

Dilley Rancher Changed Puerto Rico's Education

By GAYLE HAYES
State Editor

DILLEY.—Rev. J. Will Harris, a native Texan who founded Puerto Rico's present system of public schools, doesn't feel that farming and ranching can be taught from books.

Harris is convinced the only way to teach practical farming is by putting people on the soil and showing them how to handle the earth and Mother Nature.

"All this F.F.A. and 4-H education is fine," Harris will tell you, but he wants to take the discussion much further. "And after all the theories are expounded, then you have to put your fundamental knowledge to work. That's why I left Puerto Rico and came back to Texas to buy 4,000 acres of Texas soil along the Frio River.

"What we need to do is take folks who want to farm and set them up with about 200 acres of ground and teach them how to make a living on it. And making a living these days, on the farms and ranches is not too great a problem.

"Years ago, when I was a boy, my daddy had to keep his steers for years at a time, waiting for the market. There were no fences in those days, and there was — on our ranch at least — plenty of water.

"One day F. F. Collins, for whom the Collins Gardens area in San Antonio is named, came down to see my father since the two had been comrades in the Civil War. Collins was selling windmills and told my daddy there was plenty of water that the windmill could pump and the water was only 120 feet down. And my father dug the first well in this area from that conversation.

"**BACK IN THOSE DAYS** ranchers had very little money. They traded for what they needed and in fact they didn't need a lot. I was just a boy, and when I looked over the good Texas land I vowed I'd buy a ranch for myself some day when I got enough money. It took a long time, but I reached my goal in 1917.

"Back in 1905 I married and soon after that the Presbyterian

Church sent my wife and myself to do missionary work in Puerto Rico. We stayed with the church until 1912, when we opened a school of our own at St. German, with just one pupil. But the school grew out of a dilapidated building with the one student into a liberal arts college. The boys built the buildings and did the work on the 100 acres of land. The girls did the cooking, laundry and inside work.

"That school revolutionized education in Puerto Rico. Until that everything had been 'head learning' but we gave industrial training and after the Puerto Rican government scoffed at us for a while, they saw the benefits and switched to our system as official for the school system there."

BUT HARRIS still had his boyhood goal of a Texas ranch. And when he felt he had done as much as possible in Puerto Rico, he returned to Dilley and bought his "dream ranch" and went about improving it. He and a few hired hands built a concrete home, roof and all, and Harris began buying Brahman steers in spite of the fact his daddy had been partial to white-face Herefords.

Harris fattened the steers and found ready market. He'll tell you he does not need a lot of money, but is confident the soil can care for him the rest of his days.

Recently Mrs. Harris, who had been a companion for nearly half a century, died.

But Harris plans to carry on on his ranch. "After all, I am a native Texan," he says. "I was born near Dripping Springs and even though I spent a lot of time in Puerto Rico, I still considered myself a Texan. And I'm going to spend my few remaining years down there on the H-half-circle ranch. It's my home."

Along the
Texas
Highways

For JAG