

An Iowan in Havana



“THE COUNTRY IS REAL PRETTY,” Joseph T. Krob told his readers back in Solon, Iowa. Krob was a bass player in the band of the 49th Iowa Regiment. In a series of letters to his hometown newspaper, Krob described the soldiers’ life at Camp Cuba Libre in Florida and Camp Onward in Savannah, and, finally, the regiment’s arrival in Cuba in late December 1898.

It was a symbolic moment in Cuba—the transition of power from Spain to the United States. But Krob also took time to describe his impressions of Havana in the following letter.

The accompanying photographs are the work of the Detroit Publishing Company. They are typical of photos commercially produced and sold to soldiers and tourists as remembrances of the Spanish-American War.

—Ginalie Swaim, editor

We left Savannah, Saturday the 17th of December. We passed in review before President McKinley and in the afternoon of that day we commenced packing our stuff in boxes and packed till Sunday noon. . . . All the teams and detailed men were busy all day, hauling boxes and other things and loading on the boat. . . . About 50 wagons and 150 head of mules besides officer’s horses were taken on board last. . . .

At a little before nine o’clock P.M. on Wednesday the 21st we passed the frowning walls of Morro castle and entered the Harbor of Havana. The battleship Texas, cruiser Brooklyn and two gun boats were in the harbor. Our boat was anchored a few rods from the wreck of the Maine [above] which shows very plain above the water and was guarded by Spanish soldiers. Thursday the 22nd a tug pulled us to the docks and we commenced to unload.

At about half past eight on Friday the 23rd we left the boat and marched through the streets of Havana toward our camp which is four miles from Havana. The dust on the road was an inch thick and the sun was very hot. We got into camp about one o'clock, P.M., all covered with dust and worn out. Some of us didn't even take time to eat our dinner but commenced to put up our tents. By evening all tents were up, cots were issued and we rested very well our first night in Cuba.

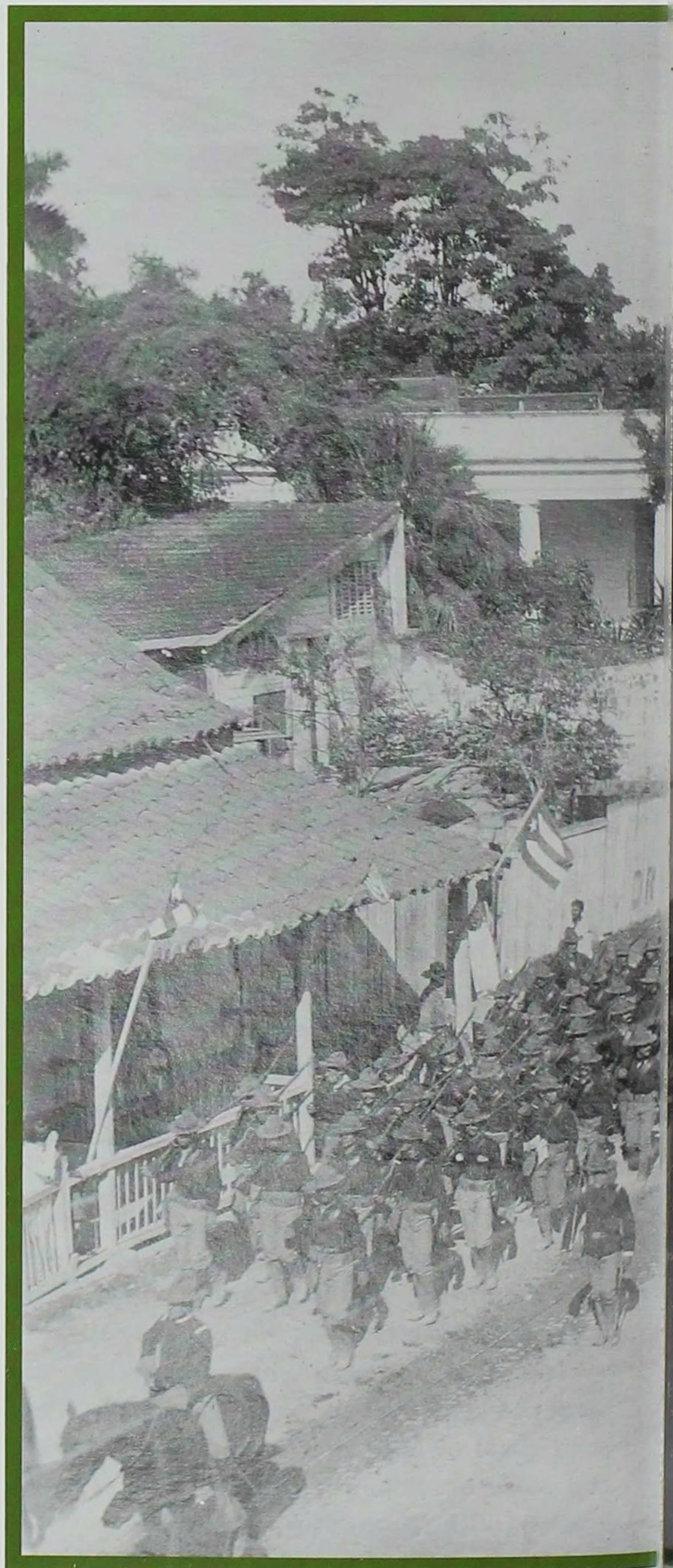
As we marched through the streets of Havana most of the Cubans made rather a funny appearance, most of them being very ragged and some children not having any clothes at all. Some of them followed us clear down to camp giving us cigarettes and oranges which are very cheap here.

