

Dear AHS Classmates,

I recently finished writing an autobiography, titled "Stories from My Youth," and several people who read it have told me that I should share with you the chapters that relate to my childhood and adolescence in Mexico, which spanned the years 1956 to 1965.

I have not included the first chapters of my book, which are about my parents and grandparents and my early years in Michigan. Nor have I included those that came after high school, including my college years, my experiences in the Peace Corps, my various jobs, my first marriage, and my children.

Since it would be presumptuous of me to imagine that anyone would want to read all the chapters, I might suggest that the casual reader read one or two of my favorites, such as:

Ch. 6 - "Junior High School" (starring Jerry Newgord)

Ch. 11 - "The Maximilian Trail" (starring Tom Mount and Rick Cromwell)

Ch. 12 - "Greek Drachmas" (starring Jon Church)

Ch. 13 - "Boys Will Be Boys"

(starring George Wonderly, Grant Brandon, and Bill Birkenmeier)

Ch. 14 - "Climbing Popo" (starring Corky Larson)

I hope you enjoy reading my stories; I certainly enjoyed writing them and reliving those wonderful years with great friends, unforgettable teachers, and fabulous experiences.

Bob Ogden, '65

Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca

February, 2022

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1	Moving to Mexico	p.
Chapter 2	El Colegio Americano	p.
Chapter 3	Our First Year in Mexico	p.
Chapter 4	Adventures with Javier	p.
Chapter 5	Boy Scouts	p.
Chapter 6	Junior High School	p.
Chapter 7	Jr. High School Crushes	p.
Chapter 8	Debacle on Little Nell	p.
Chapter 9	High School Days	p.
Chapter 10	High School Sweethearts	p.
Chapter 11	The Maximilian Trail	p.
Chapter 12	Greek Drachmas	p.
Chapter 13	Boys Will Be Boys	p.
Chapter 14	Climbing Popo	p.
Chapter 15	Our Hike to Puebla	p.
Chapter 16	The Ill-Fated Trip	p.

## Chapter 1 - Moving to Mexico

By all appearances, my parents were leading a very happy life in Trenton, Michigan. They had three beautiful children (well, two beautiful daughters and a son); Dad had a good job; they lived in a nice, new home in a leafy neighborhood; they were parishioners of a lovely Episcopal church where they socialized with good friends and where my sister Debbie and I sang in the children's choir; Dad sang tenor in a barbershop quartet and belonged to the company's bowling team; and Mom's parents lived in town so we were able to see them frequently. Everyone was healthy and apparently happy — with the possible exception of Mom. She must have been overwhelmed with us kids — three in less than four years — and the upkeep of the house. She had always been a social person, but given her circumstances, it was impossible to have the kinds of friendships she used to have. I'm sure that being housebound during the long, gray northern winters was a factor, as well. In fact, years later she would tell us about how miserable she was, in spite of having everything a woman of that time could possibly want. She would ask herself, "Is this all there is? Is this the life I was destined to live?" She had seen lots of Hollywood movies, and knew that there was a lot more to the world than Trenton, Michigan, and she ached to be a part of that world.

So imagine her surprise and delight when one day Dad came home and asked her how she'd like to move to Mexico. It seems his boss had told him that the head office in Philadelphia was planning to build a new plant in Mexico, and that Dad had been identified as the man to make it happen. Mom's reaction was immediate: "Yes! When do we go?" In spite of having only vague ideas of what Mexico was like, gathered mostly from the photos in the World Book Encyclopedia, which showed people in huge sombreros, at the village well, with their donkeys, etc., she was

anxious for a change of scene. She really thought that she'd be living in some small, backward village, rather than in the large, cosmopolitan city that was Mexico City. Nor did she have an inkling of what a glamorous life she would live there. She just knew that she wanted out of Michigan.



Mom's idea of Mexico, from the 1953 World Book Encyclopedia



Mom imagined that this would be her life. She was still game!

