

CHAPTER XV



Things were becoming hectic at the shoe factory. The home office in Pasadena sent Helge Ystrom to Australia to open a plant in Sydney and the Korean War began to have its affect on the operation. Because of the high incidence of Tuberculosis and other debilitating diseases among the island population, I had required pre-employment physical exams of all applicants before hiring them. As a result all employees were in relatively good health. As the Korean War grew, a lot of the younger physically fit men at the plant were drafted into the service.

Other problems besieging us were late delivery of raw materials from the mainland, a general lack of understanding or appreciation for quality among the workers and a cavalier attitude towards meeting production standards. I guess this was to be expected in an industry on the island that paid a minimum rate of 27 cents an hour. In order to stimulate the employees towards better performance I established piece work and group bonus rates that permitted them to earn as much as 50 cents an hour if they put forth the required effort but that backfired on me. As soon as they had earned enough to buy what they needed to subsist for the next week they would just take some unauthorized time off.

This was a problem common to the other industries in Puerto Rico and a group of we industrialist got together with the General Electric distributor on the island and outfitted a trailer with appliances such as re-

frigerators, electric irons, toasters, etc., and then had it taken to all the various factories to display the items to employees. The idea was to get them to buy such things on credit so they would have to make regular payments and therefore would have to put in a full weeks worth of work. That idea did not work either, mainly because of the lack of power distribution to many areas where the workers lived.

In spite of the many difficulties, we had the daily production up to 1,000 pairs a day by mid 1950 and then union organizers from the mainland hit us. They held several meetings with our employees and so did I with the end result that a vote to join the labor union failed by a considerable margin. By the end of 1950 we were up to 1,500 pairs a day and were making huge shipments on a monthly basis. However the spoilage rate and discards were costly.

During this period I was visited by a number of people from the mainland who were considering locating a plant in Puerto Rico. Among them were, Mad Man Muntz of TV and Muntz Car sales, Bill Frawley who founded Papermate Pen Company and a group of executives from Consolidated Cigar. Muntz had one of his cars shipped down to the island ahead of him and he gave me a tour around town in the car which was very advanced for it's time. The visitors also included executives of Bosch and Lombe Optical Company and Built Rite children's shoes.

In early 1950 we moved again to another and still larger house on El Vigia, a high hill that overlooked the town and the ocean. It was a big, all-cement two story house with four bedrooms and two baths on the ground floor which we occupied. The grounds were surrounded by coconut palms, flamboyant trees and hibiscus plants. It was a beautiful spot with an expansive and breathtaking view. There was a large screened side porch and a long covered front porch. The upstairs was occupied by Fred Hawkins and his family. He was the General Manager of the

huge Textron Textile plant in town.

There were both an exterior and interior stairway to the second floor and our kids were constantly going up the inside stairs and trying to get through the locked door to the second floor at the top of the stairs. I finally put a stop to that by telling the kids that there was a mad monk on the second floor that would eat them alive if he caught them. The structure was called "The Trolley House" because it had been built in the 1930's by a group of investors who were planning to install an electric trolley transportation system on the island, an idea that never came to fruition.

Our nearest neighbors were the Seralles family who owned Snow White Sugar and the Don Q Rum plant. Their home was a huge three story Spanish Mansion which was cared for by a virtual army of domestics. Their little boy Tito and our children became fast friends and played together a lot. The Seralles also made sure we never ran out of rum. Squatters were constantly building shanties on stilts on the hill below us and at night you could hear them pounding the things together which were mostly made of discarded lumber, scrap sheet metal and heavy cardboard.

There were a number of small boulders at the base of our lot above the two car garage that was dug into the side of the hill. One day Richy and Tito decided to roll some of the boulders down the hill below us and one of them knocked the stilts out from under a shanty which immediately crashed to the ground. The guy who lived there came up the hill with a machete while he was screaming and yelling and chased the kids into our house and then began threatening Virginia. He was going to have their heads come hell or high water. Virginia called me and I raced home to confront the frenzied man. I had learned that the Puerto Ricans were very expressive in their mannerisms and their bark was often worse than their bite.

After talking with the fellow, who was demanding \$100 cash in damages, I began negotiations which end-

ed in our settling the matter with a gallon of rum that I promptly handed over to him. Rum would settle most problems.

Practically none of my employees had checking or bank accounts and lived day to day on the cash in their pockets. As this was true of most of the working class on the island, it was common practice to make all payroll payments in cash. Therefore, every Friday morning my accounting people, who had figured out how much each employee had earned the week before, gave me a withdrawal slip for several hundred dollars broken down by pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and bills which I then took to the bank and returned with a couple of heavy sacks full of coins. These were then sorted out in piles for the exact amount for each employee and then placed in little envelopes with the employees name on it. These envelopes also had the hours worked listed on them along with the employees pay rate.

The people received their envelopes at the end of their shift and as they departed the plant they would be besieged by the local loan sharks who had advanced them funds using their pay envelopes as collateral. I hated those guys and would not allow them on the property so they would stand in a group outside the entrance gate in the fence awaiting their prey. The only good thing I can say about them is that to my knowledge they never beat anyone up.

