

HONDURAS in the “GOOD OLD DAYS” La República de Honduras en los “Viejos Días Buenos”

Part II – 1970-71

My 1970 field season was the longest of my dissertation mapping project—five months, June through October; my 1971 season was much shorter, just a couple of months, but –importantly— it was undertaken during the dry season, when access to the area south of the *Río Ulúa* was easier and outcrops more visible than during other times of the year.

Unfortunately, the nice ICAITI jeep was no longer available to me (could this be because I had rolled it?). But DGMH arranged for the *Banco Central de Honduras* to lend me an old, very beat-up Jeep pickup painted a sort of hospital green. It was rough, but it had 4WD and high clearance, so it met my needs. The main drawback was the fuel supply: *Obras Públicas* was willing to supply gasoline and repairs, but the only place I could draw gas from was at their main complex in Tegus. And this meant I had to get a 55-gallon drum installed in the pickup bed, roped in just behind the cab, and fill both the gas tank and the drum before leaving Tegus for my field area. And it meant I had to come back in to Tegus when I needed a refill—I calculated that this crazy arrangement meant I used up at least a third of my gasoline getting gasoline! A terribly inefficient arrangement and waste of government funds, but no one was willing to let me buy gasoline in the field and present receipts for reimbursement. It also meant that I lost two field days for each trip to gas up. And with the 55-gallon drum full, I felt like I was driving a car bomb.

Having worked the NE quadrant of my field area, I moved my field headquarters to the *municipio* of San Pedro Zacapa, more centrally located in the quadrangle. Zacapa was a town with a population of around 1000 according to my best guess...but if one added the population living in the countryside under the political control of the *municipio*, the count would be considerably higher. Zacapa was a very rural town, with no visible signs of significant wealth. I would guess there were possibly as many as six vehicles in this town, one of which now was my Jeep pickup. Perhaps the well-to-do signified their status by having TV sets.

The road leading from Zacapa southward to the CdeIN (and eventually, Tegus) was so miserable --virtually intransitable in the wet season, kept in a rutted mess by logging trucks—that what little traffic existed went to Santa Bárbara, the *cabecera departamental* about an hour or hour-and-a-half to the west. From here, decent gravel roads connected to San Pedro Sula, Honduras' major commercial city.

As far as I remember, Zacapa had no regular public transportation. People walked, rode horses or mules, or hitched rides with trucks (including my Jeep pickup). If Zacapa had any public transportation, it would have been a *baronesa*—which requires some explanation. The *baronesa* was an early form of passenger bus in Honduras, used on rough roads unsuitable for regular passenger vehicles. From the mid-30s, if not earlier, to the mid-50s, if not later, this included the CdeIN between San Pedro Sula and Tegus where *baronesas* were in service. By the time I arrived in Honduras the road network, such as it was, had grown to where many small backwoods towns were served by *baronesas*—Zacapa should have been one such town, though I have no specific memory of a *baronesa* in that town.

So what was a *baronesa*? It was a truck (probably a flatbed truck to begin with) which had a homemade wooden body built onto it, wider than the original bed, giving the vehicle an overall wide profile. The wooden body even extended forward on each side of the cab (from which the doors had been removed) so that one passenger would sit to the driver's left, and at least three to his right. The body was crafted much like a stagecoach in the Old West, but bigger. Several rows of hard bench seats were installed inside the wooden body behind the cab, with an aisle

down the center. The windows were open rectangular holes, furnished with canvas or leather coverings that in times of good weather were rolled up and strapped in place, but which could be let down during foul weather. Large pieces of luggage were placed on the roof, which had a metal rail around the edges to keep items from sliding off during the jouncing journeys. Small pieces of baggage (including chickens, and the like) rode inside with the passengers. In some instances, a tailgate for additional luggage hung behind the passenger cabin, covered with canvas that sloped up to the roof of the cabin, thus completing the stagecoach-like appearance of the *baronesa*. The turn signals were hand carved wooden arrows or pointing hands, activated by pulling on a cord. Typically the tires were bald, cracked, and/or showed ominous-looking bulges. But these vehicles were ubiquitous, serving towns and villages throughout much of the country, anywhere reached by an alleged road.



A *baronesa* from Valle de Ángeles on a street in Tegucigalpa. Note the wooden arrow turn signal.

