

CIAT's Early Days: Some Personal Memories

by Kerry J. Byrnes (Okemos High Class of '63)



In 1963 The Rockefeller Foundation hired my father, Dr. Francis C. Byrnes, to head the communication and training unit at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in Los Baños, The Philippines. After working at IRRI from 1963 to 1968, the Foundation reassigned Byrnes to Bogotá, Colombia to work with Dr. Ulysses (Jerry) Grant to establish the Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT). Years later the Asia Rice Foundation-USA (ARFUSA) invited me to serve as the first (former) “IRRI Kid” on the foundation’s Board of Trustees. Actually, by the time our family arrived at IRRI in March of 1963, I was hardly a “kid,” being just one correspondence course short of graduating from high school. Unlike my younger brother (Kevin) and sister (Kathryn) who were “kids” and attended the Makiling primary and high schools at the University of the Philippines-College of Agriculture in Los Baños (UPLB), the time I spent at IRRI was initially limited to a long vacation before starting my freshman year at Michigan State University (MSU) in the fall of 1963, plus later studying for a semester at the UPLB in 1966. A year or so later, my parents’ time at IRRI ended when my father was reassigned to Colombia, initially working in Bogotá with Dr. Ulysses J. Grant (CIAT’s first Director General) to plan the construction of CIAT. Not long after, Dad was reassigned to Cali to open CIAT’s initial office on the 16th floor of the Edificio Aristi, where he hired CIAT’s first two employees, a secretary (María Victoria Caicedo) and a driver (Humberto Villaquirán).



By the time I arrived in Cali in September 1968, having completed a M.A. in communication at MSU, I could hardly have been pegged a “CIAT Kid” but I did move in with my parents, soon landing a research position on the USAID-funded Proyecto de Mercadeo Urbano y Rural (PIMUR) implemented by MSU in partnership with the Cauca Valley Corporation (CVC). PIMUR’s office was one of the early tenants in the new Banco Ganadero (now the BBVA bank). For the balance of 1968 through early September 1969 I worked with PIMUR, heading its market information and communication study—and, at times, when at home and around the dinner table, heard my father talk about his work during those early days of getting CIAT up and running. I share below some of his stories and other memories I have of my “close encounters” with CIAT.

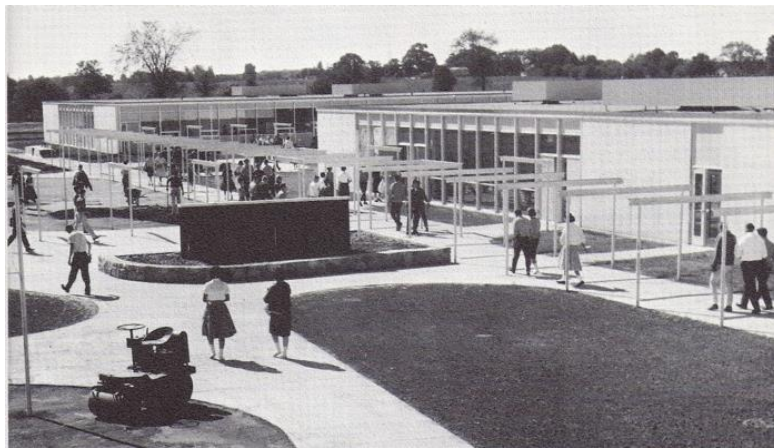


The Battle with Caicedo – CIAT’s physical plant was designed by Roberto Caicedo. During those early days of CIAT in 1968-89, while Dad was working in CIAT’s office in the Edificio Aristi, he traveled frequently to Bogota to meet with the architect and review draft architectural plans for CIAT’s buildings, one of the features of which are the beautiful arches that cover CIAT’s red-brick hallways and white-painted walls. The design was (and is) at once both colonial and contemporary. But the architect included one feature my father simply could not stand, namely, translucent plastic sheets (some blue, others orange) that the architect proposed as space dividers in CIAT’s hallways. Before those sheets could be installed, and while my father was acting DG (while Dr. Grant was on travel status), Dad asked one of the CIAT mechanics to cut those sheets into small rectangles, say, about 2 inches wide by 5 inches long.

