

FROM PUERTO RICO TO ORANGEVILLE:
THE STORY OF JUAN JOSE OSUNA IN COLUMBIA COUNTY

Edited by Robert Dunkelberger

In 1929 Dr. Juan Jose Osuna, 1906 graduate of the Bloomsburg State Normal School and Dean of the College of Education at the University of Puerto Rico, learned of the death of Mira Welsh, the woman who had helped to raise him as a young man in Columbia County over 25 years before. This was the impetus for him to write a brief article on his days here and at the Indian School in Carlisle, published in 1932 as “An Indian in Spite of Myself.” Fourteen years later Osuna began writing a more extensive biography of his early life, which was only partially complete upon his death in 1950.

The manuscript of Osuna’s autobiography was part of his personal papers deposited in the Bloomsburg University Archives in 2006 by his son, Jim Osuna. What follows is the section on his time here from the original annotated version, exactly as he wrote it except for a few corrections for obvious typographical errors. Along with Osuna’s account is additional information by the editor on some of the people and places he mentions, as well as a summary of his life both before and after the time a young man from Puerto Rico grew and matured on the farm and at schools in Columbia County, PA.

Juan Jose Osuna was born on June 24, 1884 in Caguas, Puerto Rico, the grandson of an immigrant from Spain. The event that was to change his life was the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the annexation of Puerto Rico. Children from prominent families ended up coming to the United States to further their education and learn American culture. Although not from a wealthy family Osuna also had this opportunity, and he arrived in New York Harbor on May 1, 1901 at the age of sixteen.

Because he and other Puerto Ricans did not know English some of them were sent to the Carlisle Indian School for an introduction to the language and culture. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School was founded in 1879 as an attempt to assimilate Native Americans into “white culture,” although in the end it met with very little success except on the football field. Osuna remained there for nearly a year, progressing in his studies but learning little English, until an opportunity arose that set him on his course for life. This is where we pick up his story in his own words.

“Professor Oscar H. Bakeless,¹ the Principal of the Academic department became very fond of me and at times would take me into his office to work. He often had me at his house for meals and to help take care of his son John² who was then a little boy about 4 or 5 years old. Although I knew very little English, I seemed to be able to understand Professor Bakeless. He was so good and fatherly to me, that I could not help understand and love him. He began to talk to me about going to the country to work on a farm for the summer of 1902 in order that I might learn English. He made all arrangements and on March 25, 1902, he asked that I be gotten ready to go to the country to work. Mother Given had gone and Miss Carter³ had taken her place. She got me ready and on March 26, 1902, at four o’clock in the morning, Professor Bakeless came in a wagon, got me and took me to the train and went with me to my next destination. We traveled

about half a day and arrived in the forenoon at Bloomsburg, Pa. He took me to the normal school and introduced me to Dr. Judson P. Welsh, the Principal.⁴ Dr. Welsh shook my hand, and said: How is my boy? I liked him immediately. We stayed two nights at the school and on March 28th in the forenoon, Professor Bakeless put me in a milk wagon and I went with the driver to the country where I was to become a hired boy.

“On March 28, 1902, I arrived at the Welsh farm about a mile from Orangeville, the nearest town.⁵ There were three Welsh farms, the old homestead where Mrs. Welsh, mother of Dr. Welsh, Diana, a cousin and Miss Mira a sister to Dr. Welsh, lived⁶; an adjoining farm on one side belonging to John Welsh a brother of Dr. Welsh - and on the other side Dr. Welsh's farm. Each farm had a very fine residence and outside buildings - I was to be the hired boy of old Mrs. Welsh, eighty years old, Diana about seventy and Miss Mira about fifty. I was to do the chores of milking, cleaning stable, tend the chickens, keep the grounds nicely, take care and drive a horse and help with the general farming, when John Welsh came to farm the land belonging to the old homestead. My salary was four dollars a month and my keep.

“I began work there April 1st, 1902, the other Indian boy who preceded me remained a few days to start me. I knew very little English, but now I had to talk English. I was the only person of foreign birth in all that neighborhood. In fact, I was a curiosity. People thought I was another Indian boy, and yet I did not look like an Indian. Sunday afternoon many people would come to call, to see Miss Mira's Indian boy who was not an Indian. Coming from Carlisle I had to be Indian and yet I was not an Indian. In my poor little English, I tried to make the people understand that I had been born in Puerto Rico and that I was not an Indian in spite of Carlisle. They asked many questions which I could not understand. I suppose I was a queer duck of an Indian.

