

A Yankee Jibaro Reminiscences: How F



Elmer Ellsworth looks over his adopted homeland (Illustration by Lorenzo Homar)

By ELMER M. ELLSWORTH

There was a moment toward the end of the month of February of 1939 when it seemed quite improbable that the new Popular Democratic Party, the dream of Muñoz Marín, would ever become a reality. Luis was with us at Treasure Island at the time. That day he was planning to go down to Canóvanas to Jesús Piñero's house where a meeting of his political group leaders was to be held. At lunch time he asked me if I would like to go with him. Though I had watched the dream take shape in Luis's mind, and participated in many of the preliminary discussions, I had not yet definitely committed myself to joining his party. However, I accepted his invitation to at least go along for the ride.

So in mid-afternoon, with the faithful Erasmio at the wheel of the old Model T Ford, we were on our way. Luis was silent and preoccupied as we drove along. He had told me that he had called the meeting today to hear reports on the progress of the registration of the party, but he seemed to be facing it all with foreboding.

Then suddenly he straightened up from his slumped position, pointed his finger at me and declared firmly: "You are hereby appointed executive treasurer of the Popular Party."

"But you already have a treasurer, don't you?" I answered.

"Oh, Buscaglia, yes, but he won't move out of his office in San Juan. It will be your job to cover the whole island," said Luis. I let this pass without comment awaiting further clarification.

At Piñero's house in the country near Canóvanas, there were a score or so of men present when we arrived. Luis immediately called the meeting to order, and wasting no time on ceremony took up the subject of registration. At the previous meeting, he pointed out, there had been 22 towns registered. Now he trusted that a number more had been added to the list.

He was to be disappointed. When the check of the different districts was completed,

there were only six new towns to be added, and most of these in the district of Dr. Rafael Susoni. This meant that the Party was legalized in only 28 of the total of 72 towns of the island. To appear on the ballot in the coming elections of 1940, a new party would have to have at least two-thirds of the total towns registered as well as affidavits sworn before a judge amounting to a total of at least 10 per cent of the total votes cast for the Resident Commissioner in the previous election. And all this completed by November, one year before the next election. With a gain of only six towns in three months, prospects for getting this big job done in time seemed none too good.

Luis grimly called these facts to the attention of those present, and brusquely ended the meeting. If he had been preoccupied on the ride down to Canóvanas, he was now plunged in gloom on the way back to Cidra. Arriving at last at Treasure Island, he retreated at once to his Number 4 cabin.

Later, as he hadn't appeared for dinner, I walked over to see him. I found him stretched out on the porch, too low in mood to even answer my question about his dinner. Instead, he began a violent denunciation of "those guys at the meeting. They talk, they talk, but they do nothing! Six towns in three months! There is no hope! No one will do anything! No one will work!"

After listening to a continuing repetition of this plaint, I had enough and interrupted: "No, Luis, I don't agree. I believe there must be

Editor's Note: Elmer M. Ellsworth, a transplanted Vermonter who became a Yankee jibaro here 44 years ago, is one of two continentalists who have served in the island's legislature. He helped Luis Muñoz Marín form the Popular Democratic Party, campaigned with him in 1940, and served as administrative assistant to Gov. Rexford G. Tugwell in the early Forties.

someone who will work at this job."

"Who, for example?" shot back Luis.

"Jesús Piñero for one."

"Oh, Jesús, yes, I know he's good, but he won't do it either."

"Luis, will you sign a telegram to him if I prepare it?" was my answer. His half mumbled, half grumbled reply was enough on which to act. I went back to the lodge, and wrote the following telegram: "Please come to Treasure Island tomorrow morning Saturday without fail. Important." I took it right back to Luis in No. 4 cabin. He signed without enthusiasm, but he signed. I wasted no time in sending it off by messenger to the telegraph office in Cidra.

About 10 the next morning, Jesús drove up. It was such a bright day of sunshine that it had given a lift to Luis's spirit. He was out walking on the grass in his pajamas enjoying the view when I walked up with Jesús.

After a greeting, Luis, again in his role of leader, pointed that finger at Jesús as he stated: "You are now appointed director of the program of registering the Popular Party throughout the island. You will concentrate first on the south and west where the situation requires an intensive effort."

