

FUN LIFE AND ECONOMIC CRISIS IN RIO BRANCO: BETWEEN THE FIRST SPORTS INITIATIVES AND AN AMUSEMENT HOUSE (1910-1914)

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ABSTRACT: This study examines aspects of leisure life amidst the economic crisis in the city of Rio Branco, the capital of the state of Acre, between 1910 and 1914. It focuses on the early sporting initiatives, particularly horse racing, foot races, and bicycle races, as well as the Bar Acreano, which served as a prominent house of entertainment. The sources utilized are the periodicals *Folha do Acre* and *O Acre*.

KEYWORDS: Entertainment. Sports. Rio Branco. 20th Century.

VIDA DIVERTIDA E CRISE ECONÔMICA EM RIO BRANCO: ENTRE AS PRIMEIRAS INICIATIVAS ESPORTIVAS E UMA CASA DE DIVERSÕES (1910-1914)

RESUMO: Esse trabalho discute um pouco da vida divertida em meio à crise econômica na cidade de Rio Branco, capital do estado do Acre, entre os anos 1910 e 1914. São focalizadas as primeiras iniciativas esportivas, que se deram em torno das corridas de cavalo, a pé e de bicicletas, e o Bar Acreano, que se constituía em uma verdadeira casa de diversões. Como fontes foram utilizados os periódicos *Folha do Acre* e *O Acre*.

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| PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Divertimentos. Esporte. Rio Branco. Século XX. |
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Presentation

Occupied primarily by Indigenous populations until the early 1880s (Sobrinho, 1947), isolated from the rest of Brazil, with precarious living conditions for its inhabitants and surrounded by armed conflicts, Acre only became Brazilian territory in 1903, with the signing of the Treaty of Petrópolis between Brazil and Bolivia. Its occupation by non-indigenous populations was late and sparse, when compared to other states in the Amazon region (Klein, 2013, p. 47).

Rio Branco, its capital since 1920, was initially called Volta da Empreza. It was a small village until 1904, when it was elevated to the status of a town, remaining so until 1912, when it became a city. Cut off by the Acre River, which divides it in two, the city needed to adapt its way of life and transportation to the river's movements. During the flood season, the river inundated part of the city, and during the dry season, navigation was only possible for small boats, thus compromising the transport of people and goods.

The city of Rio Branco, as well as the entire state of Acre and the other eight states that make up the Legal Amazon, has its formation and development linked to the extraction and export of latex from the rubber tree – the raw material for rubber (Silva, 2019; Bezerra, 2006). This product was the country's second most exported commodity, second only to coffee, during a period that extended from the end of the 19th century until 1913. Between 1901 and 1910, latex accounted for 28.2% of all Brazilian exports (Carneiro, 2014, p. 239). The dynamics of the capital of Rio Branco, such as migration, population size and composition, commerce, associations, and leisure activities, were closely related to the rubber market.

The latex trade, at its peak between 1880 and 1910, attracted many people seeking quick enrichment, especially migrants from Ceará fleeing the drought. In 1904, there were approximately 1,389 people from Ceará in Rio Branco, representing 58.45% of the city's total population (Klein, 2013). There were also migrants from other Brazilian cities and other countries, such as Syrians, Portuguese, Bolivians, and Armenians (Menezes; Fernandes, 2005; Pontes, 2014). In that context, Portuguese and Syrians established colonies in the city and participated in the development of entertainment.

According to IBGE data, in 1910, the city of Rio Branco had a population of 23,340 people and was composed mostly of men, who represented 69% of the inhabitants, while women represented 31%. The majority of these men and women were single (IBGE, 1927). These figures are explained by latex extraction, the migratory movement it has generated, mainly of young, single men, and the difficult living conditions in the city.

