

And a Happy Birthday to You, Rich, Famous Siamese Twins

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SAN JOSE de OCOA, Dominican Republic — "MariLIN! MariLIN!" the grandmother yelled to the 9-year-old girl with the sad, beautiful face. "We have visitors. They have come to see the twins. Go quickly. Prepare them at once."

The girl disappeared, and soon the room was filled with people running in and out of doorways with wet washcloths and baby clothes. Neighbors crowded outside the house and peered through the open windows and doorways. They wanted to know who these foreigners were who had come down their street in a new car with Sister Cecilia.

It was 1 p.m., midway through the

Almost a year has passed since the Siamese twins — Altagracia and Clara Rodriguez — were separated in an operation that made medical history Sept. 18, 1974, at Philadelphia's Children's Hospital. They are celebrating their second birthday, which is Tuesday, with a small party today in their native Dominican Republic. Inquirer medical writer Donald Drake, who began covering the twins with the operation, went to the Dominican Republic to see how they were doing. This is the first of two reports.

two-hour siesta when everyone in the Dominican Republic escapes from the sun for shade, food and sleep, and the twins were asleep. But that did not matter. The visitors were very important. They came from Philadelphia, which has become almost a holy place for these people in the mountains. The twins should be awakened.

The grandmother, a thin old woman with a weather beaten face,

apparently was becoming nervous about keeping the visitors waiting, so she invited everyone into the bedroom even though the twins were still napping.

It was a small, airy corner room with cross-ventilation from the two, glassless windows with aluminum jalousies. Half of the small room was filled with an old bureau and double bed where the twins' mother sleeps;

Twins, Now 2, Celebrities in a Rustic Setting

TWINS, From 1-A

the other half contained the two cribs.

And there they were, the now world-famous twins, eyes closed, oblivious to the excitement, but dressed as if they were ready for a party. Most Dominican children this age—especially the poorer ones in the campo—which is what people call the rugged, beautiful countryside here—wear simple clothes that frequently aren't clean. But the twins are always clad in immaculate, frilly dresses.

The twins, approaching their second birthday, looked a little bigger, perhaps slightly more pensive than they did in Philadelphia, but they were the same adorable babies who had captured the attention of every nurse in Children's Hospital.

The most significant change since they returned seven months ago was symbolized by the big, specially made orthopedic shoes that they wore even while sleeping in their cribs.

They can walk now. And though short on endurance and speed, they can even run a little. But they don't do it exactly the same way as other children their age.

Because of the way they were joined at the pelvis, surgeons had to reshape the bony structure. But nature couldn't be reproduced exactly. Thus Clara walks with a wide gait, almost as if straddling an invisible fat dog. And Alta, who must wear a corset because she has no abdominal muscles, walks with her left foot pointed out.

But they get around, and it takes a close look to notice that something is wrong. Everyone is still very excited about their walking because it's been only a few weeks since they returned from the Rehabilitation Center in Santo Domingo, where specialists spent two months developing strength in their legs and abdomen and teaching them to walk.

A New Role

Farida Rodriguez is the mother of the twins and as such has achieved fame, a new self-image and essentially a supervisory position in the family. It is for the grandmother and Marilyn Guerrero, the twins' cousin, to take care of the mundane matters while Farida contemplates more important and international affairs—like returning to Philadelphia to hold a Mass of Thanksgiving.

The twins will return next month to the United States to be examined by Dr. C. Everett Koop, who preformed the operation separating the babies.

When the visitors arrived, Farida Rodriguez was with her husband in the small village of Las Auyamas taking care of matters there, unaware of all that was happening the other house. Otherwise she would have been there herself to handle protocol.

Marilyn, always on call in the household, is as close to the twins as a sister. Her mother lives with her eight other children in a shack in Santo Domingo and is too poor to care for her, so Farida brought her into her home.

If the twins need something, Farida immediately barks out the order "MariLIN." If someone should want water, the name is heard again: MariLIN!" She is generally standing silently near the adults, ready to do their bidding. In San Jose, they say that Marilyn is the twins' mother.

Fame's Rewards

The twins were moved from their native village in Campo,, because it has no electricity, running water or medical facilities. They haven't slept overnight in their old home in Las Auyamas since their separation. But Salvador, their father, still runs his store there.

