CHAPTER THREE

THE CUBAN SUMMER SCHOOL, HARVARD

UNIVERSITY, 1900

The Spanish-American conflict of the year 1898 had passed. The Battle of Santiago, the Blockade, and the episode of the Rough Riders were history. The post-war Cuba was poverty-ridden, war-torn, and desolate. Educational facilities on the Island were minimal. School attendance was not compulsory, neither were the attendees compulsive in their attendance. President McKinley of the U.S.A., in concert with existing Cuban authority, appointed Alexis E. Frye and Leonard Wood to supervise, improve, and if necessary, remodel Cuban education. Frye gave his services to the cause without salary, and Wood had at that time recently rejected a position of substance with private enterprise in the U.S.A.

Employing foresight, initiative, and hard work, the Cuban Department of Education was able to announce in January, 1900, that 80,000 children were studying in the public schools of Cuba. Four months later, in May, 1900, this figure had risen to 130,000. In that month Mr. Frye announced that 3,379 public schools were flourishing, 3,500 teachers were employed, and 3,500 tons of school equipment and furniture were in use. Frye, earnest in his attempt at educational reform, braved a stormy unrest of those indigenes who visualized a Cuba libre. In the face of criticism he reorganized the school curriculum. Under the old system children embroidered dresses, shirts, blouses for the larger part of the day; this work was then sold and the resultant monies were given to the teacher for salary. Frye changed that. He realized the value of a well planned curriculum, the value of teacher self-improvement, and so proposed three Normal schools for the Island.
The establishment of these schools, however, would require time, whereas the educational problems demanded immediate attention. Fortunately, Mr. Frye was not the only American who saw the need for educational facilities and opportunities for the Cuban people. A Mr. Ernest Lee Conant proposed to Frye that during the summer of 1900 some ten or twenty Cuban teachers be sent to Harvard University for an educational experience which would benefit them and, on their return, the Island of Cuba. Mr. Frye could find no encouragement or enthusiasm for this venture, but by enlarging the scheme and proposing that approximately one-third of the teachers of Cuba be given schooling at Harvard University in the summer of 1900, he was able to at once secure support for the venture. The parochial suggestion had failed, the plan for a national movement was to succeed.

Late in June, five army transports—the Sedgwick, Crook, McPherson, McClellan, and Burnside—jointly collected some thirteen hundred Cuban school teachers from fourteen ports. Two-thirds of these thirteen hundred teachers were women. Some mothers acted as chaperones in the traditional Spanish pattern. Then began the seven-day journey north to Cambridge. Meanwhile President McKinley had sanctioned the plan, Secretary of War, Mr. Root, had provided free transport for the Cubans between their homeland and Cambridge on the Charles River, families in the environs of Harvard had extended their hospitalities to the Caribs, and President Eliot had, by private subscription around Boston, raised $70,000 to defray the expenses of the summer program at Harvard. The Cubans, who had undergone physical examinations before leaving their isle, brought with them physicians conversant with their problems to tend them at times when the passage became rough. By June 30th, the first of the teachers were landed at the Navy Yard at Charlestown. Mr. Mann, who was manager at Harvard for the undertaking, was assisted by sixty younger men, many of whom wore badges, indicating proficiency in the Spanish language. Numerous other officials were present at the landing, at which time each of the ladies was presented with a bouquet of flowers at the Navy Yard. The Cuban women wore brightly colored clothing such as was rarely seen in New England. This was an invasion of Cambridge by people of another culture, but the Cambridge of 1900 was equal to an accommodation of the Caribs. President Eliot of Harvard received protests from local groups concerning painted Cuban women who smoked and drank, but he remained firm in the belief that there should be no encroachment upon their way of life. The visitors, aged from 14 to 60, a majority probably in their twenties, made Cambridge their home for the next six
weeks. A beautiful Cuban flag dominated Harvard's University Hall while brilliant U.S. trimmings abounded.

In addition to the regular Harvard summer school, a special program was established for the Cubans. This included regular courses in English, in the history of the United States, in Spanish American colonies, and in physical geography. W. M. Davis recommended Jefferson strongly to President Eliot for the geographer's post, since his one-time pupil was not only thoroughly versed in geography but also because he had lived in Spanish speaking South America for six years. In April, 1900, Jefferson received a letter from President Eliot suggesting that they discuss the possibility of his teaching physical geography to some 1,300 Cuban schoolteachers for the summer session.

Dear Sir,

May I see you at my office, no. 5, University Hall, Cambridge, within a day or two about teaching Cuban teachers this summer? I expect to be in my office every day this week between twelve and one, and between five and six.

