Rockefeller Foundation Collaboration in Agricultural Research in Mexico

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At the time of the Spanish Conquest early in the 16th Century, there were from 7 to 8,000,000 Indians inhabiting the territory now known as Mexico. Some Indian tribes lived by hunting and fishing, but others were rather highly organized and developed a sedentary, agricultural type of society in which the possession and use of land became a matter of the greatest importance. These highly organized tribes lived in Yucatan and on the south-central plateau on some of the best agricultural land of Mexico. From the time of the Conquest the population of Mexico has increased and today it is estimated at 22,000,000 inhabitants. Of these about 60% are mestizos (mixed races), 30% pure blooded Indians, and about 10% foreigners.

To support these 22,000,000 inhabitants has become one of Mexico's major problems and chief concerns in recent years. There is not enough production of the major food crops such as corn, wheat, and beans to provide an adequate standard of living for all of the population. Rural production barely provides enough for the rural population and so Mexico has had to import large amounts of corn and wheat. The amount of importation varies from year to year but in 1944, an average year, 500,000 tons of wheat and 200,000 tons of corn were imported.

Many factors have contributed to insufficient food production but among the most important are geographical factors. Mexico has a total area of about 491,000,000 acres, approximately one fourth that of the United States, but only about 12% of this total constitutes potential arable land. Actually only about 7.6% is at present being utilized for farming, of which more than half is periodically fallow. This low percentage of arable land is largely due to the fact that most of Mexican terrain is either too mountainous or too dry to be of use agriculturally. Much of it is often both mountainous and too dry. Rains in many areas can be expected only from June to October when the year is dry.

From the agricultural and agrarian viewpoint the country comprises a number of well defined regions as described by McBride, 1923. These are shown on the map, Fig. 1. The Northern Mesa and Central Mesa constitute what is known as the great plateau of Mexico. It varies in elevation from 4,000 feet in the north to an average of around 8,000 feet in the south-central region which comprises about three fourths of the total area. This great plateau is bordered on the south by mountainous, escarpment areas in elevations up to 18,000 feet. The southern highlands are also very rough and more somewhat lower in elevation. Along these comparatively narrow strip of low land coastal plains. On the West coast, the mountains practically rise out of the sea except in the case of the Sonoran desert where there is a wider strip of low level arid land like the Sonoran desert.

The Northern Mesa is a continuation of the basin and plateau country of Arizona, New Mexico, and western Texas. It consists chiefly of vast nearly level land, covered with mesquite. Its low annual rainfall of from 5 to 20 inches with a very irregular distribution makes it of little agricultural purposes. Because of this principal use of the land is for grazing, except around Torreon where a small irrigated region such as La Laguna is devoted to the production of wheat and cotton. The Northern Mesa comprises half of the total area of Mexico but contains one-fifth of the population.

This is in sharp contrast to the region known as the Central Mesa where over 40% of the people live in an area comprising about 15% of the total area. This is again in sharp contrast to the southern highlands where the population comprises about one-fifth in an area of about one-fifth in four times the area of the Central Mesa.