

The ideal image of boys and girls in the Mexican publication *The Children's Mail* (1872-1879)

*This article refers only to the period February 11th, 1872 to September 20 th, 1874.

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Preliminary Notes

This work has two purposes: 1) to introduce a children's publication of the nineteenth century that made history in Mexico and 2) to establish the ideal image of boys and girls projected by this publication. This will simultaneously serve to fill a gap in the history of publications and the world of children in Mexico.

I

The Children's Mail, was a weekly educational publication (dedicated to Mexican childhood) published first by J. Neve and subsequently by Miguel de Quesada. From its first appearance on February 11th, 1872 until its demise on May 4th, 1879, *The Children's Mail* carried children's stories, teachings, texts in modern languages to be translated by the subscribers and original writing by Mexican authors.

Miguel de Quesada, the owner and editor of *The Children's Mail* during the second period, to which this article refers, stated "he was always generously supported by the principals of Mexican schools who consistently encouraged their students to subscribe to the publication, and even when *The Children's Mail* was suffering economic difficulties, these schools would buy the publication to distribute as awards." The schools he refers to are private schools that would only admit children from the middle and upper classes. The fact that there are texts in modern languages (English, French or German) on the pages of *The Mail* attests to the importance the study of foreign languages had on the elite of that time.

The Mail defines itself as an ethical, educational and entertainment magazine but it is to be understood that here entertainment is not independent from education nor education from ethics. All of them fulfill a function: to transform a boy into a gentleman and a girl into a lady. The editor of our magazine considers that the educator's basic attitude should be that of a friend. He should not impose his

knowledge or opinions but “lead children into learning with teachings and games to lift up their ideas and to stimulate their brains.”

The director also considers that learning is the best heritage that a father can pass on to a son. According to Miguel de Quesada, the following are the words affluent parents should employ to stimulate the study of their offspring:

“Study my son, because you are very rich, and should know how to manage your assets. For then if I lose them before you inherit them, I will not grieve to think you are going to die of hunger.”

And these are the words of the parents that are poor:

“Study my son, because you are very poor and you need to know many things, to earn money with the sweat of your brow, to support yourself, to provide for us when we are old and to sustain your own family in the future.”

The idea that rich parents and the not so rich advise their children to study sounds very Utopian in Mexico where facilities to study (good schools, good teachers and books) are luxuries. The proof of this can be found in a conversation that the editor had one day with a subscriber on the street.

Subscriber: Friend, your *Children’s Mail* has already cost me twenty pesos.

Director: How come?

Subscriber: Well, Julio told me that in order to solve the puzzles and answer the questions, he needs a dictionary; so I had to buy a dictionary. Then he added he wanted a copy of the *General Geography* by García Cubas, where the names of all the towns in the world are listed, which I also had to buy. And now he is telling me he wants a book in which the names of every famous man can be found, because they are referred to in the puzzles. So, now I am buying that as well.

Director: Well, be happy my friend because without the puzzles, the last thing Julio would have thought of would have been to read the dictionary, the *General Geography* by García Cubas, or the book of famous men.

If *The Mail* were bought in a foreign country it would cost nine cents. The subscription in Mexico cost half a Spanish coin, or the equivalent of 6.25 cents an issue. The twenty pesos the child’s father talks about is not a small matter because it must be taken into account that this would be equal to the price of thirty-two copies of *The Mail*. Although effective, the puzzles that the publisher sought to entertain and teach the children with were nevertheless expensive.

Regarding the contents, the following could be added: 1) that the eight pages of *The Mail* are interesting in spite of the fact that there are no illustrations, 2) that the texts are almost entirely written by

the editor, 3) that the topics are local, and 4) that the writings do not pretend to be classical literature.

The column entitled *Episodes about Children and School Life* is specially captivating since the reader is taken into a world where he is reading literature based on his own social customs. The main characters of the stories are the subscribers themselves using their own names, which the director does not try to change. Their adventures, which are real, have a plot, climax, moral message and many details of everyday life of that time. The main characteristics of the writing by children and that of all *The Mail* are that it revolves around the private life of the subscribers and that of their schools with their authorization and to the delight of both, and that it focuses on the closed world of the middle and upper classes of independent Mexico in the second half of the nineteenth century. For today's reader this has a special interest since it allows him to travel back in time.

