

Memories of Spring Term Class in Mexico 1964

The first year of The Hanover Plan was 1962-1963. My colleague in the Spanish department, Dr. Emma M. Hill, in an earlier year had taken a summer class to Mexico for Indiana University. She had experience and decided that she would take a Hanover class the spring term of 1963. Her class was mainly in and around Mexico City with one longer trip to western Mexico and the Lake Chapala area. During her time in Mexico City she visited with the Cultural Affairs officer at the U.S. Embassy who suggested to her that it might be a good idea for us to take classes to the southern state of Chiapas, a place not visited often by tourists or U.S. citizens in general. She brought this suggestion home to me. I was scheduled to take a class somewhere in 1964.

I had been in Spain but never in Mexico and felt that it was important for me to visit Mexico before going there with students. President John E. Horner agreed and authorized funds to pay my way. My wife and I made the trip during the 1963 Christmas holiday, leaving our children with her parents in Indianapolis.

Max Healy and his wife, Libby Rae Healy, Hanover College alumni, were living in Mexico City. Libby grew up in Madison and Max in Indianapolis. They had strong ties to Hanover College and the Madison community. Max was the CEO of Mexicana Airlines, 51 percent owned by Pan Am. Max had worked with Avianca in Colombia and Pan Am in Cuba earlier in his career. We met Max and Libby for the first time during our Christmas visit. We were staying in a boarding house with no heat and with wide openings around the windows. This was the place I would stay later with students. It was so cold in our room that we removed all the covers from one of the twin beds and piled them on the other bed where we slept together. I phoned Max from the "posada Carlota". He invited us to have lunch with them on Saturday and said he would send a car to pick us up. The car was a limo with Max's personal driver. In spite of such luxury, we felt right at home with Max and Libby and continued to be close friends as long as they both lived.

They had friends visiting from Guatemala and took us to the "Bazar Sábado", the Saturday Bazaar in the wealthy San Angel section of southwestern Mexico City. Later we had lunch at the magnificent San Angel Inn, one of our favorite restaurants in the world. In my many later trips to Mexico with students I tried to save enough money in the budget for us to have our farewell dinners there. By that time the students had seen the poorest life in the country. I wanted them to see also it's most elegant.

The Christmas trip of 1963 was our first jet flight. We flew to Chicago and then non-stop to Mexico City, a flight of three hours and fifteen minutes. During our stay in Mexico we made a two day trip by air (Mexicana) to the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, capital of Chiapas. This state borders Guatemala to the south and the Pacific Ocean to the southwest. It is mountainous with a great variety of temperatures due to the different elevations. It has indigenous tribes, fringe groups of the Mayan civilization, some of them living yet today according to social orders of before the arrival of Europeans. The area had a significant history from the period of conquest and colonization and in many ways is similar to Guatemala. In 1964 young women still walked one way around the central plaza of the city and young men walked the opposite. The women were always accompanied by a relative. The dominant musical instruments were the giant marimbas, at times played by as many as eight or ten musicians at once. For the most part these musicians had no formal training and had acquired their skill by playing from a young age. It looked like a perfect place to take a group of students for language and cultural experience.

Through the embassy contact we met the Director of the Instituto de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas (ICACH), Eduardo Javier Albores, his wife Marta and their younger daughter Beti. Javier was unusual in the role of administrator of a state-operated institution because he did not have political ambition. He was not worried about negative political contamination from contact with U.S. Americans. He was a true academic in the area of Chiapas state history. It was he and a committee from ICACH who planned our program for a three week stay in Tuxtla Gutiérrez at the end of April and beginning of May, the hottest time of the year for the area. The local Club de Leones (Lions Club) had agreed to house the students, generally two to a family. Following this home-stay we would spend a week in the city of Oaxaca and the last week in Mexico City.