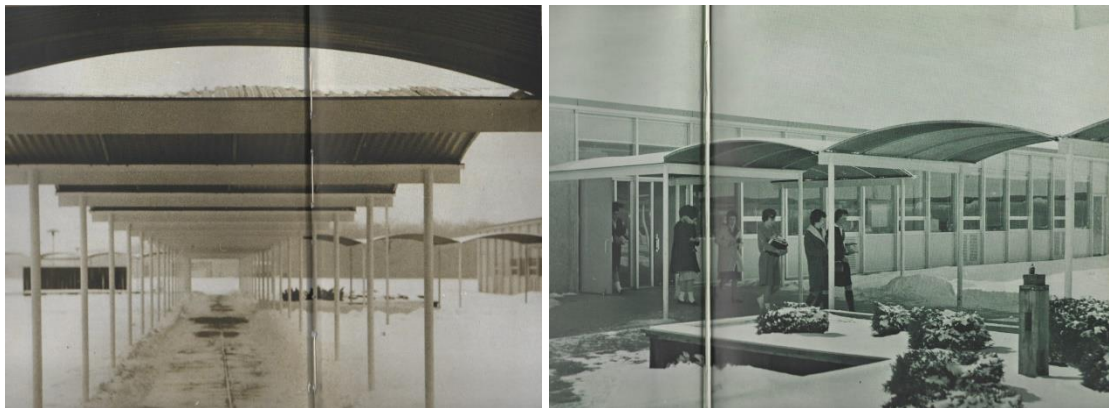


When the mechanic expressed concern that Dr. Grant might not approve, my father told him not to worry about that as my father would deal with Grant. Then the mechanic asked: “What are we going to do with the rectangles?” Dad again responded not to worry, just cut the sheets into rectangles and then bring him a few of the rectangles. When the mechanic returned with a sample of the rectangles, Dad told him to drill a hole near the end of each rectangle and attach to each a key to one of the CIAT guest house rooms. Hence the origin of the blue and orange plastic key holders which, apparently, along with the attached keys, have long since been replaced by modern electronic key cards to unlock CIAT’s dormitory rooms. During an early 2015 visit to CIAT, I asked what happened to those blue and orange plastic key holders but nobody remembered them.

Incidentally, those orange and blue plastic sheets at CIAT reminded me of the curved orange fiberglass sheets that became awnings for the covered walkways that students walked to get from one building to another at the high school (Okemos High) I graduated from in 1963. Those covered walkways, however, were not all that practical as wind would blow rain or snow horizontally under the awnings, with puddles of water or drifts of snow accumulating on the walks under the awnings. Those awnings would have been a great idea for a sunnier/drier climate but not for the climate typical of Michigan’s rainy springs/falls and snowy winters! Perhaps even worse, why the hell “orange” awnings when the school’s colors were and still are “maroon and white”? But I digress!!



Walkways at Okemos High School before Awnings Installed (*Tomahawk*, 1961)



Walkways at Okemos High School after Awnings Installed (*Tomahawk*, 1962 and 1963))

I think it's safe to say that CIAT was much more successful with its arched and covered walkways – and my father certainly had the right idea in having those blue and orange plastic sheets repurposed into key holders!



The Fugitive Pepper Shakers – This is the story of the “battle” between my father and Nestor Guzman, CIAT’s first manager of food services. My father had for some time noticed when he had lunch in CIAT’s cafeteria that there were no pepper shakers on the table. So one day he asked Nestor: “Where are the pepper shakers?” Nestor answered that Colombians don’t like pepper, so what’s the point of putting pepper shakers on the tables?” Dad answered that CIAT was an international center that had scientists from around the world, from the United States, Europe, Asia, and other Latin American countries—and, accordingly, salt and pepper shakers should be on each table in the cafeteria. The pepper shakers quickly reappeared on the cafeteria tables until, a few weeks later, when Dad noticed that there were no pepper shakers on the tables. Again confronting Nestor, Dad asked why the pepper shakers are not on the tables. Nestor replied that some of the Colombians were stealing the pepper shakers. Dad, incredulous, replied: “Nestor, how can that be? Just a couple of weeks ago you told me that Colombians don’t like pepper, so why would they steal the pepper shakers?” I’m not sure if the problem, perhaps a cultural one, ever got resolved but, on a March 2015 visit to CIAT, I stopped by the CIAT cafeteria and took the below photo. Not only were no pepper shakers in sight but even a table or two was without a salt shaker!