Why they were called *baronessas* is a separate story. According to Peter Keenagh (a young Brit who explored a portion of the *Río Patuca* area and wrote up his adventures in the book "Mosquito Coast", published in 1938), the *baronesa* was named "either to honor or ridicule a certain German Baroness" who lived for many years in a native hut near the Caribbean coast. "The only features the Baroness had in common with the *baronesa* was her extreme width: but this was said to be very remarkable and was indeed the salient characteristic of both Baroness and 'bus'." Whether true or not I cannot say, but such is the reported origin of the name of these amazing buses once common throughout much of Honduras.

An even older traditional form of transport that at this time could still be seen on Honduran roads and even in the streets of the capital was the oxcart. Pulled by a pair of *bueyes* yoked to each other by a hand-carved wooden yoke strapped to their horns by leather cords, the oxcart had two big solid wooden wheels that tended to screech from lack of grease. These carts were a commonplace mode of slow, but sure, freight transport.

By the time I went to Honduras roads and bus services were beginning to improve. A major bus line, the *Cooperativa San Cristóbal* had bought a fleet of old Continental Trailways buses, still in their red and silver livery, and ran them between Tegus and San Pedro. They were small buses by U.S. standards, typical of buses that roamed the South in the 1950s, and most of them still featured the names of southern destinations in their marquees: Miami, Greater Miami,

Mobile, Charleston and Parrot Jungle (!) are names I remember seeing. And old U.S. school buses, mostly Bluebirds, bearing inscriptions such as “Grosse Ile ISD” on their sides, began servicing lesser towns. I think by the 1980s the *baronesas* were a thing of the past. In more modern times, one major bus line celebrated its 50th anniversary with advertisements telling how the company started off with “*camionetas tipo baronesa*”.

As for electrical communications, well, everybody in Zacapa had transistor radios*, and not only did these supply music and news, but personal messages were commonly sent over the commercial air waves, especially if they dealt with medical emergencies and other urgent but personal news. And then there was the telephone and telegraph office... I do not think I ever placed a phone call from Zacapa, but several times availed myself of the telegraph service. Telegraph service was introduced to Honduras in the 1880s, and the Zacapa office seemed to have the original equipment: a heavy brass key mounted on an oak plaque on a table where the operator sat, with thick wires trailing down into a glass battery jar partially filled with blue copper sulfate liquid. To send a telegram you would write out your message and give it to the operator; he would study it a bit, then ask what class service did you want: *urgente*, *doble urgente*, or *triple urgente*? The cost was by the word and *doble* class was priced at twice the normal per word rate, and *triple* was, of course, thrice the cost. So what did you get if you paid extra (there’s no way to make the electrons move down the wire any faster)? If you paid triple your message would get sent right away; if you paid double it would likely be sent before the day was over; but if you paid simple *urgente* rate, I am not sure how long the message would languish on the operator’s table before he got in the mood to send it.

Zacapa did have something many Honduran country towns did not have at this time: electricity** —at night and all day on Sundays. This came about because in 1948 the venerable New York & Honduras Rosario Mining Co. —operators of the famous El Rosario gold and silver mine near Tegus—opened a new silver mine, El Mochito, a few kilometers north of Zacapa and needed electrical power to run the mine. They brought a 1913 vintage Pelton wheel from El Rosario across country and installed it at a big spring known as the *Nacimiento del Río Zacapa*. Here great volumes of water gush to the surface through a mass of boulders at the foot of a fault scarp (which I mapped as the Zacapa fault); remarkably enough, this water is known to come from *Lago de Yojoa*, flowing into a sinkhole near the southeast end of the lake and following a subterranean course to the nacimiento. The straight line distance between the two points is nine kilometers—a helluva cave system for sure (in 1981 and '82 I led two groups of cavers to Honduras and managed to penetrate a portion of this system, but most of it remains inaccessible and unexplored today).

I rented a small apartment from *don* Saúl Sánchez and his wife *doña* Mérida, owners of the *Bazar El Carmen* situated on a prominent corner of Zacapa’s small *parque central*. My apartment consisted of a single room with a tiny bathroom attached. None of the windows had glass panes, but they had wooden shutters that could be closed and locked, a necessary security. The toilet had no seat. There was no hot water, but I quickly learned that if I showered soon after coming back to town at the end of a field day, I could get a decently warm, if short, shower because the pipes ran across the roof and baked in the sun during the day. About once a month I would hike

*Everybody but me. And one of the delightful things about working in Honduras during this era was that I could go days without hearing any news about America’s disastrous war in Viet Nam.

