

PIORNEDO

Piornedo is a mountain village (about 1200 m, situated at the foot of one of the most emblematic mountains of the Sierra de Ancares (Mustallar); the houses are built close together and the farms surrounding them, so when heavy snow falls we are close to our neighbors and are able to help each other and to pass away the time (during the long winters we have more free time, even today, and are able to hold *polavilas*, have a drink at the canteen or celebrate a party).

This small village is made up of a total of 18 houses but in the early twentieth century there were over 200 inhabitants – there are only thirty today. Emigration has drastically reduced the population throughout the area and it is not hard to find whole villages abandoned. This fact has led to increased depression, discouragement, loss of self esteem, the deterioration of our rich cultural heritage and a degradation of the environment (the mountains are covered with shrubs and grasses which increase the risk of forest fires etc.).

The outstanding feature of Piornedo is that it boasts the largest grouping of *pallozas* in Europe. In this type of dwellings almost all the families in the village lived (together with the cattle) right up to the seventies. The livestock was indispensable as a kind of central heating! We have now stopped occupying them and today they are used for keeping livestock and fodder. Some have been converted into a museum and perhaps in this way the *pallozas* are still standing in Piornedo thanks to the interest shown towards the village as a whole. In fact the *pallozas* are features of all the peoples of these mountains but unfortunately very few are left intact and many more are sadly neglected.

Despite being a cold place on account of its altitude, the village has many attractions: the people are straightforward and simple. The village is protected from adverse weather by the very mountains and there are lots of places of breathtaking scenic beauty. However, we should take steps to improve the preservation of the whole area. We must also say that we suffer from isolation and a lack of services which is quite common in many rural areas. Amenities such as street lighting, communications, telematics, public transport, and so on..

A LITTLE HISTORY

The idea that this has always been a backward and isolated place appears repeatedly in all the books that have fallen into our hands. We believe, however, that this phenomenon is the result of modern progress. Half-way through the last century there was a considerable socio-economic transformation. Many roads were built, people began to own private cars, houses and agriculture improved and public services were improved. All these changes did not reach us up here in the mountains until much later and some services public transport, health care – have yet to arrive; this gap is the essence of the isolation we endure.

Earlier, however, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, people emigrated

to Argentina and came back home. They worked in the mines of the Bierzo, there was more cultural and economic exchange thanks to local fairs and markets (Donís, Seixas) and neighbouring areas (Navia de Suarna, or O Espin), We were relatively close to the only major national highway – the N VI). Journeys were made as always in the usual fashion, on horseback and there were places where you could leave your horse for a day or two if you had to continue your journey.

...



Piornedo in 1950

It seems that years ago this village was even important than it is now, as is evidenced by the fact that there was a town-clerk in the late seventeenth century and there was a regulation that stated that young men could either go into the King's service (their military service) or do work on keeping the roads clear and maintain communication with the area of Leon. This was an important job because the transhumant shepherds with their flocks of sheep and goats needed these roads for relocating their flocks and the remains of stone huts or just some walls which Extremeño shepherds built can still be seen in the up land pasture grounds called Meixón Vella..

- A system of organization and decision making in common and in which the essential elements are the *Concello* (local Council) and the *O Celador* (Caretaker). *O concello* is a meeting of all the residents to discuss and resolve issues that affect them. Today in Piornedo this is held in the old school buildings, where questions arising from the mountain issues are discussed - grazing rights, where to set up fences on the summits, plantations - or questions concerning the villagers - water supply, road repair, and water fountains. Every family is entitled to one vote but several people from each household may attend the *concello* meetings.

O Celador (caretaker) is in charge of the meetings which may be requested by any resident. He informs the reasons for such meeting and is also the temporary custodian of the Ledger (Minutes book in which the accounts and important agreements are noted). This post is on a monthly rota system covering every house.

- Defending the mountains

The mountain is one of our most important treasures and has been a source of many problems and disputes. It remains the property of all residents. It is not divided up but every resident has a proportional share, measured in “fanegas” (0.66 hectares).