The Missed Honeymoon Flight – My parents occasionally called on two of the CIAT drivers to help out with personal trips. CIAT’s first driver, Humberto Villaquirán, drove Sonia to our wedding and then the newly-wedded couple to Calipuerto (now CAVASA) for the flight to our honeymoon in Bogotá, only to discover that we had missed our flight. Just a week before I met Sonia at the same airport when her flight arrived from San Andres, on a plane that was scheduled to continue onward to Bogotá, the flight we were scheduled to take to Bogota for our honeymoon! But I never checked our tickets and didn’t realize that Avianca had changed that flight’s departure time to earlier in the evening. Thus, by the time Sonia and I arrived at the airport, several of the wedding guests who had come to see us off asked: “Where have you been? Your flight already left for Bogota!” My mother, always prepared, anticipated that some problem might arise and, as it turned out, we spent the first night of our honeymoon in my parents’ bed, though they slept in the guest bedroom!



The Distracted Driver – On another occasion, when another driver (Azael) was driving Sonia and me to some location, Sonia noticed that Azael was spending more time watching the Caleñas on the street than keeping his eye on the road. This prompted Sonia to alert my mother that she might want to bring this to Azael’s attention, in order to avoid the possibility of an accident.



CIAT's First Car Accident? – Speaking of car accidents, after lunch one day, my father and I drove back to the Edificio Aristi and parked outside, the driver's side of the car parked against the curb. Not paying attention, I opened the front passenger door, only to have a motorcyclist slam into the door, ripping the door off its hinges. On another occasion, I was driving the family car, heading to our house, when I found myself too close to students (from the Universidad del Valle) marching and protesting in the street. Noticing the car's black license plates (or as we called them, "placas blackas", which were on the vehicles of CIAT as an international organizations), the students started to rock the car, leaving me increasingly scared. I saw an opening, slowly accelerated, and was able to get away, the only damages being some dents to the side of the car and the radio antenna ripped off. Fortunately, in both cases, the only physical damage was to the car. Some years later, Fernando Monge, who was the CIAT librarian, was not as fortunate. After a late evening party at CIAT, Fernando was driving home and ran into a truck parked on the road, sadly resulting in his death.



The Fight with My Mother! – One day, while working on the PIMUR Project in 1968-69, I got home from work and was tasked by mother (Ethel Byrnes) to do some weeding in the garden. Sadly, I didn't respond to her request in the most tactful way, my response being that I was not going to go out into the hot sun, with my allergies, and start weeding, not to mention that I had higher priorities for my free time (seeing my "novia" Sonia). Sadly, our exchange drove my mother to tears. I totally forgot that my parents were affording me free room and board, so I must have come off as a total ingrate. My father told me not to worry about what had transpired and that he would calm her down. Not long after, I noticed at Sonia's house that her family's gardener (Miguel) was doing a nice job caring for the Gomez garden. I asked Sonia to inquire if Miguel might be interested in doing some yard work at my parents' house. As it turns out, my mother, pleased with Miguel's knowledge of Colombian plants and his care of the garden at our home, invited him to come out to CIAT to assist her in designing the landscaping for CIAT's grounds and selecting and planting the flora (i.e., trees, bushes, flowers) for the Center's grounds. Miguel became a regular employee of CIAT, eventually the head gardener, and now has retired from CIAT.



Mother's Other Contributions to CIAT – My mother's contributions to CIAT were not limited to helping plan the center's landscaping, including design, selection, and planting of trees, shrubs, flowers on CIAT's 50-acre campus. Further, as buildings were completed, she identified and acquired paintings, artifacts, and materials typical of countries served by the center to complement the center's furnishings (desks, tables, and chairs). She worked with consultants on design and selection of kitchen, dining, and housing facilities and equipment for the CIAT training and conference center. Recalling those early years, Bob and Susanne Morris who were at CIAT during that time shared the following in a recent email:

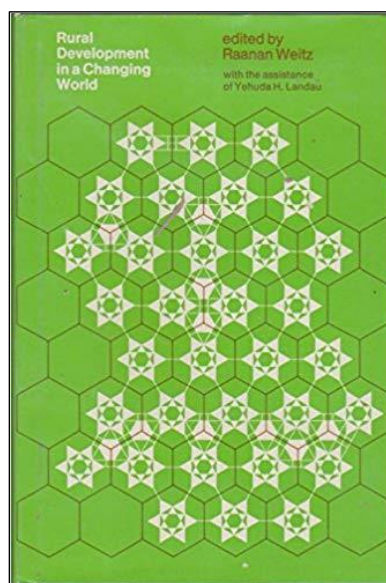
One story I do remember about your mother and the new CIAT buildings. She thought it was lovely and appropriate to have a Spanish, red-tile design used as the basic theme, but ever practical, she said it was **unconscionable** that the architect planned so few, and such tiny janitor's closets. She also thought he needed to have his head examined because he planned for what amounted to a simple dumb waiter to bring books and materials to the library on the second floor (personal communication from Bob and Susanne Morris, 7/17/2016 email).



