

CO

THE IMPERIAL
ROCKEFELLER

A BIOGRAPHY OF

NELSON A.
ROCKEFELLER

BY JOSEPH E. PERSICO.

PS

later, we arrived at Monte Sacro, located on a site where the Great Liberator, Simón Bolívar, had once lived. The nineteen-thousand-acre ranch was a sharp-toothed bowl, ringed by mountains and flat at the bottom, except for a small rise in the middle. On this high center ground, Rockefeller had built a Spanish-mission-style home. From the house, one looked out over a 360-degree panorama of cultivated fields to the surrounding mountain wall that defined his property.

Sam Scillitani was the ranch's business manager and lived with his family in a house nearby. Our full-time host now became George Baker, the ranch manager, an affable aggie type, twenty-five years on Nelson's South American payroll. Baker lived in a wing of the main house at Monte Sacro with his wife and children. We were given another wing as our quarters.

Early the next morning, Baker took us on a Jeep tour. The ranch was no rich man's plaything, but rather an avocation designed to pay. Rockefeller was a serious *latifundista*. There were herds of Brahman cattle, and vast fields planted in corn and potatoes. Nelson's latest and most promising crop was chili peppers. We entered a storehouse piled high with casks from which rose an eye-searing miasma. The casks held pressed peppers then being sold in competition with Louisiana growers to the McIlhenny firm for its Tabasco sauce.

Dotting the ranch were wooden cabins, neat and white, built by Nelson for the *campesinos* who worked on Monte Sacro. We visited the school that Rockefeller provided for the peasants' children, and nearby saw a trainer working with Happy's horse in preparation for her next visit. On the way back up the hill to the main house, we passed a simple stucco chapel. "It's for the workers," George Baker explained. "Every Sunday we bring in a *padre* from the village near here to say Mass." The interior, scrubbed white, had the austerity of a New England meetinghouse. Great fifteenth-century wooden candelabra brought from Spain flanked a small altar. Early-eighteenth-century religious canvases hung from the whitewashed walls. Its absent landlord had decorated this tiny part-time chapel with more valuable art than most towns in the United States possess.

In the evening, we sat by the pool in the courtyard of the house, sipping Bloody Mary's piquant with Rockefeller tabasco sauce. When I expressed my surprise to George Baker that the ranch was so serious

a commercial venture, he told us that Monte Sacro was just one of four ranches that Nelson owned in Venezuela. On them, agricultural history had been made. At one, Rockefeller had introduced the cultivation of rice to Venezuela; on another, he was raising the capybara, a dog-size rodent valuable for its hide.

It was all in the Rockefeller tradition. A working farm fulfilled a streak of economic puritanism in the family. Make your pleasures pay, or at least provide tax losses. Oil, Manhattan real estate, banking, tabasco peppers, and leather from super-rats. Diversification indeed. And back at 30 Rockefeller Plaza somebody was counting it all up, the chili peppers, the rat hides.

The eaves of the courtyard were ringed in lights, chockablock, covering the entire perimeter. I asked Baker why they were not turned on. He smiled. "Nelson had the architect Philip Johnson down here once. They were sitting out the way we are now and Johnson got talking about hanging a 'curtain of light' around the courtyard. So Nelson had all these lamps put in. It must have cost him fifty thousand dollars. And every time we turn on the damn things, the power drain knocks out the generators."

The house as well as the ranch was fully staffed, cooks, maids, gardeners, the trainer for Happy's horse. Nelson Rockefeller could have shown up on fifteen minutes' notice and have received the same solicitous care here as at his triplex on Fifth Avenue or at Pocantico. At the time of our visit, he had not been to Monte Sacro for nearly four years.