

Apartado Aéreo 6555  
Cali, Colombia  
December 15, 1962

Dear Friends,

Feliz Navidad! Christmas comes as a surprise in the tropics?  
(the reason for this rather late Christmas letter!)

Life seems easier now than at this time last year. Or maybe we are adjusting better! Sixteen months in Colombia has improved our Spanish somewhat. However only Walter has any degree of fluency, and his pronunciation is perfect. Infact, he often serves as my interpreter. Bob speaks quite well, but with a strong Southern accent. Diana understands everything said to her in both English and Spanish, and with her limited vocabulary is completely bi-lingual. Jan and Peggy are coming along nicely. As for me, I know all the household words. Just pity me in social situations though. I can't discuss anything in Spanish but: children, what's for dinner, how to dust the furniture, and the weather!

Last year we were suffering from cultural shock....now we hardly notice the quaint narrow streets lined with red-roofed houses. The beggars simply tug at my heart strings, but no longer my purse strings! The Taxi drivers make me shudder, but I still ride with them. We have learned to keep the front door locked at all times. The orchids growing in our patio seem almost as common to us as the African violet does to the U.S. housewife.

I have a pretty good idea of what people are talking about in Spanish now, and can even read a bit of the daily newspaper. (Bob could do this much from the start so you can see what a slow poke I am). I drive the car with equanimity now. We have even learned the art of arriving late for parties (always easy for me, but not for Bob.) In other words, we have adjusted to Latin living.

This has been a year of travel for us. In February I went to Texas to be with my parents for their 50th wedding anniversary celebration. In June we all went to Cartagena. To make the trip more complete one of Bob's Aunt's (Mrs. Ethel Nail) arrived in June in time to go with us. Cartagena is perhaps the most interesting city in Colombia, and certainly one of the most historical in South America.

Founded in 1533, it was the object of frequent attacks by pirates and buccaneers. It was beseiged and plundered many times, yet stood throught the centuries as an impregnable fort.

The old part of the city has been preserved almost intact. Of course, we spent more time sunning and swimming in the surf than sightseeing. The Caribbean is as beautiful as travel books say.

We were saddened last summer when one of our best friend George Dumbauld suffered a fatal heart attack. He and Ethel and their 3 children were on their way to visit us, and had got as far as Florida. George and Ethel visited us in South Africa several years ago.

Bob and I were able to go to Bogotá for two days in August, leaving the children with Aunt Ethel. She had visited there on the way to Cali when Bob met her there, but this was my first trip. In comparison to Cali's 504,000 people, Bogotá is a truly large city with 1,180,000 inhabitants. It has an average temp. of 57°, (Cali's average temp, is 77°) and sits on a high plateau at 8,600 feet. It fairly takes one's breath away. The city is essentially European in character, having both cultural and historical attractions. Nearby is the Zipaquira salt mine dating back prior to the coming of the Spaniards. In fact it was news of the salt mines that first brought the conquistadors to that area. Part of the interior was fashioned into a cathedral in 1952 and is most commonly called The Salt Cathedral. The ancient mine is still being worked. One reaches the cathedral section of the mine by driving (or walking) in long winding passages for about a mile. I just couldn't believe that all this was pure salt. It looked more like granite. I scratched off a bit of the wall with my handkerchief and touched it with my tongue and it was salty alright.

Bob has taken several extensive trips over Colombia this year, though he had to fly from place to place. (In a few places he had to row from village to village.) He covered the vast Llanos Orientales as well as much of the Amazon Jungle...seeing much of Colombia still unseen by most Colombians, and making many stops.

At the time of this writing he is in the Guajira Penninsular and Southern Venezuela investigating an outbreak of encephalitis. He reports that the Indians in this section seem very like the Indians of old frontier North America.

Early in Sept. I accompanied Aunt Ethel as far as Panama City on her return to Texas. We had a good time sightseeing, though I had already seen the Canal Zone and other points of interest the year before on our way to Cali, I was amazed at what I had missed, having been accompanied on that trip by the four children.

Bob attended a meeting in Atlanta in November. He was able to fly up to Indiana for a short visit with Dr. and Mrs. Smithburn.

Before returning to Cali he visited Florida and Puerto Rico. He unfortunately had no time to include Texas and California on his stops.

Except for numerous trips to his field station on the Rio Raposo ( 2hours South of Buenaventura by motor boat or 4 hours by canoe) near the Pacific Coast, this about covers the travel news from this family. I should add that Bob took us to the Raposo once last summer and it was a fascinating trip..... the most "jungly" I have seen yet.....a rain forest at the back door where one sees giant ivy with leaves at least a foot across growing all over the trees, orchids, ferns, palms, and hundred of exotic plants whose names I don't know. Evening time brought the parakeets flying overhead...noisy little birds! We swam in the river which is beautiful and tried unsuccessfully to balance ourselves in the dug-out canoes made by natives. The houses are all on stilts because of the high rainfall of 400 inches a year. It was quite a change from sunny Cali which is afterall the 3rd largest city in Colombia, and is said to be the fastest growing city in South America.

The 7th of December inaugurated the Christmas season here (the Immaculate Conception) which Colombian's celebrate with the Burning of the Candles. At sundown people come out of their houses and start lighting candles and sticking them onto their porches, windows, or on other predominate places. Soon the street and then the city is a-glitter with candle light. The average number of candles in front of each house is about 30, many having more. We think it is a delightful custom. After this the excitement builds up until finally on Dec. 26 the Sugar Festival or Feria begins. (we are in the fertile Cauca Valley where much sugar cane is raised.)

Hundreds of Casetas are erected for dancing, eating, and merrymaking. This is where it is possible to see real Colombian folk dancing. For instance, the Cumbia or candle dance! Partners dance this extremely intricate dance holding lighted candles. The Bambuco and Pasadoble are also beautiful but difficult for North American visitors to learn. The country is teeming with song and dance, accompanied by the tiple, guitar, bongodrums, castonettes, and maracas. Fireworks are an important part of festivities and every evening one can see rockts shooting upwards and showering colorful sparks on Cali.

Perhaps the most exciting event to the Colombian is the Bull Fight. During the Feria season there is one every day. Prize bulls are imported as well as the most famous toreadors.

Of course we enjoy the excitement of Christmas here, and it helps us forget our loneliness at being so far away from our families. Christmas is a time to be with loved ones...certainly a disadvantage suffered by those of us living in a foreign country. But we are looking forward to our home leave next summer.

Jan (12), Peggy (10), Walter (5), and Diana (23 months) join Bob and me in sending each one of you our very best wishes for the coming year. And we all wish you all .....

A M E R R Y C H R I S T M A S

*The Rabenatts*