

# ICWA LETTERS

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**TLT-10  
THE AMERICAS**

*Tyrone Turner is a Fellow of the Institute writing about and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings.*

## “Night Fishing”

March 15, 2000  
JUAZEIRO DO NORTE, Ceará, Brazil

Peter Martin  
Executive Director  
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4 West Wheelock Street  
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Dear Peter,

*Grande* kept telling me we would go fishing.

Images from my youth passed through my mind, scenes of me and my family huddled on the shores of Matagorda Bay in Southeast Texas, fishing poles in hand. We'd watch my maternal grandmother, “Mimo” (Mee-Maw) pull in one flounder after another, as the fish seemed to magically land on her hook instead of ours. We'd get tired eventually, discard the fishing poles and cruelly poke at soft-shell crabs that were unfortunate enough to wander within our grasp.

But this wasn't the type of fishing that *Grande* (Big) had in mind. He was talking about night fishing on the São Francisco river. All we needed was a gill net<sup>1</sup>, a canoe, a couple of friends, and lots of *cachaça*.<sup>2</sup>

The famous São Francisco river, or *Velho Chico* (or Old Chico — Chico being the nickname for Francisco) cuts through the Northeast Sertão, a slice of blue water through an arid brown landscape. It ribbons its way from the state of Minas Gerais to Bahia, forms the boundary between Bahia and Pernambuco, and then separates Alagoas and Sergipe States before it spills into the Atlantic. Though not the largest river in Brazil, the *Velho Chico* played a more prominent role than even the great Amazon during colonial times. It was one of the best means of transport between the gold mines of Minas Gerais and the coast. Today it is responsible for a different type of gold. In the midst of an unforgiving land, the waters of the *Velho Chico* irrigate green abundance. Large and highly profitable agro-industries hug the river, especially along the stretch between Bahia and Pernambuco. From the banks of the São Francisco are exported grapes, guava, melon, banana, pineapple, mango, papaya, among many other fruits, to countries around the world. The other cash crop in the area is marijuana — for domestic consumption.

The great contrast between the oasis of the river valley and the dry Sertão

<sup>1</sup> A gill net is a net in the shape of a very long rectangle: for example, three feet in width and thirty feet in length. One length is weighted, and the other is buoyed, so that it stays extended in the water. The point of gill-net fishing is to stretch it across an area where the fish will be traveling. The fish enter the holes of the net, and get caught by the gills.

<sup>2</sup> *Cachaça* is a sugarcane brandy.

through which it runs is painted poetically in the Jorge Amado novel, *Seara Vermelha* (Red Harvest). He chronicles the sad tale of one of the many peasant families on its journey from the dry interior of Pernambuco to São Paulo as it arrives at the banks of the river.

*"It was the São Francisco, they had heard of it in their lands of sun and drought. Never had they seen so much water and they associated the vision of the water with the idea of abundance, they imagined that the lands nearby would be amazingly fertile...With that great abundance of water, it was expected that everyone around would be swimming in money. It didn't take long to discover that all of those incredibly fertile lands belonged to few owners and that those skinny and malarial men worked in others' fields, at the hoe from dawn to dusk, in the ouricuri palm fields, in the groves of wax palms and in the plantations of rice and cotton, receiving an even lower salary than they paid in the sertão."* (p.106. Jorge Amado. *Seara Vermelha*, 49<sup>th</sup> edition, Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1999)

We were in the region principally because my wife Susan was pursuing a story on traditional midwives in rural areas. However, where we stayed put us smack in the middle of what Amado was describing. The family with which we were living had invaded one of those large landholdings three years before along with 273 other families. They were *Sem Terras* (Landless), members of

