

By Grace Halsell

Wisdom on the Hoof

WASHINGTON—The eminent scientist René Dubos has wisely remarked that "human life with all its endearing qualities can prosper with rather spartan ways." I can bear witness to that statement, with a concrete personal experience that graphically illustrates the virtue of walking in contributing to a vigorous old age.

I have been living among the oldest people in the Western Hemisphere—*viejos*, as they are called in their native Spanish language—in the remote Ecuadorian village of Vilcabamba, nestled like a saucer in the picturesque, rugged and physically inhospitable Andes.

Geography has imposed on them a daily regimen as simple as it is salutary and instructive, especially in a world agonized by an energy crisis. The wheel, not to speak of the internal-combustion engine, has hardly intruded upon their mode of travel. A bicycle, no less than a car, is unavailable to most of them. They look upon

the horse or burro as an expensive luxury, a diversion. So they walk. They walk to and from work. They walk to get from here to there. To be exhorted to "take a walk," would seem fatuous to the *viejos*.

Necessity is the mother of fitness and well-being to these aged mountain people, who exemplify the old saying that each of us has two "doctors"—the left leg and the right leg.

I lived in a dirt-floor mountain hut with Gabriel Erazo, who matter-of-factly says, "I am 132." I followed him up a mountain, struggling with breath and aching shins, while he composed poetry in his head, explaining that *amor* gave spirit to his life. On other occasions, I followed behind Gabriel Sanchez, who says he is 113, as he climbed the steep El Chaupi mountain to work all day with his crude hoe or *lampa*, cultivating a small plot of ground. Why would he never "retire"? "I would be

ashamed, seated in the house all day," he told me.

Manuel Ramon, who is said to be 110, has a face radiating an almost animal-like force. Through stern physical labor he had earned himself a self-respect and sense of fulfillment missing in many urban lives. Yet, when I praised his strong biceps and his ability to work from sunup to sunset in the fields, he looked puzzled, and asked, "Didn't people have to work hard in my country? Wasn't work and struggle, and walking from one point to another, a part of every man's life?"

"It is a natural thing I do," Mr. Ramon said.

Over several millenia, the human body has been fashioned to serve Mr. Ramon and the rest of us in strenuous, daily activities.

The automobile is a mark of man's surrender to the contraptions of ease

and luxury that threaten his claim to a long and useful life. The assault upon the human foot has been compounded by television. An alarming amount of our leisure time is spent in a sedentary, often mindless, state.

Just as the *viejos* lengthen their lives with their workaday routine on foot, so we endanger our health and shorten our lives with our immobile luxuries. Perhaps the most important benefit of exercise is its retarding effect on the process of arteriosclerosis, clogging of the arteries with fat.

The *viejos* apparently do not suffer from bad arteries or heart attacks. I saw no examples of fractured legs or arms. They stay flexible and hardy by a simple rule: Keep moving, don't stop, now or ever.

The *viejos* taught me, first and foremost, that you are your own best doctor; living a long life is essentially a do-it-yourself proposition.

Grace Halsell, who is writing a book about longevity, bought a bicycle and started learning yoga after returning from Ecuador.