

# PORTO RICO IN 1904.

A Chat With The Resident Commissioner on Business Conditions in Our West Indian Island

WASHINGTON, D. C., May 24.—It was in his home on P street near Dupont circle that I chatted last night with Frederic Degetau, resident commissioner from Porto Rico, on the present conditions in our West Indian island. Mr. Degetau is the first Porto Rican who has ever held a seat in the United States Congress. He has the title of resident commissioner and the powers of a territorial delegate, representing more people than any delegate of the past. He stands for about one million of our West Indian cousins and also for some of the biggest questions now before the American people.

## A PORTO RICAN STATESMAN.

I think Mr. Degetau is well fitted for his position. He comes of one of the old Spanish families resident in Porto Rico and he is a type of the best people of that island. Tall, straight and well formed, he has a high intellectual forehead, a fair, rosy complexion, beautiful brown eyes, and a luxuriant silky brown beard sprinkled with gray. He is the handsomest man in Congress and one of the most cultured and best educated. Born at Ponce he was sent to Spain to school and graduated there as a bachelor of arts at the College of Barcelona and in the law at the University of Madrid. He has been one of the professors of moral and political science in the Madrid Academy of Anthropological Science, and as a novelist he is noted in all the Spanish speaking countries.

Mr. Degetau had made a reputation as a statesman long before our war with Spain. Some years ago Porto Rico demanded self-government, and a representation in the Spanish congress at Madrid. Mr. Degetau was one of the commissioners sent to Spain for this purpose, and later on he represented the island in the Spanish cortex. After the war was over he joined with the Americans in reorganization of affairs there, and he is now at the front, pushing everything that will benefit Porto Rico.

## PORTO RICO IN 1904.

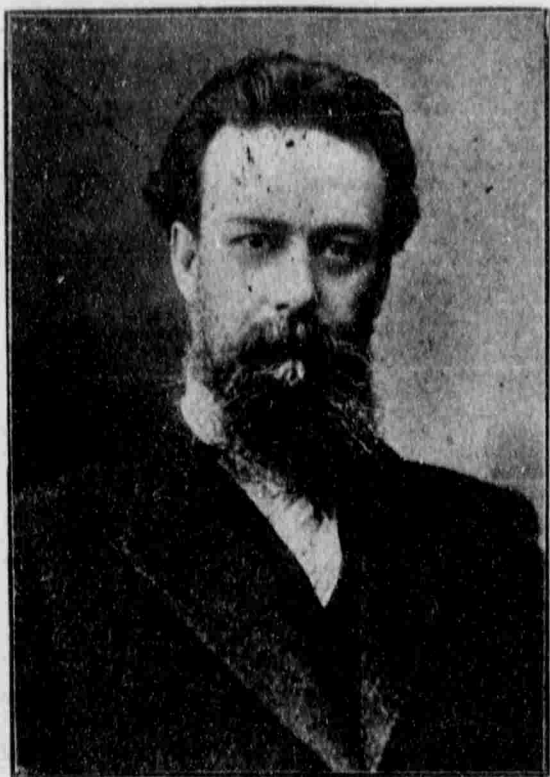
I asked Mr. Degetau some questions as to the business situation in our West Indies. He replied:

"The conditions vary in different branches of industry. In some our people are better off than ever and in others they are worse off than they were before the war."

"How about your sugar plantations?" I asked.

"They are doing very well. Porto Rico has some of the best sugar soil of the world. We can grow more to the acre than any other cane-growing country excepting Java and the Sandwich Islands. We can grow more cheaply than they can, and as a result the business is profitable."

"Where are your best sugar lands?" "On the coastal plains which border the island and on the rich river bottoms. The most of the island is high and mountainous, and the sugar lands must be limited. As it is, we have now about 62,000 acres in cultivation, and we produce more than 210,000,000 pounds of sugar per year. In other words, we raise enough sugar to give every man, woman and child in the Union three pounds every year. In addition to



FREDERIC DEGETAU,  
Resident Commissioner from Porto Rico to the United States.

these sugar lands there are some devoted to pasturage which might be used for sugar. Altogether we have about 2,600 plantations."

"What are sugar lands worth, Mr. Degetau?"

"They are very valuable," replied the Porto Rican commissioner, "and the best are seldom offered for sale. We have plantations that are worth \$300 per acre and upward."

## COFFEE LANDS CHEAP.

"How about the coffee industry?"