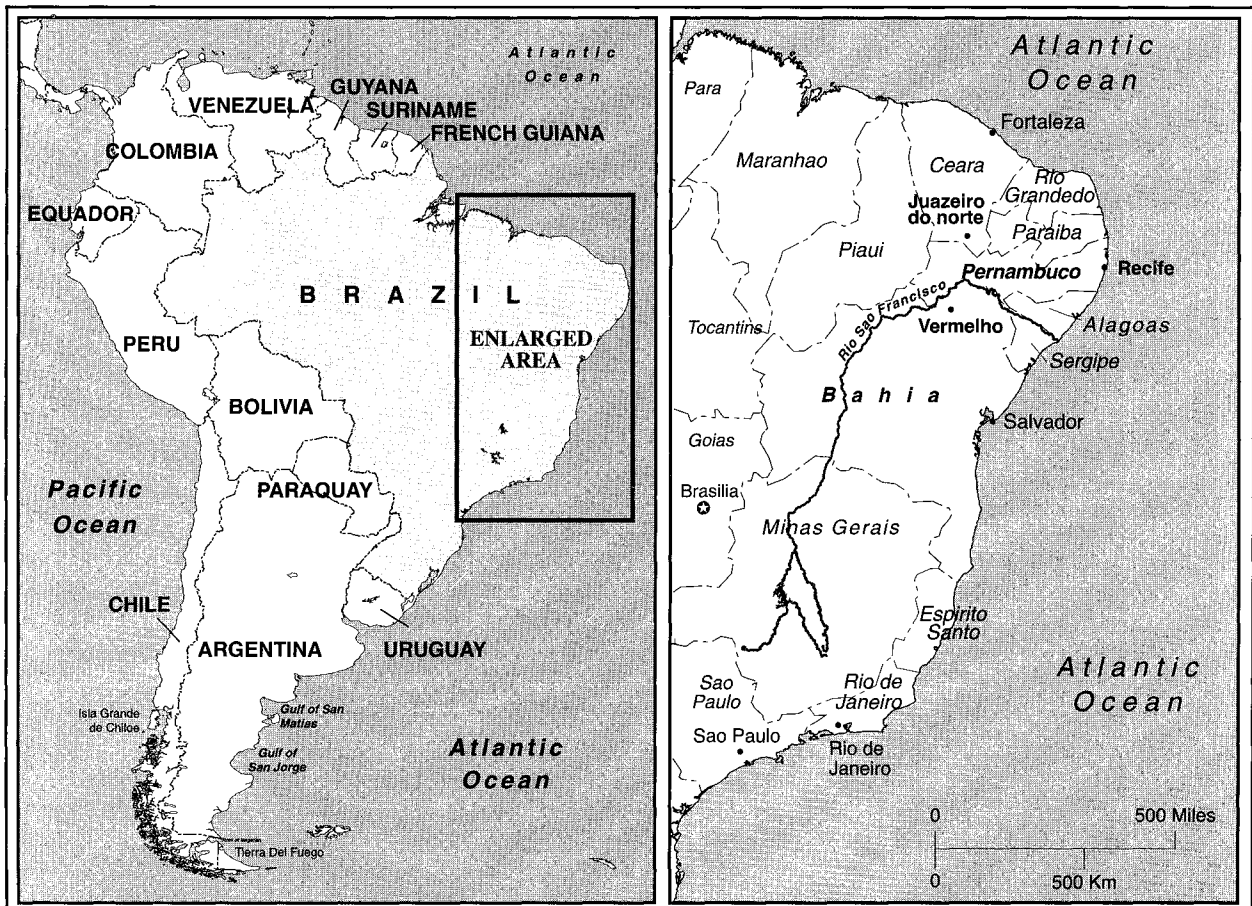
the MST — the *Movimento de Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Rural Workers Movement). The movement forced the government to enact needed agrarian reform by targeting unproductive farmland and occupying it. This estate used to belong to Varig Airlines, but now possession had been passed to the occupying families. The MST settlement was still known as the "*velha Varig*" (the old Varig).

Our family was composed of Valdete, a midwife, Grande, her husband, and Valdete's two boys, Ezekiel, 12 and Jefferson, 11. Their sole purpose in the movement was to have their own piece of land, and farm it with technical help from the MST and government loans. However, farming was a slow process and when food was short one of the places they turned was the river.

We had been living with Valdete and Grande for a week when Grande started talking about fishing. I would reply that I was ready, which would make everyone laugh. I would laugh too, without knowing why. "It's just fishing, right?"

The next Saturday Grande announced the time had come to fish. First, however, he had to convince others to go, since I didn't know how to handle the nets.