Very truly yours,
Charles W. Eliot

Jefferson accepted the job which the Harvard President offered him and at once began making outlines of his intended 18 lectures and 12 field excursions. The eighteen lectures were entitled:

I. Weathering & Soils
II. Transportation
III. Deposition
IV. Limestones
V. Elevation & Depression
VI. Elevation & Depression (continued)
VII. Sculpture
VIII. Crystallines
IX. Rivers & Valleys
X. Rivers & Valleys (continued)
XI. Plains
XII. Mountains
XIII. Mountains (continued)
XIV. Shorelines
XV. Winds
XVI. Climate
XVII. Man on the Earth
XVIII. Man on the Earth (continued)
The excursions Jefferson planned were essentially to local areas:

I. Medford (soil and rock weathering)
II. Beaver Brook (transportation)
III. Cambridge Clays (deposition)
IV. Atlantic (marine deposition)
V. Cambridge Slates (consolidation-elevation)
VI. Hobbs Brook (valley carving)
VII. Neponset Marshes (river deposition)
VIII. Riverside Terrace
IX. Nantasket (shore lines)
X. Clifton (ocean erosion)
XI. Arlington Heights (general review)
XII. Melrose (differential erosion-review)

Summaries of these lectures and excursions were published bilingually in English and Spanish in two little booklets. Each lecture warranted a program summary of approximately 150 words, necessarily planned and written at short notice. For a while Jefferson was taking preparatory wheel trips with his assistants and making final arrangements at Harvard; he was still teaching, examining, and helping with class graduation at the Brockton High School.

After the summer school had commenced, the Educational Review noted:

Great things were expected of the course in geography in the way of arousing and stimulating the interest of the teachers and to effect this purpose the course was divided into two parts, the first to consist of lectures by Mr. Mark S. Jefferson, assistant principal of the Brockton High School, and the second of excursions and tours afield. The work of the course was really that of an elementary geological class, resembling closely the course known as Geology 4, which Professor Shaler gives at Harvard. It consisted chiefly of a rapid study of common land formations, and in order that the work might be carried out successfully, great stress was placed upon the field excursions. It was these field excursions, however, which proved one of the great stumbling blocks in the path of the teachers.

The Cubans, especially the women, are but little used to long car rides and protracted tramps afoot, and to be dragged forth from Cambridge three times a week, carried out into the country, and there, after a tiresome walk, to be lectured upon "sand plains" and relics of the glacial period was almost more than they could endure. Many of them were prostrated with fatigue, and even as the season advanced and they
became more accustomed to the expeditions and felt the strain of a life
under new conditions somewhat less, they seemed to take but little
interest in the real purpose of the trips.

Jefferson himself wrote an article for *The Enterprise*, Saturday, Au­
gust 18, 1900, which was entitled “Summer School for Cubans and the
work it has done.” The newspaper article gives one of the most thor­
ough printed insights into the Cuban Summer School:

Mr. Frye, acting on a chance suggestion of Ernest Lee Conant, sought
to select the fittest of Cuban teachers and infuse them with new zeal
and inspiration by a summer at Harvard University. Every summer
hundreds of eager American teachers flock to Cambridge for advanced
instruction at their own expense. Besides knowledge, they obtain there
personal contact with foremost American scientists, scholars and men
of letters, and our other great universities see similar gatherings each
year. Perhaps there is no single agency operative today for the uplifting
of our best schools from the dangers of routine and dullness so power­
ful as this.

A great effort was made to secure those most fit to receive impres­
sions and communicate them to those who must remain behind. The
maximum number was at once fixed at 1440, the total seating capacity
of Sanders Theatre, where instruction was to be given them in form of
lectures. This meant about a third of Mr. Frye’s teachers and it was
hoped to obtain a selection of the cream of all.

But many things contributed to make this difficult. In fact, many
newspapers in Cuba antagonized the movement. Assuming the motive
back of the whole thing was self-interest, it was widely asserted that
the United States sought to make missionaries of the teachers for the
cause of annexation. To teach the children, we were supposed to
reason, was cheaper than conquer the adults. In some circles in Cuba
it is possible that such sentiments made it imprudent for a teacher to
join the party. Again, many Cuban teachers are women, and Creole
women would inevitably be astonished if not shocked at the proposi­
tion to separate themselves from the protection of their homes even in
company with members of their countrywomen. This cause again
doubtless contributed to deter many suitable persons from making the
venture. From these and other motives it happened that only 1285
Cubans have presented themselves at Harvard of the 1440 for whom
preparation was made, and some of these were not those for whom the
work was really planned.