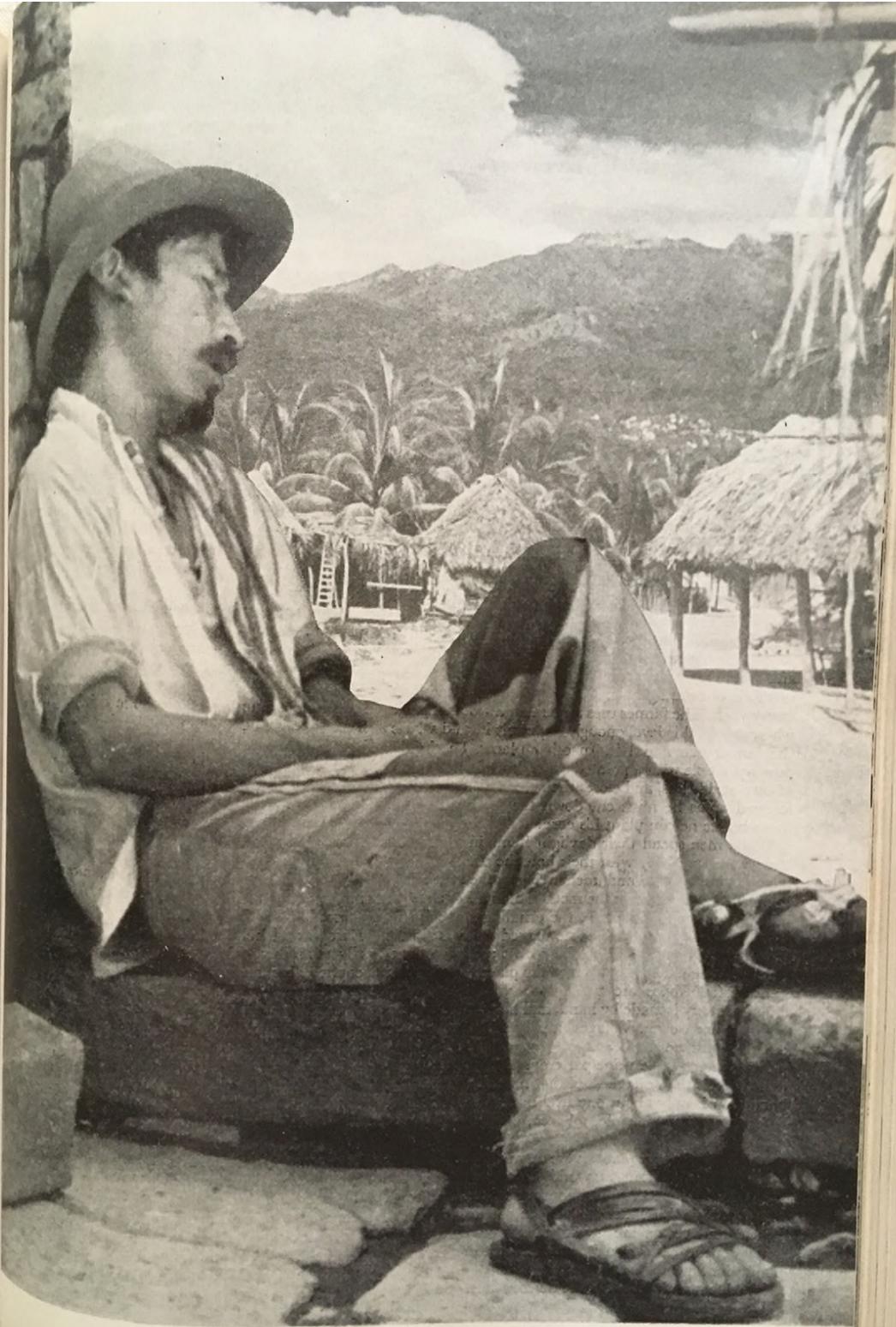
s, garlic,  
id honey,  
beef, or  
nk in the  
ely drink  
ith water  
popular.  
ey. This  
hocolate,

aves and  
e boiled,  
ps of the  
z, or the

ue, which  
ites. The  
y tended  
ut off. A  
n collect  
rd. They  
then into  
comes a  
d in the  
vitamins

e sort of  
o, Cleve-  
like those  
omemade  
ars white  
aterial, a  
an hat is  
an wears  
As a rule,  
shawl, or  
awl. The  
climate.  
f Puebla”  
s of a full  
id beads.  
eck, short  
ne which  
a doeskin  
ches with  
ch leg. A  
l or even  
costume.  
d the na-  
orn. The  
Sundays,  
d of char-  
st park of

ankets, or  
wears an  
: becomes  
an Indian  
red about  
id several  
ing a *siesta*  
where in



Almost everyone in Mexico takes a siesta, or rest, after the midday meal

Arpan

Another stereotype of Mexico from the 1953 World Book.

Mom and Dad made an exploratory trip to Mexico City without us kids, where they learned about where we would live, where we would go to school, and, of course, about where Dad would work and how he would go about establishing a new company and building a new chemical plant. It was then that Mom realized that her life was going to be drastically different, and she was delighted. They came home and told us about what they'd seen and done, and in their excitement, taught us how to count to ten in Spanish.

