

Danville News Column  
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"A Honduran Opportunity"

My mother cried last Christmas because mom and dad couldn't afford to send their usual Christmas checks to the grandchildren. Times haven't been this economically tough for my family's paint store since Grandpa started the business during the 1930's manufacturing paint, ink, and varnish. Over the telephone I tried to comfort mom by telling her that the kids would manage. Then last week I again traveled to Honduras, a trip which always helps me regain perspective on wealth and work, opportunity and expectations.

We lived for a week in a village located in the Southern highlands of Honduras within sight of Nicaragua. The people of Ojo de Agua are a self-reliant and God-reliant people. They have to be: they are incredibly remote. They are on their own. No work, no food.

My church group was there last week simply to help them build a gallinero, a chicken house, which resembles more of a pavilion enclosed in chicken wire. The building will house 200 hens, providing eggs for a consortium of nine families. On the advice of one of our work group who is familiar with raising chickens, their optimum egg production would be an egg a day from each of the 200 hens, assuming that they have sufficient water and feed (most unlikely however).

Our chicken expert also taught me how chickens are blind at night. To round them up you light a candle. They'll be drawn toward it and huddle around it. Maybe we can learn from them too. Maybe chickens are smarter than us humans. They prefer light to darkness.

Their intent is to sell the eggs in the nearby town of San Marcos de Colon. 'Nearby' is a relative term. It is a half day horseback ride from Ojo de Agua to San Marcos over some of the most rugged terrain I've traversed in all of my previous adventures in Honduras. Picture clip-clopping from one end of Rickett's Glen to the other. Imagine trying to drive a Land Cruiser, stuffed with a bunch of plump gringos, down and up and around and down again a roadway which is more rocky streambed than road. More than once we tilted so far that we feared we'd roll over. When we left the community, it was decided we had better hike out to where the vehicles could meet us, itself an hour and half trek around Yucca plants, through coffee bean fields, past fat sows looking up wearily at these strangers encroaching on their mud. I chuckled as we marched through a small farm where the Honduran wife was grinding corn and watching us gringos sweating in single file as we crossed her yard. What would we think if we saw a parade of 13 Hondurans marching across the trimmed lawns of Valley Green?

The hen project might fetch a profit of 2 Lempira an egg. That is 36 cents per egg. Not bad, if the eggs survive the horseback bounce to San Marcos. At optimum yield, they could earn a total profit of \$21. Divide that by the nine families and you are looking at a family profit of \$2.32 per day. They are giddy about such wealth! Of course, that is at the maximum, improbable, level of egg production.

Every trip I take to Honduras it astounds me how poor they are. It astounds me even more

how much richer they are. They are inventive, adaptive, industrious. And they really are not preoccupied with getting Christmas money from Grandma.

You need a foundation for the chicken house? Dig a trench for the footer, two feet deep, gather up the rocks and layer them with mud.

You need a floor? Fill the area with smaller rocks, cover them with shovels of dirt, and tamp it down. If you don't have enough small rocks you lift up the sledge hammer and bust up your own from the boulders.

You need posts, joists, and beams to hold up the galvanized roof and attach the chicken wire? You venture deep into the forest, fell a few trees (never choosing trees near each other – you spread out the timbering), drag the trees by yoked oxen, strip the bark by axe, and notch the ends by machete.

Add to that a few bags of cement, a barrel of water, a pile of sand and you have a chicken house. You have eggs to sell, plus maybe a few extra ones to feed your children.

They do not want a bailout, they want opportunity. Funny, isn't it? It took the people of Ojo de Aqua to remind me about that good old American spirit. After all, they too are Americans. They the Central Americans, we the Northern branch. Talk about a real economic stimulus package!