Brazil was the sole exporter of latex until the 1900s, when Asian countries entered the international market, causing a continuous drop in the price of rubber and leading the Amazon region into an economic crisis. From 1913 onwards, this crisis intensified, as latex production in Asian countries surpassed that of Brazil, causing the Legal Amazon's share of the international market to progressively decline until the mid-1930s (Fonseca, 1950; Klein, 2013; Santos, 1980; Weinstein, 1993; Bueno, 2012).

Despite the crisis and its negative repercussions, including on the entertainment sector (football), there was also a diversification of life in Rio Branco. From a commercial point of view, new branches of business began, such as chestnuts, agriculture, livestock, and entertainment (Weinstein, 1993). Amid the crisis, cinemas

and entertainment venues, bars, gambling houses, party venues, football clubs, and other sporting associations and activities sprang up in the city. It's not that these establishments didn't exist before the crisis, but the fact that they continued to emerge during this period is significant.

This work aims to discuss a bit of that fun-filled life amidst the economic crisis in the city of Rio Branco, focusing on the first sporting initiatives, which revolved around horse, foot, and bicycle races, and the Bar Acreano, which was a true entertainment venue. The newspapers *Folha do Acre* and *O Acre* were used as sources.

The Races: Early Sports Initiatives (1910-1914)

When horse racing began in Rio Branco in 1910, the city did not yet have a racing club or a racetrack, as was the case in other Brazilian cities. But there were races, pools, bets, and cash prizes. Despite having plans³, a racetrack never came to fruition in the city. During 1911, the races took place on Avenida Sete de Setembro, and in 1912 the route was from Rua África to Pavilhão Rio Branco. As for clubs, Sport Acreano was founded, which organized races between 1911 and 1912.

Although we don't have details about the organizers of the Sport Acreano, we know that the owners of the racehorses were all rubber plantation owners from the city: Neutel Maia, Manuel Vasconcelos, Miguel Soares, Antônio Febronio and Victor Porto. These same men were probably also the organizers of the club, since such a practice was associated with the status and distinction aspirations of the elites, as well as requiring high investments in the acquisition of racehorses.

³ FOLHA DO ACRE. Cidade da Empreza, 21 mai. 1911, p. 2.

Precisely because of the lack of such animals in the city, the races also included donkey races, whose prize money was, at most, half the value of the prize for horse races. The lack of suitable animals for racing was also a problem in the cities of Porto Alegre (Pereira, Silva, Mazo, 2010) and São Paulo (Santos, 2023), where athletes acquired horses directly from Europe and the Platine region. Even so, sometimes racing clubs held races with few animals, which resulted in a smaller number of bets and spectators compared to races with a larger number of horses.

To overcome this problem, and thus avoid poorly attended races, Sport Acreano held races with donkeys and races with horses at the same events, which always featured “extraordinary competition” and “extraordinary excitement”. This demonstrates that the strategy of the Rio Branco residents to race donkeys, in addition to horses, was successful.

One of the first initiatives of Sport Acreano was the organization of a race on Avenida Sete de Setembro, in honor of the Portuguese Republic. The newspaper *Folha do Acre* highlighted that “the brilliant celebrations that the Portuguese community, residing in this city, carried out here, commemorating the glorious date of the republic's founding in their homeland, were of great importance”⁴. Despite the colony consisting of only six Portuguese people (Melo; Marques, 2008), the tribute paid to them is not surprising, since Victor Porto, the most important rubber plantation owner in the city, racehorse owner, and also a possible organizer of the club, was Portuguese.

The Portuguese community contributed to the organization of entertainment in the city, both horse races and the founding, in 1912, of the “Sport Recreativo Acreano, intended to promote recreational physical exercise in this city and to promote other

⁴ FOLHA DO ACRE. Cidade da Empreza, October 08, 1911, p. 1.

public entertainment”⁵. Understanding the role these European immigrants played in organizing entertainment in the city is an important element for a better understanding of its structure and dynamics.

News about the races initially appeared in the “Associativas” column of the newspaper *Folha do Acre*. After the first racing events, however, such news came to form the “Hippicas” column. As the sport became more ingrained in Rio Branco society, the “*Folha Sportiva*” column emerged, devoted exclusively to sports, which were gaining increasing prominence in the pages due to their growing influence in the city.

