

" IN THE BEGINNING"
by
Opal

I somehow feel as did the men in the Apollo 8 spaceship as they neared that orbit on the back side of the moon and were out of contact with the earth. As they came around into the light again, there was the earth, seeming to rise up out of the darkness. This was the schedule for their reading "Genesis- and the words - In the Beginning."

So it is with me - these letters from Jo Bennett, prompted by Regnald Knight, has brought me around to the light of the Pan American Friendship as sponsored by the City of Lakewood.

"In the beginning" - there was this day, Thursday, September 27, 1945 - Secretly I wanted so much to go to that "dusty" ceremony (they had to haul water in for the ceremony) when that Olive tree was planted - but I was "park-sitting" for the director at Bellflower and could not leave.

All afternoon the thought of being a director of the Lakewood Park kept coming into my mind and dreams - I never spoke of it as I felt it was such a challenge and might not be worthy of this.

When Paul Gruendyke, then my District Supervisor , asked me if I would care to direct that park I could not believe it - if he thought I could, I knew I would.

I recall our first meeting with representatives of the Lakewood school when Paul introduced me. All went well and in 1946 - Easter Vacation the park was opened with supervision.

Transportation was a bit of a problem at that time - but my sturdy bike, "Susie" (the name given it by the children of the Bellflower playground) carried me from my home in Bellflower thru the carrot fields to the back entrance of the park.

Word went out the park would be open and about a dozen children met me at the back of the park to play. With a borrowed ball and bat, we attempted to play soft ball . We kept losing the ball and the children agreed we needed to do a bit of "weeding". Amongst the weeds of all kinds, were radishes, carrots and what have you - but we had fun and soon cleared large enough area on which to play.

It was more than a week before the neighbors in the front of the park realized what we were doing - and soon the County was able to clear the area larger and larger so we could go out the front gate to Centralia.

The Pan American program idea kept growing and in meeting with Jess Solter and Dr. Montano, we talked and planned and talked and worked.

What country should we honor first - it so happened, Costa Rica had been contacted and was willing to make the "trial run" - the date set and how we worked, learning about Costa Rica, knowing they were our friends as well as the other countries.

That was a thrill - meeting with the representatives of Costa Rica and learning from them - making very sure we would not make any "diplomatic errors."

A study of the flag - the country - the people - injecting the true spirit of friendship in every detail we undertook.

At last the day arrived and we had our first Pan American celebration - we were so tired but oh so happy that evening - I recall how we all congratulated each other on what had happened and were ready to plan for another.

What happened next was really something - first thing we knew the other countries were anxious to be next - Mexico being our nearest neighbor was on the schedule - but we soon realized we should take each country in alphabetical order - after Mexico came Argentina.

Near the Community Recreation building is the Friendship Circle with a tree from each of the countries. It was then quite impossible to bring a tree from any of the countries and plant it there, due to strict regulations of plants crossing the borders. The acclimation of the trees and the care afterwards was something to be considered.

The Horticulture department of the County undertook a study of trees native to each country and selected one as near like it as possible grown in our country.

Lakewood dressed up each year in costumes typical of the country we honored. Craft classes studied design, color and style and many made their own.

Where this idea came from I am not certain but it was very thrilling in its planning stage - a project to take Lakewood residents into each of the countries in Latin America. Jess Solter would represent the education phase, another health, another commerce, another culture and I the recreation. We learned the Consuls hoped we would do it and plan to have the individuals stay in the homes of their people instead of going to hotels. We even had a pilot who offered his service if we could obtain a plane. It was quite well underway but it was at that time a problem to have a private plane landing in these countries. This project as started at that time was not completed.

All in all the entire Pan Americal Culture program had a meger beginning - but the seed was planted on fertile soil as evidenced by its continued growth. From a small mimeographed program to this elaborate "bulletin" - I am amazed at the various phases of this project.

I wish you well, and

AMISTAD PAN AMERICANA 1969

Ophe Tulsoy Hamman