On Xmas we got up at midnight and played some National and Christmas songs. In the morn-



Above: "Spanish troops evacuating Havana."

Right: "American troops marching to Muriano Camp after evacuation of Havana by the Spanish, Jan. 1, 1899."

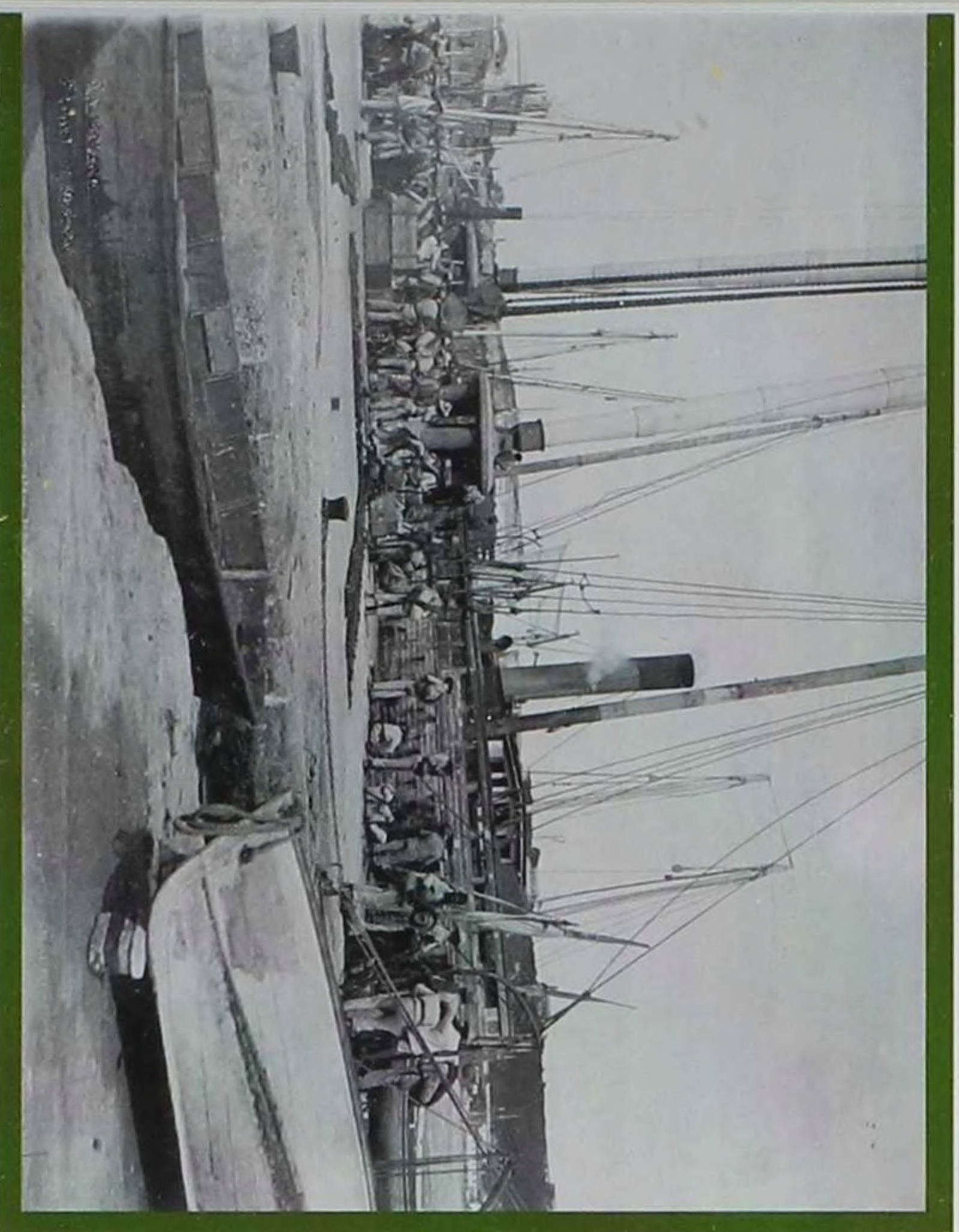




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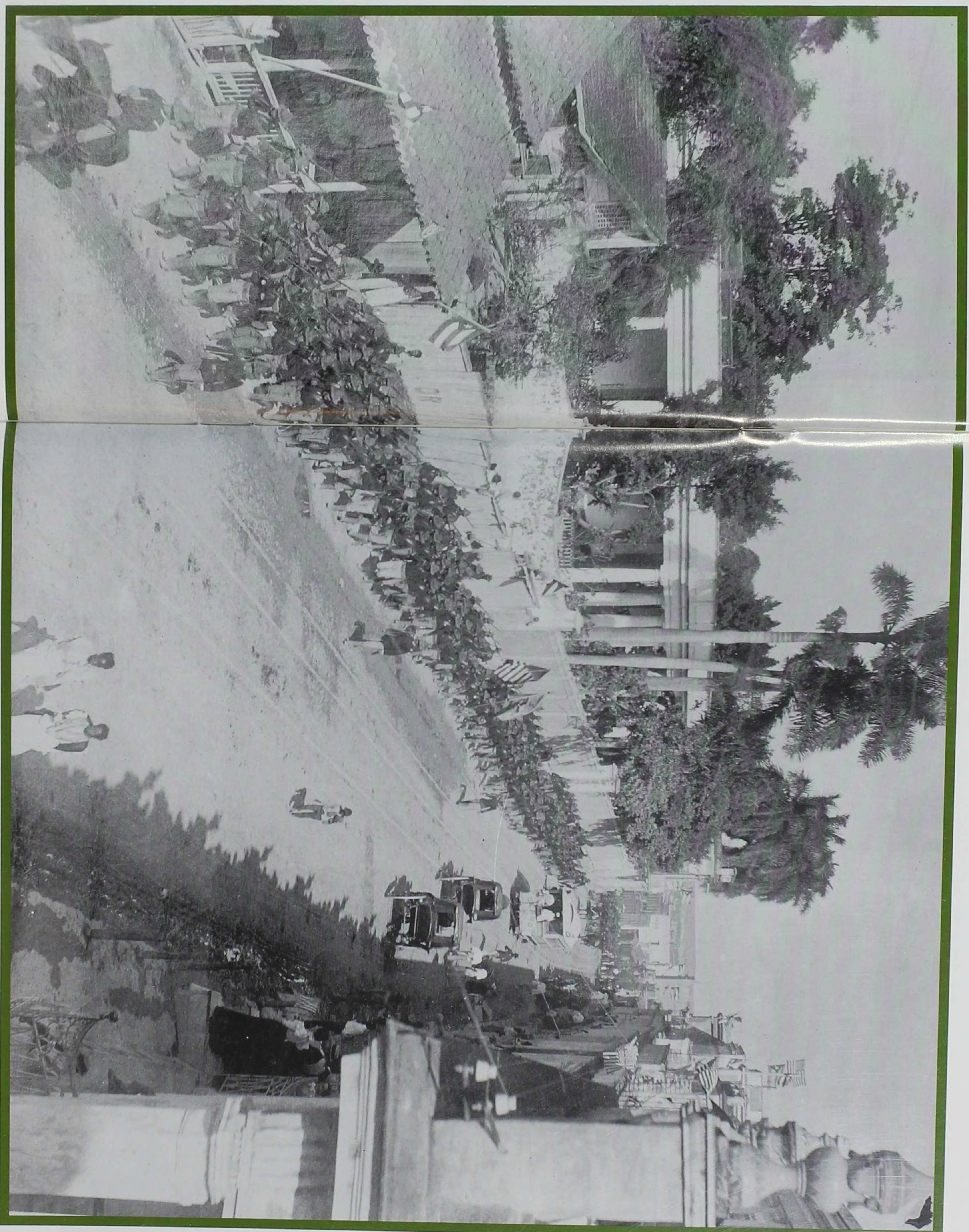
