and with formal ceremonies declared the island a possession of Spain. In the typical Spanish manner of the time, he christened it San Juan Bautista—Saint John the Baptist.

Amongst the motley crowd of adventurers who watched him plant the red and gold standard of Ferdinand and Isabella in the sands was a penurious young grandee from the province of Leon whose name was Juan Ponce. He was destined to become immortal by his bravery, his adventurous spirit and his quest of the Fountain of Youth.

### "Ay, Que Puerto Rico"

Columbus sailed away never to return. The youthful Juan Ponce de Leon, however, rose to rank and responsibility in the nearby island of Hispaniola. Stories were brought to him of vast amounts of gold on the neglected Island of San Juan Bautista and he secured an appointment from the Governor of the Indies to conduct an expedition there.

He landed with an army of fifty soldiers on August 12, 1508. Ponce de Leon made his way along the coast of the Island trading in friendly fashion with the natives from time to time until he came to a wide, safe harbor. Recognizing the verdant wealth of the island he was circumnavigating, he exclaimed, "*Ay, que puerto rico!*"—"Oh, what a rich port!" Years later that exclamation appropriately embodied the name of the Island, and its prior name, San Juan Bautista, became limited to the fortified city which is now the Island's capital.

The native Borinquens and Caribs whom the Spaniards found on the Island proved hospitable and peaceful, but forced labor in the service of the white man was soon installed. The Spaniards brought their system of *Encomiendas* and *Repartimientos* which has received so much unfavorable criticism from historians of the Colonial period. This system, somewhat akin to our present ward-boss politics, gave to certain favorites, who had supposedly rendered special services to the government, the possession of designated lands and a certain number of Indians. Greedy for gain, the men thus favored placed intolerable burdens on the hapless natives. Rebellion and resistance beginning with surprise attacks on their Spanish masters proved futile. In 1511 a handful of white men with their guns and gunpowder and protective armor met and defeated six thousand

Puerto Ricans. Only those natives who hid in the mountains or fled to sea survived. Of an estimated eighty thousand natives at the time of the arrival of Columbus a mere handful were left. In 1515 Licenciado Sanchez Velasquez wrote to the King: "Excepting your Highness' Indians and those of the Crown Officers there are not four thousand left."

To offset this depletion in the ranks of labor, the first slaves were brought surreptitiously to the Island from Guinea in 1510, and in 1513 their general introduction was authorized by the payment of 200 ducats per head. To suppress the smuggling of negroes, those imported legally were branded on the forehead with a hot iron—the *carimbo*. Any slave not branded could be confiscated and sold at public auction.

It has been said that "Glory, Gold and God" were the three motives that prompted Spain to its rapid conquest of what at that time was the world's most extensive empire. The return that Puerto Rico could make was rather small—gold she had but little and the gold-giving colony was the favorite in the eyes of the mother country. It was the smallest and least prepossessing of all Spain's colonies in the New World. Consequently, like our own North Atlantic coast where no gold had been found, it was neglected and received scant notice. This lack of gold and the Spaniard's distaste for slow agricultural pursuits as a means of enrichment caused the Puerto Rican colony to straggle along in misery.



(Courtesy U. S. Travel Bureau)

A JIBARO, RESTING HIS OXEN, CONTEMPLATES SAN JUAN CITY ACROSS THE HARBOR

### The Spanish Incumbency

The policy followed by Spain in conformity with the mercantilist ideas of the time was the chief obstacle to the growth of commerce and industry in Puerto Rico. In accordance with the contemporary theory, since a colony existed solely for the benefit of the mother country, that country could expect to reap the full harvest only by the enjoyment of monopolistic trade relations. Under this policy Puerto Rico could trade with a foreign power only by illegal means, and smuggling was carried on continually.

The small gold deposits having been quickly exhausted, Puerto Rico became essentially an agricultural community. Sugar cultivation was introduced as early as 1514. Parallel with sugar other crops were introduced with success. Tobacco, coffee, ginger and hides soon took their places as the cash items in the table of exports to the mother country. Bananas, hay, rice, maize, kidney beans, sweet potatoes and cotton were also raised with fair success.