In addition to these entries, Miguel de Quesada also writes fiction. During the period in question we have five original stories. Here it will suffice to point out that the themes and literary structures are stereotyped. In sum, this modest weekly publication, edited in both periods by the same person, turned around the life of its subscribers and created its own narrative material introducing very little classical or foreign literature. The existence of this publication depended on its small but faithful readership of children, the firm and unconditional support of school principals, the parents' sympathy, and above all else, the economic resources of the parents.

The existence of this type of magazine shows a sincere desire on the part of both parents and teachers to educate the young.

II

The director of *The Mail* felt very proud that his publication "helped to measure the perseverance, frequency, application, and the talent of the children" although he recognizes that many of them only take an interest during the first months "in solving problems, handing out papers, and perfecting poetry" after which they no longer participate in these activities.

The Mail, being an educational publication, shows a predilection for studious children, encouraging them in a very sincere and enthusiastic way. To give an example, there is the case of the young fourteen-year old Josefina Gonzalez (a faithful subscriber since she

was eleven), to whom the editor Miguel Quesada offers his warm congratulations for having qualified as a teacher. The details of the day of the exam are so well written that the impressed reader imagines he has in front of him on January 19th at 7:30 p.m. the young Josephine in a full auditorium answering the questions of a very imposing jury composed of four questioners and two officials from the Ministry of Education.

Today's reader, just like the public present that day of the exam one hundred and thirty years ago, relives the anguish of the girl, but feels confident to see her so steadfast, in control of her nerves, and so brave. This little angel answers the arithmetic questions "so accurately that the public is in total admiration." Furthermore, she clearly shows her common sense and extraordinary talents when answering the cunning questions being asked about the "educational systems" and when solving some "very difficult" matters in which "not even the best grammarians can come to an agreement."

The adults (friends, teachers, parents) that were present at the "good girl's" exam are joyous and relieved when the deliberation of the jury "unanimously" declares her capable of practicing as a teacher. The principal of the school "hugs her so moved that she can hardly speak" and her parents "show her all their love and appreciation for her having responded to the sacrifices they made in order to give her a good education." Everybody is proud and moved, they congratulate her, and the editor of the *Mail* remembers that only yesterday "she was a child." Josephine has been one of the favored subscribers of the *Mail* since its inception," to the extent that there have been very few good articles or solutions to ingenious puzzles, problems and riddles where her signature does not appear as the contributor.

The description of this event gives us a permanent snapshot of the scene. It honors education as an institution and praises the proficiency of the jury, who with admirable objectivity, judge the young lady without personal consideration for her age. The importance of education is enhanced and there is the suggestion that any child can solve complex problems, revealing the existence of courageous youth in Mexico ready to put forward their best effort, as is shown by Josephine's example. It invites young people to follow in the steps of their peers, demonstrating that in this fight for knowledge, they can count on their parents and teachers, and acknowledges finally, that women are as capable as men of finding their way in life.

Josephine is not an exception. There are other girls like her, for instance Juanita Pasos, another young child eleven years of age who is "good and modest" and has won the heart of the editor of the *Mail* with her impressive talents. She "knows English fairly well, embroiders perfectly, understands grammar, her punctuality and good behavior are outstanding," and above all, "has refined manners," "loves her mother dearly," "is humble," "listens to the advice of her teachers" and "her only ambition is to learn so that one day she may be able to help her family with her work."

If Madame Calderon de la Barca considered that Mexican girls in 1840 were "the best in the world" due to their "natural talent" and sincerely praised their "exceptional prudence and tact," it was precisely because this prudence, tact and natural talent prevented them from looking ignorant. Because "if they were...it rarely seemed so," she said since they "hardly ever spoke or acted in a way that would reveal their ignorance of the matter concerned."