“I got busy learning English. I had to eat, drink, work, play and sleep in English so before I was conscious of it, I was talking English. By May 1st, I was talking fluently and by hay making time and harvest season I was a regular American boy on the farm talking English like the rest of the boys and girls. That summer I was eighteen and with the farm work and the farm board, I developed into a man, short in stature, but strong as the farm hand that I was. I helped with the plowing, harrowing, planting and reaping of the crops. It was a wonderful summer. I began to overcome my foreigner complex and began to be assimilated into the environment as a regular American boy. I joined the life of the community, church, grange picnics, swimming parties, straw riding parties on moonlit nights. By the fall of 1902, I felt like any other Pennsylvania boy, an American boy. I have always said that the best way to make an American of a foreigner is to take him to a farm, give him a team of horses and put him to work on the farm. In those days there were no tractors or labor saving machinery on the farm. When we plowed we walked behind the plow from dawn to twilight, and put in a long hard day's work. All during the summer we worked from sun up to sun down. That is the best course in Americanization that I have ever taken.

“The end of the summer had arrived and I was due to return to Carlisle. How I deplored the fact that I had to go back to the Indian School! I had learned so much English and I loved the

farm. I asked Miss Mira to keep me for the winter and send me to rural school. She told me that during the school months she did not pay any salary but only room and board. I told her I did not need any money, that I wanted to go to school. She wrote to Carlisle and I was authorized to stay for the winter.

“Neyheart rural school⁷ was about a mile from our place. Mrs. Schoonover the teacher had been Dr. Welsh’s teacher in Orangeville. She was about sixty years old, one of the most wonderful teachers I ever had. She lived at our place, so I had the supervision of the teacher at home. The school was a typical rural school of the day, one room school, with seats for about forty children, one stove in the center, few materials of any kind. It had eight grades, the youngest child was Warren Kelchner,⁸ now of the Department of State and I was the oldest child. There were a few large boys around fifteen and sixteen years old not very good students. Mrs. Schoonover taught the eight grades in a special organization of her own, kept us all busy and we all progressed marvelously.

“As I knew English now, I became very much interested in my school work. I soon found out that the work was easy and at home Mrs. Schoonover stimulated me to go beyond the required work. We both conceived the idea that if I studied hard enough, perhaps I would finish the eighth grade and cover the work of the first year of Normal School. One of the State Normal schools was located at Bloomsburg.⁹ Dr. Welsh was principal. We consulted with Dr. Welsh and he approved of the plan. I got busy and studied very hard. By Christmas of that year I had fulfilled the requirements of the eighth grade in the fundamental subjects being a little weak in English. To improve my English Mrs. Schoonover had me read Pilgrim’s Progress aloud, and Miss Mira had me read the Bible, King James Version. I became very fond of these two wonderful books and began to commit to memory many wonderful passages of the Bible. The children in school were required to repeat a verse of Scripture at roll call in the morning. They would learn one verse here and another there without any system and they would choose the short verses. “Jesus wept” was a favorite. I was very systematic. I would take a chapter, learn a verse every day and before long I knew and recited the whole chapter.

“The school term was short. We started school in September. In October attendance was very poor because we remained on the farm most of that month to husk corn and put it in the cribs, so real serious school work did not begin until November. Then we would work hard until the end of March. By April first, it was plowing time and we had to go to work. However, in that short school term we did a lot of work and in my case besides the regular work I covered the work of the first year of Normal school. Bloomsburg Normal school at that time offered four courses: a four year normal course for those who entered from the elementary school, a four year course to prepare for college, a four year course in business and a two year normal course for those entering after completing high school.

“The Spring and Summer of 1903, I spent at the farm hard at work, my salary was raised to five dollars a month. It was a wonderful summer, I was already a young man full of life, strong and healthy. I had become a part of the community. I was not a foreigner any longer - just a boy on the farm like any of my pals. The ladies for whom I worked were like mothers. In fact, I always thought of Miss Mira as my American Mother. I was treated as a son and not as a hired boy.

“Fall came and Dr. Welsh made all plans for me to enter the Normal School. Permission was secured from Carlisle because I was still a ward of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I entered the Normal School the fall of 1903, second year of the four year normal course. I had to work my way through because I had no money, so I went to school and clerked at the so called check room where the students kept the gymnasium clothes. For a boy from the open country on the farm this job was very confining, so I became sick, full of boils and had a general run down. I was working hard, no recreation, all work and no play. In order to give me some outside work, I was made mail carrier and was relieved from the check room the time necessary to go for the mail. The Post Office was down town, about three quarters of a mile from the school.¹⁰ I would go for the mail at eight o'clock in the morning and four o'clock in the afternoon. This made it possible for me to take a three mile walk every day. I soon overcame my illness and was back into excellent physical shape.