Horse race day was always a festive occasion, which also included fireworks, gun salutes, a civic ceremony, lunch and a dance⁶, as well as musical performances by the police band, which played during the intervals between races⁷. These occasions became even more fun when foot races were added to the program in July 1912⁸.

Initially, however, foot races had an exclusive program, which included betting pools, wagers, a musical performance by an orchestra during the intervals between races, ticket sales, and a large audience⁹:

the first party organized by such a useful institution took place, and it was held amidst great enthusiasm. This festival consisted of foot races, with four races organized, each with 3 runners, plus an honor race in which the winners of the first races took part [...] The large public sometimes surrounded the table selling raffle tickets, the sale of which reached a relatively high amount¹⁰.

For the second round of foot races, the mayor ordered the area where the races would take place to be cleaned. Sport Recreativo Acreano built a 200-meter track, more

⁵ FOLHA DO ACRE. Rio Branco, June 23, 1912, p. 3.

⁶ FOLHA DO ACRE. Cidade da Empreza, September 24, 1911, p. 1.

⁷ FOLHA DO ACRE. Cidade da Empreza, August 21, 1910, p. 3.

⁸ FOLHA DO ACRE. Rio Branco, July 14, 1912, p. 2.

⁹ FOLHA DO ACRE. Rio Branco, June 23, 1912, p. 3.

¹⁰ FOLHA DO ACRE. Rio Branco, June 23, 1912, p. 3.

suitable for races, with a covered area to protect the public from the sun, where chairs and benches were placed for spectators. Furthermore, the mayor had to increase the number of canoes transporting people from one bank of the Acre River to the other to accommodate the public wishing to watch the competitions, which is an indication of how entertainment was changing the dynamics of the city.

It's impossible to know exactly who made up this audience, but it's certain that there was some diversity in its composition. The city's mayor was a constant presence at the lively scene, as were the city's judge, army officers of various ranks – who by then represented 3% of the city's population¹¹ – members of the Portuguese and Syrian colonies, and families, whose presence was always noted by the chroniclers. The presence of women and children was not highlighted, nor were their clothing or behavior. But it is possible to know that they were there, either as family members or when, for some reason, their presence gained prominence, as in the conflict that occurred during the horse and foot races held on Sunday, July 14, 1912:

And then he went over to the families who were a short distance from the group, telling them in a loud voice that he was a man worth a million! Then, some alarmed ladies pleaded with the brave man not to do anything, to calm down.¹²

Even though discourses about modernity, civility, and progress were not used to justify the need for practices and behaviors considered appropriate, they were demanded of those in the public sphere:

However, we cannot help but regret that the esteemed families who were present at the time of the incident were so grossly disregarded by a gentleman who, by virtue of his position in society, should have maintained the utmost decorum, especially in public.¹³

¹¹ BRAZILIAN INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY AND STATISTICS, 1927.

¹² FOLHA DO ACRE. Rio Branco, July 24. 1912, p. 1.

¹³ Same as above.

Despite the great success of its activities, Sport Recreativo Acreano ceased operations in 1913, leaving no clues as to the reasons for its demise, although it is possible to infer that the economic crisis, whose effects were already impacting the city and its inhabitants at that time, had an influence, making the races financially unprofitable and leading rubber plantation owners to diversify their businesses.

Neutel Maia, one of the owners of the racehorses, diversified his business activities into animal breeding, Brazil nut production, and opened a legal gambling establishment, the Empreza Club. Victor Porto, another prominent name in the promotion of races, expanded his businesses into the industrial and service sectors, opening an ice factory, a bakery¹⁴, and a maintenance firm that began providing services to the Municipal Intendency¹⁵.

