

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“Do it and then talk about it.”

Anon.

On my first trip back to Mexico, alone this time, after the truck trip to Colima with Mike Tsalikis in 1951, I went first to Yucatan in order to evaluate the opportunities there, and then returned to the tiny village of San Juan Evangelista in the southern part of the state of Veracruz, in the middle of the narrow Isthmus of Tehuantepec where the country runs briefly from west to east with a north to south width of about two hundred miles.

On the north coast of the Gulf of Mexico there was a port city called Port of Mexico, or Coatzacoalcos, a large part of which city was owned by an aunt of a girl I married near there later that year, Eva Saenz. On the south coast of the isthmus, on the Pacific Ocean side, there was a small town named Salina Cruz; but there was no road across the isthmus from north to south, and there was a lot of dense jungle, fairly high mountains and wide rivers; it was one of the hardest parts of Mexico to reach and at least some of the people living in the area were still quite primitive savages.

The then President of Mexico had been born near there and after being elected to office he had a gravel road constructed that started in Port of Mexico, joined that town with the town of Minatitlan, about twenty-five miles farther away from the coast, and then continued for another twenty-five miles towards the center of the isthmus; then stopped suddenly; it was, quite literally, a road to nowhere. There was no road connecting that short north to south road with the large city of Veracruz a few hundred miles to the northwest. In the way of local airports, there were a couple of very short and rough, unpaved landing strips that were used only during the dry season of the year; that were too muddy to use during the wet season. When in use, about half of the year, passengers were flown from these dirt strips to the city of Veracruz in very old Douglas DC 3 transport planes that carried only twenty-one passengers.

On that trip I was traveling by air, but commercial air transportation in the area was very limited and you could not ship any kind of freight by air; the closest air transportation back to the States was from the city of Veracruz, and that required the use of a very roundabout route passing through Merida, Yucatan, and Havana, Cuba, for the freight to reach Miami.

I hired a truck in Minatitlan to drive me to the end of the gravel road and beyond there through the jungle until I finally arrived in the very small village of San Juan Evangelista, a settlement that consisted of almost nothing.

But a place where I expected to be able to buy large numbers of tropical wild animals from local peasants and Indians. I had been there once earlier when Carson Burroughs and I drove there from Colima while Mike Tsaclickis stayed in Colima buying snakes and other reptiles, so knew what to expect. There were thousands of spider monkeys in the area, which I wanted, and larger howler monkeys, which I did not want since it is apparently impossible to keep them alive in captivity. There were also large numbers of jaguars, ocelots and two other types of jungle cats, jaguarandis and mountain lions; as well as coati mundis, a relative of the raccoon that has a very long face and is a savage fighter but makes a good pet if captured young enough, a few tapirs, which look like a small rhino, agoutis and pacas which are both jungle rodents, two types of anteaters, both tamanduas and a much smaller type called a tree-climbing anteater, prehensile-tailed porcupines, some boa constrictors and many very poisonous fer de lance snakes and a few other types of both poisonous and harmless snakes. So the local variety of wildlife was rather extensive; and all of these animals except the howler monkeys were valuable in the States.

I knew that the animals were there in both the varieties and numbers that I needed; so all I had to do was to spread the word throughout the area that a buyer for such animals was on hand and looking for them. The typical family income in the area was very close to ZERO annually; most of the people raised or captured everything that they required for food and made their clothing from the skins of wild animals or plants that they found growing in the jungle. They were aware of the value of money and were willing to work very hard in return for very little of it; could be hired

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for twelve hours of hard work for less than a dollar's worth of pesos, which they then usually had no place to spend, would have to walk about seventy-five miles to find a store of any kind.

The men in the area wore very little clothes and the women usually wore even less, always went topless above the waist, while male children wore no clothes of any kind until they were at least six years old and female children wore only very brief panties. Almost nobody wore shoes of any kind but most of the men wore large hats that they made from native plants.

Most of the houses in the village had only one room with a dirt floor and everybody slept in hammocks except for the children, who slept on mats on the floor. Both doors and windows were wide open with no way to close them, so the houses were always full of flies, mosquitoes, vampire bats, chickens, dogs, rats, pigs and sometimes cattle. So people sleeping in these huts had lots of nonhuman company, and typically from eight to a dozen people of all ages lived in each hut. There was nothing in the way of either bathroom or bathing facilities, no running water and only a simple log fire for cooking the meals; the staple diet was tortillas, made by hand from ground corn, and beans, sometimes supplemented with meat of some kind or fish that they caught in nearby rivers. Drinking water had to be hauled from a river by the women in pots made from clay and carried on the women's heads, sometimes carried a distance of more than a mile; one result being that most of the adult women worked about eighteen hours a day, and remained pregnant almost continuously from the age of about twelve until well into their late forties or early fifties. By the time the women were thirty they appeared to be about sixty. The men could find very little in the way of work so usually did almost nothing.