Late Saturday afternoon, we jumped on the *carroça*



(a two-wheeled wagon that is pulled by a horse, donkey, mule, or person) that Grande had borrowed from his father for transporting water, and took off. We hit a full gallop, which meant that if I didn't hold on for dear life, I would be bounced onto the trail. Not wanting to fuel the fires of more stupid *gringo* (foreigner) stories, I held on tightly.

We arrived at the house of Grande's father, *Seu Paulo* (Sir Paul), a mud-and-stick structure surrounded by brand-new barbed-wire fencing. There was something impressive about this good fence, something beyond making good neighbors. It felt like power and potential. It said that the farmer had made decisions — he knew what he wanted to keep in, and what he wanted to keep out. Given what I knew about *Seu Paulo*, a sinewy man of few words and reserved action, his fence described him well.

Grande's brother José Neto was there, but declined the invitation to go fishing. Grande unhitched the mare from the wagon and discussed who else might be up for a night on the river. Grande decided that he would have to make the rounds in the nearby *Vila* neighborhood to scrounge up some friends.

Looking like Clint Eastwood from "High Plains Drifter," Grande bit into the last shards of a home-rolled cigarette, squinted into the escaping sun, and tied a cord into a makeshift bridle for the mare. After mounting the feisty horse, better suited for a wagon than for bareback riding, he stuck out his hand for me. "Get on."

With a stutter step I grabbed Grande's forearm and kicked up onto the haunches of the horse. Surely, I looked like a real cowboy in my sandals and green Eddie Bauer adventure shorts. I attributed the giggles from the family as their astonishment at my innate horsemanship. However it looked, I was glad to have ended up on top of the horse instead of elsewhere.

With a name like Grande, little is done in moderation. He put his heels into the mare and we shot forward instantly. I dug my fingers into Grande's ribcage so as not to somersault backwards.

We bolted past green fields with young boys herding grazing cows on foot.

Arriving at the *Vila*, Grande slowed at one of his aunt's houses and ask me to wait while he found some fishing buddies. I sat with another of his brothers, sucking on a fruit called "*imbu*" (a green, plum-like, sweet fruit with a hard skin), and talking about how late it was getting to start a fishing trip. A young woman passed, and gave us a 'Grande update.' It seemed that he was at a bar on the other side of the *Vila*, drinking with friends. She doubted anyone was going anywhere, and that the fishing would probably have to wait for another day.

About when I had lost hope, with only cracks of red light splitting the evening sky, a *carroça* with three men entered the gate, with Grande in tow on the mare. This was our fishing party, already three sheets to the wind. I asked their names — Jonas, Antônio and the driver, Jurandi.

Before we bumped away into the night, the men had to decide where to securely stash the three bottles of "51" *cachaça* that they had brought along.

The next stop, after Grande deposited the mare with his father, was our home, so that Grande and I could grab extra clothing. Though the region was known for its heat, he warned that nights on the river could get pretty chilly. I took a long-sleeve shirt, a pair of jeans and bug repellent. Susan had a slightly worried look on her face, as if to wonder if she would see me again. Our long goodbye consisted in a quick kiss, and a "I'll see ya' in the morning."

Our crew headed straight for the river along an elevated mud path, with fields on either side. The full moon was so bright it lit everything in a silvery glaze of light — canudos bushes, favela trees, and the orchard of banana at the end of the road. Splitting the silence of the night were the sounds of the cracking whip, the steady clomp-clomp of the hooves and the rapid-fire, off-color jokes by the others about Jurandi's affection for his donkey.

We reached the shores of the river, and went to retrieve the paddles of the canoe from "*Paraíba*," an old guy who guarded the river entrance to the MST settlement. Emerging from his small wattle-and-daub home, he looked and spoke like a genuine "ole timer" from a Western film ("There's gold in them thar hills!"). He walked around with his plastic plate of beans and rice, gladly accepting generous swigs of "51." Paraíba could only come up with one paddle, however, and a lame excuse about how long it had been since the last fishing trip. Grande looked around for a pole to use as substitute.

