

Brazil News



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Editorial

The Vein

This story, a tale, is about an old man and his grandson, both miners. Read carefully and maybe—hopefully—before you finish, you will discover it isn't a tale after all. This discovery, as you identify with either the grandfather or grandson, will fill your heart with either gladness or sadness.

The grandfather's name is Neddih, Ned, for short, and the grandson's name is Wollahs. Their last name is Sehcir. Neddih Sehcir had a comfortable living. He and his wife lived in a pleasant house in a little mountain village. This was home, in the fullest sense of the word. They both had been born here, it is where they grew up, where they got married—over 50 years ago, where their children were born, where most of their grandchildren were born, and yes, where Wollahs was born.

Ned never considered retirement. When approached on the subject, he would say, "Retirement is doing what a fellow enjoys most, and for me that is keeping right on at what I'm doing."

Wollahs, now 30, married, with several small children, was a different story. It wasn't that he was dumb, or even lazy. But he just couldn't manage to make ends meet. And it wasn't that he wasn't loaded with ideas and theories. In fact, when it came to talking the young man sounded a lot more successful than the old man.

But with grocery and medical bills piling up and getting further and further behind on the rent, the young man finally decided to have a talk with his granddad.

Wollahs: Grandpa, back when you were a young man my age, were you hard up? Was it a constant struggle just to survive, not to say anything about getting ahead?

Ned: I became a miner when I was 14 years old. My dad was involved in a mining accident and couldn't work anymore, and so since I was the oldest, it became my responsibility to make the living for my folks and brothers and sisters. That was a mighty big bill for a 14 year old boy...

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Wollahs: How many younger brothers and sisters did you have at that time?

Ned: Four. My youngest sister was just three months old.

Wollahs: And you managed to provide for seven mouths?

Ned: I almost didn't. You see, I had my own ideas, like 14-year olds often do, and so the first thing I did was turn a deaf ear to my dad's advice and do things my way. It was when my little sister took sick and we had no money to buy medicine that I rethought my position. Back those days the word "charge" wasn't in our vocabulary...

Wollahs: And so what happened?

Ned: Let's make a deal. I'll tell you my story, but first I want you to tell me yours.

Wollahs: Aw, grandpa, you know my story.

Ned: Maybe I do, but I'm wondering if you do. Tell me your story. Take your time. I want you to listen to your story. If you forget something, maybe I can help you out. And if you get something wrong or mixed up, I'll set the record straight.

Wollahs: I really don't know what you're getting at, but I'll see what I can do. Ah... it does seem sort of dumb though for me to tell you about my dad. After all, he's your son and you probably know a lot more about him than I do...

Ned: Maybe I do, but a deal is a deal. You tell your story and then I'll tell you mine.

Wollahs: OK, I'm the youngest of five children. My dad, like you and like me, is a miner...

Ned: Hold it! Correction number one. Your dad is a miner like me, but not like you.

Wollahs: What do you mean? Are you trying to say I'm not a miner?

Ned: I said you're not a miner like your dad and me. Please continue with your story.

Wollahs: My dad says when he turned 14 you began taking him along to the mine. By the time he was 15 he was doing a man's work.

Ned: I remember that very well. He was a good worker, and a good student. By the time he went on his own, he was an experienced miner.

Wollahs: Anyway, he got married and had six children and they've all left home. When I was 21, I got married and now have two children of my own. I guess that's about the size of my story.

Ned: At least it's the size you're making it. Let me ask you a question. At what age did you become a miner?

Wollahs: Ah, well...let me see, I must have been about twenty.

Ned: Tell me a little bit about your teenage years, up until you turned twenty.

Wollahs: Must I really go into that part of my life?

Ned: Yes. You need to hear it.

Wollahs: I was the youngest of the brood and I guess I was maybe a bit spoiled...

Ned: Don't mix spoiled with disobedient. If you were spoiled, it was your dad's fault. If you were disobedient it was yours. Now which was it?

Wollahs: I hardly know how to answer that question.

Ned: Then let me help you. When you were 14 did your dad invite you to go out to the mine with him?

Wollahs: Well yes, I guess he did.

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Ned: And you went?

Wollahs: Maybe once or twice.