In sum, judging from this paper, the intellectual level of Mexican girls from the families described in the year 1870 is much higher than that of the middle-class ladies of 1840 described by Madame Calderon de la Barca in her famous book *Life in Mexico*. The girls of 1870 know their grammar well, while those of 1840 "wrote" but "not always with good spelling." Moreover, while the one barely read a prayer book in Spanish, the other even knows a little English. This shows a substantial difference in education. Concerning manners, it seems there were no significant changes between the ideal girl of 1840 and that of 1870. The obedient and meek attitude, the gentle and nice behavior, and the sweet and joyful character remain unchanged. The difference between them lies without doubt in their level of education.

III

There are numerous descriptions in *The Mail* about children's life in the home. Two will be referred to here. One involves a group of children who, by their own initiative, decide to celebrate the national holiday of May 5th in the house of a teacher, and the other describes in detail an incident which happened at Alameda Park on an Easter Sunday, highlighting the concepts of grown-ups and children regarding social justice.

The first story is about the national holiday and starts this way:

"Well Sirs - says Don Miguel the editor of *The Mail* - it came to happen that some of our little friends decided to get together for the national holiday of May 5th. They asked permission from their parents to do so, and their request was granted on the condition of being escorted by their brothers and some of their nannies.

As children get carried away easily by anything, in addition to the idea of going out, they thought that a meal could be organized in the house of one of their principals. All of this was to happen on a Sunday. The idea seemed great and a committee was appointed to arrange the dinner party.

Four boys and four girls were chosen to be in charge and at eleven o'clock, accompanied by Josephine's father, the "gentlemen" taking the ladies by the arm set out to accomplish their task. So formal were they that they looked like grown-ups. The young men offered the beautiful ladies lovely bouquets of flowers when walking through Palma Street, and John Buchelly, to whom his father had recently given some pesos as a reward for a beautiful composition he had written in the *Mail*, invited them to refreshments in the arcade of Las Flores."

Don Miguel de Quesada ends the story explaining that the children in charge of the invitations asked eight girls to the party, who in turn were allowed to invite some other friends, telling them in an indirect way that each one had to give four reales for the meal. The details with which the author enhances his description, far from boring the modern reader, helps him to penetrate the mentality of the time. The strength of the story is precisely in the abundance of these details as they help the reader to almost become a spectator and to harbor the firm conviction that the story being revealed is "beautiful and an example to follow." The editor of *The Mail* takes pride in depicting these Mexican families, where there is no such thing as doing something in excess and where "correct behavior" and "harmony" prevail.

Children are children, and the fact that "they get excited over anything" is more than tolerated, rather it is accepted by adults as something natural and also seen as an advantage in developing their social education. The little ones are listened to and advised without scolding. To this open and kind attitude of the adults they respond with docile gentleness: "they ask permission," "they accept that nannies accompany them," "they feel proud to be appointed to take care of the invitations," "they answer like adults to the dignity of their charge," and as if this were not enough, the young males sacrifice their savings in a totally spontaneous and unselfish way, "giving bouquets of flowers and refreshments to the girls."

Adults, in their turn, do everything in their power to realize the children's wishes, with such great joy that one would imagine they were giving neither their time nor their energy. Josephine's father

"accompanies those chosen to extend invitations for the party." Miss Maria Herrera, principal of the school named after her, "offers the girls gathered in front of her school a light breakfast after talking and having fun with them, hugging and caressing them," and finally, Mrs. Bernardi, the principal in whose house the innocent boys and girls had the good idea of celebrating the 5th of May, offers the children a "plentiful assortment of food" after they have played for a while in Alameda Garden. They arrive at her house chaperoned by Don Candido, whom they have come across "by chance" and invite him to the meal, just like that.

Don Candido is, by the way, an honorable old man (a literary character created by Miguel de Quesada) who appears always "by chance." He records all the good things the children of *The Mail* do to relate them later in the stories where he has intervened. To those who are familiar with Mexican habits, this does not come as a surprise. The fact that the children invited the honorable old man without asking permission from the hostess is normal as it is known that in Mexico the friends of friends are also friends. What is surprising is that at such an early age the small children know this logic and apply it so naturally.