**Sometime in the mid-1990s I overnighted in Gualaco, a town that still was left off the national electric grid. One well-to-do (by local standards) family owned their own generator and had a TV. They had placed a large number of seats in the room with the TV and turned it, in effect, into a movie house, charging admission to neighbors who wanted to watch. But this was about to change: tall steel towers already marched up the valley to the town, just awaiting the hanging of the transmission lines. Gualaco would soon have electric power, and people’s lives would be made better. But as I strolled around town that night, marveling at the blazing glories in a sky unspoiled by light pollution, I wondered if any of the locals knew what they would be losing in the name of progress.

eight kilometers to *La Cueva*, one of several thermal spring sites in my quad. Here I could get a really hot bath, but by the time I had hiked back home, I was hot and dirty again!

I arranged to get some meals at the home of *don* Pancho and *doña* Basilia Jiménez, mainly suppers, as lunch would consist of a couple of small cans of fruit juice and a can of sardines or mackerel because I was in the field. The meals were served in the old-fashioned Honduran style: male members of the family first, women later. A *plato típico* consisted of red beans and rice, served with scrambled eggs, a bit of salty white cheese* and perhaps a small portion of greasy chicken or some tough beef. And, of course, steaming hot, thick hand-patted corn tortillas. I absolutely adored beans-rice-eggs mixture, shoveled in with tasty hot tortillas. The meals were served by a very beautiful young Hondureña by the name of Sofía who was not a family member, but worked for *doña* Basilia. The following year, when I returned for my last dissertation field season, Sofía was gone. When I enquired about her, I learned that she had been let go because she became pregnant...and wasn't married. Sadly, this was a very commonplace occurrence in Honduras where the attitude of *machismo* led far too many men to pride themselves on how many women they could impregnate. More on Sofía anon.

As the only gringo in town, I drew considerable attention. I needed my windows and door open in the evenings to dissipate some of the afternoon heat from my apartment. And an open door was taken as an invitation by the local kids who wandered in, sometimes in considerable number. Having no desk or closet or chest of drawers, I had to keep an eye out to see that my pens, rulers, and other stuff did not wander off with my visitors. Fortunately, two teenagers – Mario Jesús and Mariano-- who were boarding students at the local *colegio* also rented from Saúl and Mélida and they sort of “adopted” me. They were as curious about me and my stuff as the small kids, but they were not about to run off with it and they kept a lookout for me when the small kids wandered in. We became *amigos* and went on a few weekend excursions together to the *nacimiento* or other sites of interest; I even used my old Jeep pickup to teach them to how to drive...lessons which ended when Mariano, who was too short to easily reach the pedals, ran off the road and nearly wrecked my precious vehicle. Mario Jesús, whom we called “Chus” in the approved Honduran style of using the “ch” sound in nicknames, became a very good friend indeed. He was bright, resourceful, and reliable. He went on to study at the normal school in Comayagua, became a teacher, and had a productive career in educational radio. We maintained our friendship until his untimely death from kidney cancer in 2016.

Aside from lodging, I also rented a horse from *don* Saúl, a horse of better size and with a better quality saddle and bridle than I might get by simply arriving at a village and asking who had a horse to rent. But the downside was that the horse was kept on Saúl's *hacienda* several kilometers from Zacapa, so I had to ask for it the day before I wanted it. And, of course, this particular horse could only be used on day trips within a few kilometers of Zacapa— more distant portions of my map area necessitated multi-day outings or renting horse in a distant town. Both of these scenarios were part of my playbook.

My M.O. for multi-day trips was to plan a route that, if things went well, would wind me up at the end of the day in some town where I might find a place to sleep and something to eat. I had a pair of leather saddlebags that I would fill with canned goods for field lunches, two sets of clean underclothes, essential toiletries (including bug repellent**), my carbide lamp and carbide, and my

*The cheese varied a lot character, from dry and crumbly, to soft and wet, but oftentimes it was very hard and very salty. Years later I was reading a book about William Walker and his attempt to take over Nicaragua in the mid-1850s. An incident was described in which Walker and his men were trapped in a building under strong enemy fire and in dire need of protection from bullets. They found a number of big wheels of white cheese and rolled them into a doorway to make a wall, from behind which they returned fire on their attackers. YES! I thought when I read this, I know that cheese and it will stop bullets!