The best were teachers of experience, who came with zeal and
positive thirst for knowledge and singular absence of animus to defend
their methods in the presence of more modern ones proposed. They
carry with them to Cuba all that those earnest American teachers who throng the summer schools take back to their school rooms—knowledge, enthusiasm and hope for better things. The proposition that these teachers do extra work was met by a response from more than 90 per cent. They saw good schools and modern apparatus, they who had never known a schoolhouse other than as a room in the teacher's dwelling. They went back wanting things, and some of those things they will obtain.

Others who accompanied them were not filled with their high ambitions. They were teachers of routinary mood seeking an outing; teachers of a few months' or, in some cases, no experience, carried away by the prospect of a bit of travel without expense. Some even may have hoped to remain in the American promised land, once they reach it, and hailed with joy the prospect of so good an introduction to its language. Upon these I am inclined to think the effects of the sojourn in Cambridge has been most surprising and most hopeful, for the influence that none could escape has been the influence of foreign travel and contact with a strange people with a closeness and intimacy never before attained in so short a period. For what Cuban hitherto visiting this region has not in six weeks, but in six months, or even six years, seen so much of New England institutions, business culture, home life and good society, as has been generously bestowed upon these schoolteachers?

Ignorance regards the foreigner with undisguised contempt, and travel is an excellent eye opener. I remember hearing a Portuguese teacher in a little school on one of the Cape Verde Islands hold up the Americans and English as monstrosities because their children fought with their hands until their faces bled, and thought of it again later when a teacher in Concord, Mass., portrayed the Spanish as brutal for their love of bull fighting. Could those two women have traveled they would have learned to be less sweeping in their judgments, and have come nearer the conception of the existence of vice and virtue in all lands.

I think the best elements in New England character for the contemplation of Spanish Americans is our putting our hands to the plough, and our respect for the law. Personal labor is still regarded as degrading in Spanish-American countries and regions rich with nature's bounty show little of man's work after centuries of occupation. Our respect for property everywhere seemed to impress the Cuban visitors deeply, even where to an American it did not seem pronounced.

The Cubans, too, have cultivated certain character elements more than we, and the best of these I think are manners and joyousness.
President Eliot, in his opening address in Sanders Theatre, called it “a unique experiment in mutual service. We are going”, he said, “to see how much we can enlarge each other’s minds and sympathies, and strengthen each other’s sense of brotherhood.”

Of this a good deal has been realized. The Americans who have been thrown in contact with the Cubans at Harvard have gained in manners and cheerfulness. It is to be regretted on the American side that there was not more and more intimate contact with the visitors. I have observed with especial interest their conduct under those little privations incident to a sojourn in a foreign land. Coming from a country where all the food has the high Spanish seasoning, where the coffee is high roasted, as in all coffee raising countries, where wine is in universal use at every meal, their six weeks on American food in prohibition Cambridge, with thin American coffee, must have tended to try their patience. Things of this sort are harder to bear than more serious evils, as touching our daily habits. Yet there was no sign. They admitted freely that they missed the home table when asked, but that was all. Almost universal recognition prevailed that they were recipients of unprecedented courtesies. Good literature for a Cuban must still cover much Spanish literature, and Spanish opinions still pervade Spanish-American thought. Thus it is likely that the Spanish conception of the reign of commercialism among us is widely held in Cuba.

One result of this visit will be a complete destruction of any such idea in Cuba henceforth. They have come remembering their traditions of Yankee rudeness, and they go persuaded of the culture of New England and our reliance on education to preserve the institutions of our fathers.

For the summer Jefferson took a room at 41 Matthews Hall, Cambridge: “The room is admirable up one flight, corner on the Quadrangle, and looking out on Harvard Square; sitting room 15’ x 12’, bedroom and closets.” From this vantage point he could see the Cuban teachers walking and talking, frequently in pairs, frequently in groups. Not anxious to be known as one of the teaching faculty of the summer school, he also refused a badge indicating that he could translate. In this way he could enjoy their chatter in the early days of the summer and escape unrecognized:

The Cubans are about, and though the morning is delightful, they evidently have a prejudice against air, as two go by with their handkerchiefs to their noses, and a third with mouth and nose enveloped in a scarf. It reminds me of letting out of Opera at Cordoba in winter when everyone protected mouth and nose with a handkerchief.

He was initially a little apprehensive of his fluency in Spanish, for he
had not spoken the language regularly since his Tucuman sugar plantation days terminated in 1889, though he had maintained a steady correspondence with his South American friends and some Spanish-speaking boys from his days at the Mitchell Boys School, Billerica. Additionally he had travelled Cuba in March, 1895, with his wife and first-born. He wrote to his wife just before summer school commenced:

I am beginning to feel now that the great thing is to get the first lecture off. I have more time from day to day than I have now in school for my lessons, and if I am to put in twenty slides every time, it cannot be so much to make a forty-five minute talk, even in Spanish. Really a good deal depends on what is President Eliot's appreciation, which is of value in the long run.

