

MY IMPRESSIONS OF SPAIN

By Nancy D. Dahl

I am delighted to tell you of my impressions of Spain. I shall start by saying we arrived in Madrid on the 14th of December 1953 after an uneventful trip by air. It was my first foreign station, so you can imagine the anticipation. My husband had already spent several months there prior to the Spanish Agreements so he had already rented a house for us. It was in Chamartin, across the street from the Sevilla Film Studio. I liked it from the start, mainly because it was so elegantly furnished. As you entered the front door, your eye immediately caught the elaborate chandelier hanging in the hall, the winding stairway leading up to the second and third floors was marble. Once inside the drawing room, there was a feeling of the French period with much gold leaf, marble top tables, heavy satin drapes, and thick flowered rugs. The kitchen was in the basement, underneath the dining room. I can hear my husband jokingly say now, in referring to the servants, "our house was run by one dumb waiter and three assistants," because the food was brought up from the kitchen by means of the dumb waiter. I had to have a cook, maid, laundress, and a gardener to run our fourteen room house. The cocinera did nothing but buy and cook the food and keep the kitchen clean. The doncella served the table and kept the upstairs in order while the asistenta did the heavy cleaning and helped the maid polish the silver and brass and the laundry. As for my jardinero, the small garden consisted primarily of rose bushes which took all of his time. I had roses from early May until late fall. The first year in Madrid, our electricity was turned off six days a week from eight in the morning until six in the evening, due to the shortage of hydro-electric power which resulted from a serious drought in Spain. Luckily, our deep-freeze and refrigerator would recharge at night when the electricity was turned on. My asistenta, or laundress, had to do the ironing with old-fashioned flat irons which had to be heated on the coal range. They were formerly bookends for my cook books. Speaking of the stove, it also heated all of the water for bathing. Our baths literally had to be scheduled due to the small capacity of the tank.

I never did get used to the eating hours. Breakfast was at 8:30, lunch at 2:30, and dinner at 10 or 10:30 in the evening. Cocktail parties were at 8:30 and when you were invited to dine with Spanish friends, one hardly ever ate until midnight. Unless we were going out, however, or having friends in, we ate a family dinner at 8:30. The Spanish always have marienda or tea at 7 o'clock to tide them over until dinner time. Our house was terribly expensive to run--the rent, heat in the winter (mainly by coal furnace and fireplace in the drawing room), the electricity, and feeding four servants, their clothes,

doctor's bills, etc. Their pay each month was little in comparison to their food and clothes. In Spain it is almost impossible to live without servants due to their primitive ways of doing things.

The language did pose a problem for me the first six months. But after a concentrated course, I could speak well enough to fire the servants that were hired for me when we arrived. I interviewed cooks until I found one who would let me be boss in my own kitchen and also allow the children to make candy and cookies whenever they pleased. I even taught the cook, Petra, our way of cooking so we would not have to eat Spanish food, which was all right now and then but not as a steady diet. It was too starchy and too much wine--wine at every meal. I did learn to make paella, the most typical Spanish dish which consisted mainly of rice with a little meat, fowl, and fish. Another unusual dish is gazpacho, a cold puree vegetable soup, highly seasoned with oil and vinegar which we all enjoyed on those hot summer days.

The clothes I found were extremely expensive if they were made by such famous named designers as Pedro Rodriguez, House of Flora Villa Real or Balenciga better known as Eisa in Madrid. They were very extreme and not for our way of life. Although I was fortunate enough to find a modista who made several things for me very reasonably; it took many fittings and much patience after the material and trimmings were bought.

Among the very interesting personalities whom we met were: Margaret Chase Smith, Senator Bricker, Estes Kefauver, just to mention a few. Senators and Congressmen were constantly passing through Madrid. The evening we were host to Senator Smith, we took her and her secretary dining and dancing at Recolletos, where the titled noblemen and their ladies go. During the course of the evening when my husband was dancing with our charming guest, he remarked, "never in my wildest dream did I ever think I would be dancing with a member of the United States Senate." With that, our scintillating Senator said in reply, "and never did I think I would be the prettiest woman in the Senate."

I know you would like to know if we met Generalissimo and Mrs. Franco and their daughter. The first time I met Mrs. Franco and her daughter, the Marquesa de Villa Verde, was at the Hotel Ritz during a tea. The occasion was Mrs. Franco's way of saying 'thank you' to all of the ladies who had worked on the Spanish TB Drive. I happened to be the chairman for the American military. We raised forty thousand pesetas or one thousand dollars in American money for their Spanish TB Drive. It was the first year we were in Spain and we were a very small group and I think the results of our work were very gratifying. Our table was set up in the lobby of the modern Castellana Hilton Hotel where all of the American tourists stay. It was there that I met Greer Garson. Her husband gave me a large contribution.

