

ICWA LETTERS

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THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

CE-1 1997
THE AMERICAS

Chenoo Egawa is a Fellow of the Institute studying the marketing of Native American products, crafts and produce in MesoAmerica.

A Mexican Baptism

MEXICO CITY, Mexico

OCTOBER 1997

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

I arrived in Mexico City without a single obstacle. There was room on my flights to check extra baggage, and my rather large, densely packed carry-ons fit in the overhead. At airport customs, I walked up to the *boton grande*, pressed it, received the green light and passed into the masses of people waiting just outside the gates without anyone taking even a single glance at my luggage. The apartment arrangement I had made before I left Seattle, for my brief stay in Mexico City, proved to be an excellent choice. In fact, I do not think I could have asked for anything better.

Once I was able to settle in a bit at the apartment, I called up some friends I had met in *El Distrito Federal* (El D.F.), on a previous visit. They were happy that I had finally arrived and offered me another place to stay if I had any problems with my current arrangement. They also invited me to attend a Native American Church meeting and ceremony that was to take place in a little town called Yoricosio, in the state of Michoacan, some five hours northwest of Mexico City. Since I had just arrived in Mexico, I told them I would have to think it over and get back to them. Of course, I decided that it would be a good way to begin my journey for the next two years and agreed to go with them the following day.

We — Luis, Pati, Pati (or *las dos Patis*) — and I, originally wanted to get an early start, so we planned to leave the city at about noon that Friday, which would put us in Yoricosio between 5:30 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., just in time to go into the all-night ceremony. It was not until 5:00 p.m. that we finally headed out. Luis' car, an aging Dodge Dart station wagon he had named *La Gumis* (Gummi Bear), seemed reliable enough; so we were on our way. I suppose we had been on the road for two to three hours when the engine overheated. Luckily in Mexico there are little auto service shops along the highways and in the smallest of towns. It was already starting to get dark, and the rain had been constant since we left, making it seem even later. I was never sure about the actual time. I had a little, old wind-up pocket watch my dad had given me before I left Seattle, but every few hours it would lose a half of an hour.

We stopped for help in the next little town. Most of the businesses there were already closed, but in Mexico you can usually find whoever it is that works there during business hours by asking around. Once found, that person will usually come back to work to help you, even if he or she had already gone home for the night. *Las dos Patis* and I sat in the car, while Luis and the mechanic worked on the engine. We waited for about two hours.

Patience never has been one of my strong points, though I have been working



"My name is Chenoa Egawa, and I am an enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation." Thus began Ms. Egawa's application to ICWA for a two-year fellowship to study the barriers that stand between Native MesoAmericans and international markets for their lumber, coffee, crafts and produce. Born in northwestern Washington State, she attended the University of Puget Sound from 1981 to 1983 and received her B.A. in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in 1986.

"My involvement with the Lummi community was minimal in my early years," Chenoa says. "It has been in recent years that I have become involved in Native American traditionalism and spiritualism." One of the strongest influences on her life was her great-grandmother, who was "born in 1886 and lived to be 96 years old. She had integrity, dignity, strength and honesty. She was a very spiritual person who valued all aspects of family and heritage, yet she also knew how to survive and adapt to the changes that took place in her life, changes that often brought great hardship to her family. I try to live in a way that she would be proud of, a goal that is reflected in my intention to work toward the improvement of Native communities of North and South America through trade and economic development."

In the years prior to her fellowship, Chenoa worked with the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest in an attempt to establish trade links between Native American producers and Asian consumers — particularly the Japanese, who put high value on fresh seafood from British Columbia and Washington State. At the same time, she organized marketing seminars for Latin American Indians and attended many international conferences and meetings concerning human-rights violations.

A person of bright spirits and determination, Chenoa will continue her multifaceted work for two years in southern Mexico and Central America as an Institute Fellow.

on it over the years and have actually gotten much better. The two-hour delay was no sweat, really. Soon enough we were back on the highway. The moon was half-full, but except for an occasional glimpse, the clouds obscured its light. When we were in between towns, it was pitch black as there were no lights along the road. More time passed. The seats in *La Gumis* were really soft, and my spine felt like it was compressing, sinking into itself. There was enough room to shift positions, but only if I did not wear my seat belt. It was a toss-up, because the roads can be dangerous to travel at night, so I wanted to wear my belt. On the other hand, these seat belts were the kind that kept getting tighter and tighter, and I would have to put my coat in between the belt and my stomach in order to keep it from cutting into me. Once it tightened, I was pretty much stuck in that position.