Their new home here in San Jose, a town of 13,000 people, is a white, cinder-block building that the family rents for \$50 a month. The govern-

ment has promised to build them a \$10,000 house soon.

By Dominican standards the twins' family is doing exceptionally well.. As a small businessman, Salvador Rodriguez makes more than the poor peasants who are his customers. A \$150-a-month allotment, granted the famous babies until they are 18 by President Joaquin Balaguer, takes care of most problems. It is a lot of money in a country where the average working man makes \$2 a day if he is lucky enough to have a job.

Unfortunately for Salvador, who must tend his little mountain store, fame has turned him into a commuter who sees his daughters only on weekends.

Although Las Auyamas is only 10 miles away, it is a long 10 miles because the twisting road is narrow and steep and a peso (\$1) is a lot to pay for the Land Rover bus that makes the trip each day.

So the growing crowd in the twins' small bedroom was startled by Sister Cecilia's suggestion.

"Oh, I have an idea," she announced cheerfully. "Let's surprise Farida and Salvador and take the twins to Las Auyamas."

Take the twins to Las Auyamas! It was a shocking idea. The last time Clara and Alta went back to their native village was in April when Dr. Koop visited. But that was a very important day. No one is more important than "Papa" Koop. Could such a trip be justified now? Could they dare expose the twins to the heat and dust of the road between here and there? Would Farida be angry?

Then It's All Right

"If Sister Cecilia says it is all right," the grandmother said to the expectant crowd of upturned little faces, "then it is all right with Farida."

Pandemonium! Everyone ran to prepare for the trip. Alta's corset was made ready. Marilyn prepared two nursing bottles. The grandmother ruled that she and Yuderki, who is 16 and also a cousin, would be the ones to make the trip with the twins.

The group bundled into the small Japanese car, two adults in the front, five people in the back, including the twins. The heavily laden car made its way down the dusty road, the air conditioner useless in the heat. Thermometers in the sun read 150 degrees. In the shade it was 106.

Struggling against the steep grade of the boulder-strewn road, the car climbed farther into the mountains. The countryside was green with majestic royal palm trees, but the rivers were almost dry.

The area was going through the

worst drought in memory and the people were suffering. Malnutrition which is always bad here, had worsened. Sister Cecilia's hospital was filled with babies with bloated bellies and gaunt eyes.

The twins were quiet, as they usually are when visitors are present during the hour long trip. Alta was in Yuderki's lap and Clara in Marilyn's. They looked at each other, dozed and drank from the plastic nursing bottles.

A Rare Nourishment

Most children in the campo don't drink milk because it costs too much and malnutrition dries up the milk in their mothers' breasts. Instead they drink sugared water. The more fortunate drink unpasteurized cows' milk.

The twins, however, get special dried milk provided, for a year, by the Nestle Co. Though Marilyn is charged with preparing the milk and feed the babies, the girl drinks none of it herself, getting unpasteurized milk instead. Why not drink the better milk that the twins get?

"Because it is theirs," she says simply. The twins are special. Everyone knows that. And special people are entitled to special privileges. Non-special people don't even question such things.

Making way for an oncoming Land Rover bus, the car edged precariously close to the rim of the road, 1,000 feet straight up from the valley's floor. It bumped through a rock-strewn section of the road and then started down toward Las Auyamas.

The incredible beauty of the campo, even in the aftermath of the deadly drought, clashed with the shacks and buildings, topped with thatched or corrugated roofs.

Women in dirty dresses and children in brown school uniforms gazed at the car, a strange sight on a remote road usually traveled only by the Land Rover bus.

Home Again

Two girls saw Marilyn, their long-lost friend, and waved. Taking an arm from around the twin, she smiled proudly and waved back. As villagers recognized the twins, the apprehension on their faces turned to delight.

Divining in some way that a car was coming down the road, people were already waiting in their doorways. Chickens scurried from the road and hogs sluggishly moved aside.

The twins were really home now.

Not the new, cinderblock home that fame brought them, but the building made from raw bamboo planks with a corrugated tin roof.

It was quiet. Supper time was still a

few hours off, so the children with food pails and coins tied in handkerchiefs hadn't begun to arrive at Salvador's store to buy food for the evening meal.

Food is bought on a daily basis because the money for the evening meal comes from the work done during the day.

Farida came out of the house attached to the little one-room store. She could not believe what she saw. She hugged Sister Cecilia and her twins and the reporter from Philadelphia, whom she recognized from earlier encounters.