A Trip to the Llanos – On another occasion, my father asked if I'd like to go on a field trip to the Llanos to see one of CIAT's research sites. We flew from Calipuerto in a DC-3 to Villavicencio, where we took a bus to visit one of CIAT's research sites. The entourage of CIAT scientists and Government of Colombia officials included the Minister of Agriculture who, on viewing one plot, asked what crop was planted in it. The answer: corn! My immediate thought was to ask myself: "How could someone be the Minister of Agriculture and not recognize corn planted in a field?" Of course, after many subsequent years working in development and visiting many developing countries, I learned that ministers of agriculture, more often than not, are political appointees who all too frequently lack any in-depth knowledge of agriculture.



My First Co-Authored Publication – One day my father asked if I'd like to collaborate with him, doing some research for and writing the draft of an article on "agricultural extension and education in the developing countries." Drawing on publications my father had on hand, I drafted, with extensive editing input from my father, an article that CIAT translated to Spanish as "La Extensión y La Educación Agrícolas en Los Países en Desarrollo" (mimeo, May 1969). The article's English version ("Agricultural Extension and Education in Developing Countries") was published in **Rural Development in a Changing World**, R. Weitz (ed.), M.I.T. Press, 1971, pp. 326-351 [Library of Congress No. 70-123252].



Mail Call at CIAT – Near the end of the year I worked with PIMUR from 1968-69, my father called me at PIMUR to tell me I had received two letters. During the lunch hour, I went to CIAT’s office, where Dad presented me with two envelopes. On opening the first, I found that it was an order from my draft board to report for induction into the military service. On opening the second envelope, I was surprised to find a letter from Iowa State University’s Department of Sociology, offering a research assistantship to study for a Ph.D. in sociology. With my father’s sense of Irish humor, he asked which offer I planned to accept. Obviously, in the midst of the war in Viet Nam, my geographical preference was Ames, Iowa. Further, as it turns out, the letter from my draft board had been sent by surface mail, reaching me weeks after the date I was to report for induction. My father suggested I take the letter to the U.S. Consulate in Cali and get on record that my failure to report for military service was not because of a dereliction of duty on my part (i.e., I was not a draft dodger) but rather because the induction notice was sent by surface mail – a slow boat to Cali! When I showed the letter to the Consulate representative, he jokingly quipped: “Welcome to the U.S. Army!” – a joke I certainly didn’t appreciate! I followed up with my draft board by letter to report what had happened, indicated that I was returning to the U.S. to begin study for a doctorate at Iowa State University, and reported my new Ames, Iowa mailing address to the board. What eventually resulted in my relationship with the draft board is a lengthy and convoluted story that I plan to share in a future memoir.



The Electric Typewriter – At some point during the time Sonia and I were working in VISTA in Miami from late 1969 to early 1972, we decided to take a short vacation to Cali to visit our families. One of my father’s colleagues, Mario Gutiérrez, an editor at CIAT, asked as a favor that I purchase a Smith-Corona electric typewriter and bring it to him in Cali. On the day we arrived in Cali, my parents took Sonia and me to a party also attended by Mario. To my surprise, when Mario introduced me to his wife, Yolanda, she asked: “Do you remember me?” At first I was embarrassed that I could have forgotten this beautiful Colombiana. She reminded me that, while I was working on the PIMUR project, we had met in Bogotá when I visited the library of the Universidad Nacional to search for some publications. Even when I met Yolanda that first time, having never previously met her she recognized my name, telling me she was the one who previously tracked down and sent to me a journal article I needed for my research on the PIMUR project. Certainly a small world!



Training & “The Pito” – During 1984, before leaving the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC) to take a job working with the U.S. Agency for International Development in Washington, DC, CIAT invited me to participate as a trainer in the 1st International Workshop on Seed Marketing in Latin America and the Caribbean. During the course I conducted the Green Revolution Game and led a mini-course on *Comunicación Eficaz* (a Spanish version of Thomas Gordon’s Leader Effectiveness Training).

