Schools With Workshops

Third of a Series 12/31/74

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CUBA: A NEW PRIDE

HAVANA — Manuel Ascunce Domenech is one of the many revolutionary martyrs whose names are known to almost every Cuban.

Ascunce was one of the half million Cubans—most of them teen-agers like himself—mobilized in 1961 to move to the countryside to teach peasants to read and write.

Like others, he lived with a peasant family, working in the fields in the daytime and teaching at night. The family he was assigned to lived in the Escambray mountains, where there was still a lot of guerrilla activity against the two-year-old government of Fidel Castro.

As the story is told now, the guerrillas came one night to the house where Ascunce lived and forced him and his middle-aged students to go away with them. The bodies of Ascunce and the peasant were found later, hanging from a tree.

Today 7,500 teen-aged Cubans wear a uniform with a patch on the left shoulder bearing a picture of the young literacy teacher, and the words "Manuel Ascunce Domenech Pedagogical Detachment."

The teen-agers are both teachers and students, participating in a form of teacher training that has helped Cuba to expand its school system faster than

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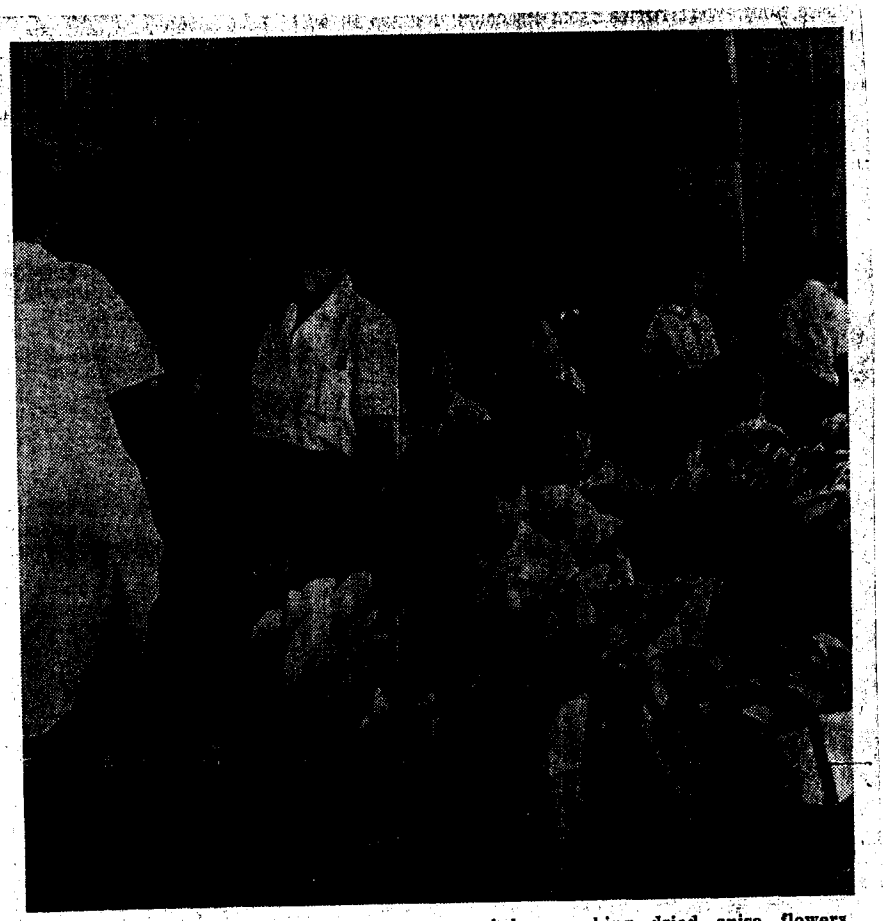
Photos by Terri Shaw—The Washington Post

Students wearing classroom uniforms mingle with others in workclothes during a break at the Lenin technical school.



Fourth graders at a school near Havana spend two hours a day in the school workshop packing dried anise flowers into envelopes for sale in drugstores.

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any other country in the hemisphere, according to U.N. satistics.

Members of the "detachment," as it is generally called, are 10th grade graduates who have committed themselves to teach junior high school (grades 7 through 10) attend senior high school (grades 11 through 13). Then, after two more years of study at the university level they will be qualified high school teachers—with five years' teaching experience, at age 21.

Earlier this month it was announced that 7,400 10th grade students had signed up to join next year's "detachment," and 600 more are expected to do so before the end of the school year in June.

The Ascunce detachment is one of the many innovative educational programs developed in Cuba during the 16 years since Fidel Castro took power.

Education is considered the right and the duty of every Cuban citizen. From the day care centers where two- and three-year-olds learn politcal songs and stories to the factories where workers study college-level engineering courses on "company time," Cubans seem to be studying constantly.

Even at the Mazorra mental hospital, near Havana's airport, six teachers patiently work to impart the standard primary school curriculum to 80 patients, most of them schizophrenics, with the hope that some will eventually be able to work outside the hospital.

Many of the Cubans interviewed during a three-week visit contrasted the educational opportunities available to their children with the difficulties they had experienced in finishing school.

"My youth was very hard," said Candelaria Garcia, 57, a housewife and enthusiastic volunteer worker in government-sponsored political activities. "I had to quit school after fourth grade and go to work as a nursemaid in a rich family's house."

"Now there are so many opportunities for young people to go to school. My son is in military school. My daughter is a nurse. My eight - year - old granddaughter is the mathematics monitor of her class, and my seven-year-old grandson is the leader of a 'brigade' in his. They get A's in every subject."