It must have been another two or three hours before *La Gumis* overheated again. Like before, the next available auto shop was closed, but we found someone who was willing to help. He was very gracious, but unable to fix the problem. We thanked him for his kindness, added water to the radiator, and continued on. At that point, we were only about an hour from our destination.

It was midnight when we reached Yoricostio. The directions that we had been given were meager at best. We were told to look for the house made of wood on the left, continue past it for approximately 800 meters where we would then see a dirt road on the left. From there, we would simply follow the road up the hill to the end, and this is where we would find the ceremony — at that hour, already in progress. We must have driven for another two hours in and around Yoricostio. There were a lot of houses made of wood, and there were several dirt roads to the left, none of which were 800 meters past a wooden house. Luis was getting really tired, as we all were, so he suggested that we sleep in the car, in an upright position, in the middle of the town. He reminded us that people in the countryside get up early to work, so we could sleep until dawn, at which time there would be plenty of folks around to ask for better directions. The rain had never ceased, and my back was still hurting from the soft seats. I wanted to put my sleeping bag out on the road beside the car and sleep lying down, but every now and then the village dogs would come running up to the car, barking and growling, as if they had just discovered our presence. I did not want to get attacked in my sleep, so I endured the aching in my neck and spine. All the while, thin layers of patience were sloughing away, and I began to feel restless and irritable. I drifted in and out of sleep, longing for daylight to approach, so that I could get out of the car. At dawn, Luis and one of the Patis went to ask for directions.

They came back to the car with a man by the name of Don File. He told us that he had helped bring others up to the site the day before, and he would be happy to show us where they were. We pulled the car around and waited for him at the end of the dirt road behind his house.

Moments later he came barreling out on a big, light turquoise-colored tractor that looked like a giant antique toy. He turned onto the main road, cruising along slowly, the engine rumbling loudly. Some 800 meters from town, he turned left off the main highway, and onto a dirt road. We followed him for about four or five kilometers, before we finally came upon the site. There was a teepee there! I could not believe it. A teepee out in the middle of the hills of Yoricostio, Mexico! As it turned out, an elder from South Dakota had come down to help run the ceremony. We thanked Don File for guiding us to the site, gathered our things and went over to the teepee. The participants were at the point in the ceremony when a prayer is said for the morning water. In other words, the ceremony was coming to a close. We had missed it. There was a little makeshift outdoor kitchen back near the car, so we headed over in search of hot coffee.

I tried to find a place to rest, lying down on the ground, under a tree, back in the car, wanting desperately to doze off for awhile; but I could not get comfortable anywhere. The four of us decided to go down to the river for a swim. It was cloudy and still raining periodically, but at least it was not too cold. Yoricostio is a beautiful area. There are rolling hills as far as you can see, with pine forests and orchards of avocados, peaches and *habanero* chilis. Apparently, the rains were unusual for this time of year, but it kept the air fresh and the hillsides lush and green. This was a greatly appreciated contrast to the thick, heavy smog of Mexico City. We went for a rejuvenating swim in the cold, crystal-clear water, and then relaxed near the river and among the orchards for most of the day.

We returned to the campsite in the late afternoon. We had not eaten since our departure from Mexico City, so I went back to the outdoor kitchen in search of something warm. Everyone else had already eaten and there was

nothing left. I had had about enough of the place by then. The man from South Dakota was preparing a sweat lodge, and one of the Patis really wanted to stay for it. Usually I would feel the same. I love going to sweats back home; but here, in Yoricostio, I had a strong urge to head back to Mexico City, preferably before nightfall. My face must have gotten longer and longer at the thought of having to stay another night, and Pati finally gave in, stating that we could leave under one condition: that I would not maintain the look of utter dismay on my face.

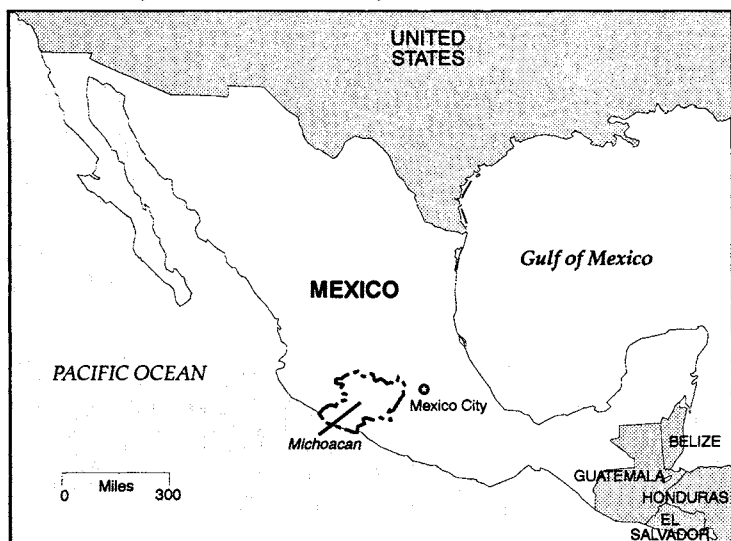
We piled back in *La Gumis* at about 5:00p.m. The rain had started up again, and I was feeling totally exhausted. It was only my third day in Mexico, after all. We decided that we would go to *Los Azufres*, the sulfur hot springs, that were an hour or two down the road, set up camp for the night, soak in the springs, and sleep lying down. The mud road was getting wetter and wetter, but we managed