Years later I learned that CIAT was recruiting a new director for the training program. Taking advantage of being in the region on an assignment in Peru, I proactively reached out to CIAT to offer to come to the Center to be interviewed for the job. While the interview did not translate into a job offer, the visit proved educational as an opportunity to meet with CIAT staff who shared memories of their early days at CIAT when they worked with my father. They remembered how nobody on his staff would go home at the end of business day while my father whom they affectionately referred to as “Pacho” was still working. Then when he was ready to leave, he offered to drive his staff back to Cali. They told me that when the new DG (John Nickel) replaced Dr. Grant (the original DG), Nickel installed a “pito” (a whistle) to mark the end of CIAT’s business day. To my father’s former CIAT colleagues with whom I spoke, the “pito” marked the passing of CIAT’s early pioneer days, when the staff was on a mission and not just doing a job, with the “pito” becoming a daily reminder to the employees that it is “time to go home.”



Some Final Thoughts – The opportunity for me to travel to the Philippines and Colombia in conjunction with my father’s work at IRRI and CIAT, respectively, had various impacts on my life personally and professionally. Living in the Philippines opened my eyes to the challenges of agricultural development in the developing world, while my year in Colombia provided an opportunity to work on a development-related project (PIMUR), plus meeting and marrying the young woman, Sonia Gomez, whom I married in late August 1969. Those years opened my eyes to the important work of IRRI and CIAT as International Agricultural Research Centers – and would lead me within just a little over five years to begin working in 1975 for nearly ten years with the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC) and subsequently 30 years under various employment arrangements with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

As I reflect on those early years, I recall meeting many of the agricultural scientists who worked at either IRRI, CIAT, or at both as was the case with my father; agronomist, soil scientist and 2006 World Food Prize Laureate **Colin McClung**; rice breeder **Peter Jennings**’ and agricultural engineer **Lloyd Johnson**. Other names that stand out in my mind from those early days at CIAT were **Ulysses Grant** (who later was a consultant on a team I co-led to evaluate two USAID-funded agricultural technology development and transfer projects in Panama); livestock specialist **Ned Raun** who later was my father’s colleague at the International Agricultural Development Service (IADS)-cum-Winrock International in Rosslyn, Virginia; economist **Per Pinstруп-Andersen**, later my boss in IFDC’s Agro-Economic Division; weed control specialist **Jerry Doll**, later a colleague in IFDC’s Agro-Economic Division; training coordinator **Fernando Fernández**, later DG of the Fundación Hondureña de Investigación Agrícola (FHIA) while I collaborated with FHIA on a study of citrus growers, and years later a participant in a training program I conducted for Honduran NGOs on Organizational Management for Sustainability; animal specialist **James Maner**; communication specialist **Fernando Monge**; and agronomist **James Spain**. I also fondly recall several members of CIAT’s Colombian staff, including **Julio Toro** (assistant to the DG), **Mario Gutiérrez** (editor), **Vickie Caicedo** (secretary), and **Martha Daza** (translator), among others.

Although my memories of CIAT’s early days are neither those of the physical plant at CIAT (those had not yet been built while I lived in Cali from 1968-69) or of working on a day-to-day basis with CIAT’s staff, I fondly recall CIAT’s formative years (late 1960s and early 1970s) during which those noted above were the pioneers who laid the foundation for what CIAT would achieve by the Center’s 50th anniversary in November 2017, a story shared by CIAT on its website at: <https://ciat.cgiar.org/ciat50/>.



But those early years, when the focus of agricultural research was largely on increasing crop productivity (yields), narrower than today’s “rainbow revolution” of challenges including gender equity, food security, and poverty reduction; trade-led agricultural diversification; and developing climate-smart and sustainable agricultural systems. While many new research and measurement tools became available to researchers over the years, from desktop computers and software applications (e.g., for spatial mapping), to hand-held devices (GPS and tablets) to record data in the field, to “big data” analyses of research results from around the world, the potential of agricultural research programs such as those at CIAT ultimately rests in the minds and hands of the scientists who are dedicated to carrying out and achieving the mission of the organization.



The challenge to the new generation of CIAT's employees is to learn from the past, design and carry out innovative research, and generate technologies that provide new options for agriculture to improve the lives of farmers and reduce rural poverty, while at the same time contributing significantly to national economies growing sustainably. For more information about CIAT, visit: <https://ciat.cgiar.org/>.