An interesting point is made by Don Miguel, a practical man in his own refined way: from the beginning the girls were given permission to invite other friends, but were told to inform their friends in an indirect way that each of them had to contribute four reales for the food. This clarifies that you can ask for money as long as it is in an indirect way. What is not so clear is if the last minute guest, Don Cándido, paid the four reales or not.

Aside from these speculations, it can be pointed out that at the beginning of the meal the children were "well seated, ate with their silver" and of course the boys "acted with great courtesy offering the girls the dishes they liked best." As has been noted before, the politeness of the males is highly valued. Don Candido has been asked to begin the meal with an address, praising in an explicit way the children's reunions where they "learn to use good manners and socialize" and condemning the vulgar habits of their times in which "only science was taught and not good manners to the detriment of the young who were too shy and ran away from society because they did not know the rules and felt ridiculed each time they attended a party".

In conclusion, we can affirm that for the editor of *The Mail*, courtesy, politeness, good manners, gentry, healthy enthusiasm and a

spontaneous and generous desire to please others, are the most important qualities in every education for men and women alike.

IV

The next description involves the themes of charity and poverty, which matter so much to the author, and it should be noted that his texts focus on the Mexican reality and pretend in an active way to awaken in the children of the economically privileged class the wish to alleviate the needs of the very poor. It is worthwhile relating this story because it describes in great detail an event in which two opposing groups of society are involved, that is, the poor and the rich. The story goes as follows. Our small friends of *The Mail* were having a lot of fun "riding a bike or the train, watching puppets, playing the 'burro' or the 'viudita', listening to the music box man, or inviting a friend to have an ice cream" when unexpectedly, in front of two very formal groups of girls, "one seated on a bench talking," and the other "eating some cakes," a runaway horse nearly kills a "poor girl of about twelve years who was wandering from one place to another with her two little brothers asking for charity to help their sick parents". The little friends of *The Mail* who saw what had happened, were the first "to run to the site of the accident," even though no one tried to help the injured until Josephine Garfias, "not being able to control herself," "stepped to the front" and "without thinking how dirty the baby was nor how her dress could be ruined with the stains of blood that flowed from his head" (he had hurt his head against the root of a tree when he fell) "she covered him and cleaned his wound with her fine white handkerchief." Don Miguel de Quesada pointed out that her example was contagious because the other girls who saw Josephine started to do the same with the older boy who, very frightened, was crying, while the boys in attendance used their physical strength to "carry the girl who had lost consciousness to a bench," where they waited for her to recover.

This event took place when the twelve-year old beggar was returning to her house satisfied with the "fifteen tlacos" (a small amount money) in alms that some of the parents, moved by her helplessness, had contributed. Nevertheless, when she came to, *The Mail's* friends, sorry for what had happened, wanted to send her home with a larger amount of money, and gave her everything they had. "One gave a half real, another a quarter real and another a complete real," and in this way between all of them they collected 2 pesos in no time," in addition to the 3 reales that Maria Solis have given "very quietly" and the real that Manuelito Arce had contributed earlier. According to Don Miguel, the poor girl "trembling with emotion" accepted very

gratefully what they had given her and addressed her benefactors with the words "God will reward you and grant all the happiness you deserve."

Two of the boys wanted to take the hurt children to their house but Margarita Mejía, another friend of *The Mail*, offered "her uncle's carriage" that had brought her to the park and "gave orders to the driver to take them very fast." Don Candido, in the meanwhile was so moved he cried "to see God revealing Himself in his creatures" and "to see that the present generation educated under the principles of his holy doctrine took pity on and helped the poor."