News of the discovery of gold in Peru reached Puerto Rico in 1534 and whipped the colonists into a frenzy of excitement. They wanted to abandon the Island en masse and feast on the treasures of the Incas. Governor Lando had to impose the death penalty on "whosoever shall attempt to leave the Island."

The discovery of gold in Peru and later in Mexico also brought to Puerto Rico a new importance as one of a "bridge of islands" for the protection of the treasure galleons on their way to Spain. But the galleons brought the pirates. England, France and Holland had been unsuccessful in their quest for the yellow metal. And so they did the next best thing: they countenanced privateering and haunted the trade routes of the Spanish Main like birds of prey. Sir Francis Drake, hero of the Battle of the Spanish Armada, and Sir John Hawkins, the first English slave trader, were operating in those waters in 1595. Both were mortally wounded when they attempted to capture a richly laden galleon in the harbor of San Juan. The Earl of Cumberland captured and sacked the town in 1598. He was forced to leave the Island after five months because an epidemic of dysentery decimated his ranks.

The Dutch under Bowdoin Hendrick captured, sacked and burned San Juan in 1625 but were soon driven from the Island under the heroic leadership of Juan de Annesquito. In 1663 the French under Beltran D'Ogeron tried unsuccessfully to force the Island. Nearly every name famous in the annals of piratical venture appears in early insular history. Puerto Rico suffered many other attacks during the next two centuries because of the constant wars which the Spanish Crown carried on with its neighbors.

Meanwhile, the Island struggled along beneath the burden of bad governmental administration under the control of court favorites and the spoils system. It was not until 1778 that the native Puerto Ricans first received the right to

own land. In 1815 they received the *Cedula de Gracias*, which brought reforms that stimulated business. The most important reform made possible by this new ruling was permission to trade with non-Spanish islands of the West Indies. In 1869 negro slavery was abolished but not until the ruling class had reimbursed itself to the tune of eight million pesos from the public funds.

### The American Regime

As Spain's power in the world began to weaken, various of her over-seas colonies struck for their independence. The Puerto Ricans organized a home rule movement which flourished despite the persecutions of the Crown Officers. One rebellion after another was put down with ruthless cruelty. Finally an autonomous government was actually inaugurated in Puerto Rico on February 9, 1898. However, an examination of the political status of Puerto Ricans under the decrees of autonomy yields little evidence of actual independent government. The political machinery consisted of a Governor-General and an insular Parliament composed of two houses. The Governor-General represented the King and as Commander-in-Chief of the land and naval forces of Puerto Rico exercised military as well as civil authority. He was given the power to refuse to promulgate the laws and resolutions of the Parliament, being required only to transmit to the Spanish Government a report of why he considered such action necessary. He could suspend at will all civil rights and constitutional guarantees, and dissolve Parliament, enforcing such actions if necessary by ordering out the military and naval forces. In addition special qualifications such as ownership of property yielding an annual revenue of at least four thousand pesos, or the possession of a degree from a recognized university, limited membership in the upper house of Parliament to the landholding and professional classes. Severe restrictions were also placed on the right to vote. Many Puerto Ricans saw in the imminent occupation by the Americans a means of hastening total independence and applauded the approaching sovereignty of the United States.

On October 18, 1898, after a bloodless engagement, the Spanish colors were lowered and the American flag was hoisted in San Juan. The Island and its dependencies were ceded to the United States by the treaty of Paris on December 10, 1898 and the treaty was ratified on February 6, 1899.

The American military forces took control of the Island and attempted to reorganize its economy. Freedom of assembly, speech, press and religion were decreed and an eight-hour day for government employees was established. A public school system was started and the U. S. Postal Service was extended to the Island. The highway system was enlarged and bridges over the more important rivers were constructed. The government lottery was abolished, cockfighting was forbidden, and a beginning was made

toward the establishment of a centralized public health service.

Congress approved the Foraker Act on April 12, 1900 giving the Island its first constitution under the American Government. Besides providing for a representative form of government the principle of free trade was established between the Island and the mainland, and import duties previously levied on Island products entering the United States were abolished while the full tariff "protection" given to products of the United States was extended to Puerto Rico. This inclusion of the Island within the American tariff wall was the most important factor in determining Puerto Rico's future economy. Coastwise shipping laws were made applicable to the Island. As a result, 90% of the Island's trade was directed to the United States.