Foreign observers here and abroad generally support the Cuban government's contention that its education system is the best in Latin America.

In a spech earlier this month at the inauguration of a large new teacher-training school outside Havana, Prime Minister Fidel Castro said that 99.5 percent of the children of primary-school age attend school.

He added that 464,000 students attend secondary and 60,000 attend universities. According to government statistics, there were only 63,500 students in secondary school and 15,000 in universities before Castro took power.

All schools are free, as are textbooks. Uniforms, pencils and paper are cheap. The 300,000 students in boarding schools around the country get free uniforms and food, and their families are allowed to use the students' ration coupons while the students are away.

At a refrigerator factory in Santa Clara, a provincial capital 150 miles southeast of Havana, workers who take university courses work six hours a day instead of eight.

Havana bureaucrats studying law in a special weekend course are relieved of their militia patrol duties so they can study for exams.

Work and study are combined at every level. At Salvador Allende primary school in the housing project of Alamar, outside Havana, third grade students spend two hours a day packing dried anise flowers into brown envelopes to be sold in drug stores.

The Allende school's workshop is a pilot program, but most primary schools and day care centers have vegetable gardens tended by the students.

On the high school level, students are expected to make a greater contribution to the country's economy. Students in the city are bused to farms in the countryside for six weeks of work every year.

In recent years the government has shifted its emphasis to the construction of what are called high schools in the countryside—boarding schools on state-run farms where students work in the fields three hours a day. The students provide most of the labor involved in running the farm.

To date, according to a Foreign Ministry official who acted as my official guide, 104 such junior high schools and three senior high schools have been constructed around the country. A recent article in the Cuban magazine Bohemia reported that there are 111 junior high schools in the countryside, six senior high schools, eight technical schools and three schools for student-teachers participating in the Ascunce detachment.

Valerie Landau, a 16-year-old American who, with her mother, chose to live in Cuba, attends Heroes de Varsovia junior high school in the countryside. She said her work day begins with a 5:45 a.m. wakeup call, and ends after two hours of nighttime study at 10 p.m. A bus takes Valerie and her classmates who live in the city back to visit their families on Saturday afternoons, and picks them up for the ride back to school on Sunday nights.

The students are divided into two groups. One works in the fields in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Under a system the Cubans call "socialist emulation," the two groups compete with each other and are rated regularly on the basis of grades in their courses and productivity in the fields.

Julio Cesar Aguilar, manager of a macaroni factory near Havana applauds the mixture of study and work.

"The kids used to come here out of school and they wouldn't want to take any job we offered them. They were used to receiving everything and not doing anything.

"Now we have a new educational system to train sutdents in what work is all about."

Along with the importance of work, technical ubjects are stressed throughout the school system. In Cuba's drive to develop industry and mechanize agriculture, engineers and technicians are badly needed, and students are encouraged to enter those fields.

If there is an elite school in Cuba just outside Havana it is the lenin technical school, a large complex of four-story modern building with open-air corridors and patios. Its 4,400 students can use three swimming pools, a large gymnasium, clinic, half a dozen playing fields and 35 modern laboratories equipped by the Soviet Union.

Along with their work—in the school's vegetable and citrus farm or nearby factories—almost all the students belong to science clubs whose activities include visiting industries (in the lower grades) and working with scientists and engineers (in the upper grades).

At a highly technical exhibit designed by the Industrial Chemistry Club, two enormously serious 13th grade students discussed their plans for the future.

One of them, Maria Elena Musibay, 17, said she had decided to be a chemical engineer because "we need so many engineers."

She was asked if she liked chemical engineering.

"Well, I have certain inclinations in that direction," she said, "but mainly I chose it because it is one of the priority fields."

Not all schools in Cuba are as impressive as the Lenin School. A vocational school in Cienfuegos, proudly displayed as one of the accomplishments of the revolution, had a despressing atmosphere like old-fashioned vocational schools in the United States.

Unlike the students at the Lenin School, who are selected from the top of their grade scholl classes, the students—all male—had not done well academically and were destined to become factory workers.

The classrooms were dark and small, the halls had a lockerroom smell, and the students appeared much less enthusiastic about their work than those at the Lenin school.

While bright students are praised as the hope of future, the Cuban educational system also tries to accommodate the not-so-bright. Teen-aged drop-outs attend high school level classes at the factories or sugar mills where they work.

The 100,000-strong Revolutionary Youth Army is made up of active duty soldiers, from the age of 16 up, who work in the fields and factories and study technical skills as well.

Future military officers can attend one of the six Camilo Cienfuegos military schools, beginning at the age of 12. They take military training and technical courses, and may eventually go on to an officers' training academy.

The history of the Cuban revolution and the lives of its heroes are taught as thoroughly in Cuba's schools as the catechism and the

lives of the saints were in Catholic schools of 25 years ago.

Critical thinking is, to say the least, not encouraged. The Marxist view of history, economics and even literature is the only acceptable one.

The young Cubans I talked to seemed to either accept the government and all its policies unthinkingly or, if they disliked the system, to seek escape through pursuit of foreign music and clothes. I did not find any young Cuban who was willing to question the present system or discuss whether it should be changed.

A sophisticated Havana journalist was asked if it might not be a good idea for university students to read differing philosophies to broaden their view of the world. Her response was a puzzled look.

A Foreign Ministry official, who was 12 when Castro took power and received most of his education under the revolutionary government, was asked what he thought about the most recent meeting of the Organization of American States.

The official, whose specialty is international organizations, looked confused, then replied: "Fidel has not yet made a comment on that I don't have any opinion."

NEXT: Experiment in democracy.