**I once bought a bottle of Honduran-made bug repellent with the brand name “Repel-12”. I think they were inspired by the U.S. brand “6-12” but were unclear on the concept because the label said “12 horas de protección con una aplicación cada 6 horas.” Fifty years on I still have the bottle and still smile when I see it.

harmonica. My sleeping bag and air mattress I wrapped in my rain poncho and tied it on behind the cante. Upon arrival at my target town I went to the central plaza, picked out the most prosperous looking store and went there to find lodging and food. I was seldom disappointed. Food was generally the beans, rice, scrambled eggs and tortillas I so dearly love, and it was cheap—I remember paying Lps. 0.70 for one meal, the equivalent of 35 cents U.S. But sleeping arrangements could be strange (in the town of San Francisco de Ojuera I was given a storeroom to sleep in; when I looked up at the ceiling above my sleeping bag I saw a coffin resting on the rafters above me). And I learned that I could sleep with ticks and mosquitos, but fleas would drive me crazy. As my canned goods were consumed, the space left was filled with rock samples. When I ran out of cans or space for samples, it was time to get back home to Zacapa.

On one of my first forays south from Zacapa to the *Río Ulúa* --which separates the northern two-thirds of the quadrangle from the then roadless southern third—I found the river up, wide, muddy and swift. I do not recall if I was mounted or afoot, but either way, I wasn't crossing this dangerous torrent. I happened upon a *campesino* and asked him how I could get across the river and he replied that if I kept on going on the trail I was following, I would come to *una hamaca*. Knowing that hammocks were something you slept in and certainly would not get me across the flooded river, I asked again. But I got the same answer. So I thanked him and went on, and eventually I came to...a cable bridge...hanging in a catenary*...just as a hammock hangs! These bridges, I soon learned, are incredibly common in Honduras, as they were once very common in Tennessee (where they can still be found, but in declining numbers). Cables are strung from trees or poles set on each bank of a river, with a flooring of planks and slightly higher cables for hand rails, forming a bridge which swings and sways but which carries human traffic just fine. Horses and mules, of course, won't have anything to do with them, so the Hondurans force their animals into the river and make them swim across. When the rivers are in flood the animals wind up several hundred yards downstream from where they were forced into the water, but nonetheless, they generally make it crossing without drowning.

Even in the dry season, crossing the Ulúa, one of the larger rivers in Honduras, could be dicey. One day I found myself mounted and needing to cross the river. I had faith in my horse, urged it into the river and gave it its head, believing it would not cross if it couldn't do it safely. Well we got about two thirds the way across when the swift current began to turn the horse sideways, and it began to struggle. Suddenly it went down and we began to roll over and over downstream together. I was trying to hold my daypack and camera up out of the water as we rolled, and to dismount, but had one foot stuck in a stirrup. After what seemed a long time, but which undoubtedly was only a few seconds, we separated and both of us managed to regain our footing and stagger to the shore. My camera was never quite the same, and I lost two weeks of field notes! But it could have been worse.

Another memorable trip I made south of the Ulúa by horseback was a long trip, probably made in 1971 during the dry season. In this particular case the trip lasted six full days. My planned route included the *aldea* of Santa Ana, a village in the mountains near the south border of my map area. This village happened to be the hometown of my friend Mariano and he had told me that he would be going home on a particular date to celebrate his birthday. So we arranged to meet in Santa Ana. And he was to bring me my mail—if I had any—when he came. Well, in spite of being the dry season, the *Río Gualcarque* (a river to achieve notoriety decades later due to a fight by indigenous Lenca people to block a planned dam) was up, and I had to cross it to get to Santa Ana. I lost a lot of time finding a fordable crossing and dark fell before I reached Santa Ana. By the time I got there the village was closed up, everyone inside their simple houses, all the doors and windows tightly shut. *Campesinos* had a fear of night air, probably due to

*These hanging bridges are not true suspension bridges. In the true suspension bridge the main cables hang in a catenary, but the bridge deck hangs in an upward arch, suspended by secondary hanger cables dropping from the main cables. Such bridges are much more stable than the simpler hanging bridges, but require more sophisticated engineering and more cost in materials.