Amongst the provisions of the Foraker Act, the first organic act of Puerto Rico after the Island passed into the hands of the United States, was the following: "No corporation shall be authorized to conduct the business of buying and selling real estate except such as may be reasonably necessary to enable it to carry out the purposes for which it was created, and every corporation hereafter authorized to engage in agriculture shall by its charter be restricted to the ownership and control of not to exceed 500 acres of land. This provision shall be held to prevent any member of a corporation engaged in agriculture from being in any wise interested in any other corporation engaged in agriculture."

American efficiency was soon applied to the production of wealth in Puerto Rico. The growth of the sugar industry soon displaced coffee as Puerto Rico's dominant pursuit and shifted agricultural economy from that of direct consumption crops to commercial crops for export. Development of the tobacco and citrus fruit industries followed the same lines.

It was not very long before the Puerto Ricans discovered that they had given up the personal latifundias of their Spanish masters for the corporate latifundias of the new regime.

In the old days the Island politicians had but two principal political parties, the Monarchists, or representatives of the privileged class, and the Republicans, composed of the less fortunate members of society. The native politicians had developed a successful technique of discreetly threatening, blustering and bluffing in order to force concessions from the Crown officers. However, some restraint had to be shown because at any moment they might educe a sharp and violent reply to their fulminations. This same technique was transferred to the new regime but the blustering became more thunderous as reprisals were not drawn forth. To this day this same technique is the main stock in trade of the Puerto Rican politician.

Despite the fact that many political hacks and favorites

of the reigning political parties were sent from the mainland to the Island during those early days, no one can deny that a sincere effort was made to develop the resources of the Island. The introduction of machinery began to have its usual effect and the small landholder was soon forced to sell to the large landholder.

Meanwhile, the sugar companies found that it was to their advantage to woo the screaming Island politicians and as a consequence the local legislature became quite amiable. The Hon. Antonio R. Barcelo, for many years leader of the Unionist Party, the majority party in the Island, and for many years President of the Senate, was the brother-in-law of Jorge Bird Arias, Vice-President and General Manager of the Farjado Sugar Company. The Hon. Jose Tous Soto, for many years Speaker of the House, was also attorney for the South Puerto Rican Sugar Company. And so on down through the rank and file of both Houses. One politician when accused of being on the payroll of a sugar company indignantly exclaimed, "It is true that I am on the payroll of the sugar company but when I am on the floor of the Senate I represent only the people of Puerto Rico and when I am off the floor of the Senate I represent only the sugar company!"

Under such leadership it is not difficult to deduce why the people of Puerto Rico have sunk so low in the economic and consequently the intellectual and moral scales.

### Puerto Rico Today

The Island of Puerto Rico is a little larger than the state of Rhode Island. It consists of some 2,198,000 acres of which about 604,760 are under cultivation. Of these acres under cultivation four large American absentee sugar companies own and control some 200,000 acres. Four Spanish absentee sugar companies own and control an additional 40,000 acres, making a grand total of not less than 240,000 acres directly owned or controlled by absentee sugar companies. There are about 60,000 more acres devoted to the production of sugar cane and these are owned by small farmers who sell their crops to the big sugar companies. Since these small farmers or *colonos* are often financed by the sugar companies and are dependent upon them for grinding their cane, one can readily see that their relationship is one of dependence on the big companies. This makes a grand total of approximately 300,000 Island acres devoted to sugar cane alone. While sugar acreage was increasing five times, crops devoted to food were declining to less than two-thirds of their former acreage.

Owing principally to periodic devastation by hurricanes, coffee production has been steadily declining but there are still about 169,000 acres devoted to this purpose. Nearly 60% of this acreage is also controlled by absentee companies and landlords. About 30,000 acres are planted with tobacco. Of this about 85% is controlled by four absentee companies.

In addition there are about 6,500 acres devoted to the cultivation of fruits. About 31% of these lands are absentee controlled.

Thus, of an approximate total of 604,000 acres under cultivation, nearly 370,000 acres are directly controlled by absentee owners, mostly American, in only four export crops. A good part of the remaining land is heavily mortgaged to absentee banks.