Defending our interests in the mountain led us, at the end of the eighteenth century, to file a lawsuit at the Royal Chancery of Valladolid against the neighbouring residents of Suarbol. The dispute was over the use of grassland, firewood and dead wood to be found on the border between the mountains of the two villages. The results ended with the Royal Charter of 1799 executed by King Charles IV and in which we were granted the use of the grasslands, deadwoods, etc and it was expressly prohibited to take possession of stray cattle (a term we call *prindar*). In the mid-twentieth century the same issue arose again and we went to court once again. However, by this time the “Mountain” had passed over to Suarbol Common Land and so therefore the suit ended up being against the State. The supreme court ruling (village administrative litigation) on July 3, 1965 granted an appeal by residents of Piornedo against the decision of the General Directorate of Forestry on the recognition of charges in Mount Suarbol.

At the end of the last century the issue of defense of the mountain came up again and the residents prevented a road being built through an important autoctonous oak forest called Val da Freita.

On another occasion we took steps to prevent the mountain community from becoming Common Land by decree, and in this way we prevented the area from becoming a re-forestation of pine trees.

- The arrival of the road

In the early twentieth century the road reached Os Cabaniños (about 10 km from Piornedo) thanks to a timber company that needed to transport wood from Avisedo de Vilarello. These were years of economic prosperity for the whole parish - many jobs were created - chipping stones, maintaining curb-stones, cutting down trees, etc.. Bars were opened and the houses were refurbished..

With the coming of the road building materials could be brought in for building houses as far as Os Cabaniños and from here they were transported on horseback to the villages. Some of us can still remember in the 60s going to Os Cabaniños on horse-back where the doctor would visit twice a year together with a nurse to make check-ups and vaccinate the children. Paradoxical as it may seem this was the time when we had a medical even closer than we have it nowadays because now the nearest doctor is in Becerreá (60 km).

It was in 1970 when the road reached Piornedo (even though Piornedo was one of the privileged villages of the parish as it was becoming quite popular, With the road came

the first cars. This was an important step but during the winter months the village remained almost constantly isolated because of snow, ice on the Costa dos Cabaniños, etc.. Nowadays in the villages we have are metal blades which can be adapted to a tractor converting it to a snow-plough for clearing the roads of snow. The road from Navia de Suarna also helped improve communications in this part of the mountains.

- **Electricity**

We used to have our own generator driven by a turbine in the river and which was in operation 1965. Though not very powerful it was enough for six light bulbs per household. Then in 1972 came the power-lines of Fenosa - an important step, but in the early years there were long and constant breakdowns caused by wind and snowfall.

The river water also moved six flour mills (one for every three or four neighbors) of which today only part of the walls remain.

- **The school**

Piornedo was one of the first villages in the Cervantes area to have a school . They sent a teacher to the parish of Donis but as nobody offered premises then Piornedo took the opportunity and ceded Pedrete's Place. Later the school stayed for good, first at Pedrete's then at Coxo's building.. In about 1945 a school was actually built and this still stands at the entrance to the village. There was a house for the school-teacher who earlier had lodged at Regueira's house. Payment was derived from the sale of wood from the Val da Freita.

The school has thus been a success for the residents and is something much valued by them. However, the decreasing number of children in the village caused one larger school to be built so all the children from surrounding villages came under one roof. Nowadays, we use the old school for Council meetings and as Head Quarters of the Association O Teixeira.

- **Water supply**

The bringing of water to supply homes has also been a great work on the part of the residents. Many remember how between 1973 and 1976 the villagers, tired of carrying water in buckets and driven by the need to install bathrooms, began to attend long, tiring *Concellos* meetings and finally decided to channel water from Sana Barrigas spring - about 5 km away.. The work was carried out by all the residents and with the help of the priest they managed to obtain a grant in order to purchase the pipe-lines. The distribution system has been the same since then; an curious, original system whereby every resident has the right to the same amount of water for domestic purposes and they can use whatever excess water they might have for irrigation.

The "*Palloza*" is no longer "Home-sweet-home"

As we have mentioned before, when the road reached Piornedo, this was also the time when we began to disuse the *Palloza* as a dwelling place for several reasons: building materials could now come by road and this made housing cheaper and those who still lived in *pallozas* were seen as "show pieces"... this is the time when most houses were built or when existing buildings were converted into living quarters.