

Brazil News



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Reporting

The Lord Led – 57 Years in Brazil

On November 16, 1968 the first two immigrant families set foot in Brazil. That was 57 years ago.

If we were to resume this migration in three words, what would they be?

The Lord Led!

I doubt if anyone can come up with a three-word, 10-letter, definition more descriptive than this.

A paradox, to put it mildly. The stage was set for a resounding disaster. The cards were stacked against this bold venture.

Let's notice:

Brazil could then have accurately been defined as a Banana Republic. Economically, industrially, educationally, structurally, internationally, democratically, socially, progressively, the report card would have said that the "student" rated – generously – as having a C- average. I think a D+ might have come closer to telling the story.

But back then, America was probably the only country in the world open to immigration that would have rated an A-. So, the move to Brazil was sort of a jumping-off-the-cliff enterprise, as we were leaving an ideal situation in exchange for a big question mark.

Brazil is a big country, approximately the size of the contiguous area of the United States. It has no mountain ranges, although many regions are hilly, with low mountains. In the Northeast there are arid areas, but most of the country is crisscrossed by an abundance of streams and rivers. Most of the population was located in costal regions. Thus a great deal of the country was sparsely inhabited.

And this brings us to the big question mark. How in the world (or at least in an area the size of Brazil), do you decide where to make a permanent settlement?

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That is exactly what the brethren on the first exploratory trips faced. Where should a permanent colony be established?

It should be inserted here that Paraguay was also investigated as a potential area for a new settlement, but soon abandoned. I think that it would have rated a D-

A VW Kombi was bought for the exploratory trips made by brethren from the US. We won't attempt to retrace the routes taken on the explorations, or the different impressions made. In a sense, the story we are telling begins with the VW Kombi that was purchased.

In the travels being made, the Kombi was due a checkup. This occurred while in Rio Verde, at that time the town of Rio Verde, with less than 30 thousand inhabitants. Since it had a VW agency, it was deemed the ideal place for the first maintenance check ("primeira revisão," as we say here).

For a Kombi load of bearded "gringos" to invade the agency was without a doubt a historical first. In those days beards were a rarity in Brazil – especially full beards. They were associated with Fidel Castro. So, was this Kombi load of Americans an invasion of communist forces? This possibility never took root. The Kombi load of travellers smiled too much to fit into the conspiratorial mold. They were land "buyers," not invaders.

Only my dad-in-law, Denton Burns, who had spent some years on the mission in Mexico knew a foreign language, which in his case was Spanish. And since Spanish and Portuguese are "first cousins, once removed," and since Denton was linguistically curious, a makeshift conversation was soon the order of the day. It was soon ascertained that "hacienda," Spanish, was "fazenda" in Portuguese. He was able to transmit the message that they were wanting to buy a "fazenda."

Not only did these benign smiles result in new friendships, they also produced a gentleman wanting to sell land.

Enter Manoel Norberto Vilela, a short, chubby citizen who could smile in any language. He was a large landholder, I think maybe the equivalent of some 50 thousand US acres of land. Interestingly, he was not considered a rich man. This region was made up of hundreds of thousands of acres of land, just like Manoel Norberto's, that was considered to be almost next to worthless. Thousands and thousands of acres could have been picked up for a couple of US dollars per acre.

So, we have a Kombi load of Americans wanting to buy land, we have a smiling seller who would like to sell 5 thousand, or 10 thousand acres, or more, for almost nothing.

Too good to be true? Manoel offered to show them his land. It was some 25 miles from Rio Verde. There was a crude road over the first 15 miles, or so, and then no more road. Only a fisherman's trail faintly visible that lead to a gorgeous waterfall with possibly a 45-foot drop, which was located on the far edge of the land. Tents were pitched and the night spent hearing the incessant roar of the falls.

Rio Verde was projected as a stop on the exploratory trip, with plans to proceed to the neighboring state of Mato Grosso. That night, the entire group discussed this

situation, and had a special prayer, asking the Lord to direct their steps. Manoel made them an offer on a piece of land. They asked for a week's time to give him an answer. After returning from Mato Grosso they would reach a decision.

I'm not sure just how this happened, but I understand that on their trip to Mato Grosso there was a road problem, or something, that made them decide to turn around and see Manoel again. In the meantime someone else had come along and offered more money for the parcel of land, but he told the prospective buyer that until the "gringos" returned and gave their word, he wouldn't sell.