Ned: Then what?

Wollahs: I didn't like working underground.

Ned: And so your dad quit asking you to go to work with him?

Wollahs: After a while he quit.

Ned: Do you remember why?

Wollahs: Well...I guess it was when I stomped my foot and told him I never wanted to hear about that fool mine again...

Ned: Yet you find it convenient to say your dad spoiled you. Please continue.

Wollahs: Grandpa, you have a way of interrupting and distorting things. There's more to it than that.

Ned: Let's hear it.

Wollahs: I told my dad that life is too short to be holed up in a dumpy mine scratching around for diamonds—at least when there are diamonds to be found out in the open. So I began walking the rivers and streams, panning for diamonds...

Ned: You did that every day?

Wollahs: Oh, no. If I needed a little spending money, I'd take a day or two off to do a little panning.

Ned: And that's what you did until you were 20, right? Then what happened?

Wollahs: Well, I realized I was having just a bit too much of a happy-go-lucky attitude, so I set up a schedule. I began spending a certain amount of hours per day out in the hills.

Ned: I assume you still feel that the panning method is better than going underground.

Wollahs: I do.

Ned: Why?

Wollahs: There are a number of reasons. To begin with, I simply don't like the idea of going underground. Working underground is much harder work than panning in the streams. Last, but not least, you know I'm a social creature. I enjoy being around people. When I go panning I can occasionally invite my friends along. Underground not a soul wants to come along...

Ned: And when you invite friends along, do you find as many diamonds as when you work alone?

Wollahs: It depends. Sometimes we take a picnic lunch along and that of course takes a little extra time. Sometimes we do spend a little time swapping yarns...

Ned: I think I have the picture. As a youth you panned just enough to satisfy your own wants for today. When you hit 20 and began looking to the future, you started putting in more time, but didn't change your modus operandi. Now with a wife and several small children, you are about to go hungry, so you're wanting my advice. Right?

Wollahs: That's a rather cruel way of placing it, but let's just say you may be right.

Ned: OK, you have made an attempt to tell your story. Now I'll tell mine.

We'll return to when I was 14 and my dad began taking me to the mine. For a couple of weeks it was something new and I enjoyed it. After that I would go with him every day, but I didn't enjoy it. When my dad had his accident, I really worked hard for a month or so and got tired of it again. Like you, I looked for an easier way to find diamonds. I began walking the streams and rivers, panning for diamonds. Some days I did fairly well, but most I didn't. Soon you could tell by the food on our table how I had been doing the previous week. I didn't like it, but like you, I enjoyed inviting my friends along on my panning expeditions.

Then, as I already mentioned, my little sister took sick. I was able to come up with enough money to call the doctor over. He checked her over and said she would need some expensive medicine to recover...

Wollahs: And then what?

Ned: My dad saw the desperate look on my face and called me to his bedside. He said, "Son, remember the vein..."

That's all he had to say. I got my old miner's lantern, my pick and a jug of water. I told my folks not to expect me back that night. I headed straight out to my dad's old mine, down the gallery to where I knew the vein was. I worked nonstop that afternoon and night. By midmorning the next day I had a dozen small diamonds in my pocket. I headed back to town and didn't even stop at home, but went directly to the local diamond purchaser's office and sold the diamonds. From there I ran—ran, mind you—to the doctor's office. I knocked on his door and when he answered, I said, "Doc, I want some of that medicine for my sister. Here's the money." From there I ran home and right up to my sister's bedside where my mother was keeping a tearful vigil. I said, "Here Mom, give Sis this medicine. She's going to get better."

I gulped down a quick meal, refueled my miner's light, refilled my water jug, and said, "I'll see you tomorrow noon." My folks told me to rest up and go early in the morning, but I wouldn't hear of it. I headed back to the mine, to the vein, and gathered enough diamonds to buy enough medicine to last for several more days for my sister.

I took a bath, had a good meal, went to bed and before sunrise the next morning I was back in the mine, working the vein.

My sister got better. And never again was there a lack of food—or of anything else, for that matter—in my folks' house.

Today, more than half a century later, I'm still working in that same mine. True, I'm not working nights like when my sister was sick, but I still put in a good day...and enjoy it as much as ever.