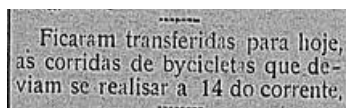
The following year, the city's vibrant entertainment scene was enlivened by a grand and modern novelty: a bicycle race featuring five heats. Organized by the short-lived Grêmio Sportivo, the race was held in commemoration of the Storming of the Bastille, an important date for the French, who were not present in the city, as there was no French colony or even anyone of that nationality in Rio Branco. However, the importance of the Storming of the Bastille to world history may explain the celebrations, which highlight the connections of the people of Rio Branco with the rest of the world, despite their geographical distance from the center of Brazil and Europe, which at that time still constituted an important cultural reference. In this sense, the use of French expressions by newspapers, such as *pourquoi pas*, *toilettes*, and *rendez-vous*, constitutes further evidence of such connections.

¹⁴ FOLHA DO ACRE. Rio Branco, April 04, 1915, p. 2.

¹⁵ FOLHA DO ACRE. Rio Branco, April 25, 1915, p. 2.

The race used the Sport Bar as a reference point, as it was from there that the runners started and finished, and in front of which a grandstand was built for “the families and the general public”.¹⁶ The existence of Gremio Sportivo was linked to the Sport Bar, which served as its headquarters during the few months of its existence. Furthermore, the owner of this establishment, Francisco Leite, was also the vice-president of the association, as well as a city hall employee, where he worked with other members of the association. The race, however, only took place five days later, as announced in *Folha do Acre*:

Image 1



Source: *Folha do Acre*, July 19, 1914, p. 2.

It is not possible to know, however, how this sporting event took place, as there is no trace of it in the sources consulted. This was the only bicycle race that the city's newspapers reported on. However, the level of organization of this race is noteworthy. There were five starting judges, five finishing judges, six referees, twelve lane judges, four race directors, in addition to nine runners, and medals for awarding the winners.

The existence of an organizing body, coupled with the number of people involved, as well as the existence of a dedicated space for spectators, are indicative of an attempt to structure the sport in the city. Also noteworthy is the existence of bicycles in Rio Branco, considering not only their value but also the difficulties in getting them into the city.

¹⁶ FOLHA DO ACRE. Rio Branco, July 12, 1914, p. 3.

All members of Grêmio Sportivo were municipal civil servants who were attentive to the codes of modernity in vogue at the time. The bicycle was an industrial artifact and an important symbol of this modernization process, to which the capital of Rio Branco wished to be linked, despite the lack of discourse in that direction. Both the bar and the club closed their doors around September 1914.

Bar Acreano: A House of Amusements (1910-1913)

A prominent venue for entertainment in the city was the Bar Acreano, owned by Antônio Toscano Floquet, of Italian origin, but who came from Pará to Acre, where he had lived since 1901¹⁷. Despite being called simply a bar, the place was a true entertainment venue, featuring various performances by local and traveling artists in theater, magic, and music, as well as games like billiards, dancing, drinks, balls, movies, and a restaurant.

Existing in the city since at least 1907, the bar had a distinguished waiter. The public prosecutor, Santa Rosa, when not conducting official business, worked at the bar, which horrified the city's mayor, Plácido de Castro. According to him, by working in a bar, wearing attire appropriate to the job, the prosecutor exposed himself to ridicule, forgetting the decency imposed upon him by the position he held in the Public Prosecutor's Office (Klein, 2013, p. 187). Santa Rosa, as well as the important rubber plantation owner Neutel Maia, was a partner in the bar. These connections between important people in the city and the entertainment venue demonstrate the prestige of the place, which was a privileged space for social interaction in Rio Branco.

¹⁷ FOLHA DO ACRE. Pennapolis, June 09, 1912, p. 3.

Other important figures frequented the establishment, such as large landowners and merchants of the city, public officials, and army officers. It was to this audience that the establishment's advertisements would be directed:

Image 2



Source: Folha do Acre, February 19, 1911, p. 3.