There are various points of interest in this account. First, aside from the incident (probably half true and half invented), the author describes in great detail a Sunday in Alameda Park in 1874, giving very complete information about the games played there. Moreover, he reveals the amount of money the children had in their possession. The fact that the beggar girl received, in a short time, from the friends of *The Mail* nearly nine times more than the total amount received earlier from the adults, indicates clearly the enormous difference between the resources of the rich and the poor. In other words, a rich child nine to ten years old can have sufficient money in his pocket to buy an ice cream, while a poor adult does not earn enough with his work to feed his family.

In fact it is interesting to see that *The Mail* presents various stories in which "the rich child" is considered by street peddlers or beggars as an attractive source of income. Also it is interesting to see not only the poor but also the indigenous people appear in many texts. Here mention will be made of just two of these stories. In one of the stories, a bad boy grabs a cage from a "poor Indian" who was trying to sell three white mice at a market, and in the other story, two pickpockets steal a fruit basket from a poor indigenous woman, depriving her of her only source of income. Both stories, true or not, end well. In the first one, fortunately there is among the onlookers a boy of about twelve years who is good and generous and of means. When he sees the poor little Indian crying and heartbroken, he runs to give him the two reales he has in his possession. In the other story, the police arrest the thief's accomplice, who had not thought twice about the great harm done to the poor and helpless Indian.

Going back to our Sunday in Alameda Park, four observations can be made: 1) that the children feel they have the right to take command or make decisions without previous authorization from the adults. Margarita Mejía "ordered" her uncle's driver to take the injured

children quickly to their house and the coachman obeyed without question; 2) that the lack of cleanliness of the poor people causes repulsion, although this time it was overcome by Josephine, who "without thinking how dirty the baby was, nor how her dress could be ruined with the stains of blood that flowed from his head, covered him and cleaned his wound with her fine white handkerchief" ; 3) that the Christian doctrine is still the foundation of morality despite the fact that in 1868 there is anticlericalism in the air and that in the same year of 1874 the Sisters of Charity were about to be expelled; 4) that the editor of *The Mail*, keeps on pointing out how the children should act: the girls were eating their cakes "in a subdued manner so as not to show off" and Maria Solis gives away the money she has to the injured "very quietly" so as not to make a display of her generosity.

In short it can be said that these stories, in which the central characters are also subscribers of *The Mail*, are written to show boys and the girls of the economically privileged classes that there are many other members in the community who live in far less fortunate circumstances and need their help. The moral obligation of those born into good families, regardless of gender, is to alleviate the needs of the helpless. As far as Don Miguel de Quesada is concerned, the Indians, the poor, as well as the nannies and the coachmen are worthy of our respect, consideration and support in the world, and the mean are those, who far from helping the underprivileged, laugh at them or hurt them.

In conclusion, *The Children's Mail* gives praise to both boys and girls for positive emotions, charity, gratefulness, truthfulness, loyalty, correct speech, obedience, loving their parents, prudence, reason, courage, honesty, countenance, beauty, cleanliness, taking good care of shoes, laughter, livelihood, joyfulness, work, gentlemanly behavior and knowledge, while reproofing hypocrisy, cruelty, envy, laziness, selfishness, lies, vengeance, flattery, drunkenness, arrogance, defamation, bad habits, nosiness, greed and meddling. In his stories about children boys and girls are always together, to a degree that we cannot tell if the schools are mixed or not, nor can we tell if the girls play the same games as boys. In fact the girls seem to have ridden a train "when naughty," but like the boys, had also been offered bicycles. What the girls seem not to have done is miss school. Girls, more than boys, seem to have had a nanny, a chauffeur, a brother or an uncle to protect them. Boys more than girls, seem to have had philosophical doubts about good and evil. There is an incident in which a boy, having found out that a poor man had exaggerated his sickness to take money from him, stopped doing

good deeds and this in turn almost caused a boy genuinely in need of charity to commit suicide.

To sum up, the boys are recognized to have the same values as girls. Politeness applies even more to the boys as a sacred obligation, since the women are considered weak and in need of protection, despite the fact that they can now have a profession and work. If Don Miguel de Quesada seems to have a special affection for the girls and talks about them more frequently, it must be because they were more loyal readers than the boys.