This order came with such suddenness and swiftness that it left Jesús a bit dazed. While he was recovering, I spoke up: "So you don't have to ride the miles alone, Jesús, I will go along with you. When can you start?"

"I'll be here early Monday morning, Elmer," said Jesús, and that was that.

True to his word, Jesús drove up in his Dodge runabout before 8 that Monday morning, took me aboard and headed for Coamo and the south coast. As we reached a town, we looked for the local committee of the Populares, consisting usually of not more than five or six members. Seated with them in their "Club" (often only a small room) Jesús would follow a routine.

First he would introduce me as "el loco Americano" who left behind his farm and resort

Populares Got On The Ballot In 1940

business to go with him to help the cause of the popular party. Then came a pep talk on the need of their immediate drive and effort so that this new party, the only hope for a better future for them and their country, would surely be on the ballot for the next elections.

Then last, Jesús would tell the story of the women of Humacao, a town far to the east, who, losing patience with the lack of enterprise and action shown by the men of the town, had taken on the job of registering the party themselves. Told with all the seriousness and sincerity which were so much a part of Jesús's character and mien, it sounded entirely credible, and was certainly effective in strengthening his listeners' morale and resolution. I was quite taken in by it myself. It was only after leaving that first town where he told it that I discovered on questioning him that he had cunningly invented the whole thing.

"Ay, Jesús!" I shouted, slapping him on the shoulder, "what a rascal you are, with that benignly solemn face of yours, fooling us all so completely!"

My main function after lending my presence and putting in an occasional two cents' worth of pep talk was to get Jesús out of his chair as he ended the Humacao story and up and on his way to the next town. He wanted to continue to sit, to gossip a bit, to ask about all his friends in the area. So I would have to get up from my chair with a decisive gesture and urge, "Let's go, Jesús. We've got a long list of towns ahead."

"How restless you are, Elmer," he'd complain.

"Yes, I know." I'd laughingly reply, "you are the ox that is doing the hard work and I'm the good urging you on to the next plowing job to be done."

So we proceeded town by town, usually forgetting to take time out for meals, living mainly on canned fruit juice and bottled pop with now and then a cup of black coffee provided by the local *compañeros*. We slept the few hours that we could spare at small town hotels or "boardings" with quite primitive facilities in those days. It was hot on the south coast, roads between towns were long and poorly surfaced, meals were few and far between, baths likewise, beds were generally bad. It was grueling but we endured.

At Mayagüez, we were invited to stay at a friend's place, an old hacienda house set back in an overgrown jungle and coconut grove near the *playa*. This friend was engaged at the time in a project of canning guava fruit in rum. It was dusk that evening when we finally found the overgrown lane entrance.

At the big house, we were told to go on beyond to an out-building where our host awaited us. Sure enough, it was still light enough for us to find a shed-like structure among the palms. Inside we found our kind host and a number of young men who were apparently his helpers in the canning operation. The building was part bunkhouse and part cookhouse. It was altogether a strange set-up, but we certainly welcomed the hot meal which was soon set before us.

Afterwards, we had to find our way back to the big house to sleep. As it was pitch dark now, we had to feel our way cautiously through that jungle of vegetation, and over that swampy ground where big land crabs were scurrying about. I kept warning Jesús, "Look out, you'll step on a crocodile!" until we became completely hilarious.

Somehow we made it to the big house at last, and to a room on the vast second floor where two cots with mosquito nets were set up for us. Apparently these cots were the only furnishings in the whole place. The rest of the several rooms, as far as we could discover, were being used for storing the canned guava. We took to our cots and the safety of our mosquito nets at once upon hearing the ominous shrill

whine of countless small wings.

However, we were not to do much sleeping that night. After chatting a bit while Jesús smoked a cigarette, I had begun to doze off when suddenly an explosion startled me awake.

"What was that?" we both cried simultaneously. It took us some moments to figure out that it must have been a can blowing off in the adjoining room. Obviously the sterilization process had not been perfected. So at intervals all through the night, cans kept popping. All we could do was to stay put under our nets, safe at least from the hordes of mosquitoes and the rats running wild on the ceiling above, to await the next explosion, and eventually the dawn.