"I am sorry to say that the coffee planters are not doing well," replied Mr. Degetau. "This is a serious thing for us, for coffee has always been our chief industry. Before the war our principal markets were Spain and Cuba. In those countries our coffee was considered the best as it is in France and other parts of Europe today. Spain took the bulk of the crop at high prices and Cuba bought largely. After the war Spain put such a tariff on Porto Rican coffee that we lost that market, and the Cuban tariff kept us out of that country. At the same time a corresponding increase did not come from the United States. The most of your coffee comes from Brazil, and the Brazilian coffee does not compare in quality with that of Porto Rico. It is a cheap coffee, while ours is comparatively dear. I feel sure that the Americans will gradually learn the excellence of our Porto Rican product and that it will have the position that the best of

the Java coffee has now."

"I think it will eventually bring the highest prices of any coffee in the American markets. When that time comes our coffee area will be increased and we will be one of the richest states of the American Union."

"How much coffee does Porto Rico produce?" I asked.

"We annually raise about 45,000,000 pounds. We have 150,000 acres under cultivation and there are large areas which might be planted. The coffee lands are back from the sea on the slopes of the mountains. They are to be found in nearly all parts of the island, although some districts produce finer coffee than others. As for me I drink only Porto Rican coffee, except where the social demands are such that I have to do otherwise. Our coffee has a flavor which is beyond compare."

## CHEAP LANDS IN PORTO RICO.

"What are coffee lands worth?"

"That depends on the location and the soil," replied Mr. Degetau. "If the lands are accessible to the ports and in good coffee districts, they will bring much more than where it is hard to get the coffee out. The coffee business has been so bad that you can buy some lands for \$12 an acre, and very good speculation could be made in such lands and in other lands on the island. Indeed, I bought a piece myself the other day for one-tenth what its value was just after the war. This was not strictly farming land, however. It was a

tract of 24 acres adjoining the town of Alibonito. It is high up in the mountains not far from Ponce, in one of the most beautiful regions of the world. It cost me, not counting the buildings, about \$10 per acre."

## MONEY IN FRUITS.

The conversation next turned to the fruit industry, and Mr. Degetau ventured the prophecy that Porto Rico would some day be the chief orange grove and pineapple plantation of the United States. He says the fruit lands are being taken up, and that many Americans have gone there to raise oranges. He cited one instance of a man who was offered a job at \$5,000 a year in the United States. The man had recently lived in Florida and had just begun to raise oranges in Porto Rico. He replied that while he had nothing now he would not give up his prospects of making a fortune out of the fruit raising in Porto Rico for \$20,000 a year, much less \$5,000. The climate is such that there is no frost. Oranges grow luxuriantly and produce excellent fruit. So far but few of the trees have been budded and the bringing in of the best of our Florida and California varieties will make the Porto Rico orange one of the best. At present the transportation facilities are not as good as to some of the other West Indian islands, but fruit lands are cheap and such plantations are being growing. I have never seen better pineapples than those which are grown in Porto Rico. They are about twice as large as the varieties we have in our markets and their flavor is unsurpassed.

## HAVANA TOBACCO IN PORTO RICO

"What other industries have you?" I asked.

"We have some excellent tobacco plantations," replied the Porto Rican commissioner. "We can grow as good tobacco as Cuba, and a great deal of our tobacco goes to Cuba and is exported thence as the best Havana. Not long ago some of the Cuban farmers objected to the importation of Porto Rican tobacco on the ground that the Havana exporters were using it and that its quality was such that it would injure the Havana brands. Inasmuch as the exporters had most to lose by such an injury, the complaint should have come from them. The tobacco is grown well up in the mountains. There are large plantations near Cayey and elsewhere. There are cigar factories in both city and country, and in San Juan there is a cigarette factory which makes about 100,000 cigarettes a day."

"What are the prices of tobacco lands?"

"They vary according to situation and quality. Very good lands can be bought from \$50 to \$100 per acre."

## A STOCK COUNTRY.

"Tell me about your Porto Rican cattle."

Said Mr. Degetau: "Porto Rico has great possibilities as a stockraising country. We have something like 300,000 cattle and we raise as fine stock as is grown anywhere. Our cattle are noted for their beautiful hides. Indeed, one of the South American republics charges a tariff on other stock raised in Porto Rico free on this account. The animals are usually of a dun color. They are heavy limbed and finely formed. They are said to be the descendants of Andalusian and African cattle which were brought to the islands centuries ago."

"Have you much good pasturage?"

"Plenty of it. The grass is green all the year round. It grows luxuriantly,

Money in Sugar—Two Thousand Plantations and Their Product—Coffee Lands at \$12.00 Per Acre—Something About Oranges and Pineapples—Havana Tobacco, Raised by Porto Ricans—A Stock-Raising Island—No Place For Poor Men—Electric Railways and Big Hotels—Something About The People as American Citizens—And About the School Teachers Who Will Visit the United States.

and, the expenses of keeping stock are low."

"What other kinds of stock have you?" I asked.

"We have horses, hogs, goats, mules, sheep and donkeys. We have altogether four or five million dollars' worth of stock, and as a whole more than one million acres in pasture. I think there is money to be made in stock raising."