“In the Spring of 1904, Dr. Welsh moved from the normal school to a house down town¹¹ and I was taken along to be house boy, so I made all my expenses living with the Welsh family. Later in the year the School bought the old Buckalew place, twelve acres of land and a fine residence. It was all fitted up for the Principal's residence. I went with Dr. Welsh to take care of a team of horses, be the driver, take care of one hundred chickens, attend the furnace and take care of the yard and garden. Until June 1906 that I graduated, I was official gardener, coachman and in the summer, when the work was pressing, such as during the thrashing season, I worked on the farm. I finished my normal course and graduated with honors. In the meantime in the Spring of 1905 Carlisle recalled me, examined me and granted me the diploma of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School with the class of 1905. This act severed my relations with the Federal Government. I was ready now to teach.”

Osuna went back to Puerto Rico where he taught for two years before returning to the United States to begin his college education at Pennsylvania State College. It was a natural step since Judson Welsh was now a vice-president there, and Osuna would visit Orangeville to see Miss Mira. Following his 1912 graduation he furthered his studies at the Princeton Theological Seminary and became a Presbyterian missionary in his native land. He then went to Columbia University and received a Doctorate in Education in 1923. Upon returning to Puerto Rico he worked for the University of Puerto Rico, serving as Dean of the College of Education from 1928 until his retirement in 1945. Osuna then moved to Washington, DC to work for the Education Foundation, Inc., and died in Arlington, Virginia on June 19, 1950. The hills of Pennsylvania that meant so much to him became his final resting place, and he was buried on a hill in the cemetery overlooking Orangeville.

Notes

¹ Oscar Hugh Bakeless (1858-1933) was born in Shamokin Dam and graduated in 1879 from the Bloomsburg State Normal School (BSNS). After teaching for a few years he entered Lafayette College, graduating from there in 1890 and then came to teach at Bloomsburg. In 1893 he accepted the position of head of the academic department at the Carlisle Indian School. In that capacity he oversaw the work of the academic faculty and traveled the United States to check on the welfare of Indian youths being raised in white homes. He was lured back to BSNS in 1902 to run the department of pedagogy, which he did

until his retirement in 1929. Bakeless remained active working with the teachers college Alumni Association and the First Methodist Church of Bloomsburg, where he died while leading a prayer service on his 75th birthday, September 6, 1933.

²John Edwin Bakeless (1894-1978) was actually six years of age when Osuna first met him. Bakeless was the son of Oscar and Sarah Harvey Bakeless and was born in Carlisle while his father worked at the Indian School. When the family returned to Bloomsburg he attended schools here and graduated from the BSNS college preparatory department in 1913. He went on to earn a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Williams College in 1918 and a master's and doctorate from Harvard University. Among the many occupations he engaged in during his lifetime were those of writer and editor, and in both World Wars I and II he served as an army officer. Bakeless began his writing career as a reporter and editor for the *Morning Press* in 1911, and went on to author a number of books on such subjects as playwright Christopher Marlowe, frontiersman Daniel Boone, and military affairs. In 1920 he married Katherine Little, a 1915 normal school graduate, and they resided during their later years in Connecticut, where he died in August of 1978. The Bakeless Center for the Humanities on the Bloomsburg University campus was named for Bakeless, his wife, sister and his parents.

³Leda Given was born in 1843 and served the Indian School as the manager of small boys. Because Osuna was only four feet, six inches in height and weighed 85 pounds he stayed in the dormitory for younger boys, even though he was actually 16 years of age. By 1902 Florence Carter, who was born in 1859 and had been a teacher at the school, was the new manager of the dormitory.

⁴Judson Perry Welsh (1857-1934) was born on the Welsh homestead north of Orangeville, the son of Abner and Mary Kline Welsh, and graduated in 1876 from the Bloomsburg State Normal School. In 1882 he graduated from Lafayette College, later receiving a master's degree and doctorate from there. He became a faculty member and vice-principal at the West Chester State Normal School, where he authored a textbook on grammar. When David J. Waller, Jr. left Bloomsburg as principal in 1890 Welsh was hired to replace him. He spent sixteen very successful years as head of the normal school, overseeing the enlargement of the main dormitory, the laying of the first athletic field and construction of the gymnasium and an employees' dorm, the addition of a tower to Institute Hall, and the planning for a new science building which opened in 1907. Welsh left in the fall of 1906 to assume the vice-presidency of Pennsylvania State College, where he remained until 1910. After his career in education ended he moved to New York and went into business, with previous experience in Bloomsburg as co-owner of the Welsh & Hyde Buttonless Suspender Company. He lived in Pleasantville, NY with his wife, the former Alma Sager, until his death in 1934 at the age of 77.

