

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION, JAMAICA (1955-56)

In the fall of 1954, not long after our return home from a year in Africa and Europe, I received a phone call from the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) asking if I would accept a year's assignment as the soil conservation advisor to the Jamaican government. After a careful -- though rather hurried -- discussion lasting about ten seconds with my wife, we said we would go (Fig. 84).



Fig. 84. Will and Edith Rockie at Jamaica's annual Denbigh Fair, June 1955.

Our home in Kingston was a suburban apartment, situated several hundred feet higher than the city. Our windows to the south looked down across the city, the bay beyond, the airport on the sandspit which practically separates the bay from the sea, and beginning about six miles from us, the blue waters of the Caribbean. To the north and east, our windows opened onto the precipitous Blue Mountains. Six miles away -- though 25 miles by

the corkscrew trail they call a road -- the British army had built a hill town, Newcastle, at an elevation of 4,000 feet where their personnel could get some respite from the heat down in Kingston. Up there, because of the cooler climate, they grew peaches, strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, and all of the common vegetables that we can grow in the temperate zone. During part of the hot, sticky, rainy season we also maintained a home up 2,400 feet in the mountains. It was delightful and we wanted to live there for our remaining months, but there was no way for Edith to get anywhere -- she objected to the 12 mile walk to town!

About 80 per cent of Jamaica is mountainous, with scattered lowlands fringing much of its coastline. It is about 150 miles from east to west, and a maximum of 50 miles from north to south. The south shore is quite dry, with many cacti and other desert plants, while the north shore of the island, and all of the mountains are much more humid. The rainfall ranges from as low as 20 inches on the south side to as high as 250 inches in the northeastern part.

The coastal lowland fringe was dominated by many large farms of the plantation type, some with corporate ownership, such as the United States Fruit Co., others individually owned, but mainly given over to the production of sugarcane and bananas. A rather large number of these were installing irrigation systems, to keep crops growing during the dry season. Sandwiched in between these larger estates were literally thousands of small peasant farms of from one to several acres each (Fig. 85). The government was taking the lead in irrigating these farms, especially in some of the driest parts of the island, making the water equally available to large and small farmers. The homes on these little farms were tiny; most had but one or two rooms, with the entire house having between 150 and 250 square feet.

Every farmer builds his own house, and almost entirely from materials on his own land. He cuts a few small trees which he fastens together to make the framework. He mixes red soil with water to make mortar, gathers loose rocks and from these he makes his walls. He cuts grass for the thatched roof, and his home is almost done. He finds a large log and handsaws the boards from which to make floor and some furniture, and it is ready to live in. He usually buys windows, and if he has some money



Fig. 85. Typical peasant farm near Alligator Bay.

burning a hole in his pocket, sheet iron to replace the grass roof.

The farms that occupied these steep mountain slopes were even difficult to see. There were no fences except for the occasional rock wall where the rocks which worked out of the soil were piled to get them out of the way. You saw no fields as we think of them and it was out of the question to find the boundaries of a farm. Most of the farm fields looked more like a patch of unused brushland or woodland than like cropland. Nearly all the crops were spotplanted, and rows of any sort quite unusual. In one very mixed planting I found that I could touch 11 different crop plants without taking a step. I measured out a square rod at this same spot and found 18 different crops growing thereon. I have counted 42 crops mixed up on a single acre. The variety of crops was great, but most of the peasant farmers grew only a few, the most common being sugarcane, bananas, yams, sweet potatoes, beans, coconuts, pigeon peas, cassava, corn, peanuts, mangoes, coffee, akee, breadfruit, oranges and limes.

Although these peasant farms had relatively little livestock, there were invariably a few chickens, a pig or two, a cow of sorts, and less commonly a goat and perhaps a donkey. From them they got some eggs, meat and milk.

My study of agricultural land problems required a great deal of driving on very winding gravel roads (a few of the main roads were blacktopped). I was offered a driver, but I had seen

how too many chauffeurs drive, so I preferred to handle the wheel myself. The government furnished me with a Vauxhall (British Chevrolet). It was bright red in color so they had no trouble keeping track of my travels.

Since almost all of the cars used here were the small size of the various British makes, the roads were built proportionately narrower than those in the States. The road traffic was badly mixed in character, bicycles being the most abundant. Pedestrians who, until the last few years, have dominated these roads, also were everywhere, usually with head loads. Loaded donkeys, large wheeled carts pulled by one, two or three donkeys, cars, trucks, buses and an occasional American car further complicated the road problem.

Much of the published data on the island had stressed the malnutrition of the people here, but after living here for some time, it seemed to me that this area was fortunate in that respect. Several local scientists, who also felt as I did on this point, believed that the yearlong abundance and almost universal availability of mangoes, bananas and other fruits were important factors in minimizing the ill effects of the widespread poverty. A native Jamaican told me they turn over the pot during the mango season and do no cooking.

Because of the poverty and the widespread unemployment, from one to several thousand Jamaicans were emigrating to the United Kingdom each month, mostly to work as housemaids and

laborers. As high as 800 had gone in a single day since our arrival. They all wanted to migrate to the United States, but our immigration quota for Jamaicans was so small as to practically close that door to them.

The opposition party ousted the labor party from the control of the government here just one week before we arrived, so we saw the all too familiar scene of sweeping out the old personnel, bringing in the new, yet at the same time hoping to improve the economy of their country. Attempting to do these things, dozens of official missions to the U.S., the U.K., Trinidad, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and various South American countries were the order of the day. One lady stated it rather vividly, "Join the party, and see the world."

My work in Jamaica was completed in late January 1956, and we returned home to the States, and visited with family and friends as we drove across country. Prior to going to Jamaica we had sold our Portland home and moved our "home base" to Spokane. At the post office I found 15 months of mail, including 485 unanswered first class letters. We had made arrangements in 1954 for handling our mail, but something went haywire. I spent a lot of time making apologies for the neglected correspondence.

(Note: Most of this chapter consists of excerpts from an article Rockie wrote for the Nebraska Alumnus while on assignment in Jamaica [Publication 60]).