Yet these people appeared to be quite happy and were almost invariably friendly and helpful. Most of the children had never seen a Gringo before and were very curious although quite shy about it, would seldom permit you to make eye contact with them and would run away if you attempted to question them, but were almost constantly lurking in the bushes watching to see what you were doing. Primitive as most of these people were, nevertheless the Spanish spoken by most of them was the clearest and most beautiful Spanish I have ever heard anywhere. Some of the people also spoke one or more Indian languages which I could not understand a word of. Nobody spoke or understood a word of English, and nobody in the area was even aware of things like radios or television sets since there was no electricity anywhere close, not even battery-powered radios; and, of course, no newspapers or magazines and very few books.

The school for children was very primitive, yet most of the children were very good at both reading Spanish and doing arithmetical problems; most Mexican children could perform calculations in their heads by about the age of five, far earlier than most children in the States. Numbers seemed to come to them very easily and at a young age. The local hotel had four small rooms with a dirt floor and open windows and doors, with only a small cot in each room in the way of furniture; but it was cheap, a room cost about a quarter a night. My biggest problem there was getting something to eat and drink that would not poison me, so I got my own water from the river and then boiled it for at least thirty minutes before drinking it, and cooked all of my own food over a wood fire, usually eating only fruit that had a skin, carefully selected vegetables like corn, fish that I caught myself and small animals that I killed, skinned and cooked myself. I didn't dare eat anything else. There was absolutely nothing to do after dark so we usually spent the first few hours of the night sitting in the smoke from wood fires trying to avoid the mosquitoes, talking in Spanish with some of the older men. The women were never involved in such conversations, seldom said a word about anything but were not unfriendly, would instantly bring you anything that you asked for if it was available, things like a pot or pan or a cup made from a gourd.

All of the men owned long, sharp machetes and a few had ancient shotguns but usually had no ammunition for them; nobody had weapons of any other kind. I had the only modern gun there at the time, and this was a great curiosity for all of the men. I was then carrying a Colt .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol that was adopted by the U. S. Army in 1911; but changed guns shortly afterwards when I discovered that the police and military all carried that same kind of gun and considered it an official badge of office, and thus resented a Gringo carrying that kind of pistol.

I had no permit for a pistol in Mexico so tried to conceal it as best I could when I was in a town, but it was a large gun and was hard to hide when you were not wearing much in the way of clothes because of the high temperature. But I would never have considered going there unarmed, because there were a lot of bandits and thieves in Mexico; bandits

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in the jungles and mountains and thieves in the large cities, particularly in Mexico City. In Mexico City they would steal the teeth out of your mouth if you were not constantly on guard.

Within a period of less than two weeks I had a large truckload of wild animals assembled, then had to hire a truck to haul them to the city of Veracruz; most of the distance driving through the jungle with no roads or trails and fording all of the streams enroute because there were no bridges. Mike was aware of my scheduled date of arrival in Veracruz and was supposed to have wired me a large sum of money there, knowing that my funds would be almost exhausted by the time I got back to the city.

And after a brutal trip through the jungle I arrived back in Veracruz without a cent remaining in my pocket, with a large truckload of wild animals and with no place to put them, and filthy dirty, only to find that Mike had sent me no money at all; instead, I found a telegram waiting for me that said I should call him at home at eight that night. My problem then being that I could not place the call to Mike collect; so I went to the office of the phone company and spoke with Mike from a phone booth there, but afterwards had no money to pay for the call. So the phone company sent a man with me while I went out on the streets in search of somebody who might be another Gringo, hoping to be able to borrow enough money to pay for the call; and, eventually, I found another American who did agree to loan me the money I needed. Then I had to try to find a place to unload the animals, and eventually found that; in the home of a man called Pedro The Dog because of his occupation, stealing dogs. He lived with one son and a daughter in a very small house in a government housing project and agreed to let me put my animals there until I could ship them to Florida. My animals filled his house to the ceiling so his family had to sleep out in the open in an enclosure surrounded by the small houses.

Having read Mike the riot act because of his failure to have the money awaiting my return, he promised to have it waiting for me early the next morning; and it was waiting, but then the man on duty in the telegraph office refused to give it to me in spite of the identification provided by my passport, told me that the sum represented several years of his gross wages and he dared not give that much money to a stranger. Which brought me to the end of my rope, but I then found that while he would not accept my passport as sufficient identification he was more than willing to accept my pistol; after about five seconds of looking into the barrel of my pistol he gave me the money in cash, in pesos.

A few days later, sitting at a table under the roof of a restaurant outside of the largest hotel in the city, eating with the other American who loaned me the money for the phone call, we noticed two middle-aged and very homely women seated at another table; he said they looked like American women, but I said that they did not look like Americans, so we entered into a bet on the subject. Neither of us were interested in the women because they were far from being attractive; our only interest in them was their nationality, because of our bet. So we invited them to move over to our table, and they did.

They were English school teachers, both old maids, who had saved their money for years in England, then moved to New York and worked there for several years as domestic servants while saving enough money to buy a new car for a planned trip to lower Mexico in search of adventure; which they were about to find.