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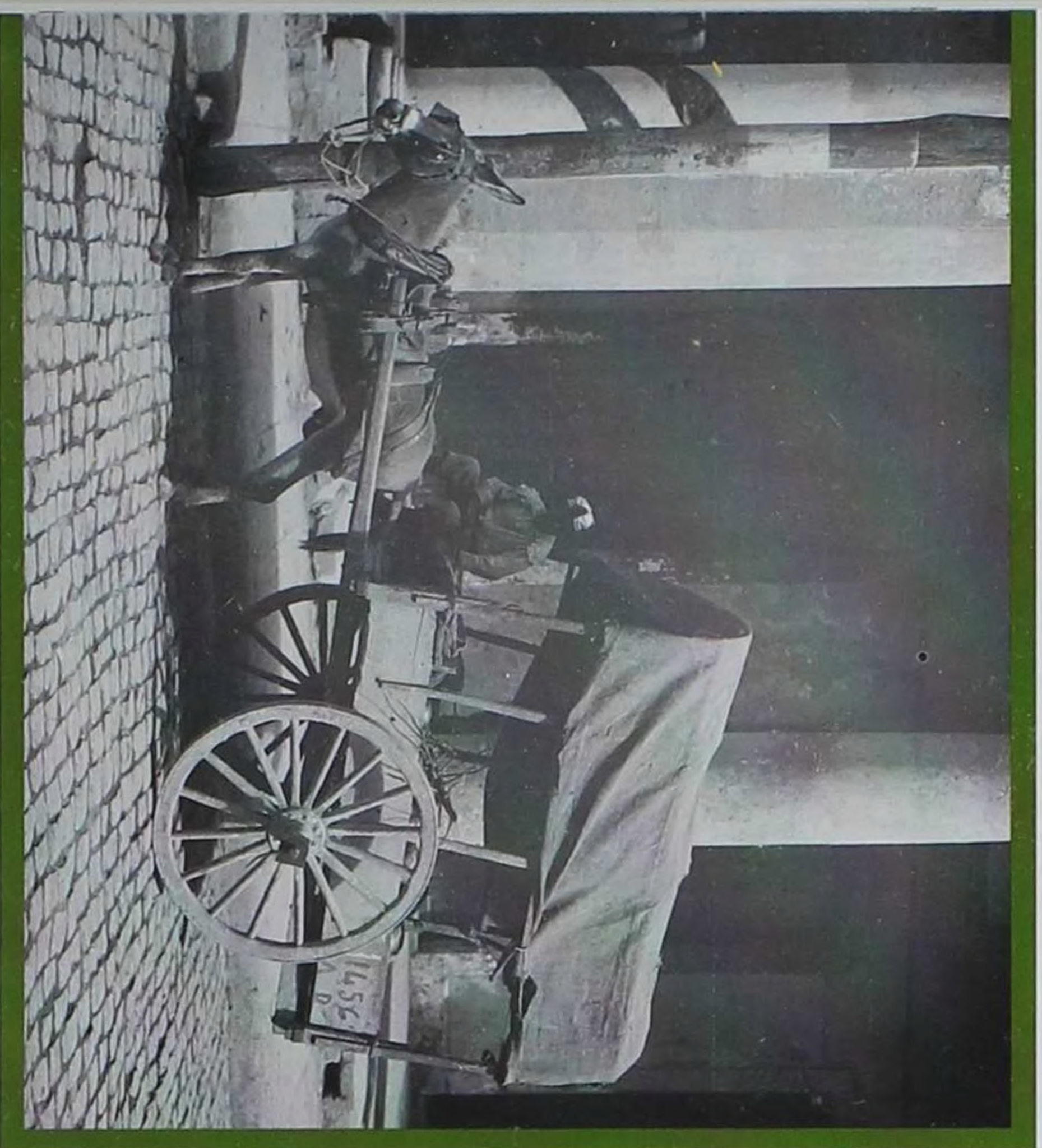
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ing Chaplain Mason had services in front of the band quarter for which we furnished music. Our Xmas dinner consisted of potatoes, rice, hard tack and coffee and in the afternoon the entire regiment went bathing in the ocean. For nearly two weeks water and wood were very scarce here and many times we made our meals on corned beef, canned beans and hard tack for it mostly happened when they had wood they had no water and when they had water they had no wood and without either one or the other little cooking can be done....