In this class there were twenty-two women and seven men students. (We then called them girls and boys.) The total cost per student was \$300. That included all transportation, room and board, admissions, sight seeing, etc. I worked to keep the cost as low as possible. The class convened in Chicago at the train station and traveled for almost twenty-four hours to Dallas. With thirty of us we had our own railroad car, seven cars from the end of the train next to the station. When the train pulled out one girl was missing. She was the only freshman girl in the class. President Lyndon Johnson was visiting Chicago that day and traffic had been snarled and delayed her arrival at the station. About half an hour after we left the station she appeared at the rear end of our car with her suitcase. She had barely

made the train but had to board the last car and work her way until she found us.

In Dallas we had busses to take us to the airport. Max Healy had helped us get reduced cost tickets for flights in Mexico. We were on a prop plane. Our first stop was Monterrey, in northeastern Mexico where we cleared immigration. Then we went on to Mexico City where we cleared customs and went to our hotel for one overnight. The next day we flew first to Minatitlán in Vera Cruz state and then to our destination, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas.

Our welcome at the airport was tumultuous to say the least. It was a Saturday and the Saint's Day of the city. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of students from ICACH, and the families of the Lions Club members who would host the students. There were banners with the students' names; there were flowers and other gifts and most of all the noise of happiness. There were marimba and mariachi bands. There were girls dressed in the flamboyant typical dresses for the Chiapas folk dancers. The city had four daily newspapers and reporters from all of them wanted to interview me and the students, all at the same time it seemed.

From the airport we were escorted to the auditorium of ICACH where there was a lengthy program of welcome with music by the official state marimba. Most of the men playing looked like mechanics who had just crawled out from under a car with holes in their T-shirts and auto grease on their shirts, but there was no doubt in any of our minds that these were among the most skilled musicians we had ever heard, and we all immediately acquired a love for marimba music.

We soon learned the meaning of "la hora mexicana." Nothing ever happened at the announced hour. Professor Albores explained that when they scheduled a time, it meant that under no circumstances would it begin prior to that time, and it could begin at any time after that hour.

Our three weeks in Tuxtla Gutiérrez included language classes that I taught and a lot of individual tutoring since the range of skill of the students was broad. Professor Albores had arranged a series of lectures on Mexican and Chiapanecan history and art by members of his staff. These lectures were not very successful since only a few of the class had the skill to benefit from them. They were given in a classroom with windows bordering the Pan American Highway. There was a stoplight nearby and it seemed that few of the trucks had mufflers, and they braked by gearing down as they approached the light. It was too hot to close the windows. At times we could not hear the voice of the lecturer. I learned that some Mexican

professors cared more for giving their lecture and getting paid than for having students learn something.

While we were in Tuxtla, Mexico celebrated three holidays: May 1 (Labor Day all over the world except the U.S.), May 5 (the anniversary of a major battle and victory by Mexican troops against French invaders in the city of Puebla in 1862), and the birthday of Father Hidalgo, the Mexican leader for independence from Spain.

My students and I marched in the Labor Day parade with the students of ICACH; we celebrated the Cinco de Mayo with them; and we took our turn standing honor guard for five silent minutes at the monument to Father Hidalgo.

Professor Albores and his committee arranged several excursions for us. We traveled by school bus and usually there was following us a string of cars filled with boys who wanted to spend time with the girls in the class. We visited the Mexican equivalent of our Grand Canyon, a place called El Sumidero. We saw old colonial churches including the catacombs of the cathedral of San Cristobal de las Casas. We went to the city of Comitán (near the border with Guatemala) and had an overnight there in a hotel where we learned that the purpose of toilet seats is to protect the user from the cold porcelain of the fixture, a protection not needed in the tropics. We learned that in many tropical homes the only hot water in the pipes came from sun-heated tanks on the roof.

In this mountainous area there are a group of sixty beautiful volcanic lakes called Los Lagos de Montebello. Some are quite large and the water in each of them is a different color. (I think the area has been turned into a national park since 1964.) At that time the roads into the area were what we would consider fire trails. A visit to the lakes was our first excursion. Professor Albores wanted us to see the lakes before the rainy season began, and he had arranged for trucks to take us. The trip took about two hours into the Lacadón jungle and another two hours out with most of our group standing up in the back of a truck holding on to side rails or an elevated cross bar down the middle. With us was a jeep with a roof rack with cases of Squirt, a lemon flavored drink. When we arrived at the first lake all of us were dying of thirst. Somehow we thought there would be ice to chill the drinks, but there was not. The rest of the trip we talked about how good the “esqueert caliente” was.