"How about your markets?"

"We have all the West Indies and all the countries of South and Central America along the Caribbean sea. Live stock and dried beef are in demand in that part of the world and we can sell all we can raise."

"Would you advise young Americans to go to Porto Rico to make their fortunes?" I asked.

"Not if they are poor," replied Mr. Degetau. "We have plenty of good workmen and many small capitalists. If the young American has some money and at the same time any special knowledge or ability, he can do well in Porto Rico. The more money he has the better he can operate."

"There is a good opening for bankers, railroad building and business of various kinds. Department stores would pay in San Juan and Ponce. As to banks, the interest rates range from 12 per cent upward, although the legal rate is, I think 6 per cent. Loans can be made on good security. There are only opportunities to buy lands for those who can command ready cash."

## INVESTMENTS IN RAILWAYS.

I asked Mr. Degetau to tell me something about the railway possibilities of the island. He replied:

"At present we are not well supplied with railways. Some little additions have been made to the line known as the Ponce concession, running from San Juan with some branches to the west coast. This will some day be completed, and we shall probably have a railroad encircling the island. A movement is now under way to build a trolley line across Porto Rico, following to some extent the line of the military road, connecting San Juan and Ponce. This road should be immensely profitable. It would get its power from the streams, and could be operated at small cost."

"There is no more healthful country in the world than the interior of Porto Rico, and I know of no country so beautiful," Mr. Degetau continued. "A short distance back from the coast there are hills which rise into mountains. These mountains are green all the year round. It is never very hot. The trade winds from the North Atlantic wash them daily with ozone, and in time they will be the great winter resort of the United States. I understand that a hotel is to be built at San Juan and another at some mineral springs near Ponce high up in the mountains. These hotels should be full during the winter, and it may be that Porto Rico will have a similar winter population to what Florida has now."

"How about your towns? Are they growing?"

"Not rapidly," replied Mr. Degetau. "The largest are San Juan and Ponce, neither of which has 50,000 people. The next city in size is Mayaguez, on the west coast, with a population of from 15,000 to 20,000. We have altogether about 1,000,000 people, but they live largely on the farms and in comparatively small villages."

"How are your people satisfied with American rule? Are they glad of the change?"

"They are glad to be Americans," re-

plied the commissioner from Porto Rico, "although it is undeniable that they are dissatisfied that they are not yet recognized as such. In other words, we are glad to be members of your great and glorious commonwealth, although not satisfied with our present political condition. Under the rule of Spain we had 15 representatives and four senators in the cortex or Spanish parliament. Now we have only a resident commissioner who has within the period of two months only been granted the parliamentary powers of a delegate in Congress."

"What is to be the future of Porto Rico?"

"I am sure that Porto Rico will, within not many years, be a state of the American Union, and that the Union will be as proud of us as we are proud of being American citizens."

I here asked Mr. Degetau whether the Porto Ricans would make good American citizens. He replied:

"Yes. They are naturally quiet and law loving. The island has been always noted as one without revolutions. The people have high ideas of honor and justice. They are intelligent, and through the schools which have been established since the occupation they are rapidly becoming educated."

"Have you many colored people in Porto Rico?"

"Nothing like so many as in most

of the West Indies," replied Mr. Degetau. "We have less than 60,000 pure negroes and about 300,000 mulattoes. The balance are whites, so that about three-fifths of the whole population is white."

## OUR PORTO RICAN VISITORS.

"Tell me something about the school teachers who are coming to the United States."

"You mean those who are to be brought by the transports to spend the summer, I suppose," said Mr. Degetau. "They are very bright young men and women, and the trip will be valuable to them and our schools. We have bright teachers. In some respects I think they surpass the American teachers. They have good imaginations and learn easily; but so far their observative faculties and experience in nature studies are not so cultivated as with the American teachers. This trip to the United States will greatly benefit the teachers and give our children a practical knowledge of the United States. As it is, our schools are rapidly improving. We have three times as many pupils as we had before the war. There is a high school in operation at San Juan, and we have a number of agricultural schools in different parts of the island."

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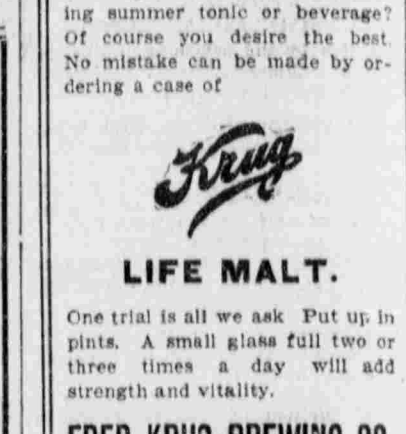


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