On the 1st day January the regiment marched to Havana. We started from camp at 8 o'clock A.M., in full marching order, every man carrying three meal rations and canteen filled with water. On the edge of the city we had an hour's rest. After that we



Above: "Coconut merchant's wagon"

Right: "Group of natives, Havana."



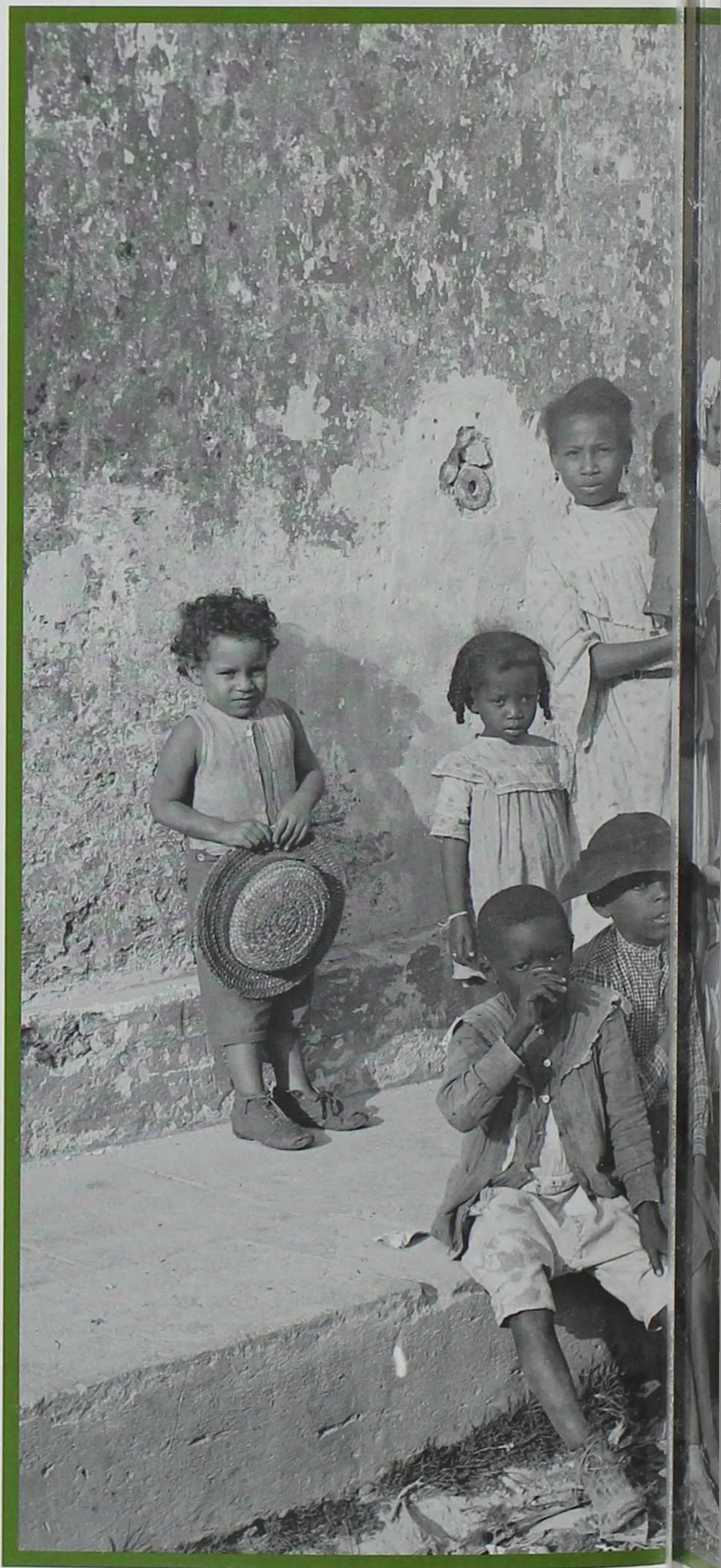
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proceeded toward Morro Castle [right] where we arrived just a little before 12:00 M. Exactly at noon the Spanish flag was hauled down and the American flag hoisted in its place which was cheered by many thousand people and a few guns fired by one of the battleships in the harbor. After that we marched through the streets of Havana on our way back and reached the camp at 5 o'clock P.M. all tired out. The day passed very quietly in Havana and the trouble that some feared did not materialize. For about two weeks after we came down here, nobody was allowed to go outside the guard line and no passes were issued, whatever and even the officers were stopped by the guards and anyone that was caught outside the guard line was put into the guard house for ten days. It would be hardly necessary to state that the detention . . . [was] overcrowded part of the time. But circumstances have changed and passes are issued to the boys every place except for Havana and I have just learned that passes are issued to the boys for Havana after this.