At the river's edge I was mesmerized by the expanse of black water. Night gave it dimensions that I had not imagined during sunny hours. It looked like a mile to the other shore, although I knew it to be half that. The insects hitting the glass-surface gave the only indication of the current, moving fast and slick. During the day, I had playfully wondered whether I could swim to the other side, even with the strong current. That optimism was nowhere to be found at this moment. Instead, I wondered whether our little fishing party was a little foolhardy. Five men (four in a *cachaça* haze), in a canoe, with one paddle, in the middle of a large river, in the middle of the night — suddenly I had immense respect, and a little fear, for the *Velho Chico*.

After bailing out the small, half-sunken boat, we loaded our gear and ourselves into the canoe and pushed

away from shore. I asked how deep the river was, and Grande, instead of answering me, returned with another question. "You do know how to swim, don't you?" I reassured him that I did, but that I wasn't up for a dip right then. What I hadn't understood was that, in fact, we weren't all staying in the canoe all night. Instead, Grande paddled for an island in the middle of the river to make a base camp, from which we would be fishing. My confidence was returning. We slipped through a blanket of reeds and onto a small beach area: home for the night. After untangling the 25-meter nets, which were twisted into a holy mess, the first team of Jurandi and Antônio left to fish. Jonas, Grande and I stayed behind to build a fire. We ventured into the thicket and pulled at rotten branches. With the flick of a lighter, the fire grew, and I put water on to boil for coffee.

As we settled down to wait for the first load of fish, Jonas asked me if I was "for" or "against" the MST. I replied that I was "for." As I saw it, if the poor waited for the government to give them land, they would die before seeing anything. I was impressed by their courage: normal people cutting barbed wire to occupy land, skirmishing with the police, all to realize a dream of having their own piece of land.

"Does the United States have 'the movement?'" he wanted to know.

I said "no," that the government doesn't look favorably on occupying other peoples' land, no matter how under-utilized it is. Then I tried to explain that the history of the two countries was different. Here, the Portuguese crown divided Brazil among a handful of noblemen. The land started out in few hands, and continued that way. In the United States, although we certainly had our large landowners, the percentage of smaller holdings was much higher. The promise of "forty acres and a mule" impelled small farmers to "go west." Of course, as in most of the Americas, our country dealt with the previous tenants of the land, the "Indian problem," in a particularly unjust and bloody way.

Then he asked if there were poor people in my country. I replied that we did have poor people, despite what is shown on TV and in movies about the United States. However, as I explained, we didn't have as many poor as Brazil did, nor the unbelievable inequality between the rich and poor.

As discussions do around a campfire, ours shifted abruptly. Since I loved to hear Lampião<sup>3</sup> stories, I asked if the famous bandit had roamed this part of the Northeast.

Jonas had two stories to tell. The first involved his

grandfather, who at the time lived in Vermelho, one of the nearby river communities. Like many small farmers, he sold his produce at the Curaça market, which was located on the Bahian side of the river.

One day, as Jonas' grandfather pulled up to the landing near to Curaça with a boat-full of watermelon and squash, Lampião and his men were waiting. This was a tough looking group of bandits: guns and bullets strung around their chests, and a one-eyed leader. Lampião wanted a watermelon. Jonas' grandfather sprang into action, knowing the dreadful fate of those who did not give the *cangaceiros* (or bandits) what they wanted. In a fearful flurry, he started hacking all of his watermelons in half. Lampião shouted for him to stop, that he really wanted just one. He had found out that Jonas' grandfather was not rich, and after receiving his one watermelon, Lampião let the lucky farmer go peacefully.

Jonas said that the second story was well known in the area. A very wealthy merchant and landowner, by the name of Barrinhos, operated fabric stores in the larger towns along the river. One day, someone told him that Lampião and his gang were planning to attack him at one of his biggest stores near Curaça. Barrinhos fled immediately from the area, seeking refuge at a distant plantation owned by a friend.

As predicted, Lampião did indeed arrive at Barrinhos' store near Curaça. As Jonas told it, the townspeople froze as the *cangaceiros* rode into town. Arriving at the store and being told of Barrinhos' flight, Lampião turned to the people nearby, mostly older, poorer women. As he stood beside the huge bolts of expensive cloth, he ordered the women to grab hold of the end and run out of the door. When they had traveled 20 meters, he would cut the cloth and order the next to do the same. This continued until not a bit of cloth was left in the store.

