

Chapter 17 – Martin Fernandez Teacher Who Changed Professions, Güemez, Tamaulipas

Prologue

Güemez is a tiny town near a very large lake, Lake Guerrero, which in its heyday was called the “Bass fishing capitol of the world.” Whether that was hyperbole or not, a lot of American fishermen flocked down there to prove it. If you visit any of the lodges ringing the lake, there are plenty of gruesome pictures of grinning gringos with long stringers of dead fish. But hey, fishermen are the ones who keep Mexican driving tourism going. They don’t get scared by sensationalist headlines. Nothing short of an armed revolution would keep a dedicated fisherman from going to Mexico to fish. God bless ‘em. The lake has had a low water level for years and some say its glory days are over, with newer lakes getting more attention. But for Louisiana and Texas fishermen, it is still a draw.

My connection with Lake Guerrero goes back to about 1975 or 76, when two hippie friends and I were returning from a driving trip to Guatemala in an old Ford station wagon. We had camped on the shores of Lake Guerrero on our last night in Mexico. It had been an eventful trip; the last event involved hitting a child with our car in a small Mexican town on the coast, called Ozuluama, Veracruz, without having insurance. That one sentence sounds like a recipe for roast disaster, and it could have been. The good news is that the child (a little girl) ran across the road after we had slowed down for *topes* or speed bumps in town and we were going maybe two miles an hour. She was ok. Ozuluama today has a reputation for having the most *topes* of any Gulf Coast town in Veracruz, which is saying a lot. I am ashamed to admit it, but I think my little visit there had something to do with that.

Just so you will know, if you have auto insurance in Mexico and have an accident, you have nothing to worry about. If you do not have insurance (as we didn’t), you are in big trouble. If you were a hippie in Mexico in the 1970’s you were in trouble on general principles.

The short version of the story is that the Federal Highway Police came, asked if the girl was okay and told us to get out of town. He left and the townspeople surrounded us. So that option was out. The local citizens escorted us to the *plaza*, where they introduced us to the *jefe de policía*. While we were being questioned, I could see the actual jail cell. It was a small building outside in the courtyard. It neither looked nor smelled inviting. But there was not a lot we could do. We were guilty. There was no way the cop could just let us go and still live in that town. So, he and I started talking about life. I’ve found Mexican cops to be quite the philosophers. I told him that we had driven back from Guatemala. He sniggered.

Yeah, I said, Guatemala is not anywhere as good as Mexico.

I don’t like Guatemalans, he said.

¡Me either! [That's not actually true, I have Guatemalan friends. But one of my life-rules is to always agree with a man who has a gun].

We both spat on the floor. We had bonded.

I see you have some very nice cowboy boots. Are they handmade? I asked.

He smiled. *Yes, in Monterrey.*

Great place Monterrey. But not as good as Tampico here in Tamaulipas.

“Eso es la verdad.” [Ain't that the truth, or something like that].

We both spat again.

My boots are mierda (not so good, or something like that), I said, raising them. *They were made in Guatemala.*

We both spat.

A little more scintillating conversation and spitting and he came up with an idea. He would let me and the younger guy lay out our sleeping bags on the floor of his office and the old man with us could sleep in the station wagon. Since Ivan had had polio when he was a kid, it was hard for him to get around. The police don't usually make allowances for disabled people, so the cop was being very considerate.

Two cops escorted us to the local restaurant and guarded us while we ate. We came back, slept well, except when someone was dragged in and thrown into the real jail cell. He did not seem happy about it. In the morning there was a big conference in the officer's office. We paid the doctor bill for the child (cuts and scrapes and x-rays to be sure), and the mother (mostly valium to calm her down). We paid the mother for her pain and suffering. We tipped the policeman for his kindness and the room rental. Three hundred dollars later, we were escorted out of town. So that is how we ended up on Lake Guerrero. It was out of the way by today's road system, but I don't think there was a road from Tampico straight to the border then, so we zig-zagged west.

When the lake was created, it flooded the town of Padilla. The government “moved” the town to Nuevo Padilla, about fifteen miles away on the main highway, MEX-101. Güemez is just south of there. I astounded Martin, because I swore I had sat and fished on the top of the submerged church. I also astounded everyone around me when I said I was famous for being the only person to not catch a fish at the bass capitol of the world. I didn't tell them, but I had not caught fish throughout much of two countries.

Martin's Story

Martin, you graduated from college to become a teacher, but you are leaving teaching to go to work for your city government?

That's right.

Why would you prefer to work for the government than to teach?

Because sometimes when you are a teacher in Mexico you work for the government anyway. And to supplement your income, sometimes you have to work in private schools. I have worked for private schools, but I have never worked for the government.

When I have the chance to change I am doing it. It is better for me economically because my job in town is a mile from my house. When I was working for the private school I had to travel 20 miles every day. I decided that this would be better for me.

Working for private schools, do you feel the kids get a better education in private schools than in the public schools?

Some of them.

But some are not?

Some of them, no. It depends on the owner of the school.

Does it cost for kids to go to public school?

Yes. The parents must pay for the school uniform.

What do teachers make in public schools?

It varies, but from about 6,000 pesos a month here.

What kind of children go to the private schools? Are they just the very rich families?

Not all are rich, no, but they are those who value their children's education and can afford to, or do without other things to send their children to the private schools. The public schools, some are very good, but the problem there is the government does not check on them, and in some the quality of education is not good. If you run your school with a low quality of education - no problem. It is not regulated.

There are economic problems in all the world. One of the problems some people say there are not enough jobs, and that there is not enough education to support good jobs. So what is the solution, or is there a solution?

Most people say that the government should help. There needs to be a better chance for employment. If we had better jobs we would have a better situation economically. I don't know; it is a difficult question. Most would like to improve their education, and with that, their employment situation.

If you had a choice, would you prefer to live in Mexico or in the United States?

Oh, in Mexico, definitely for me, in Mexico.

Why?

I think that you have a better life in Mexico. A better quality of life. I think better schools. You can afford a house here. Your schools are very violent, very dangerous for the students and the teachers. There is no respect. Here, we do have some problems. There are some gangs in the bigger cities. Not so much in small towns. I would not want to be a teacher in the United States.

END