Jefferson need not to have worried. Very soon he wrote to his wife:

You would love to see me start out on the Sanders platform at 9:30 a.m. and the hissing start, which is the South American way of making conversation stop.

The fatal day is past, the lecture was middling, the slides fine, the principles sought brought out well enough and I made myself heard with President Eliot stalking about and telling me once from behind to speak louder.

Excursions superb—they worked finely but I am too tired and tomorrow must go better than today though the excursions cannot. Frye complimented me on the lecture and Dr. Eliot well implied that it was no failure.

And again

... The second lecture was a great success—some few did not hear everything and when explaining the pictures sometimes I spoke carelessly and was not heard. But I got out in the open, away from my notes and fired away and held the attention of all. I spoke easily, rapidly enough and came out only 7 minutes late which I thought was pretty near. President Eliot has declared himself not badly impressed yesterday. Others have spoken very well indeed of it.

I suppose I told you that the excursions yesterday were great, all agreed that they had never had a class so diligent and in every way so attentive. But thirsty—we are to organize a water supply for the future. I gave you too bad an impression of the Cubans. The first ship was from Santiago, very rustic naturally. The people from the Habana region are better. Still they do walk on the grass and throw cigar butts around.

The Cubans attended Jefferson's classes well, found the geography to their liking and requested that he have the series of lectures published in Spanish in order that they might be able to use them in Cuba.
Jefferson prepared the lectures and offered them to Ginn and Company, but Ginn declined: they had already published Frye's Grammar School Geography in 1895 and 1899 and had undertaken a third revision which was published in 1902. The Cubans frequently sought Jefferson, that he might take them to the museum and offer explanations. Some Cubans wanted him to tutor them in the English language, others wished to talk of Caribbean and Cuban problems, others wished simply to chat with him. He enjoyed these moments, although the acceptance on one such occasion of a Cuban cigarette, whose leaf was unseasoned, poisoned his lips rather severely. Frequently he took meals with them. Soon he was receiving photographs of Cuba from the teachers and being showered with invitations to visit them in Cuba. He did visit them three years later in Cuba at which time his students of Sanders Theatre escorted him the length and breadth of the Island, showing him that nothing was too great an inconvenience for them in his behalf.

While lecturing in the Cuban Summer School, Jefferson renewed his acquaintance with the Harvard Geography staff, and more especially W. M. Davis, N. Shaler, and R. DeCourcy Ward. Jefferson borrowed some slides for his lectures from the Harvard departmental collection, while other slides he took from his own collection. He persuaded Davis to undertake several of his excursions to see how they might be improved; he also had the aid of six bilingual assistants equipped with bicycles. The excursions had been carefully planned. Several of the trips were local Harvard field course trips, while others had been especially planned for the occasion by Jefferson who was familiar with that part of the country. Opinions varied as to the success of the excursions.

The Educational Review wrote:

The remarks of the lecturer on the peculiarities of the phenomena which they had been brought out (in the field) to observe received but little attention from the majority of them, and a stray baby by the wayside was enough to completely demoralize a whole party, while an oddity in the way of fence construction has been known to absorb attention entirely to the exclusion of the lecturer. This lack of interest and total inability to concentrate the attention which the Cubans exhibited was more in evidence on these trips than anywhere else but in reality it was everywhere throughout the school: it pervaded the atmosphere, and it soon became easy to see that in spite of certain more or less unavoidable defects in the school, what the Cuban teachers lacked was not the appliances to work with, but the inclination to work. The trip was regarded by them as a gigantic picnic with a little study thrown in, but only a little.

The Lynn Newspaper noted:
A very interesting excursion was to Squantum. The teachers on this excursion were the men who are school directors. Of about 40 names called out, 36 were present when we boarded the car at Harvard square, Monday, July 30. We left the square at 1:30 p.m. and went by special car to City Point, and from there to Squantum by a small steamer. On the way down from City Point the teachers were requested to make sketches of the coast line of Thompson's Island and show the slope of the land. They were also told to note the inclination of a grove of pine trees located near the water. This inclination of the trees is caused by the creeping of the earth. As the bases or roots, incline, the top straightens. From the boat there did not appear to be a tree not affected by this creeping of the earth.