On August 13, 1956, we departed Detroit's Willow Run airport, on an American Airlines Viscount propeller plane, bound for New Orleans. We spent the night there, and the next afternoon we made our connection to Mexico City's Benito Juárez International Airport, where we were met by our first Mexican acquaintance, later mentor and friend, Sebastián Miguel Cruz. He was the first employee of Pennsalt de México (Dad being the second), and he was Dad's driver and overall facilitator for maneuvering Mexican red tape.

Sebastián drove us to the Churubusco Country Club, one of the city's beautiful golf clubs, where we lived in an apartment very close to the olympic-sized swimming pool. Oh, the fun we had sliding down the enormous slide into the pool! We lived there for one month, long enough for Mom and Dad to find a suitable house in the fashionable neighborhood of Lomas de Chapultepec. That house was to be our home for one year, during which time Mom and Dad made the decision to build their own home. More about that later.

In the meantime, we kids had to be enrolled in school. In spite of the fact that it was summer vacation in Michigan, school was in session, as the long break in Mexico coincided with the many

festivities in December and January. Sebastián drove all five of us to our new school, and we were duly enrolled: me in fourth grade, Debbie in third, and Polly in kindergarten.

Our Mexican adventure was just beginning!

© Copyright 2021. Property of Robert Ogden. If copying, please attribute to author.



Sebastián Miguel Cruz, native of Oaxaca, at our Pedregal house.  
Circa 1959 (three years after arrival in Mexico)

## Chapter 2 - El Colegio Americano

Mexico City had, and still has, a number of very good private schools. In addition to the several prestigious Mexican schools, many expat communities had their own: el Colegio Madrid for the Spanish kids, el Liceo Franco-Mexicano for the French kids, Greengates School for the British and Canadian kids, and el Colegio Americano for the Americans. In the elementary grades, these international schools were free to teach half the day in their language, but at least half the day had to be taught in Spanish, per Mexican law, where the Mexican government's curriculum was covered.

Although technically an American school, over half the kids in our elementary school were Mexican, having been enrolled by their wealthy parents with the purpose of learning English. There was a lot of turnover among the American kids because of the nature of their fathers's jobs. (There were few, if any, working mothers then.) The American Embassy changed staff frequently and other Americans were in Mexico on short assignments, so kids were always coming and going, which meant that the newcomers had to be taught Spanish quickly so that they could function in the Spanish half of the day. For that there was "Special Spanish." While all the other kids attended the regular Spanish class, newcomers had take Special Spanish, and once they passed it, theoretically in a few weeks, they took "Intermediate Spanish." Since all the Spanish-speaking kids, both American and Mexican, considered anyone who was in Special Spanish, or even Intermediate Spanish, to be a bit of a knucklehead, there was a huge incentive to learn the language and be enrolled in the regular class. Besides, most of the schoolyard games were in Spanish. Peer pressure at its best.

My Special Spanish teacher's name was Señora de la Garza. I thought she was ancient, but in fact she was probably about fifty years old. (I guess that fifty is, indeed, ancient for a nine-year-old.) Señora de la Garza was very nice and taught us several traditional Mexican songs, which was one of her ways of teaching vocabulary, expressions, and the correct accent. We learned "Cielito Lindo," "La Cucaracha," "Allá en el Rancho Grande," and an old song to which she had written her own lyrics for her students. It was called "Somos Amigos," and I still remember it:

"Somos amigos, buenos amigos, de la escuela principal.  
Estudiamos y aprendemos, en español con gran amor.  
Estamos listos, y muy contentos, cuando hablamos español.  
Si lo decimos, y es correcto, ¡ay qué contento el profesor!  
La gente muy contenta habla español,  
La gente muy contenta habla español ..."

As I mentioned, there was a lot of student turnover in our school, and it seemed that every new boy had to endure a bit of hazing until he was accepted, or at least until another new boy arrived. During my first few weeks I dreaded recess because I got bullied by a group of tough kids in my grade. It was traumatic. The leader was a wiry blond kid by the name of Jaime Verduzco. Jaime's favorite tactic was to push me, and I would fall over because little Mario Madrazo would be squatting down behind me so that I'd go falling over from Jaime's push. Jaime and Mario and several other kids taunted me mercilessly, calling me "Ugly Face," until one day I fought back and beat the crap out of Jaime Verduzco. From then on I was okay and they left me alone. Soon after, another newcomer by the name of José de la Borbolla arrived in school, and he got the same treatment, until he, too, proved himself. (Here's a question I never thought of at the time: Where were the adults?)