The Reunion

Bare chested, Salvador came to the doorway, smiling also. Everyone was invited into the small, dark living room with the shiny concrete floors. The twins played under a photograph of "Papa" Koop while Marilyn pushed the chickens away.

"Marilyn" Farida barked, ordering the little girl to wash and change the twins' soiled clothes. Marilyn and Yuderky disappeared, each with a twin in her arms.

People gathered in the open doorway to see what was happening now with their famous neighbors. Salvador put on a shirt, and Farida sat down in an old, plank-wood rocking chair to sew the border on a dish towel with the words "Balaguer 74-78" written on it. It was material left in the house she had rented, and out here cloth is never thrown away.

Outside in the crowd of people was Adelaid Zuceno Soto, a 9-year-old girl with lovely unafraid brown eyes and a ready smile. She is the only girl of eight children. A ninth child died a few months ago. They do not know what she died of, but her mother, who watched the goings-on from her doorway across the road, is sure that it was witchcraft.

There was Bienenido Rodrigues Rodriguez, Salvador's cousin, a thin but handsome man who speaks little. The drought wiped out his beans and peanuts, and he has no food for his family of seven children. What will he do? "What God decides," he said with resignation.

A Woman of Means

And there was also Ida Caldaron Subero, a stylishly dressed woman with matching top and pants, who sneaked a look into the room as she goes by but did not stop because it would not be fitting for a woman of her means, even though a relative, to stop at this moment. She runs the single pool table in Las Auyamas, a sad, broken-down old table for which the men pay 5 cents a game. Her husband owns one of the Land Rover buses, making him a man of consid-

erable substance.

Rocking in her chair and sewing on the dish towel while the twins were freshened, Farida said she wanted to thank the people of Philadelphia for all they have done. She explained that she had not written because she **knows only** Spanish, but that she was very thankful.

Farida said she enjoyed the fame that her twins had brought her. People come up and talk to her in San Jose and Santo Domingo, and she makes new friends.

As she spoke, a laborer worked on an addition to the house. A modest room made of bamboo, it would be just big enough to provide space for the twins to sleep with their small court of attendants when they come for visits.

Soon, thick Dominican coffee was served with a very sweet milk cake. Sitting there in the chair, sewing and talking every now and then whenever a question is asked, Farida looked like a simple, country woman content to be in her home with her family.

America's Temptation

But she is more complex than that, and she has been tempted by what America has to offer the privileged people of the world.

Her husband, a good-natured man who is forever smiling and combing the gray hair that tops a handsome face framed by huge sideburns, goes along with whatever Farida decides.

Farida said she was eager to come back to Philadelphia, where the people have been so kind. She was too careful to say she wanted to live permanently in Philadelphia, but her friends in America think she does. They have warned her that she knows only what it is like to be a famous person in the United States. America treats its average people — especially if they speak only Spanish — with less generosity, they say.

Farida spoke of sending a teenage

son to school in the United States.

And she complained about the house she now rents in San Jose, which she said uses up \$85 of the \$150 each month when utilities are included. Also she doesn't like the new house, she said, even though it has five rooms, — because the rooms are small and have no screens, a fact verified by the many mosquito bites on the twins' arms and legs. There are no trees for shade, and the house is hot.

Selling Their Story

The family received \$10,000 from the Ladies' Home Journal magazine for the exclusive rights to their story. Farida did not make it clear where the money went, but she said she spent \$1,900 for the land where the government is supposed to build the house it promised and \$1,200 for the furniture in the house she now rents.

Farida recently told the writer for the Ladies' Home Journal that she was satisfied with the arrangement and instructed her to tell her boss in the United States that she wanted to renew the magazine contract for next year.

After the cakes were eaten and the coffee drunk, Farida got up, piled many belongings into a carton and packed them into the car that brought the twins. There was no discussion. She had decided to return home that night and, of course, there was room for her in the car, because in Las Auyamas there is always room for one more. It is not unusual for 10 to 15 people to crowd into a Land Rover or a Chevrolet taxi.

While everyone else got into the car, Farida marched off with the twins to show them to the appreciative neighbors. It was not every day that the twins visited Las Auyamas, and everyone was waiting outside for the chance to see them.

NEXT: How the twins are faring under Dominican medical care.