

Unhappy People of Tristan Da Cunha Start Journey Home

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(Editor's note: This week end, the first of the bewildered, unhappy people of Tristan Da Cunha begin the long journey back to the only home they ever had known until, less than 18 months ago, disaster thrust them into a frightening new world. United Press International Reporter Robert Musel, who tells the Da Cunha story in this dispatch, sums it up in a sentence: "Our civilization has failed them.")

By ROBERT MUSEL
United Press International

Calshot, England — (UPI) — The chill winds of winter whipped across Southampton water and through the stucco walls of the house as though they weren't there.

Willie Repetto, choked with a chest cold, huddled so close to the fire he was in danger of being barbecued.

"It's this climate," he croaked. "I have never seen such snow. I have never been so cold. Four of us have already died of pneumonia."

How shall I describe Willie Repetto?

In the records of the local labor office at Calshot outside of Southampton he is simply listed as an unemployed laborer, 60 years old, a bachelor with no special skills.

An unemployed laborer? No special skills?

Values of Civilization
But these are the precious values only of our own civilization. There is a place where Willie Repetto is a leader, headman of an entire community, and none more daring at launching flimsy longboats into raging seas.

No special skills?
This is the giant of a man, scouled over now in the agony of a coughing spell, who courageously led his people from the isolated South Atlantic island of Tristan Da Cunha when its long-extinct volcano suddenly erupted on Oct. 10, 1961.

And this is the man who tomorrow begins leading them back again, disillusioned but not without hope.

Melancholy Saga
The melancholy saga that began that October afternoon when the little church of Tristan shuddered under an earth tremor at Eyvasson is playing its last act here in former Royal Air Force married quarters at Calshot, 7,000 miles away.

The whole world watched the drama of the rescue of the Tristans from their island that let the 20th century pass by — and cheered the efforts of the British to settle them somewhere they would feel at home.

It hasn't worked out. Our civilization has failed them. Now every man, woman and child of the Tristan population of 260 is so homesick they can think of nothing but going back.

They appreciate that Britain has done everything possible.

Don't Need Money
"Money, money, money — that's what people live by here," Willie said. "We don't need money on Tristan. We grow the food we eat. Here you must work at something you don't know or like for money to buy even the simplest things."

"We've tried your life and we would rather have our own."
That is why, tomorrow, Willie will be leading 50 other Tristan adults (20 of them also unemployed) and two children to the Tilbury docks in London where they will board the Royal Mail Ship Amazon on the first stage of the long journey back.

They are heading for Rio De Janeiro in Brazil where they will transfer to the S.S. Boissevain. They should reach home April 10.

Won't Want to Leave
"When we put foot back on Tristan," Willie said fervently, "none of us will ever want to leave it again."

The Colonial office is sending Peter Day back as administrator of the island with the advance party, and an agricultural supervisor will help the islanders retrieve the potato patches that provide a

staple of a frugal diet of fish, sea birds and their eggs, and some vegetables.

They call Tristan — almost halfway between Africa and South America — the loneliest island in the world. "It's a lonely island," Willie agreed, "but we are not a lonely people."

Exploratory Party

An exploratory party of six islanders traveled back to Tristan in August, 1962, to survey the volcanic damage. They reported that the island could be restored and now Willie's group will out the 65 thatched stone huts — each with running water and modern sanitation, ironically installed just before the earthquake disaster — into shape.

Then in October — two years after their forced departure — the main party will follow in the motor ship Bornholm, chartered by the Colonial office.

The Tristan islanders have tried our way of life — the television, the automobile, the airplanes, railroads and buses, labor disputes (in which a few were involved when they got jobs at an oil refinery.)

Life Hard, Dangerous
But they prefer the home they know even with the threat the volcano may become active again, even though they cling to a small tongue of thin arable land only two miles long and half a mile wide on a plateau stuck out from a 7,000 foot peak. And even though life is hard and sometimes dangerous.

