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WW-18 San Pedro Mixtepec

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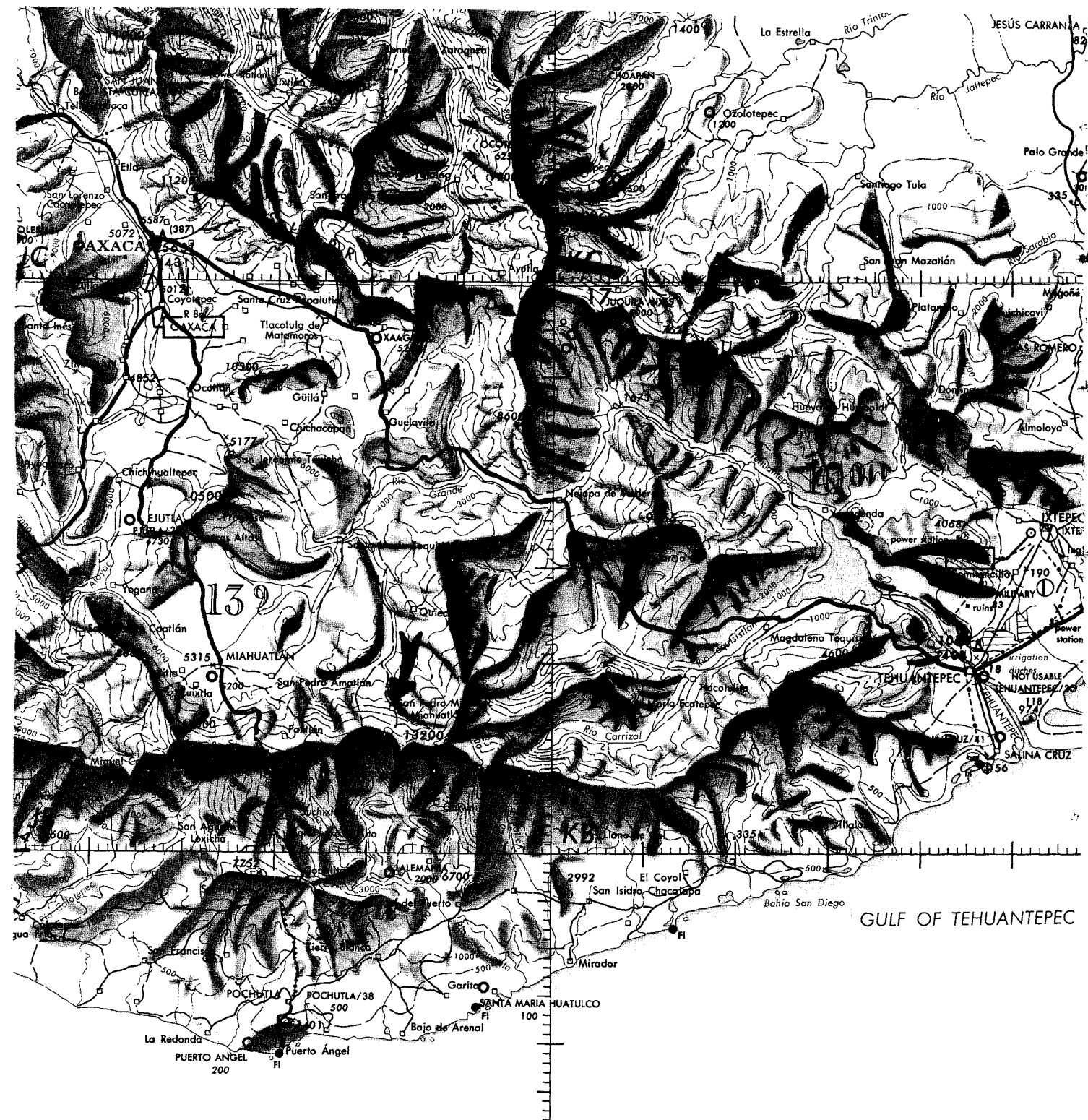
Dear Mr. Nolte:

This is the first of a series of newsletters from a Zapotec village in southern Oaxaca (wah-HA-kuh), Mexico. I have settled here for a stay of about a year. First let me tell you where I am.

The Sierra Madre Occidental is the great western mountain system of Mexico. It rises in Baja California in the north, and extends along the mainland coast of the Pacific as far as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, forming the western boundary of Mexico's high central plateaux. In the south, the Sierra Madre Occidental ends in the state of Oaxaca, where its southernmost section is known as the Sierra of Miahuatlan (mee-uh-what-LAHN). The latter runs east-to-west along the Pacific coast of Oaxaca.