Upon arrival at Squantum a few minutes were spent, while on the boat in explanation of the shoreline. The party then landed and remained for about an hour and a half, using the time in the study of the sea cliffs. The explanation was on the stratification of the rock, its cause, and the action of the sea upon the same. On the south side of the point there is a deposit of rock that is slaty in appearance. At this place the teachers were instructed to make sketches showing the inclination of the strata and their sections. In some instances the teachers made very good sketches. These were not intended to be pictorial. After the explanation, the lecturer, Prof. M. S. W. Jefferson, asked the teachers what they had learned from his explanation. The answers came from the older members of the party. The discussion was interesting and the answers indicated close observation on the part of the one answering.

The teachers saw the Myles Standish monument erected to the Indian Chief Squantum. Here, as in other places, the teachers copied the inscription on the monument, and not being satisfied with that they questioned Prof. Jefferson about the reason of the monument being erected. Their questions were answered briefly and to the point, and notes were made of the general appearance of the monument, and the explanation given of its history.

A new feature has been introduced in the lecture work of the excursions. The teachers are now required to write what they think is the cause of the geographical features which are to be explained to them. By this course the instructors are enabled to check the tendency on the part of some of the teachers to know more about the subject than the instructor knows.

The interest in the lecture at Squantum, referred to above, was maintained throughout. This was due to the lecture being delivered without the aid of an interpreter. The lecturer, Prof. Jefferson is the
gentleman who has delivered the lectures on physical geography and he has entire charge of all geographical excursions; he is ably assisted by six young men of Harvard. Prof. Jefferson is the only lecturer thus far who has been able to hold the attention of the teachers when assembled in Sanders Theatre. His words have been clear and have gone to all parts of the theatre.

And in a letter to Theodora, Jefferson wrote:15

Yesterday was a remarkable day—I offered an extra excursion to Hobbs Brook under my personal supervision to make up one lost by rain. 89 were in my party. Some photographing was going on and the party that started 10 minutes later, from the same spot was found to be 260 strong for a membership of 211 and usual attendance of 120-180!

Jefferson was very happy with the results of the excursions, and so it seems were the Cuban teachers. He was later to remember one incident in some autobiographical notes written just prior to his death in 1949. One of the young lady Cuban schoolteachers wrote a letter which was published in the Cuban Discussion of Habana. The letter criticized Jefferson’s spoken Spanish, contrary to previous newspaper accounts and to other recorded testimony . . . “The Geography lecture in Horrible Spanish by American professor. He talked of erosion of rocks but quite eroded our patience before he got through.” Her report concerning the field excursions was almost as trying. Extracts of the letter published in Cuba were published in the New York Post and in the Boston Herald. The Cubans were disgusted with their fellow letter-writer and took every opportunity to persuade Jefferson of their true feeling. They showered the unfortunate Jefferson with long unrestrained outpourings of feeling, with elaborately phrased expressions of sorrow and grief, and with protestations of anger against their own complainant. The disturbed teachers stopped Jefferson on the sidewalks, approached him in cafes, groups even ventured to his room of an evening.

Jefferson’s geography lectures and excursions became a testing ground for the success of the Cuban Summer School. His performance was vindicated at the close of his last lecture in Harvard’s Sanders Theatre when the Cuban schoolteachers simultaneously rose and gave him “an encore”! President Eliot, who had been watching over the summer school with special interest, wrote to Jefferson:16

Dear Mr. Jefferson,

Your work as teacher of geography to the Cubans has been so thoroughly done, and the undertaking has proved so serious, that I feel that the compensation which I agreed to give you is insufficient. Will you please suggest a sum which would seem to you a suitable compen-
sation? I do not promise to adopt your suggestion; but I shall consider it carefully. Shall you be able to go on any of the remaining excursions; or are you proposing to leave Cambridge at once?

The following day Jefferson received a check for $500 from President Eliot. The earlier agreed salary had been $250.

_Later President Eliot wrote to Jefferson:_

_I have written to E. O. Fisk & Co., as you requested._

_I hope you look back on your service to the Cuban teachers with satisfaction. You are surely entitled to do so._

_The expedition as a whole was much more successful than anybody could possibly have anticipated. For me, it was the most interesting single piece of work that has ever come my way._

Jefferson returned to his teaching position at Brockton. On June 29, 1901, a letter was sent to him from Secretary Hurlburt of Harvard University that was to shape his career:

_A letter from C. T. McFarlane tells Professor Davis that he has resigned his position, the professorship of geography at the State Normal School, Ypsilanti, Michigan, to take a similar position at the State Normal School, Brockport, New York. Professor Davis and I are ready to back you for the position at Ypsilanti, if you want it._

Jefferson did apply for the post, received it, and settled down to live the most productive 48 years of his life.