



Dr. Montione wears two hats, and mask to prevent tuberculosis. The man at the rear is amused at the dentist's efforts to keep his patient's hat clean.



This five year old girl, above, is responsible for tending the family's entire herd of sheep all day. An uneasy encounter results, below, when Dr. Montione takes an interest in a native llama.



Patients in "waiting room:"

Photos by Carl Montione, D.D.S.
Text by Laurence E. Keefe

For the past three years an Irondequoit dentist has used his vacation time to help a remarkable Franciscan nun-midwife in the South American Andes.

The dentist is Dr. Carl Montione; the nun is Sister Ramona Johnson from Little Falls, Minnesota; and the place is the Altiplano of Peru, 12,000 feet above sea level on the shores of the bitterly cold Titicaca, one of the highest lakes in the world.

Their unique partnership began when Dr. Montione was on a tour of Latin American capitols, and Sister Ramona, who had heard he was a dentist, approached him to ask him to teach her to pull teeth.

After being convinced that she wasn't joking, Dr. Montione spent that evening trying to explain the fundamentals of extraction. Following that fortuitous meeting in La Paz, Bolivia, she returned to her convent in the mountain town of Yunguyo, Peru, and he to Rochester.

But a friendship had begun, and after eight months of correspondence, Dr. Montione returned to South America, this time with a suitcase of supplies and the intention of training Sister Ramona more thoroughly.

"The altitude, that 12,000 feet, is what gets you most," says Dr. Montione. "Each time I've been there, it's taken me about eight days to adjust. You can't jump or run there like you do here, you'll just faint and fall right over.

"Every morning for the first week," he recalls, "I would wake up with headache, but you just take one aspirin every six hours and suffer through it until your blood thickens."

The high country of Peru has a serene, desolate beauty, according to Dr. Montione, despite the poverty and public health problems of the native Amyra Indians. Lake Titicaca, although too cold for swimming, is clean and free of pollution and litter; the atmosphere is clean and smokeless, almost untouched by man.

Standard procedure during Dr. Montione's last visit was to go as far as possible by truck or station wagon toward the village where he and Sister Ramona would be working that day.

Villagers would then carry the chairs, tables and equipment up dirt paths to a churchyard or "a one room schoolhouse, if we could find one." The reason for having the Amyras carry the equipment, Dr. Montione explains, was not a misplaced pride, but because "at that altitude it is almost impossible for me to carry anything, and they are used to it."

Working conditions for the dentist and his apprentice were uniformly primitive. Most extractions were done in the local church's graveyard, with the patient seated in a kitchen chair. Water would be brought by truck in jerrycans for washing hands and cleaning instruments between extractions. "If we spilled the water on the way we would have been out of luck for that day," Dr. Montione said.

Doctor Montione's last visit was during Easter this year, "when the area is not isolated by floods and the cold is not so intense. Even though they don't get the heaps of snow we have in Rochester, the cold is so damp and so severe that it gets right to the bone. It's a different kind of cold."

Now that he has trained Sister Ramona to the point where she can do extractions regularly, Dr. Montione does not feel certain he will return to the high country of Peru. "If you were to say you were going there just to see what it was like, I would say you were a fool," he told me.

But after a pause, he added, "If you have to go there, to help, then it's worthwhile."