The southern slopes of the Sierra of Miahuatlan, the slopes facing the Pacific, fall away sharply through steep foothills to a strip of lush "hot country" ten miles wide, edged by magnificent beaches, some of them still wild. The northern slopes of the Sierra, facing inland, descend slightly more gently and only half as far, to the floor of a system of valleys at about 5,000 feet. Of these valleys, the most important is the Valley of Oaxaca, really three valleys that convene at the site of the city of Oaxaca. Midway up the northern, inland-facing slopes of the Sierra of Miahuatlan lies the village where I have settled, San Pedro Mixtepec (Miahuatlan). (It should not be confused, but regularly is, with another village of the same name in the district of Juquila, to the west. To avoid confusion, the name of the district to which San Pedro Mixtepec belongs-- Miahuatlan-- is placed after it in parentheses.)

The Sierra of Miahuatlan forms a continuous barrier between the Valley of Oaxaca and the Pacific coast. The ridges of the Sierra lie at 12,000 feet and above. Passes occur at 10,000 feet. The two dirt roads that cross the mountains to the coast follow dizzying routes through gullies and switchbacks. Recently, both roads were closed three weeks by heavy rains. By trail, experienced Indians with mules



take two days to make the 25-mile trip across the Sierra.

The highest peak in the Sierra of Miahuatlan, estimated at 13,200 feet, lies just behind and above San Pedro Mixtepec. Descending from that peak, one follows steep trails skirting deep, rocky gorges and outcroppings of jagged, weathered stone. Agaves, cacti, and wildflowers grow in the cracks. On surrounding slopes stand virgin conifer and oak forests, visited only for hunting.

Between 10,000 feet and 8,000 feet, the men of San Pedro cut timber for construction and set cattle to graze unattended for months at a time. Below 8,000 feet, these northern slopes flatten out slightly, becoming brows and fingers gradually descending 3,000 feet to the edge of the Valley. These lower slopes are watered by perennial streams draining the high country. The topography is striated by rivers running north to the Valley.

The village of San Pedro hugs a small brow less than one square mile in area. The river that drains the peak above runs below San Pedro in a 1,000-foot gorge. Sighting north along the river between the foothills, we can see the floor of the Valley and, 75 miles distant, the mountains that border the Valley on the north. On a night when the air is clear, we can see the lights of cars driving the Pan-American Highway down the center of the Valley.

From the city of Oaxaca, three roads radiate into the three branches of the Valley: the Pan-American Highway north toward Mexico City; the Pan-American Highway southeast toward Tehuantepec and Guatemala; and a road south to the Pacific coast. Ten miles south of Oaxaca, the latter branches in two, communicating finally with two small coast towns, Puerto Angel and Puerto Escondido. These two towns have lost the importance they had in colonial times as supply links between the merchant ships working the Spanish ports in the Pacific and the inland markets of southern and central Mexico. Today they are enjoying a modest tourism boom. The Mexican federal government this month announced a tourism development project for Oaxaca's coast that will probably extend to even the most isolated stretches of wild beach. It will certainly spur tourism in Puerto Angel and Puerto Escondido. It includes completion of the first paved highway through the coastal Sierra to the Valley of Oaxaca.

Along both roads from Oaxaca to the coast, one encounters large towns every 20 miles or so, regional trade centers for mestizo and Indian peasants in the nearby Valley and mountain villages. Miahuatlan, sixty miles south of Oaxaca, is the last "market town" along the Puerto Angel road before it turns from pavement to

dirt and winds up into the Sierra. Miahuatlan is the market town of which San Pedro Mixtepec is a satellite. For many people on the northern slopes of the Sierra, Miahuatlan is modern Mexico. There they find the nearest doctor, post office, bank, pharmacy, and market. From there they can travel by bus to the rest of Mexico.

San Pedro Mixtepec lies 25 miles due east of Miahuatlan, a trip that takes from five to fourteen hours. Most people go on foot leading mules or burros. In the dry season (winter and spring), it takes them about 12 hours. They leave Miahuatlan at dawn, following a dirt track east parallel to the Sierra along its lower skirts. They pass through five villages, cross five streams, arriving about midday at the foot of a steep ascent into their section of the Sierra. Here they climb abruptly to the pass near San Agustin, a town of bakers, then follow a rougher, sidehill trail through two more villages, arriving in San Pedro at nightfall. In the rainy season (summer and fall), they may arrive after dark. Water draining along the trail sometimes washes away six-foot sections, and water seeping through the uphill wall triggers rockslides that narrow the trail or block it altogether.

Each village is informally responsible for clearing the trail of rubble or rebuilding it when washed out between the home village and the next village nearer Miahuatlan. If a village delays repairing its section of the trail, the villages further along, which depend on that section for their communication with Miahuatlan, complain publicly about their neighbors' laziness. It is a point of community pride that its trail is well maintained.

