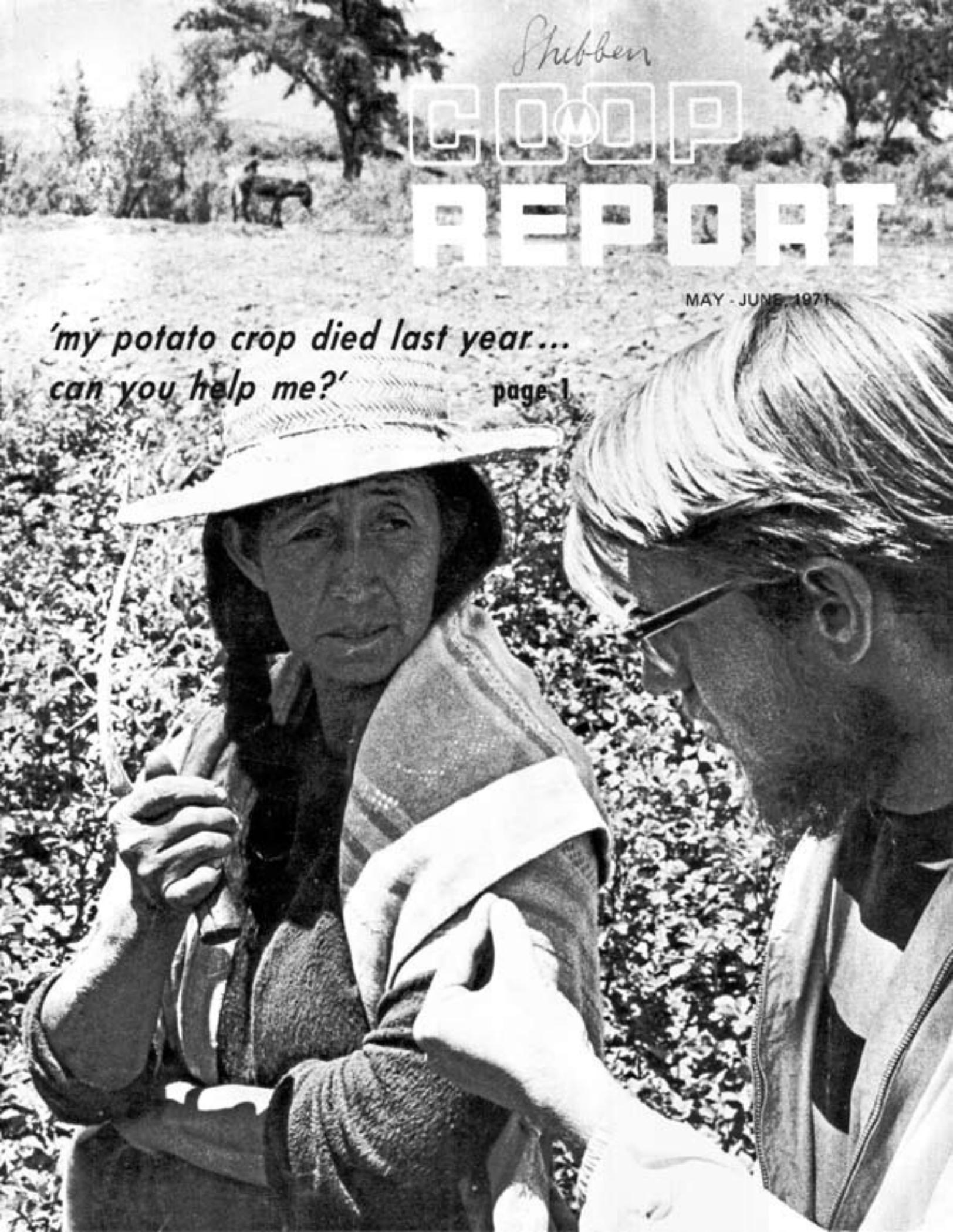


Shubben

COOP REPORT

MAY - JUNE 1971

*'my potato crop died last year...
can you help me?'* page 1





Agricultural extension agent explains potato growing program in a valley once closed to outsiders by Quechua Indian farmers like the three men shown here. Today, these men and other

farmers are profiting greatly from Peace Corps efforts to introduce better growing methods — and cooperatives.

Building Co-ops Among the Quechua

The road from Totora to Aiquille, Bolivia, is typically Bolivian. Rock-studded. Blind curves. Steep drop-offs to nowhere. Bridgeless stream crossings over rocky, nearly waterless bottoms. A real tailbone rattlin' type ride. One hand holding tightly beneath the seat, the other in readiness to shield the head from bumps against the steel top of the jeep. Yet, it's claimed that a Bolivian "Gran Prix" was held over this road some years back. No record of fatalities.