⁵What became the borough of Orangeville was laid out in 1822, received its name about two years later, and was incorporated in February of 1900.

⁶Mary Kline Welsh (1821-1908) was a life-long resident of the Orangeville area and married Abner F. Welsh (1811-1891). She had seven children, five of whom survived her on her death, including Judson, John, and Myra Welsh. Mary was well-known in the area, regarded with high esteem, and was an 1842 charter member of the Presbyterian Church in Orangeville. Diana Welsh was the niece of Mary and was born in 1831 and also lived with her along with Mary's daughter Elmira (Mira) V. Welsh (1849-1929). Mira was as esteemed as her mother, was a faithful member of the Presbyterian Church's Ladies Missionary Society, and resided on the family homestead her entire life. She lived by the motto "I am here to serve" and trained several young men over the years, one of them Juan Osuna. Her last two winters Mira stayed with her niece in Kingston, where she died in April, 1929. John M. Welsh (1846-1916), son of Mary and brother to Judson and Mira, also lived his entire life in Orange Township where he worked as a farmer. He served as an elder in the Presbyterian Church and died in June, 1916, one week after his 70th birthday.

⁷ The name of the school was probably Neyhart. The 1876 atlas of Columbia and Montour counties shows a school located north of Orangeville near the land of both J. Neyhart (misspelled Nyehart on the map) and Abner Welsh. Ellen Schoonover (1838-1918) was the wife of Isaac E. Schoonover, who headed the Orangeville Academy from 1870-75. They later went to Brooklyn where Isaac worked for the Custom House at the Port of New York until his early death in 1893. By 1900 Ellen was living with her sister in Wayne County, PA, but then returned to Columbia County to teach. In 1903 she was teaching at a school in Rohrsburg in Greenwood Township, and in the summer of 1906 was hired by her former student (probably at the Orangeville Academy) Judson Welsh to work in the normal school English Department and assist with the Cuban and Puerto Rican students studying at Bloomsburg. Juan Osuna had just graduated, and her previous experience with him must have helped her immeasurably in her new job. She not only taught the students but was like a mother to them as well. Mrs. Schoonover remained an active and vital member of the faculty until her death in February of 1918 at the age of 79. She was so well respected that every member of the BSNS student body, faculty and officials attended the funeral services in the normal school chapel.

⁸ Warren Kelchner (1895-1965) was the son of Woodward L. and Dora J. Kitchen Kelchner (1869-1966) and grew up first in Orange Township and then the Millville area. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and earned a master's from Harvard and doctorate from Penn. He entered the employ of the State Department in 1929 and became chief of the Division of International Conferences in 1940. One of Kelchner's responsibilities was to supervise the administrative details of the conferences, which included the monetary and financial conference at Bretton Woods, NH in 1944 and the 1951 signing of the peace treaty with Japan in San Francisco. He retired after many years of service and then lived in Sarasota, Florida with his sister and mother until his death in June, 1965.

⁹ In 1868 the trustees of the Bloomsburg Literary Institute, a private preparatory school headed by principal Henry Carver, decided to apply to become one of the normal schools that were being established around the state to offer training for teachers. A prerequisite for this was that a dormitory to house students be built on the campus, which was completed the following February. That month a committee formally approved Bloomsburg's application and the literary institute was now also a state normal school, which it remained until becoming a state teachers college in 1927.

¹⁰ The post office had a number of locations in downtown Bloomsburg before the current building was constructed in the 1930s. In 1899 it moved to the Moyer Building at 108 West Main Street where it remained until 1906, when it occupied a larger space in the First National Bank building on Market Square.

¹¹ Judson Welsh and his family lived in the main dormitory at the normal school from the time he was hired in 1890 until the fall of 1903, not the spring of 1904. They then moved to the Billmeyer property at 146 North Market Street. The home was later torn down to provide parking for the Caldwell Consistory.

¹² Buckalew Place was built in the 1860s, the home of Charles Rollin Buckalew (1821-1899). He was a native of Columbia County and had a long political career, serving as a state senator, U.S. minister to Ecuador, U.S. senator, and member of the U.S. House of Representatives. Following his death the normal school trustees purchased the home in July of 1903 and decided to thoroughly remodel it to serve as the principal's residence. A number of interior renovations were done, including adding electrical wiring, and repairs were made to the porch and the entire house was given a fresh coat of paint. The work was done during the spring of 1904 and the Welsh family moved in by early summer. In July the trustees named the house and grounds Buckalew Place.