Despite the mud, washouts, and rockslides that add hours to the trip, in the rainy season San Pedro people make about twice as many trips to Miahuatlan as in the dry season. In the dry, a truck operated by a Miahuatlan ladino hauls in goods twice a week-- corn, flour, beer, soda pop, cement, etc. On the way back to Miahuatlan he carries passengers. In the rainy season, the trucker does not attempt the trip. Supplies are brought to San Pedro entirely by bestia (mule, burro, or pack horse). For example, this month the town government dispatched five men to bring corn from Miahuatlan. They walked to a village three hours away that specializes in pack animals. There they rented thirty bestias, drove them four hours to the nearest village to which a truck could drive, there loaded three tons of corn, and brought it to San Pedro three days after they had been commissioned by the town government.

When I make the trip on foot (rarely, now that I have a vehicle), I take two days, stopping overnight in San Agustin, the town of bakers. I stop to talk in



villages along the way and to rest at favorite vantage points. The people of San Pedro are afraid of assault and robbery. They take care to travel only by day, keep up the steady pack animal's pace, and stop as few times as possible—twice to eat the tortillas and chiles they have brought with them, and two or three times to water their animals. They do not have kin in villages along the way, or friends, apparently. Meeting others from San Pedro along the trail, they greet them with "Where have you been?" or "Where are you going?" They are answered with "I have been on an errand" or "I am going on an errand." The questions are a standard greeting, no more intended to elicit information than is our "How are you?" Meeting people not from San Pedro, they exchange "Adios" and keep walking. The less strangers know of their business and itinerary, the better.

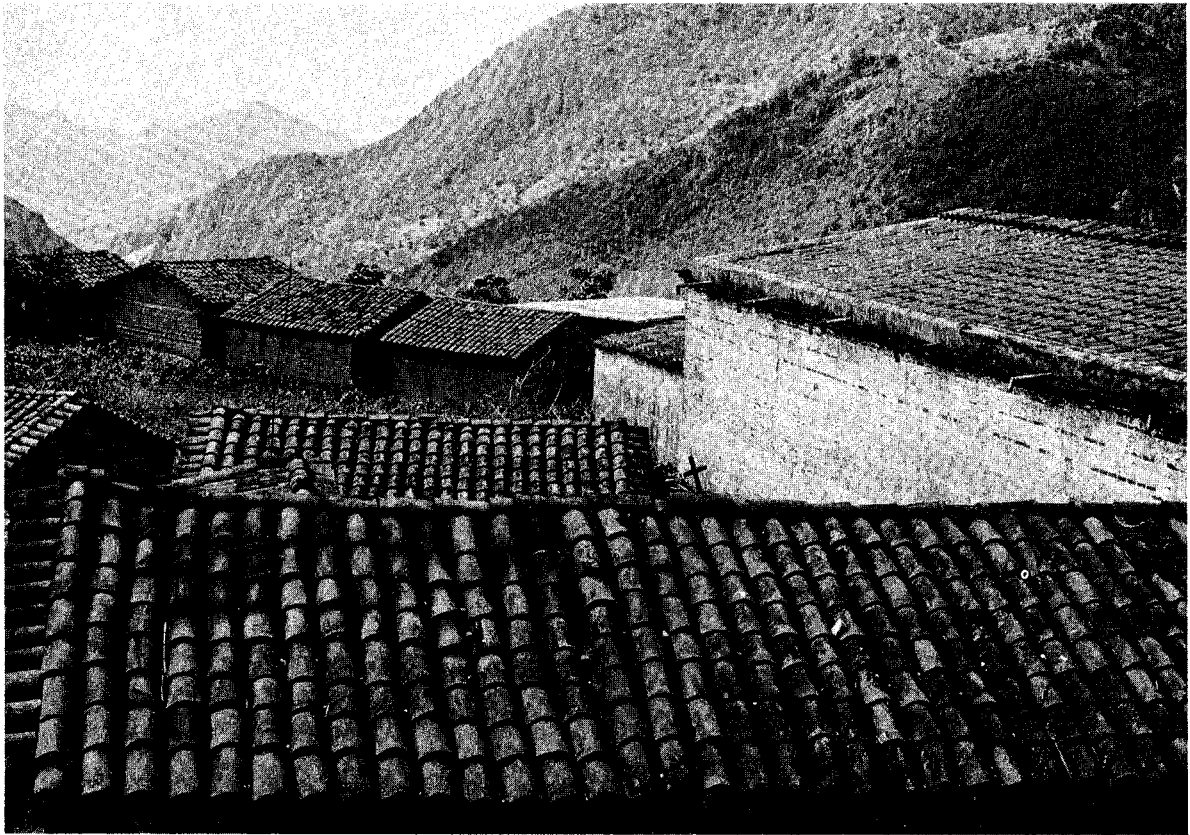
In March, a man of 20 was murdered and robbed near the pass at San Agustin, a good, well-regarded San Pedro man who was to have married within the month. For weeks after the crime, his family kept fresh flowers and candles at a shrine of rocks placed in the middle of the trail at the point where he had been discovered. At first it was assumed he had been killed by The San Agustin Bunch, rootless drinkers— not from San Agustin— who lurk near the pass and waylay travellers.

