

Mexican Hegira

By ROSE LEIBBRAND

"REAL MEXICO!"

The Ides of March! I wonder if they still exercise their mystic power over the turn of events as in Caesar's time? At any rate, though we started out under a dull, gray, rain-pregnant sky, we soon ran into adventure—

Unwittingly, of course—but when "on the loose" adventure dogs my heels as Lady Luck smiles on some consistently and as regularly denies others—at any rate, a hunch while at Santiago—or the Villa de Santiago—was strong enough for me to turn around in someone's front yard, after a workman had dragged an ox-plow out of the way—and we returned to the San Antonio restaurant.

There we asked the way to "Villa Hermosa," the site of "Horsetail Falls." The boy asked if we had tickets—"No"—so we bought two, though we were to need three later. Then, he asked if we wouldn't like to see the cathedral on the hill, so we drove up to the plaza in front of the "iglesia"—took some pictures, and started on up the winding, narrow village street, with plain stuccoed walls on both sides, broken only by an occasional deep-set doorway.

We were all agog to see the iron-barred homes; the quaint shops with no display windows; the bougainvillea, roses, hibiscus, camellias and lillies that hung over the high stone walls of the enclosed patios.

Occasionally we saw men standing along the street wrapped to the eyes in their serapes against the chill of the Texas "norther" that had blown us from Texas into Mexico—they were apparently too cold for motion, for several hours later, when we returned from the long detour, they were still standing there.

The street went on and on—and finally after dodging burro caravans and ox carts, we came to a wide place in the road and decided to turn around, or, at least ask someone where we were. The first man that strolled up, his gay serape nonchalantly worn as knight of old wore his medals and sashes, couldn't speak English and he didn't care for my brand of Spanish which is "muy poco!" I didn't know that within the next two hours I was to have a continuous lesson in Spanish.

A boy ran up, tipping his hat, but he spoke English as he said, "very few." I showed him our tickets—oh, yes, he knew the way—did we want him to go along? I asked, "cuanto?" and he said, "Whatever you may wish or feel like." So, I took a chance in a country where everyone bargains and he "came along." However, there was no room for him to ride! So the "Botika Lady" (Pharmacy Lady), as he was scrubbed and as clean as the proverbial whistle, moved over, and he got in front with us.

We were in "San Francisco" he told us—though we thought we had seen S. F. ten days before by the Golden Gate—but perhaps here was the original, the seed from which spawned the City of Seven Hills by the Golden Gate. We drove through El Cercada and another village whose name we didn't catch.

It seemed as though we drove for endless miles up and down and around on typical country lanes—over-shadowed with great trees—alamos and black walnuts—there were "elephant ears" in the creek bed and wild hemlock. After entering a gate where we bought the third ticket for the guide, a young fellow in his second year of high school.

He asked me, "Do you want to speak Spanish as I want to speak English?" I told him that I thought Spanish a very lovely language and he said, "And I think English a very pretty way to speak—for me." So, we spoke halting Spanish and English respectively, until L. became enthused and started in on Spanish herself. That lesson lasted two hours and we nimbly leaped or stumbled over subjects ranging from why he was not in school, ("It is holy week,") of flora and fauna, without benefit of verbs.

Finally, after traveling on the private road of the "Villa Hermosa" for a mile or two, we left the car and refusing to mount the saddled burros waiting with their small-boy

drivers to "ride us" to the falls, we set out on foot and walked up the creek for a half mile.

The "Horsetail Falls," 190 feet high, pour in misty sprays over a flat, cone-shaped rock, hence the name, and thunder into smaller cascades which lead off from the foot of the falls. It was a sight to make the visitor forget twisting country lanes and dirt roads; the rocky path up the canyon gorge, and to murmur only, "Que bonita! Muy bonita!" We met some people from Texas (in fact, we think half of Texas is in Mexico, judging by car licenses) who thought it remarkable that we were going to Mexico alone—just "Two Girls from Oregon."

We jammed ourselves into The Tiger's front seat again and retraced our route, stopping at the "Villa Hermosa" just long enough to receive permission to keep our "billets" for souvenirs. Again we enjoyed the charm, the enchantment of the country roads, even to the sight of two burros sound asleep in the middle of a lane, pretending they didn't hear the horn, only wakening with an insouciant flip of an ear as we were almost upon them—when, they slowly wig-wagged off!

Soon we were back in "San Francisco" where we gave the guide "whatever we may wish or feel" in the form of 1 peso, which we consider "cheap bounty." He grinned, we grinned—and departed in an antiphonal chorus of "good-bye," "adios," "good luck," "hasta luego."

It had been great fun! We had had a Spanish lesson—we had been to "Real Mexico"—we had enjoyed a conversation with a happy, well-mannered boy who was the son of a "comercio," a courteous, pleasant, informative, inquisitive—he was, perhaps, a happy representative of the new, "young Mexican."

On we sped from Santiago—for Mr. Mumm at Laredo had carefully scheduled us for the Villa de Juarez—but the Botika Lady and I are not well-disciplined and we have gypsied more or less as we pleased. He particularly deprecated any whim we might have for stopping in Ciudad de Victoria—so we stopped there in spite of his "there is nothing there." But it is the capital of the state and there is much there—all un-Americanized and very natural and Mexican. It has a cathedral and all the trimmings—a plaza, band concerts, promenades, narrow, one-way streets down which I nonchalantly drive—relying on the foreign license, and policemen who think it doesn't pay to bother with "crazy Americans" who probably can't read street signs—most of us can't, as they are, of course, in Spanish!