I have entitled this issue "The Lord Led." Let me give a bit of a rundown on Manoel Norberto Vilela. He was more than just an interesting fellow. When talking with Denton, who didn't understand nearly everything he said, Manoel tried to rectify the situation by talking louder. And louder. The quasi shouts brought results. Details were ironed out and the deal was closed.

And that brought us to stage two of this land deal. The legal details. We knew absolutely nothing of legal procedures in Brazil, except that the Constitution had provisions for conscientious objectors. And that would be possible to legally immigrate.

(Just a word on this. Laws are more flexible in Brazil than in the US, rubber bands, if you like. Thus, I'm not sure just how clear the wording was in the Constitution on the conscientious objector issue. However, now over 55 years later, we never had a serious problem. Each congregation has a member responsible for filling out the forms for exemptions, but it is no big deal. Also, when we filed for immigration, shortly after folks-in-law moved here, the only requirement from the Brazilian Consul in Houston was a letter from Dad-in-law declaring that I would not become a Brazilian liability. Later on it became much more complicated, but never impossible. Later on, when the authorities from Goiânia began periodically sending out an official to see how the "gringos" were doing, he would tell us hi and head to the falls on the river to fish. He became a close friend and when we had any passport problems, he would be right there to help us out.)

Back to Manoel Norberto Vilela. International money transfers were somewhat complicated back in the beginning. We had estimated the date the money for our land payment should arrive here. It didn't. We talked to Manoel and his only reaction was his trademark smile. Not to worry! Not to worry! He was sure that eventually the payment would get here. And it did.

Folks-in-law and the Dick Toews family got here with their permanent visas and set up camp near the falls on the Monte Alegre River. Manoel would often pay them visits, smiling, and offered us a lot of useful information how things worked here.

Needless to say, we were unacquainted with the species of trees, which were different from those in N America. So, by now my wife and I and two small children had moved here. We decided to build a corral. We found some trees, absolutely straight, and when peeled – very easily, I might add – they were all white. We quickly inserted them in the holes we dug, fastened others horizontally, and soon had one of the most beautiful corrals I have ever seen.

And then Manoel showed up. He looked our corral over, seemed embarrassed, and then with his ever-present smile, said, “Este curral não vai ficar bom.” (This corral won’t last.)

Astonished, we asked him what the problem was. He explained that their durability was six months, at the most. In fact, I’m not sure it lasted even six months. But, through it all we were smarter than we had been. Beauty and strength were not necessarily related (not even the human species).

Manoel ran cattle over his enormous acreage. Since it was all in native grass and there were no fences, it did beautifully in the rainy season, but dried up when the dry season hit us. Since he had no provisions for his cattle without their native pasture, they began flocking to the numerous streams that crossed his land, where the grass was still green for maybe 20 or 30 feet. The problem was that this was all swamp land and the cattle would soon bog down and be unable to extricate themselves. Unless someone came along with a horse and lasso, and pulled them out, they would die. Even so, quite a few died for lack of rescue. Knowing the difficulties of the dry season, herds had to be kept at a minimum. That meant it was inadvisable to have more than one head for 10-15 acres of grass. Since there were virtually no fences on Manoel’s huge acreage, not even on our new borders, his cattle would become imprisoned in the mire.

We as a family have been listening to Laura Ingalls Wilder’s “Little House” books. Amazingly, they were able to raise bumper crops on the Kansas and Dakota prairies without fertilization. We quickly found out that the land we had bought (or had practically been donated to us), was another story. And that is a story I will attempt to tell in the next issue of our little paper.

The original tracts of land purchased from Manoel was divided into eight tracts, according to the number of buyers. These new owners began dribbling in. Tents were erected as initial living quarters, followed by other crude shelters. More permanent structures were sheds made of masonry, with living quarters in the front section. This provided adequate protection when in the rainy season.

We continue our narrative in the next edition.

From my Scratch Pad

I have this little habit of jotting down some of my thoughts and ideas on a scratch pad. So here we go:

I used to buy puzzles, empty the box on a table or card table, turn all pieces right side up. And then finding the fitting pieces, usually the border pieces first. I don’t remember ever coming up with an extra piece. But to “finish” a puzzle with a hole, that is, missing a piece, that occasionally happened. To me, one missing piece, that could be found nowhere, ruined the puzzle. One thing I never

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encountered was an additional piece, obviously from that puzzle, that didn't fit. Interesting, this situation occurs in real life – often. There are people who never seem to find their place in life. And so they stumble around making life miserable for themselves. And often for others. I might add here that in the electronic puzzles that I put together on my iPad, there are never missing or extra pieces.