On show nights, the presence of women was noticeable both in the audience and on stage, as performers. At the celebration of the Proclamation of the Portuguese Republic in 1912, they stood out for embellishing the festivities (Klein, 2013, p. 189). It is worth remembering that women were a minority in the city's population at that time, representing 31% of the inhabitants (IBGE, 1927).

In August 1910, two plays were staged by amateur artists from the city: the drama *Fatal Love* and the comedy *Genius Artist*¹⁸. In October of the same year, the arrival in Acre of the artist Frontino Santiago, who described himself as a “singer, comic tenor, and drag performer”, was enthusiastically announced.¹⁹ He gave a series of three performances at Bar Acreano, in celebration of the advent of the Republic, and in the second performance, he was joined by two amateur artists, Luiza Rosa and Beatrice Bressler.

¹⁸ FOLHA DO ACRE. **Bar Acreano**. Cidade da Empreza, August 21, 1910, p. 4.

¹⁹ FOLHA DO ACRE. Cidade da Empreza, October 30, 1910, p. 3.

This was the show that received the most media attention, but not because of its content or quality, but rather because of the price of admission, which cost spectators ten thousand réis, the equivalent of two tickets to the most prestigious movie screenings. Nevertheless, the show drew a large audience who, as a way of expressing their displeasure with the situation, refused to applaud the artist, despite him having presented “beautiful musical pieces” on the piano, “singing with a good voice and truly proving himself an actor on stage”²⁰. The audience, however, did not deny applause to the two guest artists.

The success of Frontino Santiago's performances was felt, altering the dynamics of the city, as it required the extension of streetcar services – the vessel that transported the population from one bank of the Acre River to the other – and horse-drawn carriage services to the neighborhoods furthest from the city center, to allow the participation of people who lived in places further away from the Bar Acreano²¹.

The following year, in addition to local artists, other traveling artists performed at the bar, such as Emma Biari, Alley, Lily Candini, Clementino Santos²², and Piêrio Cordeiro²³, with varied programs. Also in 1911, Frontino Santiago returned to Rio Branco and, together with Piêrio Cordeiro, organized theatrical and cinematographic presentations, as well as a magic act and a “splendid evening”²⁴. These artists arrived in Rio Branco after performing in the Amazonian cities of Manaus, Belém, and Senna Madureira.

Bar Acreano was the site of the first film screenings in the Acrean capital, which took place in 1911, thanks to the efforts of businessman and photographer Piêrio

²⁰ FOLHA DO ACRE. Cidade da Empreza, November 13, 1910, p. 3.

²¹ FOLHA DO ACRE. Rio Branco, November 13, 1910, p. 3.

²² FOLHA DO ACRE. **Theatraes**. Cidade da Empreza, February 12, 1911, p. 2.

²³ FOLHA DO ACRE. **Theatraes**. Cidade da Empreza, June 16, 1911, p. 3.

²⁴ FOLHA DO ACRE. Cidade da Empreza, June 04, 1911, p. 3.

Cordeiro. In that same year, the owner of the establishment, Antonio Toscano Floquet, expanded the business into the restaurant sector, presenting a “splendid menu”²⁵ and hosting an inauguration ball.

The carnival of 1911 from Acre featured festivities lasting four days, “several masked *bobos* walked through the streets of Empreza”²⁶. Some of them rode battered Bucephalus-like horses. In turn, the exchange of confetti among families and the use of *lança-perfumes* made for a lively and delightful celebration”²⁷. The following day, a group of masked revelers, known for their “fun and good taste”, took to the streets²⁸. On Tuesday, “gracious young ladies dressed up, flaunting elegant toilettes. Several well-mannered young men walked about in masks, uttering witty remarks”²⁹. In the evening, various balls were held. At the Hotel 6 de Agosto, a costume ball took place, and at the Bar Acreano, a dance party also took place. In this regard, we perceive that the bar was part of the city’s festive calendar, establishing itself as an important social hub.