We had a scheduled visit with the governor of Chiapas in his office and another with the mayor of Tuxtla Gutiérrez. I had taken two letter openers with the word INDIANA on them for ceremonial presentation. I was observing so many indications of folk superstition that I became

concerned that presenting a blade might have a negative connotation. I decided to present it with a story. I told the governor that in the days of European colonization in Indiana, settlers had presented knives to Native Americans when they became friends, and today this tradition was continued with letter openers as a sign of friendship. All twenty-nine of my students listened to me tell this “old Hoosier legend”, and I am sure they understood my Spanish. Not one questioned the story. The reporters from all four newspapers wrote the story down and published it. I smile to think that some day a doctoral candidate in folklore will go mad trying to trace that story to its source!

The governor was so pleased to welcome us to Chiapas that he offered to supply us a bus for a weekend trip to the Pacific coast. Professor Albores accepted for us. It was an overnight visit to a rustic place called Boca del Cielo (Mouth of Heaven). I am sure the Mexicans delighted in a rustic outing to the seashore. But while my mid-western students found the place interesting, most of them found it to be more like the Mouth of Hell than Heaven. For supper and breakfast we had fresh fish (complete with heads and tails) and corn tortillas. Fortunately they also served scrambled eggs. For sleeping we had hammocks and bed frames with twine covered by straw mats. The toilets were outhouses in a fenced area for pigs. At lunch time one of the sows was nursing her piglets near one of our tables. In spite of all of this, or perhaps because of it, three from that class later joined and served in the Peace Corps.

The crowd at the airport the day we flew out of Tuxtla was similar to the one the day we arrived. It always amazes me the amount of love that can be generated in such a brief time. As we boarded the plane there was not a dry eye at the airport. I put on my sunglasses to hide the tears, and the plane was in the air for twenty minutes before I counted the students to make sure all of them were aboard.

In Oaxaca we visited the archaeological zones of Mitla and Monte Albán, magnificent indications of ancient American cultures. We also visited the church of Santo Domingo with its gold leaf interior. Perhaps most of all we enjoyed the pleasant mountain air after our stay in a very hot valley in Chiapas.

In Oaxaca and Mexico City we were all living together and realized we had adjusted to the Mexican customs of kissing on both cheeks in greeting and eating with both hands on the table. With a bit of embarrassment we reverted to our U.S. habits with each other. In addition to the daily language work I rented a bus to take us to see the major sites of interest: the pyramids at Teotihuacán, the murals of Diego Rivera in the

government palace, the palace of Chapultepec, the Museum of Anthropology and History, the National University built on an old cold lava flow south of the city, and a performance by the Mexican Ballet Folklórico in the lovely Palacio de Bellas Artes.

A highlight event in Mexico City was an elegant cocktail party hosted by Max and Libby Healy at the University Club on the Paseo de Reforma. Because of their high position in society the event was attended and covered by the society editors of three of Mexico's major newspapers.

Our trip home was by the same air and train schedule of our going, but in reverse. On a strictly personal note, I lost twenty-five pounds during the five weeks. And some of my colleagues on campus for spring term referred to my class as my spring vacation!!

Following the class, I wrote a detailed report of it to President John E. Horner and ended with the following:

“The true value of a trip such as this for each individual participant will not be seen for some years. It isn't really important at this time to know whether one will choose language, literature, history, archaeology, anthropology, geology, botany, zoology, art, music, folklore, dance, government service, sociology or none of these. We can be sure that doors, new doors, into all of these fields have been opened for these students, and they can never again be completely closed. In spite of the responsibility which was great and the problems which were few, and because of the joy and satisfaction which were enormous, I would be both pleased and proud to take another group of students from Hanover on such a trip.”

In fact I took eleven more spring term classes to Mexico and four to Spain. My enthusiasm for this learning experience never faltered, and I am certain it is shared by the professors and students in other disciplines wherever they have gone and whatever they have learned.

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