"Later in our journey we figured that whistle must have come from the forest, and it was trying to tell us that we were not going to be leaving just yet."

aged to pass through the most treacherous part, and I was feeling confident that we would be home free if we could just get beyond the worst strip of road. Just then, we all heard a whistle. Luis stopped, and we looked to see who it was, but there was no one in sight. We waited for a moment to be sure that there was not any-

one trying to catch up to us, and then we continued down the road. Later in our journey we figured that whistle must have come from the forest, and it was trying to tell us that we were not going to be leaving just yet. As we turned right around the bend, we came upon Gustavo, the friend of Luis and *las Patis* who had invited them to the ceremony in the first place. We pulled over to greet him, and we visited for awhile. Luis offered to run back up to the campsite and have a van come down and pick up Gustavo and the rest of his family, who apparently were waiting at the bottom of the dirt road. Meanwhile, the rains were building up force, so we decided to continue our visit under the cover of the car.

Half an hour later, the white van appeared to retrieve Gustavo and family. We said our goodbyes and wished him well. At that moment, the two Patis realized they had both forgotten their coats back at camp. I was thinking, "My God, we are never going to get out of here." Now it was just Luis and I sitting and waiting in the car again. I think I said something like, "It's a fairly long walk back to camp, isn't it?" I saw a light flash in Luis' mind. "Oh, no!" I thought. Luis whipped the car around, and headed back up the hill. It was really raining now. We went flying through the gooey mud and caught up to the white van, which was heavily burdened with passengers. Luis must have been feeling confident. The road split. You could go left or right at this point, because the road circled back around to the same point. Most people however,



had used the road to the left. As we would soon discover, the road to the right was much sloppier. Luis managed to maneuver through the ooze; all the while, the muddy road pulled at us, sending the car spinning and fishtailing along. Finally we arrived back at the camp, and Luis jumped out of the car and ran off to get the two Patis. He really seemed to be enjoying all of the exercise opportunities. I waited in the car, and they returned moments later, coats in hand. In my mind, I was thinking, "Okay, this is it. Now let's get the hell outta here!"

I could already feel it in my gut. Something was waiting to sabotage us again, and it was close. I was becoming more and more pessimistic, all the while knowing that that attitude was not going to help me. I could not resist it, though. It had already taken hold. Had it been one kilometer, or two? We had almost made it to the start of the loop, when the muddy road reached out, grabbed *La Gumis*, and drew it down into the goo like a giant suction cup. "Oh, no," I said with disbelief. No, it was not disbelief, because I knew this was going to happen. It is an awful feeling to see a disaster coming ahead of time, yet walk, or in this case, drive right into it. We all got out of the car, and sank up to our ankles in the slippery, slimy, red earth. It was the consistency of clay on a potter's wheel, when the potter does not know what s/he is doing, and adds way too much water, turning the clay into a heavy, wet slime.

These friends of mine are funny. I think at least one of them put her hand under her chin, looked at the car, then at the mud, then at the woods. They were thoughtful and patient, studying the entire scenario. You could see them thinking, ever so calm, almost with joy, how they might overcome this next challenge. I know I was just looking at them with amazement. I was getting so uptight, yet I still did not want to say anything. They were my friends, but I did not know them well enough to expose my real feelings regarding the situation we were in. The whole undercarriage was stuck in the muck. According to Luis, we needed to jack the whole right side of the car up to lift its belly out the mud, stack as much wood as possible underneath the tires, and then we could try to get out. *Las dos Patis* and I went off to collect wet wood. Dry wood would have been better, but there was none. We worked for at least two hours, their attitudes never faltering. In fact, they were actually chipper. I had to ask, "How can you guys maintain such a good attitude about this?" This question gave Luis an opportunity to impart to me an important lesson about life. "We cannot run away from these problems that arise, Chenoa. We confront them, resolve them and go on. We look at this situation as all others. It is work, and we must work in this life. There is no way to run away from this problem, because we have to go on living. We also need to stick together, to help one another. You can run off if you want to, but that will not

resolve anything." I felt like Grasshopper on that show, Kung Fu. I know life has important lessons to teach. I just was not in the mood to learn any more that day. I could not run off and leave this problem behind, either. Where was I going to go? Yoricostio? Back to camp? There was nowhere to go. I was totally dependent on my friends and that car! We had to get it out of the mud.