Wollahs: Grandpa, how old were you when you got married?

Ned: Twenty-one, the same age you were when you got married.

Wollahs: I suppose you lived in a rented house for a while.

Ned: No, I didn't. You see, by working hard and steady, I was able to save up some money. By the time I was 20 I had saved up enough to buy a lot—this very lot—and build a small cottage on it. That is where your grandma and I started our life together. Finally the day came that we were able to build the house, this house we're in right now.

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Wollahs: Grandpa, I have noticed something. The key word to my failure is “panning”. The key work to your success is “vein”. Since in both cases we’re looking for—and finding—diamonds, where does the difference come in? Why does one keep you poor and the other make you...well, rich? True, you’re not rich like a lot of rich people, but you’re rich because you have a comfortable life.

Ned (smiling): Son, I can see it did you some good to listen to your own story, and then to mine. Now we can talk business.

A true diamond miner doesn’t look for diamonds only to keep the wolf away from the back door, because there is an emergency, or like happened in my case, to keep my sister from dying. A true diamond miner mines for the joy of uncovering a glittering jewel. A “wash basin” miner isn’t a true miner. He hunts for diamonds for survival. The day he finds a really big one—and you know this by experience—he may not work for a month. At the best, it’s hand to mouth survival. At the worst it’s being a pauper. Neither is pleasant.

Since a wash basin miner doesn’t have his heart in what he is doing, he likes to spice up his work with nice scenery, with visitors, with a picnic lunch, with as many days off as possible. Furthermore, since the diamonds a wash basin miner looks for are superficial, the supply is steadily depleted. You yourself know that it’s much harder to find a diamond today than it was when you were twenty. Your riches are shallow.

A true miner on the other hand, seeks for hidden riches. He digs deep. He is far removed from the distractions up top. The wash basin miner is easily distracted. The true miner has no distractions. When he hits a vein, pay dirt, he stays right there, day after day, month after month, year after year. You know, Wollahs, I’ve been working on the same vein for over 50 years and the more I dig the more diamonds I find. The more I see I have just tapped the surface.

A wash basin miner wants to see and enjoy the world as he looks for diamonds. Since he finds no enjoyment in the work itself, he never progresses beyond survival. The true miner who works a vein, on the other hand, removes himself from the distractions of the world and finds his fulfillment in the diamonds themselves. Such a miner will always be rich.

Wollahs: Which means, grandpa, that until now my life has been a failure. I didn’t even begin to prepare for manhood until I hit 20, and after that I went about it all wrong. Now here I am 30 years old and flat broke. If I sold out everything I have, I’d still be in debt. And I had the nerve to call myself a miner...

Ned: Now you’re the one who is being cruel with yourself. But very well, in life we at times must be cruel with ourselves if we want to get out of a rut...

Wollahs: And change our method of mining, chunk the wash basin and sharpen the pick, is what you’re trying to say, isn’t it Grandpa?

Ned: Exactly. And go underground and find yourself a vein.

After Wollahs has gone home, Ned stays out on the porch in his favorite rocking chair. As he slowly rocks back and forth, he occasionally smiles. Down deep he knows that from now on things will be different in his grandson’s life. But many precious years have been lost.

The stars twinkle in the heavens and the old man meditates. So do we.

We remember the promise made through Isaiah, “And I will give thee the treasures of darkness [the mine], and hidden riches of secret places [the vein].”

As we review our life, we remember the times in which we tried to pan just enough out of the Word for our survival—and got poorer and poorer.

We also remember the pleasure of going underground, all alone, and working the vein. Each diamond was like a piece in a puzzle. As we laid them out, one fit here, another fit there. Slowly but surely an image began to form, the image of Christ. Each day we anxiously sought more riches.

The days, the years, we lost panning, when we should have been mining, weigh down on us. How we wish the image of Christ in our life would be more complete. Why did we walk the creek bank, searching for shallow riches, when we could have been working the vein, and finding the hidden riches? ▲

This Month in Brazil

Crisis, Carnival, Charismatic Catholics, Community Crentes, Charlatanism, Crime

Answer quick! What do Crises, Carnival, Charismatic Catholics, Community Crentes, Charlatanism and Crime have in common?

