

Return to Nuñoa After 25 Years

by R. Brooke Thomas

This past summer my wife, Shirley, and I returned to Nuñoa with Jim Dutt and his wife, Joan. Jim was a graduate student researcher in the 1960s and 70s and the town, countryside and people had left a strong impression on him. As we rounded a series of hills before town, and houses loomed in the distance, exhilaration spread across Jim's face. Here, I describe his impressions for the benefit of former researchers and visitors who have not had a chance to go back.

At the entrance of town a twenty foot statue of a suri alpaca with two flanking ten footers provide a startling welcome. The district prides itself as being the center of alpaca production in the highlands, and in fact has the highest density of camelids anywhere in Peru. Alpacas from the area regularly win "best in show" at the regional fairs, and the statues make sure the visitor is aware –right off - of this distinction. The dusty potholed road leading into town has been replaced by two concrete lanes with shrubbery in between. The rocky soccer field of the past is now a stadium with a grass field and bleachers, all surrounded by a decorative wall that keeps grazing animals at bay. A modern school building appears at one end of the stadium, and on Sundays a market with over 50 stalls unfolds out front. Progressing into the main plaza there are now several multistoried buildings. Gone are the straw thatched roofs that while picturesque allowed fires to spread from one building to the next. A new, four floor cultural center is under construction and looms over the manicured square around the band stand. Scrawny trees that were planted by the "chosen" families of town half a century ago on the square have somehow survived drought and storm and are now elegant shade trees. Parks also line the river on both sides and the old stone arched bridge is now reserved for people and animals only. A new one has been build downriver by the new Tupac Amaru high school and "Walt Disney" slaughterhouse. Finally the health center has had a face lift, looks somewhat more inviting, and a new hospital building awaits furnishings. A functioning ambulance remains on the want list.

Clearly the national government is putting more funds into remote towns in the highlands after the Shining Path Revolution of the 1980s and early 90s, and revenues from a nearby mine for using the roads has helped modernize the pueblo. A radio station broadcasts local news and sends

messages back and forth from town to countryside. And events like the parades, the bull fight, and the annual horse race can be viewed on the local TV station. Shortly after our arrival in town word traveled on radio waves up and down the valley: they even remembered Jim's given nickname "Jesus Cristo," for his look-alike features as a young man.

In spite of this rash of modernity in municipal works the rest of the town is pretty much the same, and the countryside has changed very little. The large haciendas of yesteryear have been broken up into smaller holdings, some private and others communal. Even the state run "cooperative" experiment of the 1970s and 80s has been abandoned and the land has reverted back to local control, mostly by small holders. We had a chance to go up the Nuñoa River about two hours to visit the Mamaniri Ranch that is now part of the project, thanks to Father Paul Habing. Here we are administering a vaccination program for enterotoxemia, the big killer of newborns, and assessing parasite loads, fertility, and quality of breeding stock. Hernan Choquepata is the ranch manager who oversees 1000 alpacas and other livestock over a 1300 acre spread. We are using the ranch to develop effective herd management techniques that can be used by small-scale herders in the area.

Leaving the dirt river road and following a track over and around hills we passed through an amazing landscape filled with alpacas. Occasional herds of wild vicuña were seen as well. These had been almost hunted to extinction but are now returning thanks to a prohibition on selling any product of these stately progenitors of the alpaca. Now with their numbers increasing one can get a capture and release permit to round them up and shear their fiber. Finally, we rounded a hill and looked down on the ranch house, a weathered collection of rooms around a stone patio. In need of a paint job, with flicker holes in the adobe walls and a tattered straw roofing it nevertheless blocks the wind that courses across the treeless grassland. Except for a kitchen with its dung fueled oven, and a simple bedroom for Hernan and Maricia, the others rooms are for storage of animal products. Maricia is a kindly older lady who oversees the daily running of the ranch. She loves the countryside and her animals, and has planted small trees around the building covering them nightly against the frost. Her son says when she dies it will be here at Mamaniri her her animals – her speechless brothers and sisters as Andean herders say.

After vaccinating animals in the morning we returned to the ranch house kitchen where Mauricia had prepared a thick soup of chuño (dehydrated potatoes) and mutton. Simple foods become simply delicious in the thin fresh air of high altitude. Afterwards Hernan rounded up and showed off of his prize suris draping past ribbons over their fleece that reached to the ground. This day was the experience that Jim had waited for two and a half decades. The Nuñoa countryside and people exert a powerful attraction over those who get to know it. Once we get the children's home completed and have guest rooms available we urge you to visit and see for yourself.