The moment finally arrived to test our work. Luis got in the car, started the engine, and stepped gradually on the gas pedal. The tires spun on the wet wood, creating billowing clouds of white smoke. I knew it would help to rock the car back and forth from behind to get some momentum going, but I had been hoping that it would not come to that. The mud was so deep and wet that I thought it would be hard to get a good enough foothold to actually push the car at all. I said, "Come on, Pati. We need to push." We rocked the car back and forth, mud flying, tires smoking. I looked up at Pati, and her face was covered with giant globs of mud. We both started laughing hysterically. I could feel the car starting to dislodge, and we gave one final push with all we had. It worked! We were out! I must admit, it was a moment of great triumph. I thought to myself, thank God we got out now. The rain's picking up and it's starting to get dark. This would have been much worse to do at night.

"Why do you think this is happening?" She kind of chuckled and said, "Because you need to learn patience. It's a test."

It is as if the mere mention of doing this work in the dark created the next situation. We drove only about 200 meters down the road before getting sucked in again! When I said, "Oh no," this time, I was much more forlorn. I was losing it. I kept thinking, why don't we just go get help? Why do have to do this alone? Luis said, "Well, we'll have to go get the wood we used back there." I responded, "It's way back there!" Pati, cheerful as ever said, "No, it's not that far." Although it is terrible to admit, her optimism was killing me. I turned to Pati and asked, "Why do you think this is happening?" She kind of chuckled and said, "Because you need to learn patience. It's a test."

"I'm going to camp to get help," I said, stomping off up the muddy road, slipping and sliding in the dark. I had no flashlight, and it started to seem pretty far to camp. Better turn around, I thought. I angrily started yanking giant branches and tree stumps off the roadside and out of the brush. I got back to the car dragging my contribution to the effort behind me. At least the dark hid the expression on my face. The mud had gotten so much worse. Defeat was circling me, trying to knock me down. Luis decided that the next thing we needed was a hoe, so that we could shovel the mud out of the way. Oh, that's brilliant, I thought sarcastically. I volunteered to go get the hoe, however. I was not going to hang around the car, and repeat the last bit of work we had done, yet I still wanted to let them know I intended

to help. "It's just around the corner, Chenoa. There's a house there, and you can ask them if we can borrow their hoe." One of the Patis came with me. I think I was kind of growling by then. I had a flashlight this time, but it was practically ineffective in the shroud of darkness that hung in the air.

The house was not just around the corner, but when we finally got there, the man did have a hoe. We got back to the car and began shoveling. I said, "Give me the hoe, and I'll shovel for awhile." The mud was so deep, and so heavy. The image of shoveling muck in a pigpen crossed my mind. It was impossible, and I knew it, but for awhile I shoveled like a mad woman anyway, putting all of my frustration into the task. I was feeling desperate, exposed and helpless. I wanted to give up, but if I did, we would have to stay out there all night, in the rain, in the dark, in the car, and worst of all, we would still have to deal with it in the morning! Everyone pitched in with the hoe, but it was no use. We needed Don File's tractor to pull us out. I think it was about 8:00 p.m. We had been fighting the mud and rain conditions for three hours. Pati held up the hoe, laughing, and said, "Chenoa, this is your Mexican baptism!" Very funny, I thought.

Again, I volunteered to go get help. It was better to be going somewhere, doing something other than waiting around. The other Pati came with me this time. My shoes and jeans were soaked. My permeable *impermeable* (raincoat) was, too. Luis gave me his rain poncho, which helped. We returned the useless hoe on the way to town. I walked ahead, with Pati trailing behind me by about 20 meters. I was distraught, and my energy was waning. Aside from the hunger, I was thirsty. How ironic, I thought; here I am, inundated in water, and I am just parched. All I could see was the small circle of light cast by my *Mini Maglite*. I was walking through total blackness, and for the first time it occurred to me that maybe I should be scared. There I was walking through the hills in a strange place, in another country, in the dark, in the pouring rain, in search of help from someone I did not know. Another wave of frustration washed over me, and I screamed as loud as I could into the blackness.