malaria ["mal aria = bad air]. But I managed to raise someone and was told where to find my Mariano's parent's house. Mariano then arranged for me to be able to sleep in the school house (rather reminiscent of 19th century travel accounts when travelers were traditionally given the *cabildo* or other public building for lodging). By this time the village was roused...and people poured into the school to see the foreigner. And who could blame them? 1) I rode in at night...something very strange to them. 2) I was a foreigner, perhaps the first ever in Santa Ana. 3) I was given the school to overnight in, something special. 4) While the villagers had candles and kerosene lamps at home, I lit up a brilliant carbide mine lamp. 5) I ate a supper of canned food worth more than a man's daily wages. 6) Mariano gave me three letters he had brought from Zacapa! (About three more than I expected, and likely more than the village received in a year.) 7) I blew up an air mattress and rolled my sleeping bag out on it. And, 8) for the grand finale, I squeaked out "Red River Valley" and some other tunes on my harmonica. I was a one-man circus!



Field geology by horseback. Obviously, I was suffering from a great explorer self-image complex!

The next day I breakfasted at Mariano's home. His parents, possibly the wealthiest family in the village, had a little store in their home. Its entire stock consisted of a few items, mostly canned goods, on a single board shelf. Yes, folks, this was the real backwoods Honduras, in spades.

On the 15th of September 1821, the Central American colonies declared their independence from Spain. Hence, Honduras celebrates Sept. 15 –*El Quince*—as Independence Day. In Zacapa, on the *Quince* the students from the local *colegio* (including Chus and Mariano) marched with flags and patriotic songs. As I recall local dignitaries made speeches. After the formal festivities the teachers from the *colegio* proceeded to drink beer and some of them got pretty sloshed. They decided it would be fun to go into the "big city" of Santa Bárbara and asked me to take them in my pickup. I have a low tolerance for drunks, so I demurred...at which point one of them pulled a pistol out and stuck it in my belly and told me if Ricardo didn't give them a ride, then "bang, bang". I guess he saw the look of consternation on my face, for he quickly informed me that he was just joking. I told him I did not like such jokes, that people died during jokes of that nature, to which he replied, "No, maybe in your country, but not here in Honduras." [At the time I thought, "Yeah, right..." but nowadays his statement would seem more accurate, considering the unconscionable number of gun deaths in the U.S.]



El Quince celebrations: colegio students saluting the bandera nacional in a startling fashion.

I wound up driving the teachers into Santa Bárbara. I gave the passenger space in the cab to a female teacher (maybe two), and put the men in the back and drove like hell, hoping that if I threw them around enough and the trip was uncomfortable enough they'd never ask me for a ride again, with or without pistols for persuasion.

Earlier I mentioned that my little apartment in Zacapa had no kitchen and no hot water. Coffee and boiled water for drinking being necessities, I had to improvise something. I got a small table and put my camp stove on it and equipped it with a pot for boiling water, plus a coffee pot and a *bolsa para colar café* (you put the ground coffee in a cloth sock attached to a wire handle, hold the sock over the coffee pot and pour the boiling water into it, the coffee draining down into the pot). And I learned that the traditional clay water jugs used by the locals would keep drinking water cooler than room temperature: they are not completely impervious; they "sweat" and the beads of water evaporating from the exterior of the jugs cools the contents. Age old technology going back to the Mayas, and it works!

I learned of a woman potter in the village of Canculucos (how about that for a name—must be indigenous) and commissioned her to make me a water jug. The jug—which I still have, having carried it back to the U.S. in my lap on the airplane—is basically round, bigger than a basketball, with a molded base so it will sit upright, and a strap handle across the top, which is closed. The pour spout is a sort of mythical animal's head, with the filler hole being a flared "tail" on the opposite side from the pour spout. On one side is a very primitive charcoal drawing of a flower pot and blooming flower, with the initial "R" for "Ricardo" enclosed in the flower pot. This water jug served me well for two field seasons and remains one of my prized souvenirs from Honduras.

Another water related artifact I brought back from Honduras was a typical *campesino cantimplora* made of a hollowed out gourd and fitted with a corncob stopper. These gourd canteens were almost as obligatory as machetes for the *campesinos* working in their *milpas*. The nicest gourds had a narrow waist separating bulbous upper and lower chambers and were carried by a cord tied around this waist. The hourglass form of the gourd was attractive and if the gourd skin had a nice blotch-free yellow-brown color and had acquired some polish, some of these canteens were truly beautiful works of folk art. Two questions I never learned the answer to:

- 1) Was the hourglass form natural, or did they force it by tying a string around the growing gourd?
- 2) How did they clean the pulp out the lower chamber when the gourd was really tight-waisted?