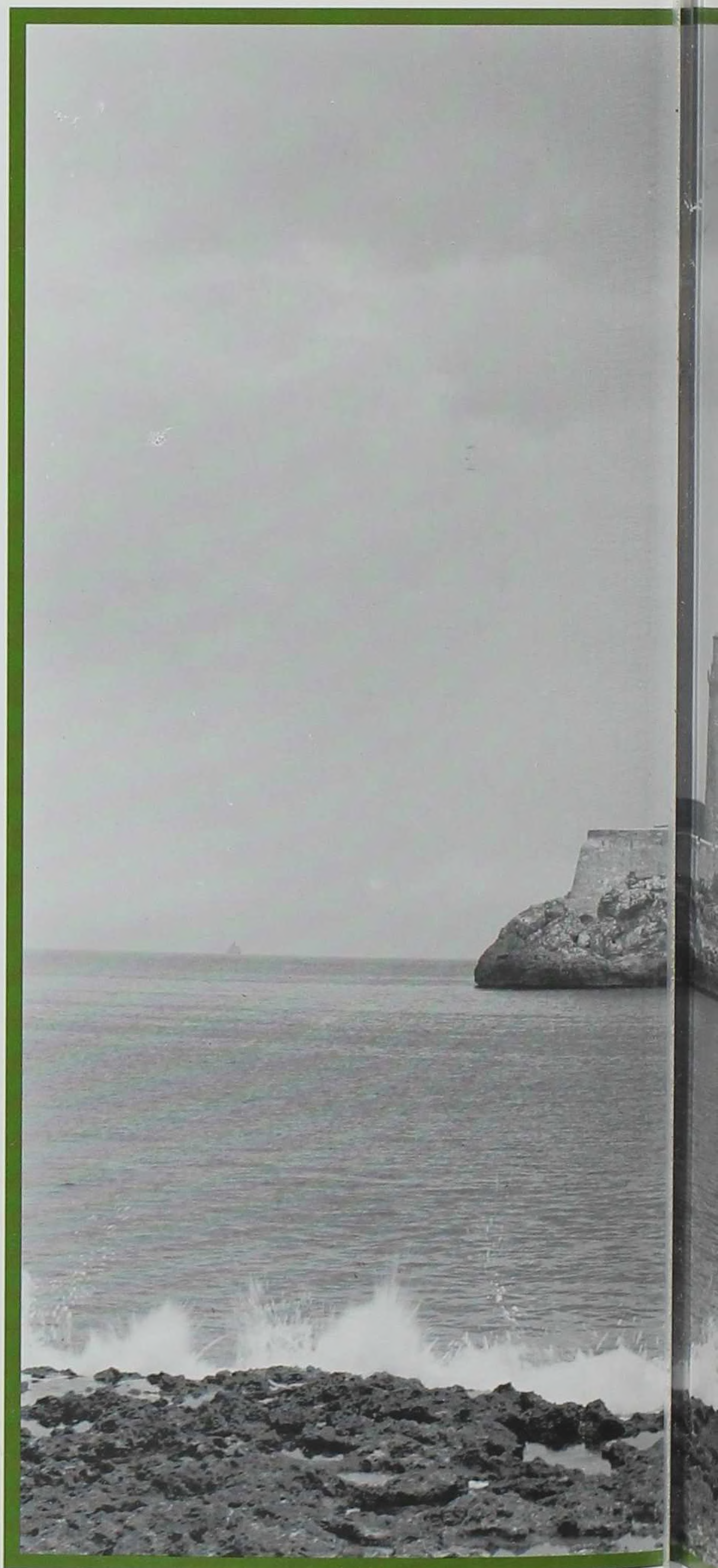
The country is real pretty. It's mostly hilly and broken but not enough so to make it unpleasant. Orange trees, palms, cocoanut trees and banana groves are plenty here. I might say that we found here what we expected to find when we first started for Florida. The soil is mostly red clay covered with rock. Fortifications are plentiful here. Nearly every half mile is a block house. It seems that was all the Spaniards were doing here the last few hundred years, building forts and block houses. . . .