Jonas admitted that not many of Lampião's actions were of the Robin-Hood variety — that for the most part he was incredibly cruel. When the *cangaceiro* wanted something — food, clothing, ammunition — he would take it or kill for it.

Jurandi and Antônio returned with only a couple of small white fish, and a few that looked like prehistoric catfish. The two fishermen complained about the bad conditions for fishing — the bright night meant that the fish stayed in the deep areas and away from the shallow gill nets.

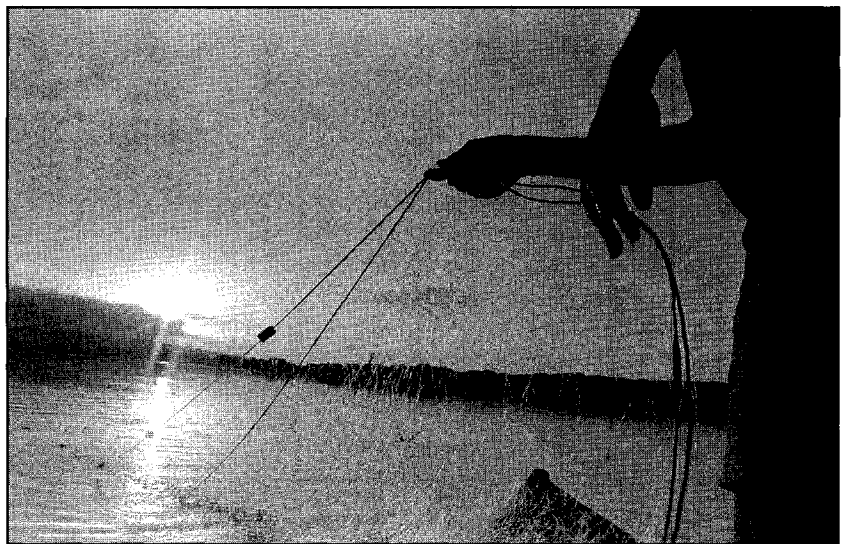
Next up to fish were Grande and Jonas. I was itching to go, but Grande asked me to wait until the next round. Jurandi, Antônio and I retreated to the fire, and prepared the night's dinner. I cut up vegetables to put into the fish

<sup>3</sup> Lampião (or the Lamp) was born Virgulino Ferreira da Silva in 1898. He became the most famous bandit in the Northeast, meeting his demise at the hands of soldiers in 1938.



*(Above) Seu Paulo, Grande's father, standing in the canoe in the waning light as he lets out the gill net in the middle of the Sao Francisco river. The clouds are part of thunderstorms rolling in that later inundated us as we crouched under plastic at the island campsite. (Right) Seu Paulo, again, pulling in the nets as the sun clears the horizon.*

*This day the fishing was miserable, and we caught just a couple of smaller fish.*



soup while the other two cleaned and filleted the catch. I thought it strange how long the prehistoric-looking catfish seemed to live outside of water, and wondered if I were looking at some sort of 'missing link.'

Into the pot went water, onion, parsley, garlic, salt, pepper, a seasoning mix ("Sazon") and the fish. The mix tasted pretty good, and Jurandi did not wait for our fishing comrades to return before he spooned out a plate for himself. I thought it best for him to eat anyway, given the amount of booze he had consumed. Grande and Jonas soon returned, deposited the few fish they caught, spooned

up plates of dinner, and were ready to go out again.

## MY BIG CHANCE

Basically, as we slipped away from shore, it was clear that my job was not to get in the way. Antônio manned the helm with the gill net and a pole they had found on the island. Grande was at the back with the one paddle. I grabbed a plastic, two-liter Coke container that had been cut in half, and began bailing out the bottom of the boat.

In the darkness, what had been invisible from the





*Seu Paulo paddling the boat into the middle of the Sao Francisco river where he was going to put out the net.*

island quickly came into sight. The middle of the river had long sandbars running parallel to the shore, from which appeared little islands of reeds, "*moitas*" (underbrush) as Grande called them. Arriving at the *moitas*, Antônio reached out with his pole and lifted up one part of the gill net that he and Jurandi had stretched between two little islands of grass on the first run. We scooted along the 10-meter length of this net without any luck. From there, we backed off from the *moitas* into the main current of the river and Antônio started unfurling the longer net. As he did so, Grande paddled backwards, allowing the net to stretch perpendicularly across the current.