When I saw Willie I had just bought an inhaler for my own mild cold and the headman of Tristan looked at it longingly. I handed it to him and after a few sniffs he smiled for the first time. Just then Joshua Green, one of his kinfolk — as are all the people of Tristan — came in.

"How you is?" Willie asked.

Speak Antique English
They speak, these Tristans cut off so long from the world, the antique English of the forebears who founded the community in 1817 when some members of a British garrison put in there to forestall any attempt to rescue Napoleon from St. Helena decided to remain.

"Is fine," replied Joshua, a tall, bespectacled man who said he was 35 though I had guessed him at no more than 20.

"Werry good," said Willie. The tend to pronounce v's like w's.

Another islander was outside the house basking in a brief period of sunshine.

Sends Them Mad
"The television nearly sends us mad," said Basil Lavorello, 30. "Cars, buses and trains roar like thunder through our brains. There is no time to think here."

"On Tristan we don't even have a theater. But we have a community hall for playing billiards and for Saturday night dancing. We lock our doors here but in Tristan we have never had a jail because we never had a criminal."

The famous island made its first appearance in history when it was discovered by a Portuguese admiral who gave it his name in 1506. Jonathan Lambert, an American who styled himself "King of Tristan," unsuccessfully attempted to colonize the 37-square-mile island in 1811, but he was drowned.

Britain Takes Possession
Five years later Britain took possession and installed its garrison. After a year the garrison was pulled out but Corporal William Glass decided to stay behind. He had an African wife and two children. He persuaded some others to stay with him and there are only seven family names — Glass, Green, Hagan, Rogers, Swain, Lavorello and Repetto, the last two shipwrecked Italian sailors who chose to stay in the 1890s.

At one time five women



TO BE RESETTLED—Careful study of the cattle and further surveys have proved that Tristan Da Cunha, which was evacuated in 1961 when the island's volcano erupted, can be resettled. "We've tried your life and we would rather have our own," a spokesman for the islanders said. (UPI)

were brought from St. Helena, some 1,000 miles to the north. Now everybody is related by intermarriage and at least one eye doctor and one Colonial expert are worried this inbreeding may produce blindness and mental deficiency.

In three of the six weddings on the island in 1957 three of the respective grandparents of bride and groom were brothers and sisters.

Office Not Convinced
When the Tristans first began speaking of going home, the Colonial office was not convinced that all of them wanted to return. Especially when G. F. Harris, a Colonial office administrator, said, "There is grave danger that in-breeding will produce a race of lunatics. The old days are gone. There is no new blood coming from sailing ships or naval personnel or scientific expeditions."

And Dr. D. P. Choyce, an ophthalmic surgeon, wrote the British Medical Journal that there were at least 25 carriers of a form of "early and untreatable blindness" already in the Tristan population.

The Colonial office decided on a secret ballot to determine whether any really wanted to stay but were being forced to say they would go back by pressure from the others. All males over 21 voted and the result was 148 for going back, five for staying.

Have Changed Minds
Those five all changed their minds and are coming back," Willie said.

"It's the weather," said Victor Rogers, 50, one of those who had voted to stay. "We have never seen weather like this. We cannot stand it. Many of us have been ill. Our winter in Tristan is like your summer."

"We have taken into account all the risks and we must go back."

"We will deal with the problems of in-breeding when and if they arise," he said. "Most of us live to a good old age and I myself have never seen any of this blindness that man was talking about."

"Believe me, it's like paradise every day out there."

Program on Ulcers Scheduled Today

Questions concerning ulcers will be answered in a discussion on "Adventures in Medicine" at 1 o'clock this afternoon over Station KBES-TV, when the topic will be "Ulcer."

Appearing on the medical panel will be Dr. John N. Reid, general surgeon, Dr. John R. Reynolds, specialist in internal medicine, Ashl and, and Dr. Earl L. Lawson, radiologist, Medford.

Parts of the discussion will be further pointed up by the sketching of Herbert Hunter, medical illustrator, as he assists during the half-hour program.

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