By the time I got to fifth grade I was finally in Regular Spanish, and the teasing about being “special” was over. But I almost wished I could be back in Special Spanish again. Even though I had passed the test and, in theory, could handle the curriculum, I struggled with the Spanish. I spent half the school day with a Mexican teacher, Señora Argudín, who taught us the Mexican curriculum, and the other half the day with an American teacher, Mrs. Best, who taught us the U.S. curriculum. I felt much more at home in Mrs. Best’s class; in Sra. Argudín’s I was pretty much lost, and predictably, I became a behavior problem. It didn’t help that Señora Argudín was a bit of tyrant and a typically old-school Mexican teacher, relying principally on rote learning, choral responses, and copying word-for-word from the blackboard or the book. I hated it, and I had the grades to prove it. It didn’t help that my parents didn’t seem to care what my grades were in Spanish class, as long as I was doing well in the English class. I think they knew how lost I was, but also that they scorned the Mexican teaching model and decided to just let my bad grades in Spanish class pass. Once I got to seventh grade, which would be entirely in English, they could expect a better performance from me. You might say I was an enabled child.

AL NUM. 204  
 del alumno R. Ogden  
 o 3°  
 do 2°  
 po 603

del profesor R. Le Arguedin  
 del profesor L. de Angalitia  
 e del Director Sanzaldia  
 del Director

de feb. de 1959  
 es gratuita.

AÑO DE 195 <u>9</u>		Febrero	Marzo	Abril	Mayo	Junio	Julio	Agosto	Septbre.	Octubre	Prom. de meses	Calif. de examen final	Prom. (C. I. No.)	Total anual
ASISTENCIA	Días utilizados	19	20	22	22	22	22	21	13	20	18			185
	Retardos	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-			1
	Inasistencias	1	1	1	1	-	1	3	2	4	4			18
	Asistencias	18	19	21	21	22	21	18	11	16	14			167
	% de asistencias	95	95	95	87	100	85	86	85	80	78			90
APROVECHAMIENTO	Lenguaje	7	8	7	7	5	9	8	7	7	7	7	7	
	Aritmética y Geometría	8	8	8	8	8	8	9	9	9	8	7	8	
	Conocimiento de la Naturaleza	6	6	6	6	5	6	6	6	7	6	6	6	
	Geografía	7	6	6	6	7	6	6	6	7	6	10	8	
	Historia	8	7	8	7	6	7	7	5	7	7	7	7	
	Civismo	8	7	8	8	6	7	8	7	7	7	6	7	
	Trabajos Manuales o Labores Femeniles	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	
	Dibujo	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	
	Educación Física	6	10	10	10	7	8	8	8	8	8	9	9	
	Canto	9	9	9	9	9	8	8	8	8	8	7	6	8
	Promedio	8	8	8	8	7	8	8	7	8	8	7	8	
	Conducta	8	7	7	8	7	8	7	8	8	8		7	

El presente no es válido si lleva raspaduras o enmendaduras

My end-of-year Spanish report card, 1959. Pretty mediocre grades... On the back, each of the monthly comments was “Debe estudiar más,” or “No cumple con todas sus tareas.”

© Copyright 2021. Property of Robert Ogden. If copying, please attribute to author.

### Chapter 3 - Our First Year in Mexico

Our first year in Mexico City — late 1956 through 1957 — we lived in a big, beautiful house which my parents rented on Paseo de las Palmas, in a fashionable section of town called Lomas de Chapultepec. It was there where we were introduced to the concept of domestic help, as we had two live-in servants — a cook and a cleaning lady. There was nothing unusual about this in Mexico, as essentially all upper-class and upper middle-class families had such help.

One of the first servants we had, María, had just arrived in the big city from some small village. The first thing my mother asked her to do was to wash the dishes. Ten minutes later María confessed to Mom that she wasn't able to accomplish the task because she didn't have any water, so could my mother please show her where the well was. Indoor plumbing was something that hadn't come to her pueblo yet.

I believe she was the same young lady who, after being shown how to operate a vacuum-cleaner, proceeded to run the device up and down the length of the living room, lawn mower style. On her first pass at the far end of the room the plug came out of the wall socket, but María, oblivious to the lack of power, kept on "vacuuming." She wasn't accustomed to electricity, either.