Speaking of a movie star reminds me of several others whom we met in Spain. Ava Gardner attended the opening of the Madrid NCO Club. She now lives in Madrid. Gen Dahl and I were guests for the opening of the NCO Club and Ava Gardner was their main attraction so to speak. She very graciously accepted their invitation and sat at our table. She is a beautiful woman with very regular classic features. Another time, I met Frederic March. He was making "Alexander the Great" across the street from our house at the Sevilla Film Studio. Page, my daughter, and I were invited to have our picture taken with him between takes for publicity. He was doing the wedding feast the time we went over. Gloria Swanson was another movie star whom we met. She attended a party at the American Embassy the same evening we were there. She's not more than five feet tall, yet strikingly attractive. I had a very interesting conversation with her which I enjoyed immensely. Sloan Simpson was another person whom we met and saw quite a great deal of when she was in Madrid. Gen Dahl, Page, and I (our son, Peter, was visiting in Wiesbaden at the time) attended a tiente given in her honor. The host of the fiesta lives in the villa Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand gave to Christopher Columbus at the end of his third voyage. Let me briefly describe a tiente. A tiente is a miniature bullfight put on by the guests fighting the lady-like bulls or Ferdinands unsuitable to raise for the bull ring. I might add, my husband and daughter joined in the fun of fighting the little bulls while Mama was busy taking movies of it all.

We had the rare opportunity of entertaining in our home a number of notable personages both American and foreign, and we in turn were entertained on numerous occasions by people of note. For instance, we attended the annual State Dinner given by Generalissimo Franco on the occasion of the Spanish Liberation Day on July 18th which was the day that Spain was liberated from the rule of Napoleon. This banquet was held at the palace at La Granja which is about forty miles from Madrid on the road to Segovia and is one of the palaces maintained in perfect condition by the State. The tables which were set up in the formal gardens were served by the liveried servants dressed in tight red velvet pants and served the tables from huge silver trays. Even the demi-tasse spoons were gold. After much wine and delicious food, the two thousand-odd guests, heads of State and royalty, moved to the far side of the garden to enjoy ballet dancing, grand opera, and chamber music, from the huge stage formed naturally by mother nature. This was a spectacle that we shall never forget.

One of our Spanish friends, Senor Saerin, had an apartment in Madrid and a finca in the country on the road to El Escorial, the famous monastery. The name of the village is Torreledones. We spent many Sundays there with the entire family dining, swimming, horseback riding, and hunting. On these occasions, we always spoke Spanish because the Saerins did not speak a word of English.

One of the most spectacular parties we attended was our Ambassador Lodge's daughter's coming out party given at our American Embassy

residence. Bea, as she is called, and Page, our daughter, are very good friends so naturally the party was more than just another debut party. Page had recently returned from school in Washington, D. C., so it was her first big party in Madrid after returning from school in Washington.

Another equally beautiful party was given by the Beamontes, some Spanish friends of ours, for their daughter who was being introduced to society our second year in Spain. A stateside band played and champagne literally flowed. The fiesta started at eleven and went on until daybreak. The Spanish girl has her first long dress on that momentous occasion and not before. They lead a very quiet and sheltered life so unlike our own American teenagers. They spend their free time horseback riding, playing tennis, swimming, learning fancy handwork, and how to run a villa with a staff of servants. Their manners are impeccable; for instance, it would be unheard of for a boy to remain seated if his mother walked into the room. When greeting one's friends at a party, not only do the teenagers but grownups alike, shake hands with everyone. Intimate women friends and even young girls always kiss first on one cheek and then the other when they happen to meet. They are an extremely warmhearted people. They have welcomed the Americans with open arms.

Madrid's night life is not for ladies. I shall let my husband tell you about that later. All of the nice unmarried girls are safe at home at 9:30. It is really a man's world in Spain. We did not have an Officers' Club nor an Officers' Wives Club in Spain, however, we did make up for this by frequent get-togethers for lunch, mah jongg, bridge, lectures, and cultural pursuits in general. During our tour of duty there, we toured all of Spain, including Portugal and Gibraltar and extended our visit up into Germany, France, Switzerland, Austria, and Italy.

What I have been able to tell you in this relatively brief message are only some of the highlights of my impressions. To adequately and completely cover all of our experiences and describe the places we visited, the friends we made, or the people we met, to say nothing of the charm and beauty as well as the stern reality of the people's daily struggle for existence would require volumes. So please consider this only as a sort of froth from the copita, and I sincerely hope that it will arouse your interest and desire sufficiently to gain your own experiences by actually going there.