

Students Join Mexico's Revolution

By J. P. GOLDRING

Over 150 Canadian students will spend next summer in the mountains of Mexico. Dalhousie students were invited Friday to be among them. The group sponsoring this temporary exodus is the Conference of Inter-American Student Projects (CIASP), a student organization which for more than five years, has been sending North American students to work on community development and social work projects during the summer months. They are engaged in what Mexico calls her "Revolution", the modernization of a country which is still backward in many places.

A meeting in the A & A building Friday attracted about a dozen students to hear an explanation of what CIASP is, and to see slides showing two typical project towns. The meeting was conducted by two former CIASP volunteers, Bernard Murphy of Holy Heart Seminary, Halifax, and Robert Evans of St. Michael's College, University of Toronto.

CIASP's summer projects last from early May to the end of August, and individual students can participate either for the whole summer or for one of two eight-week shifts. Students are not paid for their work, but transportation and accommodations in Mexico are provided by CIASP.

Students are trained during the school year for participation the following summer. The CIASP training schedule includes courses in Mexican language, culture, and history, and in basic community development techniques and principles. Projects are

financed by fund-raising schemes of the organization at national and local levels.

CIASP's main concern is teaching basic skills and working beside Mexicans for the betterment of their communities. The Canadian CIASP units usually work in extremely primitive mountain regions without roads, electricity, or running water. There are also projects in small towns which have a higher standard of living, but large slum areas.

Projects vary according to local conditions, but most CIASP work concentrates on education, alphabetization, hygiene, nutrition, recreation, and construction of community projects. Emphasis is on stressing needs and suggesting cures, rather than on outright distribution of money or supplies. Past projects of other organizations proved that the long-term effect of indiscriminate gift-giving is to reduce local initiative and make people expect such gifts as a matter of course. Community development techniques promote the rise of a sense of co-operative work and progressive development.

CIASP started as a group of unconnected American college-sponsored projects late in the 1950's. In 1963, these projects combined for better organization and coordination through a joint office in Mexico City. The following year, the first Canadian group—a handful of University of Toronto students—started working in the mountainous State of Hidalgo. Hidalgo is less than 200 miles from Mexico City, but in some parts is about 400 years behind the capital in development. Pisaflores, where this first group started work in 1963, has been a Canadian project every year since then. It now has a water system and a connecting road to a main highway, all built with the help, advice, and encouragement of CIASP'ers.

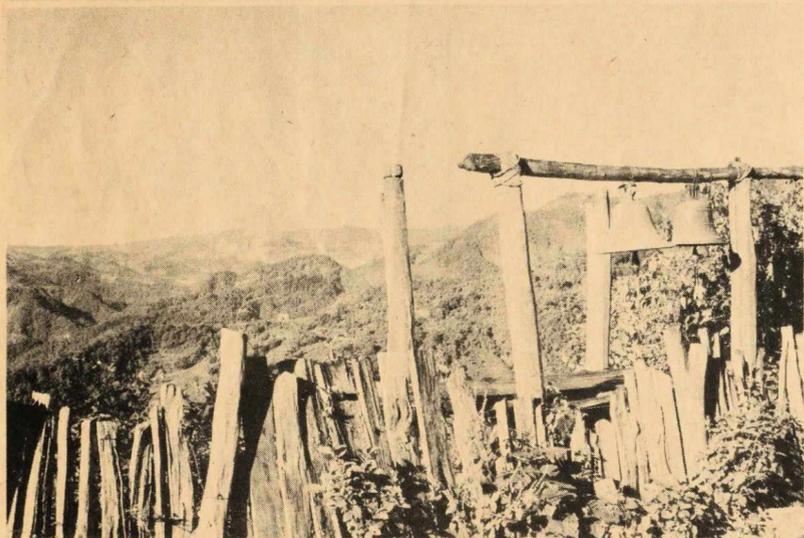
The Mexican mountain regions are divided economically, politically, and by the Church into a system of main towns and "ranchos". Each main town has a weekly market day and larger stores than are available in the smaller, more primitive ranchos. Most are also municipal centres and Roman Catholic parish towns, having a large church and one or more priests, who serve about 50 smaller communities (the "ranchos") covering usually over 100 square miles of mountainous territory.