Neither woman had ever driven a car before they left New York in a new Studebaker; an investment that required most of their funds, leaving very little for the planned trip to Mexico, but they wanted adventure so here they were, at the end of the road. South of there was nothing apart from jungles and mountains; no roads, no trails, no bridges, no restaurants, and nothing deserving the name of hotel or motel. All of which they were about to learn for themselves; learn the hard way, with a little assistance from me. The truck I had hired for the trip into Veracruz had already departed, and its owner told me that he would never use his truck for such a hard trip again since it was almost destroyed by the very rough trails that we were forced to use while carrying a heavy load of animals.

So since I knew that another, but smaller, load of animals would be waiting by the time that I got back to the village of San Juan Evangelista, and since the women were seeking adventure, I suggested that they go with me in their car for another load of animals, with me driving and with Pedro The Dog's son along as a guide and assistant; and they agreed to go, a decision that they probably still regret more than thirty-three years later, if they lived that long after our trip.

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The first part of the route south of Veracruz, after crossing a bay on a ferry boat, was a narrow trail that quickly disappeared into the jungle, a trail that crossed several relatively small streams that we had to ford, but with water deep enough that the interior of the car was soaked halfway up the doors of the car. Then back on the trail after crossing each stream the middle of the trail was very thin dust that scraped against the bottom of the car; the result quickly being that the upholstery was covered in mud within a few miles, which did very little in the way of pleasing either woman. On we went. And the farther we went the worse it got. After roaming around in the jungle for almost all of the first night, lost since we had somehow missed the proper trail, both of the women were violently sick, running at both ends; they were vomiting and shitting almost constantly, which delayed us even more, and which did not contribute much in the way of improving their appreciation of what I was doing for them.

Finally, almost destroyed by then, the car broke down and we could not continue; but eventually a big truck came along and I bummed a ride to the gravel road for myself and the two women, leaving Pedro The Dog's son to mind the car, telling him to wait there until I could return with help to fix the car. Both women assured me very sincerely that they were almost dead, and looked it; they were utterly filthy with their upper clothes covered with mud and vomit and their lower clothes covered with mud and shit, with their hair matted into fright wigs of mud and other debris. By that point they were no longer much interested in adventure. So on we went; they were too weak to protest much, spent most of their time weeping, vomiting and shitting; no longer even trying to remove any of their clothes before shitting, just letting it seep through their underpants and run down their legs. They then had no remaining interest in adventure, and did not seem to like me as much as they did when I first met them in the restaurant and told them about the tremendous favor I was willing to provide them with at no cost to them. I always was very generous in those days; not very smart, but generous. My intentions were always only the best in any situation; although my plans were seldom the best.

We caught another ride on a truck after we reached the gravel road and then I hired that truck to take us to the tiny hotel in the village of San Juan Evangelista; when we finally got there the women looked at it as if I had just checked them into a luxury suite in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. And less than an hour later Pedro The Dog's son arrived in the village, towing the women's car behind another large truck. So we all went to bed in the tiny hotel rooms; renting the entire hotel cost me only a dollar a night.

I have been in some better hotel rooms but never any that were less expensive; and there was no extra charge for the flies, cockroaches, mosquitoes, vampire bats and other assorted nonhuman bedmates, which the women did not even seem to notice.

Four days later, having managed to get the car repaired at least to a point where it would run again, having convinced the women, who were still nearly dead, that there was no alternative to a return trip, having loaded the car so full of wild animals that there was room only for me and the two women on the front seat, with the Mexican boy riding on the hood of the car, and with even the trunk filled to overflowing with boxed animals and snakes, we set out enroute back to Veracruz. As things turned out the trip south had been a pink tea party when it was later compared to the trip back north. Forging one larger than average stream, with the Mexican boy wading in front of the car so I could judge the depth of the water in the river, he signaled me to turn towards my right; I did, and the car dropped off of an underwater cliff, and sank into about twelve feet of water. When it stopped sinking only the boxed animals on top of the open trunk were still above the surface. Things were really fucked up at that point.

Between us the Mexican boy and I managed to get both women out of the car still alive, if just barely, pumped them out as best we could in total darkness, and then tried to rescue as many as possible of the animals before they drowned. We did manage to save a few, but had to release most of them and let them float away on the current of the river. After which we could do nothing more to help improve our situation. Neither woman had anything to say after they finally stopped gagging up water, and for awhile I was afraid that both of them were dead. Then, shortly after dawn, a big truck came along and I hired it to pull the car up out of the deep water and tow it to the next small village along our route towards Veracruz.

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It then took the Mexican boy and me three days and nights to take the car apart, dry it out and try to get it running again; but our first such attempt failed, it would not start. But, after a second attempt, it did start; but, by that point, the car was probably not worth fifty dollars as junk, it was simply destroyed. And the women did not appear to be worth much if anything more than the car was; having spent the better part of a week stretched out on the bare ground under a tree while we worked on the car, eating almost nothing and still shitting almost continuously, they were no longer interested in much of my conversation and had apparently lost all of their original interest in adventure. On we went, with only a few more minor disasters along the way.

Finally, after we reached Pedro The Dog's house and unloaded the few remaining animals, I gave the women a copy of Pedro's address and told them that if they would come back the next day I would get their car washed for them free of charge. But they must have lost Pedro's address, because they never came back.