This absentee control is not confined to the land. Examination shows that Island Banks are 60% absentee controlled, railroads 60%, Public Utilities 50% and steamship lines approximately 100%. It may be said in general that 60% of the wealth of the Island is absentee controlled.

No wonder the 1,800,000 inhabitants of the Island must import 90% of their scanty diet of beans, codfish and polished rice from the United States. Although the United States tariff gives the island a protected market for the absentee export crops, the poor native must buy in a protected market and pay 14% more for his imported foodstuffs than the New York City laborer, although his wages are 85% less!

The complicity of the Insular Legislature also manifests itself in other ways. And so it is not surprising to find that the lands owned or controlled by the large sugar companies are assessed for purposes of taxation at about one-half their real values. To a lesser degree the same deliberate under-assessment obtains in the tobacco and coffee industries.

The wretched native, crowded from all the better land of the Island, is forced to live on swampy or barren tracts or driven to seek the miasmatic shelter of the slums of the large cities.

Shut off from the land, the source of all wealth, he is forced to compete with thousands of other unfortunate, landless creatures like himself in order to gain access to the means of subsistence. And this intense competition drives his wages down to the starvation point. Thus it is not surprising to find that agricultural wages for males average from \$4.00 per week in the sugar industry to \$2.37 per week in coffee growing. In some cases women workers earn an average of 2½ or 3 cents per hour. The lowest wages for rural workers were in truck gardening. In this activity men worked 38.9 hours a week at an average weekly wage of \$2.26. Women worked 56.7 hours per week with a weekly rate of \$1.78, and children worked a full week of 48 hours receiving \$1.50 per week.

This same maddening competition also affects urban wages, and in 1937-38 we find that wages for males ranged from a high of \$13.00 per week in the printing trades to a low of \$2.52 for dock workers. As a rule, in the cities women receive lower wages than men.

It was not long before this struggling mass of poverty-stricken humanity attracted the attention of some shrewd

gentlemen on the mainland, and soon the needlework industry was established. At first this new enterprise was treated with contempt by the Island politicians as not worthy of their blandishments. Soon, however, their demeanor changed as the infant industry surged its way forward to become the second most important insular activity ranking next to King Sugar.

The industry thrived but the wages of the workers engaged in it did not. We find that needleworkers average 15 to 25 cents a day for those who work in their homes and 50 cents to one dollar per day for shop workers.

This condition of starvation wages and consequent degraded living conditions can only lead to disease and death. Therefore it is not surprising to find that the diseases that flow from poverty run rampant through the Island. The death rate for infants under two years of age chiefly from enteritis and diarrhea resulting from malnutrition and unsanitary living conditions is probably the highest in the world. Among people of all ages tuberculosis, mostly caused by overcrowding in houses and lack of proper food, annually produces the second largest number of fatalities. Hospitalization of these sufferers is impossible because of a lack of funds. Malaria presents one of the most serious health problems with the great majority of swamp dwellers unable to buy the quinine necessary to combat this disease. The insular government doles out small quantities free to some of these victims. Hookworm at one time affected 98% of the rural population. Through the efforts of the International Health Board of the Rockefeller Foundation this scourge now infests only about 40% of the field workers. This disease is caused chiefly by a lack of shoes while toiling in polluted soil.

In general it may be averred that the death rate for all ages in Puerto Rico is nearly twice that of the United States. The natives, ground down by man and harassed by the diseases of poverty, eke out a short and weary existence.

To escape those intolerable conditions the poor *jibaro* has tried to flee from his oppressors just as in early Spanish days. About 55,000 live in New York and Brooklyn, and thousands more would come if they could get the passage money.

### The Quest for a Solution

The writer used to watch youngsters of seventeen and eighteen years of age secretly drilling in Black shirts and with wooden guns in a pathetic desperate preparation to throw off the supposed yoke of the United States Government. This clandestine Nationalist movement was covertly supported by many of the Island politicians who hoped thereby to provoke the Federal Government into greater concessions and expenditures. They quickly took to cover however when the movement flared into violence and murder and culminated in the Albizu Campos incident.