The second Canadian group, including volunteers from U. of T. and the University of Western Ontario, continued the Pisaflores project in 1964 and expanded into several of the town's ranches. 1965 saw the expansion of CIASP into four new maintown projects and several dozen ranchos. The expansion was covered by the establishment of several new Canadian CIASP groups from Kitchener to Halifax. Four St. Mary's students participated in 1965, and another four went south in 1966.

Recent expansion has spread CIASP literally from coast to coast in Canada, but the work is still concentrated in Hidalgo. Work is continuous from year to year. Groups entering projects for the first time generally act as a survey team, examining the problems of the community and determining what resources are available to combat these problems. First-year project reports include a record of which local individuals show most potential as leaders in future implementation of projects decided on. A project is considered most successful if the local people themselves, with the initiative and know-how acquired from the Canadians, complete a project during the



Conchintlan (population 210) is four hours' travelling time from the nearest town with electricity and a road. It has no telephones and no radios -- recreation is a problem and a simple thing like a basketball court gets the community together in a way which was never the case before. The men of Conchintlan (above) spent one day each week building a court laid out by the CIASP group in the summer of 1966. There was no level spot for miles around large enough to accommodate a regulation-size court, so a space was cut out of the hill-side in front of the village church. Work started with wheelbarrows improvised out of wooden boxes and hand-made wooden wheels, but moved more rapidly when CIASP provided a standard wheelbarrow. The costs of building and equipping the court were shared between CIASP and the community.



Church bells like these in Conchintlan, Hidalgo above, (bottom) call villagers to religious services and community meetings. They also ring before dawn on religious and civil holidays. Tiny villages cover the mountainsides, unconnected by roads except for dirt trails (above, top) which are heavily worn down by mules and are almost impassable during the rainy seasons.

September-to-April period when the students are back in Canada.

The second year of operations continues the teaching and medical programs started the year before -- these are an integral part of any project. Then new work is started on a larger project, which might be the construction of a water system, a road, a school, or basic hygienic facilities.

Many returned CIASP volunteers have fond memories of bed-bugs, diarrhea, and seven weeks living on the native diet. But CIASP isn't all hard work in primitive conditions. There is adequate time for recreation on the projects, and nearly two weeks of the eight-week program is spent by the entire contingent of Canadian volunteers together. All volunteers travel to Mexico City from Toronto by bus, a trip which may sound grim but is actually a 72-hour party, livelier than anything except, perhaps, the return trip eight weeks later. A five-day orientation program in Mexico City includes trips to museums and tourist traps, as well as lectures by Mexican specialists in various fields and visits to slum districts. These visits were started in 1966 to acquaint the students with extremes of poverty before they were split up into smaller

groups and sent to individual projects.

Trips from Mexico City to the projects are the last stop before serious work begins. Travelling from Mexico City to a typical project in Hidalgo's Tlanquistengo municipality takes six and a half hours by bus, followed by a four-hour hike or mule ride over mountainous trails where not even a jeep could pass.

CIASP is no picnic. Nor is hell, as it might sound from some descriptions. Rather it is a challenge which requires energy, enthusiasm, determination, and a great deal of tolerance. The good results of the projects may be seen in towns and ranches all over the Republic of Mexico. The effect on the Canadians is best seen by checking the annual project lists.

This opportunity is now open to all students in Halifax. Several Dalhousie students have already expressed interest in the program after Friday's meeting, and some of these seemed actively interested in joining it. Other students who may have missed the promotional meeting but are interested in CIASP may find out more about it by calling Bernie Murphy at 423-9014.

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