

## Chapter 28 – Jose Vicente Mongrell Baviera – Zoo Director, El Zoológico Tamatán, Cd. Victoria, Tamaulipas

[Celia, since this is such a short interview, perhaps it would be better somewhere in the middle of the book to break the cycle of long chapters?]

### Prologue

I met Vicente when I was touring the Tamatán Zoo with a group of people from the University and business in the Rio Grande Valley. Our reason for being there was to find ways to promote Americans to visit Cd. Victoria.

Besides visiting the zoo, one highlight of that trip was meeting the mayor of Cd. Victoria, Ing. Arturo Diez Gutiérrez Navarro who actually spent some time with our group as we explored the state. I've met a lot of politicians in my time in Mexico, but never one quite as *presidentiable* as the mayor. If anybody ever **looked** like he should be president, it is he. As I relate in the final chapter, he said he would be happy to allow a statue of me to grace or defame a traffic circle in Cd. Victoria when I leave this earthly veil. Since he probably thought I was pretty nutty to have such a final wish, he took it in stride. Now that is a good diplomat. A surprise to me after the trip was that he and I are in a photograph, probably while discussing this bizarre request. The July, 2008 edition of the slick magazine *Lente* has the mayor's very beautiful and very intelligent *esposa*, Alejandra Osuna de Diez Gutiérrez gracing the cover. The picture of the mayor with this white-bearded old gringo is hidden on page 38. I can tell we were discussing my statue as the mayor is looking rather bemused, one of his aides is about to bust out laughing and another is just looking confused. Perhaps they were all thinking that I belonged in a zoo.

Normally, I am not a big zoo guy, and am probably the only former resident of San Diego who never went to the famous zoo there. But the people of Cd. Victoria, the capitol of the state of Tamaulipas are very proud of Tamatán, so we went. I was impressed. The animals are in natural habitats rather than cages and there seems to be a real respect for the animals by the people who visit as well as the staff.

Also impressive to me was that the cost of admittance is kept low, at ten pesos for kids and twenty pesos for adults and there are special days when there is no admittance fee. The zoo is being run as a public service for the people of the community.

When I told Vicente about the book I was writing, he was eager to contribute. He said, *I am glad someone is writing a book to inform the rest of the world that all Mexicans don't have big moustaches and wear sombreros*. I took him up on his offer several months after our first visit.

Vicente is very proud of the zoo in his care and talks about it a lot. That is fine as the business of zookeeper is not one most foreigners think of when they think of Mexicans.

## Interview

*How did you get into zoo-keeping?*

I am the general director Tamatán Zoo, a job that I love. I am happy to be home. I started my career working with animals when I graduated from veterinary school in Cd. Victoria Mexico. A veterinarian goes to school for five years. I worked in small animal practice.

I was a US resident and worked in veterinary clinics in USA. I became a US citizen by naturalization. My work with zoos started with Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas, where I worked from 1983-1988. I was a medical associate in Brownville. Then I was offered a job and moved to the Dallas Zoo as medical associate until 1991.

*Why did you move back to Mexico?*

I got an offer to remodel the old zoo in Tamatán. They hired me to come back. It was great that I could be back with my family again. My wife is from Cd. Victoria, so her family is here too.

I worked for several years as the director and veterinarian. I worked for three years on the project and then went into private business. I moved to Tampico and 2005 was invited by Governor to come back and run Tamatán. The position of director of the zoo is appointed by the governor. The director is a private employee and gets a subsidy from the state.

*If you had the same job would you prefer living in Mexico?*

I am probably not typical. It is typical for people to be closer to their family than to take a good job opportunity. But not for me or my wife. My family is here and they are happy here. I don't mind living in either country. I have no preference. I have one brother in Matamoros. I lived in Matamoros from 1977-1982.

*How old are you?*

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*What do you feel are the major changes you've seen in society since you were a kid?*

I see that women are more involved and working in executive positions. In the past they didn't go to school much because there was no need. Now you have them in high positions and doing a great job. And all the technology – it started with the fax.

*Do you think kids have better manners in Mexico?*

I think you find good kids anywhere.

*Have you felt any fallout from the economic crises?*

The opposite, really. In 2008 we had 3,000 more people visit the zoo than in 2007. Other zoos have been affected by a 25% decline. We were able to save some money and remodel with the help of the state government.

*What makes the zoo important?*

It is an opportunity for education. We do some educational programs for blind people, for example. We participate in scientific work to know the population of the jaguar in Northeastern Mexico, or the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle.

Most veterinary school graduates focus on food production and large animals. Now they are changing their education programs and more interest in wildlife.

*Are there many opportunities for education for people with disabilities?*

The zoo is free for people who have disabilities. We have education programs that work very well. We have senior citizens who are guides here at the zoo. We were the first zoo in Mexico to apply this way of doing things.

Other museums and zoos are looking to put the older people into such positions. They use their experience.

*What can you say to Americans to get a better picture of life in Mexico?*

People need to come and see for themselves what Mexico is like. We have good people who are doing good things. Unfortunately the bad things make more notice than the good things. For example – the recovery of the sea turtle. This is a bi-national project for 30 years and I have worked on it for 15 years. When both governments started working it went from 40,000 in 1947 to 703 in 1985 at the bottom. Now it is over 17,000. This is a conservation project that has continued longer than any other project in the world. And it has had the most success of any in the world. When good people are working together the results are great.

*Thank you for your time.*

No, thank you for asking me.

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