The bar had a dance hall ³⁰and also

a hall with four large billiard tables, a stage for artistic performances, lighting fixtures, and a bar with a variety of drinks. Behind the main hall was a room with three sets of tables and chairs, card games, roulette wheels, and a full display of weapons for sale, including rifles, shotguns, and revolvers. In a more private setting, Toscano Floquet, during his lifetime, served the gentlemen of the city with a full-service barbershop and maintained a grocery store selling dry goods, groceries, rice, and ground beans. In that establishment, the deceased even maintained a small factory for handmade candies, complete with lathes, saws, and blades for cutting copper, iron, and lead. There was a stock of bullets for revolvers, shotguns and rapid-fire rifles (Klein, 2013, p. 186).

²⁵ FOLHA DO ACRE. Cidade da Empreza, 22 out. 1911, p. 2.

²⁶ Before being named Rio Branco – in honor of Baron of Rio Branco, the Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs who contributed to the annexation of the Acre territory to Brazil—the city was called Empreza, as that was the name of the rubber plantation where the city’s town hall was established.

²⁷ FOLHA DO ACRE. Cidade da Empreza, 26 fev. 1911, p. 2.

²⁸ FOLHA DO ACRE. Rio Branco, February 26, 1911, p. 2.

²⁹ FOLHA DO ACRE. Cidade da Empreza, 05 mar. 1911, p. 2.

³⁰ FOLHA DO ACRE, November 29, 1919, p. 3.

It was common at that time to hold entertainments in honor of people, dates, or institutions important to the local public; even traveling artists employed this strategy as a way to connect with the public, gain prestige, and visibility. National civic dates, such as the proclamation of the republic and the declaration of independence, were celebrated annually; the anniversary of the Portuguese republic, the Acrean revolution, the Portuguese and Syrian colonies, the Masonic community, the newspaper *Folha do Acre*, and even the Storming of the Bastille in Paris, were all commemorated with festivities. There were parties, banquets, dances, theater, cinema, parades, fireworks displays, gun salutes, luncheons, civic sessions, horse races and, later, other sports.

Bar Acreano was a vibrant part of the city's scene, and despite having several investors and a renowned waiter, the death of Toscano Floquet led to its closure. One of its investors, Neutel Maia, soon after the bar closed, opened a new entertainment business, *Empreza Club*, which did not have the diversity of cultural events that Bar Acreano had, but instead was dedicated solely to gambling.

Final Considerations

Just as the rubber market began its decline in 1910, horse races started to be held in the capital of Acre. The fact that plans to build a racetrack never materialized cannot be attributed solely to the crisis, but also to the fact that horse racing never took hold in the city, ceasing as early as 1913. There is no record of horses being imported, even though those involved in the races were wealthy businesspersons from the city. On the other hand, donkey races were held, probably to compensate for the lack of suitable animals.

Furthermore, the following year, already in the midst of an economic crisis, the first and only bicycle race on record took place in the city. This corroborates the evidence suggesting that the economic crisis was not the only significant factor in the failure to consolidate horse racing in Rio Branco, considering the high cost of bicycles during that period, as well as the high costs of transporting them to the city.

Although newspapers always report large crowds at horse races, the inclusion of foot races in their programs may indicate a need for diversification and attractions to draw the public. Although these early sporting initiatives centered around horse racing, foot races, and bicycle races did not lead to the structuring of a sports field in the city, they provided opportunities for recreation for its residents, energized the local scene, and contributed to building the environment and material conditions for its later development.

Bar Acreano also contributed to this dynamism, because in addition to offering entertainment more commonly found in establishments of this nature, such as drinks and games, it established itself as an entertainment venue with a varied program. In addition to being the stage for the city's first theater performances, it was also where the first film screenings took place, demonstrating its aptitude for the arts.

A stage for music, theater, magic shows, dances, cinema, and parties, the Bar Acreano also offered a restaurant, and although it aimed to attract the local elite, to whom its advertisements were directed, it also welcomed the general public, who traveled from distant neighborhoods to enjoy its events. The economic crisis also seems to have had no impact on the bar's activities, which only ended with the death of its owner.

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