In addition to the live-in servants, we had a gardener who came to our house three days a week, and who, besides tending to the trees, shrubs, and lawn, also washed the family cars. In the morning, when Dad was ready to head off to work, our trusty "jardinero" would open the gate and then stand in the middle of the boulevard and stop any cars or busses that might be coming so that my father could pull out safely. As he did so, our loyal

gardener would salute him! This is not the kind of lifestyle we were accustomed to in Michigan.

My best friend that year was a freckle-faced redhead by the name of Warren Clark. Warren lived a block away, and he had lived in Mexico for a few years, so his Spanish was pretty good and he knew “all” about the culture. He asked me if I had tried a tortilla yet. When I asked him what that was, he told me about the tortilla lady that came everyday to all the houses on his street, carrying a big basket with warm, fresh tortillas to sell. She had just happened to come to his house a few minutes before, so there was a fresh batch of her wares on hand. Warren expertly showed me how he liked to prepare his favorite snack: he spread a layer of butter on a tortilla, sprinkled it with salt, and then wrapped it very tightly. I did as I was told, and took my first bite. It was heavenly! I couldn't wait to get home and tell my Mom about this amazing food!



Warren Clark and me, washing Mom & Dad's Oldsmobile. That's my pesky sister Debbie inside the car. 1957



My sisters, Debbie and Polly, always playing horse and rider.

The most memorable event of our time in the house in Lomas occurred on July 28, 1957, when an earthquake, measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale, struck Mexico City. Only two earthquakes to ever hit Mexico City have been stronger: the one in 1787 (an estimated 8.6 on the Richter scale), and the disastrous one in

1985, which measured 8.0. I have two memories of this event. One was of my mother waking me to tell me that we were having an earthquake and that we needed to go outside lest the house fall down (which it did not, fortunately). The other memory I have is of driving downtown the next morning to survey the damage; we saw crumpled buildings and rubble in the streets. There was a city-wide power outage, which meant no traffic lights, and the beloved, gilded Angel of Independence, which had stood so proudly atop a beautiful column in the middle of the Paseo de la Reforma since 1910, was smashed to pieces on the street below. We slowly drove around the traffic circle where the column stood to get a first-hand look at what was left of Mexico's symbol of independence. Over the years I have mentioned witnessing this spectacle to Mexican friends, and they are always amazed, as that is an iconic image in Mexican history.

We only lived in the house in Lomas for one year because my parents decided that they would be in Mexico for the foreseeable future and, therefore, they were going to build their own home. It was to be on the other side of the city, in the even more fashionable Jardines del Pedregal. This required that we move across town and live for about a year in a small house in a modest neighborhood where they could keep an eye on the progress of the construction of their dream house. It was there that I met my first Mexican friend, Javier López Hernández, and he and I became fast friends and partners in crime.



The Column of Independence, without the Angel



The Angel of Independence in pieces.

© Copyright 2021. Property of Robert Ogden. If copying, please attribute to author.

## Chapter 4 - Adventures with Javier

There's a section of Mexico City called Copilco-Universidad, which was so named because it is adjacent to the National University of Mexico. The house that we rented there was nothing like the house we had rented in Lomas. It was on a single floor and had three small bedrooms instead of the four enormous ones we had before; it had no graceful entryway or a living room fit for a grand piano; it had no yard at all, as opposed to the landscaped "jardín" we had just come from; and the development itself was only a few years old, so there were no stores, no public transportation, and practically no traffic on the streets. Also no foreigners — only middle-class Mexicans lived there. But it had the advantage of being only a ten or fifteen-minute drive from the property that Mom and Dad had purchased, where they were to build their dream home. We would live in Copilco until such time as the new house was finished — about one year.

I'm not exactly sure why, since our house was so small, but we had not one, but two, live-in domestics — "maids" in the parlance of the time. I suppose there were two of them so that they could keep each other company, given that there couldn't have been much work for them to do. Carmen and Ofelia were their names, and they were very happy to have the work, since the alternatives for them would have been grim, either in the city or back in the pueblo from which they came. They had a small but clean and dry room to sleep in, they had their own bathroom with a hot-water shower, they ate three regular meals per day, they wore clean clothes, they had one day off per week, and they were free to listen to the radio all day long and sing along if they so desired. Being a "criada," especially for an American family, was a dream job for a barely literate young woman from a poor village in Mexico.