They all start with C.

Here Goes:

Crisis – When Brazil released the exchange rate on the dollar, it behaved like a youngster turned loose in a candy store. It went crazy. Instead of adjusting itself at 1.50-1.60 reals to a dollar, it shot up to a high of 2.15, and then began coming down by jerks. Right now it is hanging in at 1.90.

By no means have the flickering red lights on the economic panel changed to yellow yet, and much less to green, but in view of the gravity of the crisis, Brazil is doing better than could be expected. To begin with, inflation has not skyrocketed. It's true that anything imported, or with imported ingredients or components has gone up. On the positive side, Brazilian commodities for export, like soybeans, have taken a nice jump.

At this point both the government and the consumer are on the lookout for price increases which have no relation to the dollar. Robson Macedo, a reporter, tells of an experience he had in Goiânia which shows how this works.

In some parts of Brazil there is a tree out in the wild that produces a fruit called pequi. We have quite a few pequi trees in the woods behind our house. About the size of an orange, but more irregular in shape, it has a soft shell about a half inch thick. Removing this shell reveals two or three yellow quail egg size nodules. The part that is eaten is only about one eighth of an inch thick and must either be scraped or gnawed

off—very carefully, for beneath it is loaded with minuscule stickers. To say the least, it is a very Brazilian fruit, which I don't believe exists in any other country.

When this fruit is in season, it is often sold on the street corners. Robson tells of how he decided to buy some pequi and was told it had gone up fifty percent. Asked why, the vendor didn't bat an eye, "The dollar's taken a jump." He went on to explain that the pequi is directly tied to the dollar and consequently it has to go up just as much as any other imported products.

Asked how that could be, once again the vendor had an answer on the end of his tongue: The pequi is harvested by day laborers from the Northeast. When they found out that beans and coffee were going up, they immediately demanded higher wages. Then the freight to haul the pequi to Goiânia also went up since both diesel fuel and tires went up. "So," he concluded, "the pequi gets here 20% more expensive."

"What about the other 30% of the increase?" Robson asked, by now quite certain the man would have an explanation, which he did. Without missing a beat, he explained that the distributor who buys the pequi naturally has to up his price too so that he won't lose money. Since the distributor ups his price 15%, above the 20% extra he had to pay, he, the vendor, has to add another 15% to come out. Mathematically it was flawless reasoning: The day laborers and freight increased 20%, the distributor increased 15% and the vendor another 15%, which made a 50% total increase.

Unfortunately, this isn't a joke. It is a mentality that has largely died out, but should it return, Brazil is up the creek.

Economists believe inflation will run between 10-30% in 1999—providing the old inflationary mentality doesn't resurrect.

Carnival – We have explained before that carnival is a very pagan celebration preceding lent. Beginning on Friday, it is a four day orgy ending on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. The idea is to have a fling before the 40 days of lent, in which no meat is to be eaten and penitence should be done for sins. This event is indescribably immoral.

On the front page of my daily paper I see the picture of a large Catholic church in front of which the carnival activities are taking place. About the same time the local bishop makes headlines by taking a stand against unemployment. At no point does he condemn the immorality taking place outside—and probably inside—the church building.

Charismatic Catholics

A new attraction to carnival this year was a 31 year old priest named Father Marcelo. A former aerobic instructor, he has become famous for his flamboyant, show biz approach to religion. He is the locomotive of a rapidly growing charismatic movement within the Catholic church that now has more than 8 million followers.

The charismatics, and especially father Marcelo, are accused by the Crentes—Evangelicals—of trying to steal their holy fire, even going so far as to imitate their music and rituals.

More and more the Catholic church is becoming a social affair, a club, where infants are baptized (just in case...), people are married (it might help...) and the dead are buried (who knows...), or as an American priest once told us, where his parishioners are “hatched, matched and dispatched.”

Except for a few elderly ladies, people are no longer interested in hearing a priest intone mass. On the other hand, there is a mass exodus from the dioceses to the charismatic street corner churches—people jumping from the mass into the mess.

During Carnival this year the explicitly immoral seasonal songs were lustily interspersed with father Marcelo’s “religious” songs. One of the attractions was Ademar Ebone, 37, disguised as a priest. Laughingly he says, “I was the center of attraction. Couples everywhere wanted me to marry and bless them,”—all in mockery, obviously.