The folk art that the Santa Bárbara region was best known for was the traditional art of making straw hats and other items out of fibers derived from a palmetto called *junco*. I never saw any evidence of *junco* working in Zacapa, but in the town of Ceguaca and other localities in the western portion of my field area, closer to Santa Bárbara, many women worked *junco* in their spare time (how they managed to have any spare time, what with cooking, washing and taking care of kids, I do not know). Fibers were stripped from the palmetto plants—I never learned if they were derived from the leaves or the stems (I suspect the latter), and, if the product was meant to be of high quality, the fibers were split lengthwise once or twice, to make a fine weave possible. The fibers were bleached, I think using sulfur. The most common product was hats. The weaving began at the center of the crown of the hat, which was woven around a wooden block to give it form. When the weaver reached the point of weaving the brim, she switched to a special little table with a hole in it, placing the crown down through the hole, and weaving the brim on the flat of the table, using a pointed bone or antler tool to work the fibers tightly into place. The resulting hat had an attractive and distinctive form, quite different from cowboy style *sombreros* that ultimately became the standard wear for *campesinos*. Three day's work was needed to produce a *corriente*, and up to a month to produce a really fine weave hat. These hats were nearly indestructible: you could wad a *junco* hat into a crushed ball without breaking the fibers, and it would resume its intended form when you put it back on your head. You could soak them in water and they would cool your head as they dried. I wore them in the field. Unfortunately, today this traditional cottage industry is largely a thing of the past, except for the production of some *junco* items such as small purses, cigarette pack holders, etc., for the tourist trade.

Falling in a completely different class of souvenir were the pre-Columbian obsidian arrow- or spearheads and knife fragments I occasionally found lying in the trails I walked, a testimony, I believe, to the antiquity of the trails. To find an obsidian point was thrilling, much like finding a flint arrowhead in the U.S., but better because the obsidian, being volcanic glass, is translucent and beautiful. To the best of my knowledge, there are no obsidian deposits in Honduras; the nearest deposits known to me lie in Guatemala and were quarried in ancient times, the obsidian being a valuable trade item. In addition to flaked points, the ancient native people knew the percussion technique of producing razor sharp knife blades. This was done by striking a pre-shaped core stone of obsidian with a hard hammer stone and popping an elongate sliver, several inches long, off the side of the core. This sliver, shaped rather like a slightly bowed straight razor, made an excellent cutting tool, but it was fragile, susceptible to snapping. When it broke, the user simply struck a new blade off his core stone. In Guatemala core stones are sometimes sold in tourist markets and typically they are 4 to 8 inches long. I found a tiny one near Zacapa, about 2 inches long...another bit of evidence, I think, that the source quarry for the obsidian relics found in Honduras was far away. Why else would anyone have kept working blades off such a tiny core?

One day on the trail towards Canculuncos, I chanced upon a group of men carrying a refrigerator from Zacapa, up the ridge on which Canculuncos was situated. As I recall, there were eight men (but there may have been 16), carrying the refrigerator in teams of four (or was it teams of eight?). The refrigerator was strapped to poles which rested on the men's shoulders as they struggled up the trail. When one team pooped out, they would switch to the team that had rested while walking unburdened. Their goal was the village of Agua Caliente—down the far side of the Canculuncos ridge and across the *Río Ulúa*. Why, I wondered, would anyone in a village with no electricity want a refrigerator? And this is when I first learned of kerosene powered refrigerators, a very clever invention. [If you're curious how they work, look it up on www.quora.com] And the first storekeep in Agua Caliente to acquire a refrigerator would also acquire the great majority of the local sales of cold (actually) beer and *frescos* to the detriment of his competitors. But getting the refrigerator to Agua Caliente was an epic tote.

The town of Ceguaca, sited on a mountaintop in the western portion of the SPZ quadrangle, was about the same size as Zacapa and possibly was a *municipio*, too, I don't know. The town's

parque central was graced by a spreading *higo* tree whose thick foliage made a dark shady resting area in the center of the plaza and was furnished with benches for that purpose. On one side of the plaza was the inevitable church, in this case painted a surprising bold orange.



The *parque central* of Ceguaca with its higo tree and striking orange church. Note the *baronesa*.

