

The Writing Is Now on the Wall After Cuban Newspapers Eliminate Classified Ads

By LIONEL MARTIN, Reuters

HAVANA—Handwritten notices, some large and some small, some carefully written and some scrawled with misspellings, are appearing with growing frequency on walls, telephone poles and other public places in Havana.

The proliferation of notes offering to buy or sell goods or exchange homes followed the elimination two months ago of the classified advertising sections from the two newspapers that carried them, the daily *Tribuna de la Habana* and the monthly *Opina*.

Secondhand goods from cars to baby strollers are in great demand because hundreds of items are unavailable in Cuba's sparsely stocked stores and a switch of homes is the only way most Havans can move because few new houses and apartments are being built.

No reason was announced for the abrupt disappearance of the classifieds, but Cuban journalists believe it was part of an anti-corruption drive initiated by President Fidel Castro earlier this year.

The journalists said the communist government believed that the classified ads encouraged capitalist ideas, that stolen property was being advertised and that middlemen were getting rich by buying and selling goods.

The ads were popular; three or four pages appeared daily in *La Tribuna* and a dozen pages in *Opina*. One journalist said that since the ads were discontinued, the circulation of both papers had dropped appreciably.

Asked why the advertisements

had to be eliminated, several Cuban officials just shrugged their shoulders and turned up their palms.

"It was an extremist measure like throwing the baby out with the bathwater," said one journalist. "Yes, there are racketeers and profiteers who take advantage of the classified ads, but why cut off the only means people have of buying something that they cannot get in the stores?"

The classified ads offer to buy or sell secondhand water pumps, cars, phonographs and many other

items. The most common, however, are those announcing "permutas"—apartment exchanges.

Divorcing couples try to trade one large apartment for two smaller ones. An elderly woman living on a pension might agree to exchange her larger apartment for a small one plus some cash.

These exchanges are legal for most Cubans. Many people already own their own houses or apartments and a 1985 law will eventually make most of the rest owners of their homes.

A film called "La Permuta" explored this exchange system.

It told the story of an energetic and upwardly mobile woman who was able to exchange her two-room apartment in a factory district of Havana for a magnificent mansion by organizing a chain of eight simultaneous swaps with other families.

In the mid-1960s, the now defunct newspaper *El Mundo* was shorn of its classified ads on the same grounds as the recent action—that they were vestiges of capitalism.