

Rio Prieto is situated in the southwesternmost corner of the municipality of Lares. It borders on the east with Barrio Bartolo, on the north with Barrio Mirasol, on the west with Barrio Cerrote, and on the south with Barrio Indiera Alta. The population borders on 1,400. It is cut by Rio Prieto (Black River), hence the name of the area, which flows roughly in a north-to-south direction.

Agriculture is the main manner of livelihood, the most important crop being coffee. The oranges and bananas grown there have an excellent reputation in the markets in Puerto Rico and abroad. Some of the more progressive farmers grow other crops as well as raise poultry and pigs. There is hardly a family that does not own at least a goat for milking purposes.

The names of the families who founded the community some 200 years ago include: Acevedo, Boto, Justiniano, Torres, Alemany, Rullan, Malave, Beachamp and Planel, representing various regions of Spain. It is unusual to find anyone of French or English ancestry in Rio Prieto. The first settlers came from the nearby towns; Maricao, Las Marias, and Mayaguez. The Spanish heritage in those families was rather remote even then, and, for that reason it can be justly said that Rio Prieto has been Puertorrican for a long time.

Since this barrio is so far removed from any town on the island, its social, religious, educational and economic development has been slow. Nevertheless, there are very few of the "old folks" who cannot read and write. Their writing is not only exact, but their characters are beautifully formed. During the Spanish regime there were no schools, but when someone wanted to learn, they would send for a teacher who tutored for a dollar a month per pupil. The teacher could live very comfortably, having sometimes as many as 150 students, yet not having any expenses for room or board. Some of these teachers made out very

well indeed at a time when land sold for fifty cents an acre. It must be noted, however, that only the well-to-do could pay a dollar for their instruction. Laborers in those days who made \$10.- a month did so because they almost owned the land they worked, and, \$10.- went a long way in those days.

Social affairs were closely allied to the religious life. The feasts of the Roman Church, such as Christmas, Epiphany, St. John the Baptist, All Souls' Day, were observed, as well as several people's saints' day. All could participate in the festivities; the poorest could attend, but all had to dress properly for the occasion, and behave decorously.

Racial prejudice was unknown inasmuch as there never were any slaves, black or white, in Rio Prieto; a rather odd thing for those times. The celebration were congenial and gay, and the religious motive was never lacking as they frequently had sung rosaries or pilgrimages from house to house. Whenever possible the "manor" house was transformed into a sort of chapel.

The Feast of St. John the Baptist, the Patron Saint of Puerto Rico was celebrated with banqueting and mass baptisms. On that day the priest from the nearest town, Las Marias or Maricao, would come, and return loaded with pennies, dollars and gold-pieces. Good Friday and All Souls' Day were strictly kept. On Good Friday, as far back as anyone can remember, the people went to the cemetery, as there were no churches. On All Souls' Day votive candles were burned in the homes and floral offerings placed on the graves of the departed.

Due to the difficulties in transportation, the Roman Church kept these communities in neglect, and for that reason the people developed some odd customs and strange beliefs. Occultism and superstition reigned rampant, and many made a living prescribing and preparing potions and cure-alls unhindered. Only when a large enough number of catechumens made such a sally profitable, would a priest come on horseback from

one of the neighboring villages. It can be said that due to its remote location this community remained in the dark for a long time. There is no doubt that improvements in transportation and the efforts of non-Roman religious groups have done much to overcome this center of superstitions and backward beliefs. The Prebyterians and the Episcopal Church in the last twenty years have done much goodwork among the people here. The members of these and other non-Roman denominations are the ones who truly live their religion, since the Roman Catholics are such only by tradition, rather than by true faith and belief. Working conditions have always been worse in the rural areas of Puerto Rico, and remain so due to the rapid increase in population. Only in the sugar cane and coffee plantations are the salaries anywhere near reasonable. Even then, the worker who makes \$1.44 has to share it with his family, often of as many as eight or ten, feed a cow, pig or goat, as well as the family cat or dog. However, there is a good relationship between owners and workers, and it is not unusual to see the owner and the labores hoeing side by side. The workers are honest men, but are accustomed to having a foreman checking up, just in case. If the laborer is an "arrimado", he lives in a poor shack without the right to use the land around it to grow a few vegetables for himself and his family; otherwise, he is a sharecropper.

The times are now nearly over when the sick would die for lack of medical care. In the old days the only doctors lived in town and it cost a great deal of money and wine to persuade them to come tend the sick. Many of the sick, borne in litters to town died en route, turning the hamock into a hearse. This gave opportunity to the herb doctors and to the potion makers. Tuberculosis, cancer, intestinal parasites, and the croup were the great killers then. Rural cemeteries did not exist and the dead were often buried by the roadside on the way to Lares. Things have changed now, generally for the better.