I looked at the net as Antônio laid it into the water. One side of the net had small floats, and the other side small weights, which kept the net extended in the water. As he pulled, I saw dinner-plate-sized holes in the netting and thought that it would be lucky if we caught anything.

With the net fully extended, Grande stopped paddling and we floated with the current. We could hear the partying going on in distant Curaça, with *pagode*<sup>4</sup> music still blasting at three o'clock in the morning. I looked around a bit disoriented, unable to see our campfire, or distinguish the island from distant shore.

Antônio started pulling the large net in, laying it in a pile at the bottom of the boat. The catch was three small catfish, an average of eight meters of net per fish. They seemed like a specifically nasty type of catfish, with not

only sharp dorsal fins, but also wing-like fins ready to clamp down on fingers like pincers. I kept my digits clear, dutifully tore the net to shreds, and spilled the fish into the bottom of the boat.

We threw the net three more times, but without any more luck. Grande started with fish stories about the 'big ones' they had caught when the nights were dark. He said that the shores would be filled with campfires. And the fishermen would cross paths during the night.

We swung back to the stationary net one more time before heading in. On Antônio's first touch of the net, a wave erupted that pulled the net under the canoe. We finally had something big. Antônio jumped out into hip-deep water. He pulled the fish from under the canoe and lifted a whole section of net into the boat. Compared to the catch from the rest of the night, what lay before us was a beast. Grande edged past me with the paddle, and subdued the two-foot fighting monster with a few accurate whacks to the head.

Cold, wet, tired, and triumphant with our catch, we returned to our encampment at about 4 am. We left the catch in the boat, and headed to shore to get some rest. Getting out a sheet from our sack, I wrapped myself up for a nap. As I tried to shut my eyes, the snoring of Antônio bombarded me from the left, while to my right I listened to Grande and Jurandi laughing and recounting the night of fishing at the fire. With millions of stars in the heavens above me, and millions of bugs in the sand

<sup>4</sup> *Pagode* means "revelry" but it is a style of music that comes from the state of Bahia and is wildly popular in the whole country.

beneath me, I drifted off to sleep for what seemed like a minute. A dawning sun was the next to greet me.

By the smoldering fire, Grande lay asleep, his long body curled into a fetal position. Jurandi looked like he had simply fallen over. Soon they began to awake, Jurandi with a lurch, rushing to the underbrush to vomit. He walked back and picked up the cachaça bottle to take another swig. Behind me, Antônio was already packing some things into a bag when I caught sight of a revolver in his waistband. I guessed that was to ward off unexpected and unwanted visitors in the night.

Making the trip back, it felt like we had been out on the river for days, not hours. Jurandi sat in the front of the boat, his face clouded in fatigue. We all were moving fairly slowly as we got back to shore, hitched up the wagon, and returned home. I didn't know this before our adventure, but Valdete expected our fishing trip to feed a sizable group that she had invited for lunch. The big one we'd caught didn't feed quite everyone — but at least we didn't have to come up with a story about how the big one got away.

#### A FEW NOTES ABOUT GUY THINGS TO DO IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Besides fishing, I was introduced to other guy things by Grande and Valdete's boys. I say "guy things" because the work and activities in this community was fairly gender-specific. Women generally took care of the homes, and the men did the fieldwork.

With Grande, I learned how to sink poles and string new barbed-wire fence — a lesson that ended abruptly when I sliced open the palm of my hand on one of the barbs.

He taught me how to farm the earth, the reason they were in the movement. The current agriculture project approved for their MST settlement was a guava orchard, with each family receiving 305 guava tree seedlings.

Hoe in hand, I dug quite a few holes in that field. Toward the end, Grande didn't have to "*consertar*," or fix, too many of them. The gratification came later, when we planted the 10-inch seedlings. There are guava trees growing right now in Pernambuco with my name on them.

With the boys, Ezekiel and Jefferson, I swam in the river, practiced my aim with homemade slingshots, and fetched barrels of water for use at home.