After a quick coffee at the cookhouse with the boys, we left a brief message of thanks for our host, and took to the road again. The towns of the southwest corner of the island were on our itinerary that morning. By mid-afternoon we had returned, passed Mayagüez again, and were headed for the small town of Añasco.

It was really hot, the sun beading down mercilessly, with no breeze there in the lee of the range of hills to the east. Suddenly I found myself rebelling at the thought of another repetition of our routine. Perhaps it was due to the nerve-wracking sleepless night before. Anyway, I turned to Jesús with determination in my face and voice.

"No, Jesús, I simply can't stand hearing that Humacao story of yours again this afternoon! Won't you please omit it just this once!"

Jesús slowed down the pace of the car a bit to look at me with that calm innocent expression of his and to say kindly: "Why, Elmer, you want me to deny that story to the good people of Añasco! How can I?" And he didn't. I had to swallow my rebellious upsurge, and hear it through to the bitter end.



The late Jesús Piñero, who figures prominently in this story about the early days of the Popular Party, went on to become Resident Commissioner in Washington and was the only Puerto Rican ever to be appointed Governor of the island. The appointment was made by President Harry S. Truman.

From Añasco, we headed north to Rincón. It was mango season, and the big trees lining the road as we left the town were loaded with fruit. Of course there were boys at the roadside offering their golden yellow piles for sale. They couldn't be resisted. As he slowed to a stop, Jesús turned to me to say, "Let's bring a sackful to Luis. It will assure him food for a couple of days at least."

One of the boys supplied an empty rice sack, which we proceeded to fill with the soundest of the fruit. Though we both were low in funds by now, we just managed between us to produce the small sum which the boys asked for the hundred or more mangoes. Then we placed the sack carefully in the trunk of the car, and continued on our way.

Our next stop at the town of Aguada proved longer than we had intended, due to the fact that the president of the committee there was such a talkative and entertaining character, and even the "good" failed in his job. So it was late in the evening when we took to the road again, and after midnight when we turned off the highway on the side road to Guaynabo. It was along there that we sought a small house which Luis had told us about finding and somehow renting.

Finding a place at last that seemed to fit the description, we knocked at the outside gate.

At first the only response was from all the dogs in the neighborhood. But eventually as we persisted, a light came on and then Luis's deep voice from within: "Who is it?"

"It's us," we responded.

"Who?"

"Us. It's all right. It's us." As there had been threats against his life, Luis was being cautious about opening the gate at such an hour of the night. Convinced finally that it was really we, Luis emerged in his pajamas and unlocked the gate. Jesús, meanwhile, had lifted out the sack of mangoes from the trunk of his car. Together, we carried it into the house and presented it to Luis and Inés with due ceremony. If it had been a bag of gold, it couldn't have pleased them more. They wasted no time in beginning to sample the fruit.

Of course, then, we had to tell them something about our experiences on our six-day trek. When I got to the story of our fantastic night at Mayagüez Luis began to roar, and more and more until his deep belly laughs fairly shook the rafters of the little house. So an hour or two passed before Jesús and I could break away to complete our journey back to home base at Treasure Island.

After an interim of a week, we took off on a second expedition. This time we covered the towns of the central mountain area. It was on this trip that I called Jesús a "truck driver." Three or four days of long hard driving on those tortuous mountain roads were enough to wear down almost anyone. Yet Jesús just wouldn't tire or complain. It was late in the afternoon on that endless road between Lares and Uruaco when I insisted for the nth time that I relieve him at the wheel. Again it was no, he wouldn't listen. Losing all patience, what could I do but explode: "I know now that you are just a truck driver!" Jesús only smiled and drove on.

Soon after this second trip of ours it became evident that our efforts were not in vain. The number of towns on the list of those registered began to grow. In fact, by the middle of April the list had grown from 28 to 52, well on the safe side, and with six months left to complete the job. It was now assured that the Popular Democratic Party would be on the ballot for the elections of 1940. So there was no further need for Jesús and me to take to the road again on that particular job. No need for him to tell again, or for me to hear repeated, his story of "The Women of Humacao."