Community Crentes

Crentes, as we have already mentioned, are Evangelicals. A number of years ago a church was founded here in Brazil called Comunidade Cristã—Christian Community. A number of our Brazilian brethren, especially from the Pirenópolis Congregation, were converted while in that group.

The fundamentalism that set the Community apart during its early years has given way to exaggerated worldliness. Or to reuse the example, they are acting like children turned loose in a candy store. Everything goes. This Carnival, one of their members, a 21 year old married woman from a congregation in Rio de Janeiro, made it into VEJA magazine because of her scandalous dress and the declaration that since her husband goes to Carnival, it wouldn’t be right not to go with him. But on the positive side, she made a point of attending an early church service before heading into the festivities.

Charlatanism

We have at different times written about mediums who claim to incarnate a certain Dr. Fritz, killed during World War I. One of these, Zé Arigó, has the dubious distinction of displaying indisputable supernatural powers. Psychic surgeries, performed without anesthesia or asepsis, are supposed to cure everything from ulcers to herniated discs and from cataracts to kidney stones.

The latest Dr. Fritz incarnate is Edson Queiroz, an engineer turned psychic surgeon. He claims to have performed over 50 thousand surgeries during the last five years. Now his ex-wife, who during four years assisted him in his work, is beginning to spill the beans. She declares that he does surreptitiously use local anesthesia, that some of his patients have died during surgery, and that on a normal day he makes some 15 thousand reais, which is nearly eight thousand dollars.

This charlatan is under investigation, but because of a very soft spot society has for this type of thing, it’s not likely anything will come out of it. And as we say in Portuguese, he will become “more millionaire” than ever.

Crime

Now that we have a stable currency in Brazil, it has become popular to rob banks. When inflation was running at more than one percent per day, the money stolen had to be spent within several weeks, or a month at the most, before it lost most of its value. Now its possible to relieve a bank of its money and then lay low until the dust settles, even if it's six months.

In the state of Goiás, there has been an average of almost one robbery a day. Since most banks keep a minimum of cash on hand (the bulk being stored in the very secure vaults of the Banco do Brasil), these heists yield anywhere from several thousand to 30 or 40 thousand reals.

The interesting thing is that often the thieves make their getaway on cycles. Seldom are they caught.

Banks with revolving doors, metal detectors and guards are less susceptible to bank robbers, but not immune. Since most of these sessions take in the neighborhood of three minutes, seldom do the police arrive before they have jumped their scooters and ridden into the sunset. ▲

Trip Report

by Rufus Schrock

From Colombia to Peru

We docked after 18 hours of ocean swell riding, glad to be on solid ground. Milcah had a hard time on the swells. When we docked and were told to get off the ship, we went down the long gangplank and waited a good while on our van. Finally Mark and I went back up to see what the hold up could be and there they were waiting on the guy with the key to the van, which was blocking the doorway of the ship. I backed the van up a bit and they opened the end of the ship and I drove out. So I drove all the way through this barge or ship. When they close it up from either end, you cannot see where you went in or came out.

The port immigration office was a hot place to be over the dinner hour and the slow process was nothing new, nor was it any more enjoyable. We finally came through and they opened a very large gate to let us into Colombia. Somewhat amusing.

We drove a little ways to a town where we changed money, then backtracked a ways, where we stopped to get us something to eat and while we ate some boys washed the sea water off our vehicle, so it wouldn't rust.

Now we were ready to drive and the road was clear, so what could hinder us? About a 30 minute drive proved to us where we were and what could hinder us? This patrol guy stopped me and wanted to fine me because I didn't have liability insurance, nor did I have a fire extinguisher on board, so he was upset with me. He flagged down a taxi and showed me his papers. I repeatedly asked him where I should go to acquire the

papers I needed to satisfy him. I also asked him why at the custom office they let me by without insurance if I needed it. He said they were of a different line of authority. After some going back and forth, I told him that the immigration officer had told me that I had all I needed and not to give anyone along the road one cent. Immediately he bid me Godspeed and we were on our way again.