But, we made it to the little town of 5,000 in the midst of some of the best wheat and potato farming land in the nation. Also a Quechua Indian stronghold, where outsiders were forcibly barred from entering

nearby Quechua farm valleys only two years ago. "They might be trying to repossess the land or levy a tax on an unsuspecting campesino," said one. And, even today, the lone government extension agent in town is not having the greatest of success trying to clear the age-old farm myths from the minds of the campesino. Like people from Missouri, the Quechua has to be shown — often and time and time again. But, once he's convinced, clear the tracks ahead!

Arriving late at night, dusty and tired, we were put up in the "best" hotel in town, the Oasis. It's not the kind of hotel the average North Americano would choose. But in Aiquille, there is no choice. Though



While his Bolivian girl friend listens behind him, a Peace Corps volunteer gestures as he tells Gino Baumann, country director of the Corps, about this potato co-op. The farmer stands in front of grass hut used as guardhouse to prevent thievery

from his potato field. At left is Wayne Swegle, managing editor of *Successful Farming*, and at far right is Lee Arbuckle, Oregon farmer and regional Peace Corps director.

'before I joined the peace corps I thought potatoes

the food was good, the service excellent from the pretty, smiling daughter of the owner, the rooms were another thing. The toilet facilities (well, if you think the one-holers back on the farm were bad, try the Hotel Oasis); no hot water for shaving or showers. Not recommended except for the hardest of tourists. But fun.

Next morning over coffee we heard from several of an excellent corps of Peace Corps volunteers in the area.

Jim Dunlap, who headed the contingent, told us that there were more than 6,000 acres of good wheat land nearby and that the wheat program being given top priority by the Bolivian government was getting good results.

The volunteers combine instruction on wheat growing with advice on credit cooperatives, inducing the farmers to use their credit union as loan source, instead of paying the average loan rate of 56% per year to outside loan sharks. This too, is working. The Aiquille Credit Union is one of the best in the nation. It recently built a \$46,000 new office building, paid a 7% dividend last year, and is planning to begin making

loans to a large potato cooperative in the area.

Another important project in town is being conducted by Grant Snyder, a Peace Corps volunteer engineer. Since there is only one school in Aiquille, Snyder is working with the Bolivian government community development program to construct a new school in town.

A third top Peace Corps project in the countryside is an intensive effort to improve potato farming methods. Working with the Bolivian agricultural extension agent, an able specialist (rare in Bolivia, they told us), the volunteers fan out over the countryside inducing campesinos to join a controlled growing program. The volunteer furnishes soil analysis, fertilizer, good seed and insecticides. Then advises on care and handling of the crop.

Traveling into the countryside with Gino Baumann, country director for the Peace Corps, and Lee Arbuckle, the district director, a farmer volunteer from Oregon, we were greeted enthusiastically by the small farmers in the potato program. So proud were they of their new and better potato crops, that they insisted time



One of the strange sights in Bolivia is this peasant graveyard in the mountains above Cochabamba.

grew on bushes'

and time again, that we go into the fields with them, dig up some of the crop and compare them with the older, tiny, potatoes they used to grow.

It was obvious that here was a perfect opportunity for organization of cooperatives. The base for co-ops, some of which have been started, is there. During the revolutionary period, and afterwards when the campesinos jealously guarded their new lands, they formed a vigilante group, Farmers Union. Strong and capably led, the Union can be turned into a full-fledged farm supply and marketing cooperative with ease.

It was here, too that we found that a man need not be an agricultural expert to be of help to the campesino with his potato crop. Talking with a Peace Corps volunteer from New York who had done an excellent job with the small farmer, we asked about yields, growth periods, and other questions of a general nature.

"When I joined the Peace Corps," he told us, a bit proudly, "I thought potatoes grew on bushes. I had no idea they grew beneath the ground. Hell, I don't know what the term "yield" means in English. I

learned my Peace Corps work in Spanish and to discuss potatoes or anything about agriculture in English is as foreign to me here as it was back in New York. Now, if you want to talk about it in Spanish, I'll talk . . ."

Later, as we visited another small potato farmer, we got our first taste of Chica beer, an ages-old beer made from soft corn, grown especially for the purpose. In the past, the corn was chewed first by women — usually the older women in the village — then left to ferment in a bag. Our host was careful to inform us that his Chica beer was not made that way.

Taking us to a small, cool, tool shed on his farm, he brought us glasses and pitchers of the mild beer. Following Quechua Indian custom, which dictates that the host leave the room while his guests drink, he left us with pitchers, glasses — and doubts among some of the group as to the wisdom of drinking the beer. Being thirsty, I had three glasses. It tasted like hard cider, was very good. And there was nary a twinge from it.

It was a good way to end our tour of Bolivia's ancient "potato patches," now moving slowly into another century. — A. G.