Now the Island politicians still follow the old, successful Monarchical-Republican party technique of the early Spanish days and blame the United States Government for all the ills that afflict the Island. The hapless workers, believing in the integrity and patriotism of their leaders, lend ear to their bombastic denunciations and consequently they also are inclined to rail against the Federal Government.

It is true that the United States Government has erred in many of its policies with regard to Puerto Rico but all actions should be judged by the motives which prompt them. In the great majority of cases these motives were good. Time after time the Federal Government has sent commissions to Puerto Rico in order to study conditions and alleviate the condition of the people. Time after time have the efforts of these commissions been sabotaged by the big corporations and their insular lackeys. One earnest man after another has been attacked and discredited by the politicians and the privileged group of less than five thousand people who fatten on the miseries of their fellow countrymen. These sincere men, caught in the whirlwind of screaming invective abuse in the controlled insular press have been forced to leave the Island in disgust and seeming disgrace.

Because of the machinations of the politicians and the privileged five thousand, the 500-acre law has lain dormant in the law books since 1900 with no attempt made to enforce it. Laws to protect the *colono* from usury and extortion are also disregarded. The minimum wage laws in the needlework and other industries and the laws governing child labor are bogged down and lost in seas of insular red tape deliberately spun by the small, compact privileged class of Puerto Ricans. All this despite the fact that for some years the Island has enjoyed complete home rule in matters of internal policy.

To combat the evils caused by insular and absentee land appropriation, the United States Government has poured over eighty million dollars into the Island during the past few years under the auspices of the Puerto Rican Reconstruction Administration. At one time seventy-five percent of the people on the Island were directly or indirectly dependent upon this fund. Because the Federal Government does not allow the Island politicians to administer this fund to their own advantage, they immediately set up the cry of "carpetbaggerismo."

It was due to the efforts and insistent urgings of the U. S. Department of Interior at Washington that the 500-acre law (shot through with legal loopholes and inefficacious as it is) was revived again and legal steps were taken to implement the Federal Minimum Wage Laws and the Child Labor Law.

On April 12, 1941, Governor Swope signed the Puerto Rico Land Authority bill, which establishes a Land Authority composed of seven members who are charged with carrying out the Congressional resolution of 1900, limiting

corporate land holdings to 500 acres. Of course, the sugar companies expect to be compensated for their holdings and the battle and the delaying tactics in the courts have already begun. The most that can be said for this measure is that a faltering step in the right direction has been taken.

The Malthusian theory is still carefully nurtured by the privileged class in Puerto Rico since it enables them to shift to the Creator any responsibility it cannot hurl at the United States. The slightest use of the halls and appurtenances of the University of Puerto Rico should soon convince them, if they really want to be convinced, that the solution of the problem of over-population is not to be found in the Birth Control Law of 1937 but in a higher elevation of the standard of wages. The increased standard of wages would increase the standard of comfort and the higher standard of comfort would raise the level of intelligence. The wisdom of the ages tells us that the higher the mental type the less the tendency to large families. The problem of over-population in Puerto Rico is merely another aspect of the general problem of poverty.

Careful analysis affords most convincing proof that the misery and degradation of 95% of the inhabitants of the "Isle of Enchantment" are not due to the machinations of the Federal Government nor to the stupidity of the Creator, but most assuredly stem from the greed and cupidity of corporation-controlled legislators and the guilty connivance of the privileged five thousand.

## Newton D. Baker on Henry George

IN an exchange of correspondence with the late Hon. Newton D. Baker some ten years ago, our good friend, John C. Rose of Pittsburgh, received the following from Mr. Baker:

"Henry George was a strange and significant phenomenon in the midst of an age of acquisitiveness and materialism. He sought and found fundamental moralities as the basis of an economic philosophy, and nobody who has read "Progress and Poverty" is ever the same in his thinking as he was before he saw those eloquent and impressive pages. Much that Mr. George taught has now become a part of the every day philosophy of our political life and much more will become a part of it. I do not, however, believe that there will ever be any sudden application of Mr. George's principles. Sound political development is a matter of growth and not a matter of revolution, and even a fundamentally right economic doctrine, if it involves a radical departure from accepted practices, has to be absorbed little by little to avoid consequences too severe to endure which would follow a nation wide attempt to go back to the beginnings of things to correct an ancient error."