Thinking that we had taken enough time off with the wait in Panama City and the boat ride, we would just keep on driving a good bit. Not to be. We were not far at all when we came upon a faulty bridge. No one could cross it until the next day. We returned to a hotel to catch up on some rest. As we checked in and were around the office there, I saw a telephone on the counter and I thought about calling someone. The thing was all taped together and just to try to use it was discouraging, plus the cost that would be involved made me pass the whole thing up. So I passed up one more opportunity to call home.

In the morning we got up and joined the line of traffic that was waiting on the bridge to be done. The temperature was hot, humid and unpleasant. Mark and I walked up to the bridge to take a look. There they had poured what seemed to be a header on one end of the bridge to keep it from sinking. They had poured it during the night and were waiting on it to dry. Soon after 12:00 we started to move a little at a time until the traffic thinned out.

By evening we were again out of money, so we had to stay the night again to take money from the bank in the morning. The place we stayed was Pasto, Colombia, close to Tulcan, Ecuador, where we crossed into Ecuador. Pasto is a fairly high elevation, so it was really nice and cool, the best weather we have had in quite a while.

During this time we were going up and down mountains and towards evening our brakes were squealing, so we stopped at a shop and had the man look at the problem. The only problem he could find was that the axle was loose and wobbly on the back end. He tightened the big U-bolts that hold the axle on, so we were off again. This is then the evening that we arrived in Pasto, which is a nice town with good food and friendly hospitality. There were a few drunks that showed themselves helpful. Drunks and unwelcome helpful people have a way of spicing an adventure.

June 13 we drove till about 11:00, when we stopped at what seemed to be a stopping place for others, as there were other people also stopped along this mountain road. We were not there very long when this guy comes up to us with a pistol and bullwhip and told us to move over a little so that others too could park. We promptly obeyed. He appeared to be some kind of self-made order keeper, so when he asked me what time he should wake me, I said 1:00 a.m. At 1:00 he tapped on my window. After exchanging a few friendly words, I gave him a dollar and we were off again. When I got sleepy, Flora drove, then later Rebeccah. By the afternoon of the 14th of June we were in Ecuador, still nice green country.

At the border the officials wanted more than the paper work, they wanted the faces too, so we had to show ourselves in person.

It is not far through the country. We drove through the night, had one flat and were

in Peru the next afternoon. Ecuador and Peru borders are about like any others as far as time is concerned, from two to three hours and we were done and ready to travel again.

The landscape changed almost immediately from green to brown. Ecuador is fairly green while Peru is dry burnt rock and sand along the way we traveled, nevertheless beautiful in its own way. When God created the earth He made beauty in many different ways. We drove along the Pacific coast as evening was approaching. Was it ever nice! Partly because we were not turning and curving around mountains and valleys, the scene was beautiful. Peru is fairly flat along the coast.

Around 9:00 p.m. we happened upon a hotel out in a desert area where it seemed like in more prosperous times this place had things going, like oil field work or such. There was one lone customer and the attendant until we came along. There was a kitchen, but no cook. The other guy and I drove down to a little village and bought a few things to eat and some drink. So we came through with the bare necessity of life. We had a good night's sleep. In the morning while we were getting ready to leave the children derailed and were off down to the beach. This was Sunday morning, so this was the perfect place to go and have our little worship service. I gathered up a few songbooks, Sunday school books and Bible and went to join the crowd. We enjoyed the scenery and beach for a little while. Then we settled down for a little worship time.

It was near noon when we got back to the hotel. We stopped in the nearby village and had a very good dinner: rice, beans, chicken and more. ▲

Remembering Out Loud

by Sylvia Baize

Growing Up in Brazil

As I learned to talk, I discovered that all nouns could be said two ways. A cow was also a vaca, and a cat a gato. Effortlessly I learned to speak both English and Portuguese simultaneously.

This really amazed Brazilians. They held anyone in awe who spoke English, and even more so if it was a small child. They would always try and get me to talk to them in English. This would get to me, because I knew they wouldn't be able to understand what I said, so I would beg my mom to tell them that I didn't want to.

As long as I can remember, there was a church in town and another on the Colony. The church in town was a dinky place with some red stackable chairs and a few benches. One big difference between the two churches was that in town everything was in Portuguese and on the Colony it was in English, interpreted into Portuguese.