We arrived at the highway maybe an hour later. There was a house across the road, so we went over to see if anyone there could help us. A man and his three children came to the door. No, he did not have a tractor, and no, he was not able to give us a ride to town. I mentioned to the man that the highway was dangerous to walk on at night, but to no avail. Pati said, "*Gracias, Senor, muy amable.*" *Amable* means kind. I guess you do not have to be helpful to be kind, I thought. We headed towards town along the highway. I shared my feelings of distress with Pati. She told me not to give up. We were alive and healthy, and for that we should be grateful. I cried quietly as we

walked on. All of a sudden there were voices right behind us, and we both jumped in fear, turning around to see who was there. It was two of the little boys from the house we had just stopped at. Their father had sent them to walk with us to town, to show us where Don File lived. Those little boys, Rafa and Luis, made me happy for the first time that day. Their little spirits were just precious, and they gave me the hope and energy I needed to keep going. Every time a truck or car would come flying down the highway, I would jump off the road into the bushes, dragging Rafa and Luis with me. I realized however, that they were not as afraid of the traffic as I was. So, together we headed towards Yoricostio, and every now and then, the little boys would let us know how much further we had to go. As we approached town, the glowing, neon blue cross, on top of the town's main chapel, appeared out of the dark like a beacon.

We knocked on the little wooden door of Don File's house. His wife, four daughters, and one baby granddaughter came to the door. At first *la Señora* was very suspicious and guarded. It was funny, because the baby, who was not even a year old, also looked us over very suspiciously. She was so serious. Of course, it was probably because we were standing there soaking wet, with mud up to our knees, wearing giant, dark, hooded rain ponchos. We explained our predicament, and that we were looking for Don File to see if he could help us with his tractor. *La Señora* said he was not home, but

that she would go look for him. She invited us in and offered us a seat, returning a few moments later, with her husband. Once again we explained ourselves. He remembered us from that morning and said he would help, but that his tractor had no lights and he did not have a cable to tow the car.

It was 9:30p.m. Pati and I followed Don File through town in search of cable. The main store was closed, so we went to the shopkeeper's house. Don File knocked and knocked, but I think the whole household was already asleep. Finally, one of the man's children answered the door, but they had no cable to sell us. By that point, we had already created a spectacle in the town, and the neighbor lady and her children came out to see what was going on. Just then, an earthquake shook us. It was short, but it was definitely a quake. The neighbor lady's daughter came running out of her house crying in fear. The whole experience seemed quite surreal.

Don File told Pati and I to go back to his house and wait where it was warm, and he would let us know when he had found cable. Back at his place, *la Señora* and her daughters invited us in again. It felt so good to sit down. As we sat and visited with *la Señora*, she, her daughters and even her granddaughter began to warm up to us. They had put on coffee, and offered each of us

"I was walking through total blackness, and for the first time it occurred to me that maybe I should be scared."

a steaming, hot mug of sweetened *Nescafe*. It was so delicious! After the coffee, *la Señora* heated up some beans and tortillas for us. By that point, I felt like I was in heaven. Their hospitality meant so much to me, especially after what we had been through. I expressed my appreciation to them again and again. First the little boys, and then this family. To meet such wonderful people at anytime in your life is a gift, but when you are in a desperate situation and in need of help, and you come across genuine and kind people, it is a blessing. Being with these people made it impossible for me to hang on to my feelings of despair.

Over the next hour, Don File had rounded up several young men to help on the rescue mission. Pati and I stayed with *la Señora* and her children. Another hour or two went by, before we heard the tractor pull up in front of the house. We all ran out to see if they had been successful in towing the car. They had been. In fact, according to Luis and the other Pati, Don File and his helpers had no problems at all pulling *La Gumis* out of the mud. We all thanked Don File, *la Señora*, their children and the young men. We offered to pay them for their kindness and their help, but they insisted that that was not neces-

sary. Pati explained to them that it was the only way we had at that moment to show our gratitude and appreciation, and so then they accepted our offering.

We were on the highway heading home at around midnight. It is funny how quickly I thought of my room back at the warm, dry apartment in the big city as home. Before I drifted off, I thought about the hardships of the weekend and how upset and discouraged I had been. The calm persistence of my friends and the beauty of the people we had met in Yoricostio had restored my hopes in the end. Once again, I was feeling lucky. We had never been in real danger. I was safe, healthy and, perhaps, one step up on the ladder towards patience and understanding. It was still too early to see the humor in this experience, but I knew it would eventually be a story that I could laugh about and appreciate.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Renato". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, looping initial "R" and a trailing flourish.

Institute of Current World Affairs

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

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