In the Armed Forces, the highest rank that can be reached is that of 5-Star General, or equivalent. In the Army of the Lord, the highest rank is that of servant.

If you readers visit Brazil, and pay attention, you will be amazed to notice that very seldom do you see someone chewing gum in public, or smoking a cigarette. Supermarkets display chewing gum, but never cigarettes or cigars.

When we moved to Brazil often there were doors marked with W.C. in public buildings. I asked someone what that stood for and was told it was a restroom. After sometime I found it stood for Water Closet. It has been decades since I have seen W.C. I understand there are still countries in the world that have Water Closets.

NOLO CONTENDERE. In the legal system, this Latin term meaning “No contest,” or literally, “no contest” or “I do not wish to contend.” It is neither an admission nor denial of guilt. Or as someone has said, in court it means: “I didn't do it, your honor, and promise never to do it again.”

We quote Bill Gates, the Microsoft co-founder: “The more you know, the more you [discover] you don't know.”

For years when someone was coming to Brazil for a visit, I would ask them to bring me some Snickers candy bars. My earliest memories go back to when they were, I believe, a nickle a piece. Some years ago Snickers candy bars began appearing on our supermarket shelves. And soon disappeared again. Then, a number of years back, they became a constant presence. Now there are boxes and boxes. Snickers candy bars have become a success, which shows how Brazil is developing into a modern nation. (No longer a Banana Republic, it has become a Snickers Republic. Long live the Snickers!)

It has been over 10 years since we have visited the US. So, there is a lot I don't know about how that country operates today. And it has also been approximately 10 years – probably more – that I have not given a single check, nor received one. Today, many of the smaller money transfers (and some substantial ones), which includes purchases in many stores, are handled by PIX. I don't even know what that stands for, but it works something like this. I make arrangements in my local bank to make transaction by PIX. This means that, wherever I am, I can get into my electronic bank account, on my computer or cell phone, check the PIX option, put in the other person's tax number, phone number or e-mail address, the amount I want to send, hit Enter, and within two or three seconds the money is in his/her account. There is no fee for this kind of transfer. In stores, when the bill is rung up, the QR Code shows up on the monitor, which I read with my cell phone, punch in my code, and the bill is paid. Your president in the US – what's his name? – is

violently opposed to PIX. Since most credit cards, even those used here, (Visa, Masters, etc.) are owned by American businesses, PIX cuts into their earnings, which is a no-no. He threatens to intervene here. But won't. Plus, I haven't carried cash in my billfold for years. I think our beggars feel about PIX, about the same as your president does. No more hand-outs for these poor souls.

Exploration, by land, by sea, by air or in space, has always fascinated the human race. When 99 years ago Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a solo flight, he was an acclaimed hero. The recent lunar flyby by four astronauts of the Artemis II mission make Linbergh's mission look like a stunt. In the Orion spacecraft they flew a total of 700,237 miles. At the farthest point they were 200,000 plus miles from home. On their return descent, they reached a peak velocity of 24,644 mph. And yet, they landed only a half mile from the designated landing point, in the ocean, and right on the minute. If 50 years ago we would have been told about this flight, we would have shaken our heads in disbelief and unhesitatingly declared, Impossible! Now we are told about a trip to Mars, within a decade, as a real possibility. Yes, we believe it is possible – the Lord permitting. We have absolutely no statistics for what we are about to say, but I think we are safe to say most great ventures and inventions, have come about because of men and women who early in life took the initiative to prepare themselves. Some have studied, others have been self-educated. but they have made a special effort to be prepared for the task they hoped to perform, even though at the time they may have not known exactly what it would be.

After an extended hiatus, we hope this little paper will again show signs of life.

Faith, is our unofficial statistician here on the Colony, will share with you readers, some statistics of both the Mennonite colony and the church in Brazil. Also, we want to tell you about Rio Verde, our local town, what it was then and what it is now. And most important, we want to go into details on how God has led during more than a half century while living here. What has happened in these 50 plus years can be compared to Linbergh's transatlantic flight and the recent lunar circumnavigation. If the two brave pioneers, Denton Burns and Pete Loewen (both killed in an accident shortly after the founding of the Colony), who knew the primitive Rio Verde could return could see what our city looks like today, they would surely exclaim: Impossible! This cannot be the same place. None of the original vestiges of the city remain. Yes, the older streets continue in the location, but none of the former businesses remain. Is the new Rio Verde a better place? For the next issue, we plan an update.

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