Ceguaca was accessible by road and I based my field work out of this town for a number of days, working outcrops along the few existing roads in my Jeep, hiking the trails and *quebradas*, and also doing some work mounted on a locally rented horse. One evening as I rode into town kids swarmed around my horse excitedly pointing at me and yelling “*Coronel Custer! Coronel Custer!*”, and warning me of Indians down near the river. I think they must have seen a TV show about Custer.

Toward the end of my 1970 field season, Mike Alley, a dear friend from Tennessee and a fan of Latin America, came down to visit me and travel back with me by land through Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico. He actually flew into Santa Bárbara, coming in on a SAHSA* DC-3. In those days, SAHSA served quite a few departmental capitals and other “major” rural towns, a reflection on how bad the road network was. As the roads were improved, internal flight services died out, except for flights to the roadless *La Mosquitia* region in eastern Honduras. I met Mike at the grass air strip just outside Santa Bárbara and we headed east to Ceguaca where I still had some field work to do.

Mike was something of a hippy and sported shoulder length hair, which was a novelty to the Hondurans. At the first store we stopped at in Ceguaca to get a beer to wash away the road dust from our throats, the proprietor asked me “And what would she like?” He not only mistook Mike for a very flat chested female, he apparently could not imagine that a woman would drink a beer.

After supper that night, Mike and I went out and sat under the sprawling *higo* tree in the plaza to talk. The kids, fascinated by two strangers, crowded around us to the point that when some could not get close enough, they climbed into the limbs of the *higo* and clambered out over our

*SAHSA = Servicio Aéreo de Honduras, S.A. Gringos joked that the acronym really stood for “Stay At Home, Stay Alive”.



SAHSA DC-3 on the grass landing field at Santa Bárbara, my good friend Mike Alley deplaning.

heads. As they listened to us talk some of them exclaimed "*Hablan en chino, hablan en chino!*" evidently failing to perceive that we did not have slanted eyes or any other Oriental features. It occurred to me that we ought to do something more than just talk to justify this level of attention. At the time, I smoked cigarettes. So I lit up a cigarette, ostentatiously took a deep drag off of it, and then even more ostentatiously waved the cigarette around in the air well away from my face as I continued to chat with Mike. After talking a bit, I then stuck the cigarette in one ear and made a movement as if I were drawing in a big breath, after which I finally exhaled the smoke I had taken in earlier....making it appear that I had inhaled smoke through my ear! What the kids actually believed, I do not know, but we were assuredly a hit with them.

Now get this: Around 1895, then well-known author and war correspondent Richard Harding Davis and two friends made a trip across Honduras by muleback, passing, as it happens, through my field area and stopping for a meal in Ceguaca. Davis wrote up his travels in his delightful 1896 book "Three Gringos in Venezuela and Central America", a book I first read some years after Mike and I overnighted in Ceguaca. Davis and his friends left Santa Bárbara in the morning and upon arriving at Ceguaca, stopped in the town to get something to eat. They did as I have done many times when I needed food or lodging, i.e., dismounted in the *parque central* and entered the most prosperous looking store there to find out what could be had. The inhabitants of Ceguaca, adults as well as kids, being unaccustomed to seeing foreigners, crowded into the store where they were eating, to gawk at them. Davis writes:

"It was somewhat embarrassing, and we felt as though we ought to offer something more unusual than the mere exercise of eating in order to justify such interest; so we attempted various parlor tricks, without appearing to notice the presence of an audience, and made knives and forks disappear in the air, and drew silver dollars from the legs of the table, continuing our luncheon in the meantime in a self-possessed and polite manner, as though such eccentricities were our hourly habit. We could see the audience, out of the corner of our eyes, leaning forward with their eyes and mouths open, and were so encouraged that we called up some of the boys and drew

watches and dollars out of their heads, after which they retired into corners and ransacked their scantily clad persons for more. It was rather an expensive exhibition, for when we set forth again they all laid claim to the dollars of which they considered they had been robbed.”

Davis and his companions performed higher class tricks than I was capable of with my smoking-by-ear stunt, but to me the telling thing is how little things had changed in the 75 years between the two visits. By 1970 the adults were, perhaps, less excited by the presence of foreigners, but basically, Honduran country towns were still much in the 19th century in 1970. Those days are really gone now.

My 1971 dry season efforts wrapped up my dissertation field work. I would return to Honduras soon, but under different circumstances.

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