

A Reporter's Probe of Lands Bureau

By FRANK W. SHERMAN

The JOURNAL wishes to make special note of a series of ten articles by Frank W. Sherman in the *Manila Daily Bulletin* probing the situation in the lands bureau. The articles, from which brief quotation will be made here, are now out in pamphlet form at 50 centavos the copy. They are a good piece of newspaper reporting. While all of Sherman's findings may not be as accurate as many of them are, essentially they reveal the remedies.—Ed.

Just 10 years ago the land laws now in force in the Philippine Islands went into effect. At the time the law was passed there was need for amendments, but the amendments that were made certainly failed to serve their purpose.

The law which existed before 1919 was based on principles adapted to Anglo-Saxon needs. The same law worked ideally in the United States, Canada, Australia and other countries. It would have worked the same way in the Philippine Islands had it not been for the fact that political leaders desired to make party issues of it.

The Anglo-Saxon ideals were discarded when the law was amended to accommodate politics. The power was taken from the statutes of the Islands and transferred to the director of lands and his advisors.

Following the passage of the new law, a set of regulations was drawn up by the director of lands. These allowed the director the power to "limit and de-limit, add and take away, change, cancel, approve and disapprove" all applications received by him at his discretion. With this arbitrary power there seems to have developed in the bureau of lands an idea that the bureau exists to prevent persons from settling on public lands. Instead of the idle lands being turned into productive areas they are "protected" for the future good of the country.

Despite the care that is taken to comply with every letter of the law, all classes of people have been disappointed when they have tried to get anything worth while in public lands. The "tao," who has nothing to lose, finds it just as hard as the company with capital that is anxious to really develop a piece of property and make it productive.

This is all due to the fact that the land law of 1919, with the regulations that followed it, has an interchangeable interpretation, depending upon the will of the director. No one has any assurance of gaining anything under the present "letter and spirit" system.

Any person may go to the bureau of lands today and apply for a tract of 1,024 hectares of public land. The history of this case will be the same as that of any other. The career of this applicant first will be investigated. The applicant will be asked to deposit survey fees of approximately P650 plus the annual rent, not less than P1,024, plus the annual land tax of approximately P2,048. The applicant agrees that he will apply a certain amount, say P500 to P1,000, annually on the development of this tract.

So far so good. If this applicant is the average one, however, he will soon receive a personal letter from the director of lands. The letter will inform him that if he can show P50,000 in cash he will be allowed to acquire the property. If he does not have it, he is out of luck.

The sending of this letter is one of the discretionary actions of the director of lands. There have been those who have not received them.

In bringing to a close this series of 10 articles on the bureau of lands, the writer takes this opportunity to express his appreciation for the response the articles have so far received.

Comment on the series has not been all favorable. It was not expected that it would be. It is impossible to discuss a question so popular as this has proved to be without stepping on the toes of some people. So long as no misstatements have been made, the writer offers no apology to those who consider themselves offended.

In many instances these articles have failed to touch fairly, perhaps, on both sides of the question. This may be explained in the fact that the series was intended as an exposé of the unwise methods employed in dealing with and administering the public domain, with a view

of offering some suggestions for changes for the better.

It is not a question of assisting some individual or group of individuals who have had the misfortune of having to deal with the bureau of lands and who have had personal experience with the many flaws of the system in vogue. It is a question which involves the future of the Philippine Islands, insofar as economic independence is concerned.

So long as the citizens of these Islands are discouraged by the slow, tedious and expensive method of obtaining land, just that long will the



FRANK W. SHERMAN

Islands be dependent economically. If the country is going to advance, its greatest resource, agriculture, must be developed. The greater the development the greater the advance.

In the past 15 years only about one-third of the applications made by homesteaders have been acted upon and settled. That is, no titles have yet been issued for two-thirds of the land applied for since 1915. This fact makes poor statistics to put into the hands of congressmen in Washington who may some day be called upon to decide the future status of the Philippines.

Better conditions have existed in the Philippines. In the early days of American occupation there were many successful homesteaders. The waste lands of central Luzon were settled only 20 years ago. Filipinos were the settlers, and their only capital was brawn.

But politics and the bureau of lands have not mixed well. The common Filipino who once would have staked everything to contribute his share towards the development of the Islands by homesteading public lands has lost all confidence in any bureaucrat.

Aware of the experiences of others, the average person now prefers to "buy" public land, settle it, improve it, and take as much from it as he can. Later, when the land becomes valuable, the bureau of lands can bring this settler

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into court and let the law determine who is the owner. The settler is allowed first choice of taking up the land. If he is without funds and fails he is allowed the value of his improvements from those who bid against him.

After all, considering the present state of affairs, this seems to be less expensive and more sure, for once the settler signs any form from the bureau of lands he is utterly at the mercy of the "limit and de-limit" regulations of the bureau—the discretion of the director has not always proved to be good.

It is useless at this time to say more about the bureau of lands and the system of land registration lest one gets further entangled in the national pastime—words without deeds. If there is an honest desire for economic independence and a healthy development of the Philippines, legislative and executive action will follow. This action will not stop with a lands committee or frivolous amendments to the land laws. It will be so deeply seated that it will pull up the roots of evils planted by over-ambitious persons years ago.

Through Soviet Siberia

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choir-singing which in Russia takes the place of organ music. The paintings are of the finest, especially that of Joseph and the Child, inside the massive dome. From the top of the church we saw the hill where Napoleon stood and watched the burning of the city; it was to commemorate his retreat that the church was erected.

A view of Moscow with its many churches and the Kremlin is strongly suggestive of the magic cities described in the Arabian Nights. There is nothing like it; the desire to see it again will haunt one a lifetime.

Contrasting with the splendors of the past is the shabby, ragged population—the unspeakably decrepit carriages, the rattling old taxis, the streets paved only with rough cobblestones, and the general lack of repair in everything. A few public buildings are going up and a few streets are being asphalted. Provincial towns have Moscow's shabbiness with little or none of its grandeur. The houses are mostly built of logs and are unpainted. There are no gardens and no flowers in the windows; the streets are clouds of dust when dry and pools of mud when wet. Some of the fields around the villages were so full of weeds that only portions of them had not been harvested.

The Russian government—communism? If anyone believes it in fact the ideal it is theoretically, let him go to Russia and see its practical results. He will see a blighted people—the most miserable of all the white races. I had never been in Russia before, and was there less than two weeks, but it is plain to see that though the country has rallied somewhat from the depths to which it sank during the revolution, it is still far below the pre-revolution standards. It is still drawing upon the meager reserves left from that period in order to keep going at all.

The upper and middle classes have been destroyed, only the working class has benefited. The peasants, the backbone of the Russian people, are worse off than ever. The taxing