

# Light and Shadow Over Peru

By JOHN CROSBY

(From the Paris edition of the *New York Herald*)

MUCH to its own surprise, Cornell University is engaged here in one of the great social experiments of our time. The university, almost by inadvertence, has become feudal overlord to a group of 1,800 Indians in a valley plateau 8,500 feet up in the Andes nestled between a couple of the tallest peaks in the world, and there it is attempting to move the Indians bodily out of the 16th century and into the 20th.

To study the Indians here, Cornell in 1951 rented a hacienda of 18,000 acres, acquiring 1,800 doped, pathetic and backward Indians.

Under the local customs which have obtained here for some 400 years, the *patron* is entitled to three days' work a week from his resident Indians. The Indian's wife is obliged to cook for the *patron*, and a daughter, if he has an attractive one, to provide sex companionship.

It's a lovely life if you're a Peruvian overlord and hell if you're an Indian.

## Bunch of Reds

The Peruvian ruling class, which is what our government deals with almost exclusively, would like to keep conditions that way and are spreading the word around that Cornell University is a bunch of Communists for doing anything at all for the Indians. Cornell moved into this medieval community (and this sort of medievalism is still found all over Ecuador, parts of Colombia and the interior of Brazil, as well as Peru) after the harvest in 1951.

The Indians were starving, which is normal. They were dressed in the remnants of a 16th-century page-boy uniform which a Spanish overseer had put them in 400 years ago and which they wear to this day.

Their ancestors, the Incas, were among the world's great farmers. The Incas domesticated the potato and introduced it to the world. The descendants had forgotten everything. They scratched the ground with sticks and, if lucky, a few sickly tubers came up to feed them and their families for the winter.

The Cornell group taught the Indians again how to plant a potato, a skill they had given the Western world and then almost forgot entirely, taught them how to plant in orderly, widely spaced rows, taught them irrigation.

## Dug up crop

Cornell brought in new seed, taught the Indians to dip it in fungicide and to spray the plants for disease. Because of their terrible hunger, the Indians dug up the first crop of potatoes and ate them before they were half grown.

Cornell then went to work on the social structure. First they introduced sharecropping, splitting the crop with the Indians. The margin of survival is so thin in this backward area that the Indians never had enough to eat, let alone enough to sell.

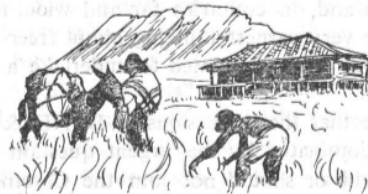
Gradually, Cornell weaned the Indians from subsistence farming (if you could call it farming) into the money economy, into raising enough to sell in the market.

Cornell taught them the uses of credit to buy seed, and tools to modernise their agriculture. Over the years the Indians have built up their own capital.

Meanwhile, the university was teaching the Indians an even more important skill, how to make their own decisions — decisions about pasture of animals, about crops, even about the control of goat rustling, which was endemic for a while. That was the real key — the psychological training of the Indians to think of themselves as human beings.

## Utterly selfless

This is the American abroad at his lovely best, being utterly selfless and tremendously capable. The Cornell experiment, however, could go to waste if the Indians do not acquire the land they have learned to cultivate. The Cornell group are still renting the hacienda whose 18,000 acres Cornell, with American government funds, is trying to buy for the Indians against the entrenched opposition of the Peruvian oligarchy.



American Ambassador James Loeb has tried to push the sale of the land. Ted Kennedy, on his visit to Peru, personally needed President Prado to do something about selling the land to the Indians before Prado visited President Kennedy in Washington.

Prado did push the sale another inch or so, but as this is written the Indians still haven't got title to their lands and there is some doubt they'll ever get it. The Peruvian rich don't like the Indians to get the idea they're entitled to anything, and even though we are offering to pay about a third more than the land is worth, the sale is dragging in the courts.

If the hacienda reverts to its owner, the Indians and the land will revert to the Middle Ages and Cornell's brilliant ten-year experiment will have all been wasted.