Fishing off the island was excellent and I and several of the fellows at the plant decided we should have a boat. I had a small Johnson outboard motor that I had brought with me when we moved to Puerto Rico so I order a boat kit from the Arkansas Boat Works. It was a fourteen foot flat bottom thing made mostly of plywood. When the kit arrived we found an empty corner on the factory floor and I put the maintenance crew to work assembling the boat. It took a couple of weeks of their spare time and when finished we painted it gray with white trim.

The best fishing was at night when the moon was

full and the preferred bait was cheese. The surface feeding fish were called "Machetes" and resembled a barracuda but were very mild tasting. They averaged three to six pounds each. The fishing gear included rods, reels, a club to kill the fish once boated and the usual bottle of rum. Those fish had a mouthful of needle sharp teeth, hence the importance of the club. The technique was to go out about 200 ft. from shore, drop anchor and then float while sipping on rum and waiting for a bite. We went out many nights and always came back with a boat load of fish.

One Saturday afternoon Jake and I decided to fish off shore near the slaughter house down at the Playa. The blood and guts in the water always drew a good assortment of fish to the area which included Barracuda and Sharks. After we had caught several Barracuda I decided to try the bottom and when I suddenly felt a jerk on the line I tried to reel in my catch but nothing would budge and I thought I was snagged on a rock.

I kept working at it and slowly I could feel something very heavy coming up on my line. I finally got it up to the boat and saw something that I thought was an octopus as I heaved it on board. As I did, Jake went over the side and yelled, "Get out of the boat." I did not realize what was going on until I looked on the floor of the boat and saw I had hooked a six foot long Congre Eel that was heading for me as it snapped it's jaws. I jumped up on one of the seats and began beating it with the club and finally killed it after which Jake got back in the boat. I did not want the thing so let Jake take it home with him.

Earlier I mentioned the long and tortuous drive across the island from Ponce to San Juan. There was an easier way to make the trip and that was by Caribair which had two DC3 round trip flights each day. one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The fare was \$8.00 each way and only took about 20 minutes. That is how I did most of my traveling back and forth which was quite frequent for meetings that I had to attend in

San Juan.

I also flew a Cessna 140 on that trip many times and could make the trip in 30 minutes in that small single engine plane. It was owned by the Seralles family who let me use it whenever I wanted and had given me a set of keys for the plane. All I had to do was replace the fuel I used. It was a two place plane but had a jump seat in the back and so Virginia and I used it several times to go to San Juan to shop and on one trip were able to take Richy and Harriet along on the jump seat. We were slightly over gross weight but made the trip over and back without any problems.

When we moved to the Trolley House on El Vigia, Manuel wanted to continue working for us as the place was within walking distance of his shack. Maria and Priscilla did not have a way to get there so we had to let them go and replaced them with Tassia an older lady who we all came to love. She was absolutely crazy about our children and they soon had her wrapped around their fingers. Tassia lived nearby so housing for her was no problem. She and the kids conversed solely in Spanish as she knew no English and even Jimmy was talking the native tongue. It seemed so strange to hear the children speaking Spanish, although Virginia and I had to use it daily on a regular basis.

I always feared that someday a coconut would fall and hit one of the children while they were playing in the yard, so periodically Manuel would climb up the palms and cut them off. I would then slice off one end with a machete and fill the bowl with rum which, when mixed with the coconut milk and crushed ice made a great drink.

We let Tassia do most of our food shopping as she was great at haggling with the merchants at the Ponce Mercado which was a large open air market in town. She was also a terrific cook and knew the right things to buy for the native meals she prepared for us. The staple meal, of course, was rice and beans of which I never tired. One night after returning from a fishing

trip I had put the Machetes in a back porch sink as Tassia had told me she would clean them in the morning. When I got up the next morning I was surprised to see all the fish cleaned and hanging up to dry on the clothes line. She said to leave them there in the sun for the day and it would make them much better. I doubted the wisdom of her method but it turned out she was right. The sun made them even more mild and tender.

One evening I came home and the house stunk something awful. I asked Virginia what had happened and she told me that Tassia had gone to the market and bought an octopus that she was boiling for our dinner. I nearly threw up on the spot and then got enough nerve to go in the kitchen and have a look at the thing. There it was, tentacles and all in a big pot of boiling water. I was about ready to take the family out for dinner but Tassia told me that it would be, "Muy Bueno," (very good).

Curiosity got the better of me and I decided to let Tassia finish with the dinner preparations. I can't recall what all she fixed to go with it but when she brought it to the table no one wanted to touch the thing so I decided to be a real hero in front of the children and put one of the tentacles on my plate. Then with everyone watching I cut off a piece about an inch long and started chewing on it which was sort of rubbery and caused all sorts of "Uhgs" and "Oohs" from the spectators. Much to my amazement it was very good and tasted a lot like lobster. Virginia finally tried some also but the kids refused to touch it. The two of us ate some of it and the rest we gave to Tassia to take home to her family.



Maria, our Puerto Rican Nanny.



That's me with the boat we built in the shoe factory. Isla de Raton (Rat Island) is in the background and got its name as it is infested with rats.



Mercedita air strip in Ponce. The Don Q Rum plant is at the top of the photo.



Joyce de Puerto Rico display at a trade fair held in Ponce to show products made on the Island.



Industrial Trade Fair held in Ponce Puerto Rico. Note prominent location of the Joyce exhibit.