

Revolutionary Missionaries in Peru: Fernando and Ana Stahl

by Charles Teel

Just prior to the Christmas holidays in 1987 I took a pilgrimage to Lake Titicaca in the Peruvian highlands made famous by the Stahls. I spent a full week criss-crossing the *Altiplano* in a Toyota Landrover, perusing faded photographs of pioneer workers, and interviewing the sons and daughters of those pioneers.

The romantic story of the Broken Stone Mission, founded by the Stahls on the shores of Lake Titicaca, may well constitute Adventism's most famous mission story. An Aymara Indian chief entreats these pioneer missionaries to send a teacher to the eastern side of Lake Titicaca in the highlands of Peru. It is agreed that the request will be honored at a later date. And when the chief asks how his village may know that the prospective teacher will indeed be a Stahl appointee and not an interloper, Fernando Stahl breaks a stone in two, gives one half to the Aymara leader who is to return to his village, and promises that the future Adventist teacher will be the bearer of the other half of the stone. Some three years later a teacher is sent, the pieces of the stone fit together as one, a school is established, and a mission subsequently thrives among the Aymara Indians.

Many of you, like myself, have children—or children's children—who are less readily fascinated by mission stories. With the advent of the electronic media and deregulated airfares, they have pretty much seen the world. And having gone

to college and graduate school, they have learned to think critically. For many of them, mission stories tend to be linked with such five dollar words as "chauvinism," "ethnocentrism," and "cultural imperialism." For our offspring, stories are not enough. Rather, data must be clear, documented, and related to the context of the times.

Which is why the Stahl stories need re-telling. Not because the stories told earlier are untrue. But because for the new generation these stories must interface with the social and political and religious cross-currents of the age. The good news is that when the Stahl accounts are retold in this manner, the stories continue to be fascinating.

For the past months I have been reading about the times of the Stahls, exploring the various forces which shaped the life of Peru's *Altiplano* (highlands) at the turn of the century. The history books tell of stolen lands and Indian revolts. The physical anthropologists picture a good portion of the Indian population, in turn, wasting away on liquor and coca. The sociologists describe a social order maintained by a self-serving triumvirate of village priest, town judge, and wealthy landowner. The cultural anthropologists depict a rigid caste system in which the world of the "white" and "mesti" was unpenetrated by the "Indian."

Meanwhile, three quarters of a century later, the rigid caste system of "whites" and "mestis" and "Indians" has largely disappeared. Rather, there are "Peruvians." (The young folks have taken to singing of themselves inclusively as "cholos"—a term that explicitly does away with the old categories and calls for pride in a social

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order no longer stratified by bloodlines.)

How come?

Probing this question has occupied creative minds over the past several decades. University investigators from such places as Lima, Stockholm, Berkeley, Buenos Aires, New Haven, Paris, Moscow, and Ithaca have descended upon the land of the Incas to analyze the manner in which these changes in Peruvian society have come about. And where has this migrating flock of scholars tended to land? You guessed it: the *Altiplano* and its Titicaca Lake encircled by Aymara Indian villages, many of which boast schools and missions established by Ana and Fernando Stahl.

Investigators from fields so wide-ranging as history, religion, political science, education, sociology, and anthropology cite the work of the Stahls. Whether the political ideology explored by the writers be capitalist, communist, socialist, or anarchist, the Stahls merit a footnote. And, more recently, feminists draw inspiration from the Stahls.

What have these researchers found? Such a question, of course, requires a book-length answer. But, for starters, it can generally be asserted that the Stahls arrived in the highlands when the *Altiplano* was ripe for change. Land—for the grazing of sheep, llama, and alpaca—had been appropriated by the powerful. The Indian population either worked as serfs on the large haciendas or eked out a subsistence living in their isolated villages. And this social order, as we have noted, was blessed by priest and judge alike. In the face of overwhelming odds, Indian leaders called for resistance. This resistance was expressed through leading open revolts, building separatist societies, or attempting to break into the existing Peruvian order.

Enter the Stahls. Indigenous leaders who envisioned education as a tool to crack open Peru's social system had invited the Stahls to bring education to the Indians of the highlands. It was not a popular move but it was shrewd strategy. For whereas Indian life was cheap and the powerful interests of the church and landowner could

cause the court to look the other way when Indian initiative was brutally crushed, it was another thing to respond in kind to *gringos* who challenged the status quo.

And the Stahls did nothing if not challenge the status quo. Defying entrenched power interests, they preached a gospel that called for equality between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. Soon scores of co-educational schools were established. And schooling equipped the

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Indian population to stand up to those principalities and powers which had held them subject. The Stahl schools taught Indian women and men reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as health and hygiene. Family-oriented health and hygiene practices resulted in a disciplined lifestyle. Reading opened up a world far larger than their parochial Peruvian *Altiplano*; writing enabled them to circumvent corrupt local judges and to file *Memorials* (written testimonies) directly with the president of the country; and arithmetic equipped them to boycott the hacienda-operated company store and local market and to set up their own markets. In short, reading the Bible enabled them to envision a new heaven and a new earth that included the Indian; it also equipped them to envision a present order in which Indian rights were respected.

Retaliation was swift. Commercial interests called for the elimination of the "free-standing" markets and schools. Religious leaders incited mob violence. And the ruling classes, seeing the schools as a threat to their position of privilege, denounced these outside agitators as anarchists, socialists, and communists:

These false evangelical (Adventist) schools bring together, daily, large numbers of the suggestionable individuals of suspect social desires, and ignorant Indians attracted through deceit, craft, and false and fantastic promises. At the schools they teach the most depraved and heretical practices. . . . They incite rebellion by instigating the Indians to disobey properly constituted authorities, whom they stigmatize as oppressive, abusive, and worthless. At the schools they work a labor of dissolution. They spread doctrines of the most crimson communism. They attempt to destroy patriotism and the spirit of the nation by inculcating the most extreme and dangerous socialist concepts of social organization, class and racial equality, unbounded liberty in the ignorant masses. They exploit their proselytes for mercantile ends, with free services and with periodic assessments to sustain the false cult. At these schools, finally, they openly attack our property system, raising Indian up against white and inciting him to ignore the rights of proprietors and to violently seize farms and haciendas, without regard to cost or means. (*El Heraldo*, September, 1923, p. 7)

The old order, of course, was destined eventually to crumble. More and more *Memoriales* were filed from the *Altiplano* as the indigenous population came into its own. The so-called "Indian Problem" as named by the dominant classes, came to be embraced by the poets, novelists, and intellectuals and—eventually—by the politicians as "Peru's Problem." And in the end, as we have

noted, the classes of "white" and "mesti" and "Indian" gave way to the inclusive term "Peruano"—or "cholo" for the younger set.

While numerous testimonials from Peru's literary and educational and political circles can be cited lauding the work of the Stahls, it is left to a French sociologist to sum up their lasting contribution. And while he draws upon terminology, more sociological than theological in nature, his words fairly echo Paul's motion of neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. The Stahls and the school system they fostered, observed this sociologist, contributed as much as any other factor to the "cholification" of Peru and its peoples!

The Stahl story needs to be retold. There remain papers to collect, oral histories to record, educational materials to write, student/teacher exchanges to sponsor, and lectureships to fund. To meet these needs (a listing enthusiastically endorsed by Inca Union's young and charismatic Peruvian president) a Fernando and Ana Stahl Foundation is being proposed. The foundation will draw upon the energies and funding of anyone who would like to participate in preserving the memory of the Stahls and passing on their story to our children.