I guess this influenced even the way we played, because once when I was only about 4 years old, we had company. The little boy was my age and we went to play in the shed, which we imagined was a church, and a pile of sacks with cow feed to be a rostrum—although it was a bit high. He being a preacher's son and I being an interpreter's

daughter, we soon had church service in full motion, he preaching and I interpreting. Not everything we said was understandable, but our fervor made up for that.

Our parents missed us and walked in on us right in the middle of the service. This unexpected audience zapped us of all our conviction, so we hopped down from the rostrum and that was the end of the service.

Growing up wasn't the easiest thing, but it sure was fun. At least most of the time...

I had this little game I liked to play when walking from the barn to the house. I would close my eyes and try to make it without getting too far off the path. Once in a while I would cheat just a bit by taking a quick peek and then correct my course.

From the barn to the house was a wide open space. The only thing I could possibly run into was a light pole. But with all my peeking, I felt I was quite safe.

Then one day I was really feeling confident and decided to go all the way without cheating even once. So I started out. I'm quite sure that if I had decided to head straight for the post, I would have missed it by a long ways. But since the idea was to miss the pole—yes, you guessed right—I hit it head on.

Talking about a banged up nose! Somehow I made it to the house and straight to my mom. I felt I was needing a double dose of sympathy. She kissed my nose, which already helped a lot, and gave me some sound advice on the importance of watching where I was going.

Here if my dad didn't hear the whole story. And dads are different than moms. They see things in a different light. My dad thought it was outrageously funny what had happened to me. He liked the story so well that he had me retell it (just so he could laugh some more).

Anyway, I decided to take him out to the scene of the accident and show him exactly what had happened. Here if there wasn't a dent in the pole about where my nose had hit. When I innocently showed him what I had done to the pole, I thought he would come completely unglued.

After that whenever we would happen to be near the pole, he would get the orneriest look on his face and ask me to show him where my nose had connected with the pole. He would nod his head and say, "Hummm, you must have hit it pretty hard."

It took me a long time to get smart enough to realize that noses don't usually make dents in hard wood and that maybe it wasn't a good idea to tell my dad that kind of stuff. But the good side of this was that I learned early in life that in some situations a good laugh—at ones self—can do miracles.

Now as I look back, I am amazed at how gullible I was at times. My brother Lucas knew that and loved to play on my gullibility.

One rainy afternoon we went out to the pasture to look for the milk cow. We looked and looked, but didn't find hide nor hair of her. By now we were wet and cold and tired. It was turning dusk, when the sky gets a greenish look to it, a sign that it will soon be dark. It gives a person an eerie feeling, a desire to be safe inside the cozy house down the hill.

We were near a road that cut through our pasture and suddenly Lucas told me to

stop and listen. “Someone’s coming!” he said. I listened carefully and could hear it too. “Let’s hide!” he said. “Run!”

So we ran as fast as we could and threw ourselves down on the ground behind a fallen tree. This provided little protection, and I don’t know why we even hid there, because the truck came into sight before we ever hit the ground. I lay there and shivered out of cold and fright. It was an old truck with no doors and I was petrified. The men were talking loudly at it pattered by. I asked Lucas what the men were saying, but he said I should be quiet or they would come and get us.

After they had passed, I was wet from both rain and sweat. He told me what the men had said. They had seen us and heard us and would have stopped to get us, but they heard us talking English and so they decided they didn’t want us. Whew! Barely escaped that time! I told Lucas I wanted to go home.

I don’t think we ever did find the cow, nor did I realize that even had we shouted at the top of our lungs, the men in the loud rattletap truck could not have heard us! ▲

Milestones

And God Said:

Let There Be School and There Was School

The creation of the world was a miracle and so was the creation of our own school system. As time goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that it was God, and not man, who brought this about. We ask ourselves: Where would the church be today if we would have tried to find a way through, instead of out, of the public school system.

Some of you readers will remember that in the 97 General Annual Meeting for the church in Brazil, the topic for the evening meeting was our own schools. The American colony congregations have had their own schools right from the onset, but that hasn’t been the case in the Brazilian congregations and mission posts.