However, the most challenging guy thing was "*argolinha*" (little hoop, or ring). Approaching was the anniversary date of three years of land possession for the settlement, and they were going to have a party. One of the main attractions was the "*argolinha*" competition: a medieval-type game where two horsemen race their steeds down parallel, 30-yard-long chutes and, with a small,

10-inch lance, try to spear a ring dangling at the end. First prize, a new bicycle, attracted the boys' attention.

Weeks before the competition, the chutes were erected so that people could start practicing. One Sunday morning Susan and I wandered to the area to watch the boys, who wanted to perfect their techniques.

Near the starting area, about ten men talked in hushed tones as their horses nuzzled the ground for a morning snack. After saying hello, I continued to the end of the track, trying to imagine the thrill and the degree of difficulty of the task.

Two of the men had mounted their horses, and I watched as, without ceremony, they shot forward into the chutes, their horses throwing up clods of dirt. At the end, with the reins in one hand and the lance in the other, they jabbed at the ring hanging just above eye-level. Neither hit the mark.

The next two barreled down the path, one racing without the security of a saddle. He hit the ring but did not spear it. Instead of steering back to the starting line, the bareback rider, Aldeberto, came towards me. "Do you want to try?"

I looked at his beautiful, caramel mare. The fact that I hadn't been on a horse in ten years nor had I ever ridden bareback didn't cross my mind until after I responded, "Yeah, sure."

The young man slipped down and handed me the one cord that served as the reins. Without stirrups or saddle horn to aid getting on the horse, Aldeberto suggested that I just grab the horse's yellow mane and jump. He gave me a firm push to the backside, and I was sitting pretty.

Not knowing how the mare responded to commands, I tested my one rein, zigzagging her towards the start. I put the heels of my sandals into her flank gently and she took off. Without a saddle, I could feel the power of her stride, the tautness of her back, and her ribcage expanding and contracting with long breaths. She slowed naturally as we approached the start and the other horses and riders.

That the "gringo" was going to take a stab at this cracked up everyone. They gave me the pointy lance and offered advice as the other rider edged up, and as Susan positioned herself at the finish line to document my attempt at "*argolinha*."

Someone yelled "hah!" and suddenly the chute was coming right at me.

Luckily, the mare knew what she was doing. She bolted at top speed as I wrapped my legs around her so as not to fall. After two seconds of acceleration her gait



Photo: Susan Sterner

*Me doing the argolinha. Can you believe it? I look like I know what I am doing, almost.*

leveled out to velvet smoothness and I realized that spearing the ring at the end of the chute could be possible. I raised the lance and tried for the ring, which passed in the blink of an eye.

No beginner's luck here. In fact, the hard part had only begun. Stopping this feisty horse was more than my skills could handle, and as I pulled her head back with the rope we dashed out of the cut grass area of the competition space. Finally, she slowed and we returned to the starting line.

It was on my third try that my luck changed... for the worse. I charged down the path, feeling like I was floating on air, and then in the next second I really was. After missing the hoop I continued straight and the mare took a hard right.

I remembered this sensation from my springboard diving days, when everything went in slow motion... it was called falling. I threw the lance to my right so as not to become a human "argolinha" and looked for a place to land. Right where I hit seemed good.

Susan and the others started to run towards me, though I waved them off. Nothing was really damaged except my pride.

The men told me that when you get thrown by a

horse you have to get right back on. However, I wanted a bit of a rest. I sat out a couple of runnings to watch as the others started getting the "argolinha" more often. I looked for a horse with a saddle to borrow for my comeback.

"Chico" offered his small, white mare, complete with saddle and two reins for guidance. Compared to the impressive caramel mare, this one felt like a pony. I wondered if I had just been demoted to training wheels. But it did the trick, and I finally snagged the small ring.

Charged with victory, I looked to repeat the performance. This time I raced against Ezekiel, and at the end, neither of us had hit the mark. Inexplicably, Ezekiel suddenly veered in front of me. My horse reacted instantly, swerving also as I tried to defy gravity with no horse underneath me. I fell into a mix of hooves, and scrambled out quickly before a horseshoe could leave a lasting impression.

In the end, I finished with three rings, two falls and an acutely sore groin — a smashing victory, in my book.

Until the next guy thing,

*Tyson*