My sisters had each other, but I was the only son. However, around the corner from our house lived a family with a boy almost exactly my age — Javier López Hernández. Javier attended a public school, whereas I attended the very expensive Colegio Americano; Javier's father was a mid-level bureaucrat at a government office, whereas my father was the general manager of an international corporation; Javier's mother spent her days at home, mostly in the kitchen, whereas my mother was an accomplished painter and sculptress who also enjoyed playing bridge with her American friends across town. Javier's and my backgrounds and families could not have been more different, but fate put Javier and me in the same place at the same time, and we became best friends.

Baseball was one of our favorite activities, and there was a less-than-ideal place to play it about a block away: a rough, uneven vacant lot strewn with rocks, cow and donkey poop, and trash. But the field was there for the playing, so we organized different types of games similar to the ones I used to play back in Trenton. We would get some of the other neighborhood boys to join us, and we'd play by the hour.

It was from Javier that I really learned how to speak Spanish. The first thing I learned was how to swear, and from him I learned the difference between a "pendejo," a "puto," and a "cabrón." I also discovered that "pinche" is the perfect adjective for sounding tough. I learned that the verb "chingar" and its many associated nouns, such as "chingón," "chingada," and "chingadera" could be either highly offensive or highly complimentary, and that one had to be careful to use them correctly. In addition to swearing, useful as that was, I also acquired a good accent, as well as the ability to manipulate Spanish verbs and object pronouns effortlessly. I got

for free that which cost many, many people countless hours of study and thousands of dollars in lessons to try to acquire.

One fine day Javier and I decided to take up smoking, but since we were only ten or eleven years old, it was difficult to obtain cigarettes. I think I began to steal them from my parents, who were smokers at the time. I soon realized that this was not a long-term plan, so, in the absence of any of our own money, we resorted to stealing them from the store down on Avenida Universidad. I'm sure we were very cool, with our cigarettes dangling from our lips like Pedro Infante. We didn't inhale, of course, as that would provoke coughing fits, ruining the cool image we wanted to project. It's incredible that Mom and Dad were unaware of my smoking, but, since they were smokers themselves, I guess they couldn't smell it on my clothes or on my breath. I might have become a life-long smoker if it weren't for the fact that I had a big fight with my sister (I'm pretty sure it was Debbie), and she told on me. My parents not only set me straight, but they also informed Javier's parents, who set him straight. So much for my life as a cool smoker.

Mexico City is located at an altitude of 7,200 feet and is surrounded on three sides by high mountains. This high elevation keeps the city from experiencing hot weather, and its low latitude keeps it from experiencing cold weather, so it has a nearly perfect climate. But very rarely, maybe once every 20 or 30 years, it snows in the relatively low nearby mountains. One of those big snowfalls occurred while we were living in Copilco, and I could see the snow-covered mountains from our house. Snow was something that Javier had never experienced, so I, as a Michigan boy, deemed it my duty to show him what this wonderful phenomenon was all about: snowmen, snowball fights, snow angels, etc. We didn't have much in the way of warm clothing, but

early on a Saturday morning we packed what little of it we had in our knapsacks, and we headed off walking toward the nearest snow-covered mountain, an extinct volcano by the name of Xitle. It didn't look too far away— I estimated maybe an hour's walk — so we'd be able to walk there, play in the snow, and be back by late afternoon. Soon we were out of our neighborhood and into the countryside, where Xitle was in plain view. But it seemed that the longer we walked the farther away it got! After a few hours we stopped to eat the lunch we had packed, and then we continued on our way. Soon our canteens were empty, and we weren't any closer than we were when we started. With heavy hearts, we turned around and headed back home. In the meantime, my mother, whom I had not informed of this outing, began to wonder where I was. My sisters helpfully told her about this adventure I had planned, and Mom panicked, knowing full well that it would be impossible to walk to the mountains from our house. She got in her car and began to search, ultimately finding us, exhausted and dirty, dragging our feet along the main highway south of the city. Once home, the hot bath felt great, but it didn't compensate for the disappointment of not reaching the snow.

Before I knew it, the house my parents were building was finished and we moved in, leaving behind our little house in Copilco and my friend Javier. I wish I had stayed in touch with him, but my life was to be very different in our new home and it would have been nearly impossible for the two of us to ever get together. I'm left with nothing but the memories of that amazing year and of my friendship with my first real Mexican friend.



Javier, Roberto, Polly, and Debbie. Acapulco 1957



Los dos cuates, Roberto y Javier. Acapulco, 1957

© Copyright 2021. Property of Robert Ogden. If copying, please attribute to author.