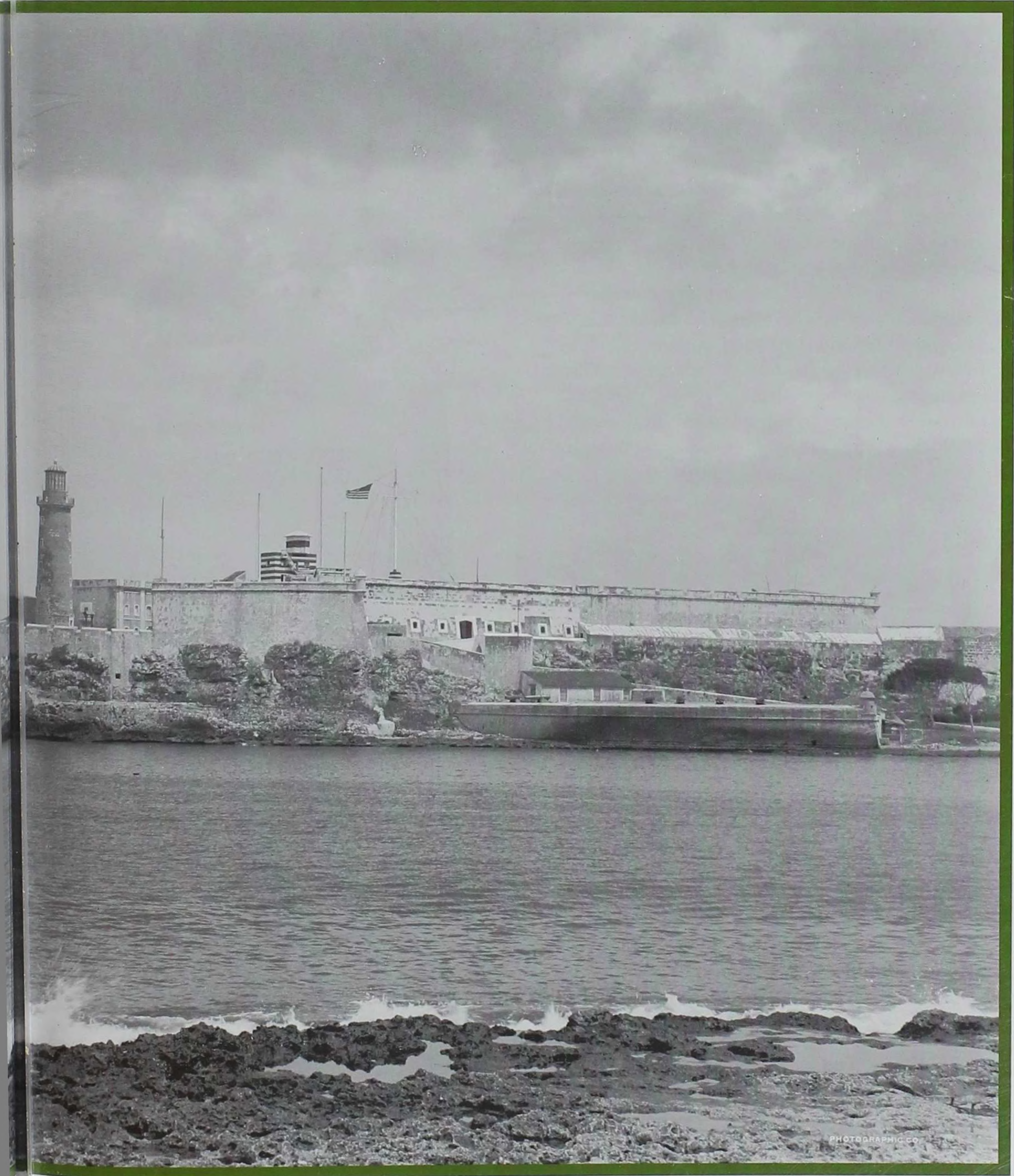
I close with regards.

J. T. Krob

"Raising the American flag on Morro Castle, Jan. 1, 1899."

Joseph Krob's letters (6/1/1898 to 4/19/1899) appeared in the *Solon Economist*. The transcript is at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City). Punctuation and paragraphing have been slightly altered for ease of reading.





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