At long last, after asking several Spanish-speaking garage men where "auto courts" were (the hotels look rather uninviting) we were rather at a loss—I had no Spanish for auto courts, except "Auto cuartos" which they thought meant a place for the car. So, at the garage sign of "The Red Fighting Cock" which Mr. Mumm had recommended as a brand of gas and oil to buy, we found an expatriate who had almost forgotten his English. He said he had some "auto courts"—but "he had no—no swimming" (with a downward motion of his hands)—he meant no showers—"must you have hot water?" We told him no, we could do without "agua caliente" this time, so he guided us two blocks to a Mexican home, arranged for tourists. It was a break for us, as it was a lovely place to stay.

The expatriate showed us through a stone wall, four feet thick, with a large, red lacquer doorway—into a patio in which grew poinsettias, brilliantly red, ten feet high, banana trees, papaya trees, and countless other flowers in beds, pots and vases. A heavenly place!

Our room was a high-ceilinged, square place, the walls tinted four feet up with dark green paint and tinged pale blue the rest of the way, the doors being lacquered dark red. Blue and yellow tiles in an exquisite rug-pattern covered the floor—two large beds with immaculate bedding; chairs, stools, drinking water—all for three pesos! 84c. Everything but heat! And the Texas norther was still evident. But the room had been warmed for so many years by the sun of the Torrid zone, which is just 24.4 miles south of Victoria, that it retained a lot of warmth when the long, narrow doors were closed. One fastened with an iron bar and a

clever locking gadget, while the other had a six-inch key, with the door-knob installed upside down.

The garage expatriate told us the best place to eat was at the "Cafe Colon," four blocks down the street. It was a fine place for Americans desiring to practice Spanish as no one spoke much English. The manager came up and bowed and smiled—we were the only guests save a tableful of Mexican men having a very good time.

"Comer?" I looked up and he hurriedly added, "Dinning?" I said "si, si" and he departed—no napkins, no menu—though the place was clean and new. Soon a waiter appeared, dressed in clean white shirt, a napkin over one arm, and black trousers. He brought in soup plates and two large "bombs" of crusty "French" bread. We were to have soup, then.

The whole dinner was a gamble we had no idea what would come next and we could enjoy the present course, with wondering what the next would be. The soup was vegetable, very rich, very tasty and rather cold! That Texas norther, I suppose! Next, rizo fritos (fried rice)—not too warm, either; apparently we had arrived after the first two courses had been taken off the stove! The rest was piping hot.

The cafe was newly painted, though its large plate-glass window overlooking the street, before which we sat, was very dusty—the archway was neon-lighted and it was radiated for music in Spanish!

After the rizo, we had tiny, round peas in chili with onions and peppers (good); then the entree, gallo (chicken) with chili; that course was followed by frijoles, (beans) mixed with ground peppers and onions with a touch of garlic, also very good, especially when I used some

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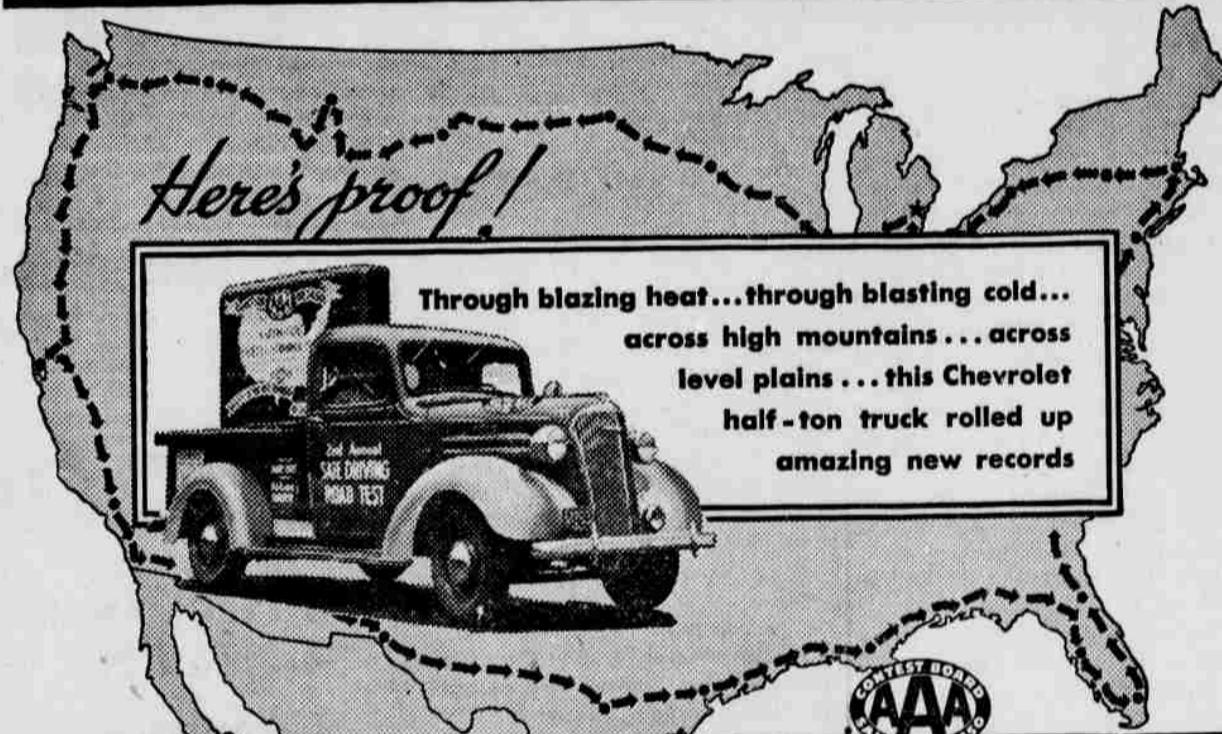


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