For quite a few years the Rio Verde Congregation has felt the need of having their own school, but it looked like an insurmountable hurdle. The first question was: Where? To buy a lot and build was out of the question. To rent a suitable building with a large enough back yard for the children to play during recess also looked impossible. Then there was the problem of finding a teacher who could handle a multi-grade classroom. Finally, even if such a teacher should be found, where would the funds come from to pay her wage and other school expenses?

So, as frequently happens in a situation like this, the project never so much as hits the drawing board.

But then something began to change. There came a period of high tides that rushed inland, up over the deep-rooted fears and began carrying them back to sea.

Meetings were held. Some were in favor. Some were cautiously neutral, and, as could be expected, some were openly skeptic, not to say resistant.

After the high tides had cleared the beach of fears, they began sweeping over the hearts and minds of the town brothers and sisters. The waters of the deep washed their eyes, and like the prophet's servant, they began seeing solutions—solutions right under their noses.

A place to have school. Why not put it “under” the unfinished fellowship hall? Set right along side the church, and approximately the same size, this building was merely a roof supported by concrete posts with no walls or floor. So the idea was to build a small classroom at one end, under this roof.

Where would the money come from for this project? Over a period of time they had been setting aside designated collections for the fellowship hall project. There should be plenty to make a small classroom.

But then someone came up with the idea, “Since we’re building anyway, why not make the classroom big enough so that later on, when necessity arises, we can divide it into two classrooms?” That is what they did and still there were building block left over. “Why not close in the entire fellowship hall?” someone wanted to know. “And since we have to put a floor in the classroom, why not finish the job?”

Things were looking mighty good, but the classroom was going to be mighty hot without a ceiling. “Why not get donations for a ceiling?” Several hours of phone calls brought in more than enough money.

The money from the building fund and the donations (plus, I believe, a loan out of their general treasury) were enough to buy materials, but not to pay for labor. Once again the Lord provided. Brethren from town and from the Colony pitched in and things moved ahead. It took Nehemiah 52 days to restore the wall around Jerusalem and it took the brethren in town 45 days, from the time it was decided to move ahead until the first day of school. The neighbor lady remarked, “These people build a city in one day!” She didn’t know who was behind the project.

But that’s only part of the story. You don’t have school without a teacher. That is a particularly sticky problem in this country where there is no such thing as a functional multi-grade classroom. The Rio Verde School would have six grades, so the teacher would have to be someone who had studied or taught in our school system. Even then it would be tough. Finally, even if a teacher was available, how would the congregation come up with money to pay his or her wage?

The solution found for this was to have all the heads of homes turn in a paper stating their net income and then calculate what percent they would have to pay to come up with enough money to pay the wages.

Laura Costa has taught Portuguese in the Monte Alegre School for a number of years and is intimately acquainted with the ins and outs of a multi-grade classroom. A conviction was born in her heart for this work, but would her board release her? Things all worked out. Aparecida, Mrs. Adejenes Lima, was interested in finishing out at least part of the year. It’s true she never studied nor taught in one of our schools, but her husband has been on the school board for a number of years, which has brought her into close contact with our way of teaching. In addition to this, she has studied to be a teacher.

Brazil News

And so, on Thursday, the 18th day of February of 1999, Escola Menonita Rio Verde opened its doors to 10 students. The following Monday three more students showed up.

The books and furnishings? Another small miracle. Between the two Colony schools, they were able to come up with almost all the books they needed. In one of the schools where Paulo David teaches, he was able to “borrow” a teacher’s desk. A teacher’s chair soon showed up.

The school board is: Paulo David, chairman; José Cardoso, secretary, Cláudio Silva, treasurer.

Not only did the Rio Verde Congregation end up with a school, but with a nice fellowship hall too. No it’s not finished, not plastered yet, but it is a fellowship hall.

Last but not least, this project has had a powerful growing up effect on the Rio Verde Congregation. Unitedly, with hard work and sacrifice, they have shown they share the vision of the church on education by falling in step with the general practice.

When talking to those involved in this project, the word most often used to describe the Escola Menonita Rio Verde is milagre—miracle. Don’t they know that when God says, “Let there be school,” a school there will be?

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