But The San Agustin Bunch are not killers. Now a rumor circulates that the good young man was killed by a man from San Pedro as revenge in a quarrel with the dead man's father. But that is another story.

The people of San Pedro took the good young man's murder hard, but privately they say he let himself in for it. It is foolish to walk the trail, as he did, alone, unarmed, carrying two thousand pesos (\$160.00 US, the wages of six months' work, if you can get it).

To make the trip in five hours, or six or seven in the rainy season, you must drive a four-wheel-drive vehicle over a circuitous fifty-five-mile route not straight along the lower skirts like the foot-trail, but up onto and along the mountain ridge itself. The road was cut by lumber companies exploiting the forests in the high country above San Pedro and neighboring villages. Along this route you pass scattered ranchos consisting of flimsy huts of hand-hewn shingles, inhabited by Zapotec-speaking people who scrape a mean living from poor, high-altitude cornfields on impossibly canted slopes enshrouded in cold and cloud most days of the year; occasional vistas through breaks in the forest across serried peaks to the glint of the Pacific 50 miles away; a long upland meadow watered by a wide, shallow river and populated by the bulls, cows, and-- these days-- newborn calves of the town that owns that piece of the mountain, San Juan Mixtepec; thick stands of lavender, white, and yellow wildflowers, and many species of mushroom, some edible; a primitive sawmill where the pine and oak booty is sliced into rough pieces 7' x 1' x 1½" and stacked for the trucks to haul away. The lumber companies are licensed by the federal government to enter into agreements with the Indian municipios (town governments) of timber-rich areas. The agreements are supposed to recompense the Indians for their wood with all-weather roads, utility lines, and the like. The hills are alive with allegations that the companies fail to fulfill their obligations while carrying out unsupervised profligate exploitation.

Winching my way up along the lumber road in the Toyota Land Cruiser to get to San Pedro, I naturally feel I am moving from the center-- Oaxaca, the mestizo Valley, paved roads and regional markets-- towards the very fringe of the inhabited world. San Pedro is the last town along the lumber road, the last point a vehicle can reach. (Now, in the rainy season, I have to stop one town short.) But isolated as it is from our world, San Pedro itself is a center, in turn, for other, smaller Zapotec hamlets higher in the Sierra and within a day's walk east.



(Beyond a day's walk east, the hamlets lie closer to villages that communicate with market towns along the Pan-American Highway towards Tehuantepec.) San Pedro men import goods from the Valley and carry them into and across the Sierra where they can be sold for a slight profit in cash or local produce. San Pedro men boast that they travel over most of central and southern Oaxaca.

Some of these trading trips last six months. San Pedro men also boast that they are favored as masons and carpenters by employers in Tlacolula, Tehuantepec, Juchitan, Salina Cruz, and Oaxaca, where they spend perhaps a year

before coming back to San Pedro. I chose San Pedro as a temporary home in part because the people spoke with such pride of their reputation as journeymen, traders, and travellers, of the quality of their adobework and carpentry, of the flavor of their peaches, and of the progressive, avansado outlook of their civil authorities. Of course they are Mexicans, Oaxaqueños, and Zapotecs, but they think of themselves as citizens of San Pedro Mixtepec.

Their localism is especially strong in their talk about "el idioma," the Zapotec language. "Here in San Pedro," they say, "we speak the pure idioma, the correct idioma." In San Juan Mixtepec, an hour's walk away, "they speak lazy. We understand them, but they do not speak it properly." In San Lorenzo, an hour further along the trail past San Juan, the idioma is "muy cambiado," very altered.



"There it is very badly pronounced. Sometimes one cannot understand them." Another two hours further on, in San Cristobal Amatlan, "it is so altered that one cannot understand anything!" San Pedro people ridicule the language of San Cristobal. They consider it backward, unrefined.

People in San Juan say I should learn Zapotec with them, that the Zapotec I will learn in San Pedro is wrong in pronunciation and tone. People of each Zapotec town all over the state of Oaxaca are said to think they speak unadulterated Zapotec. Their linguistic chauvinism reflects and nourishes hometown allegiances.

The model of the pure and corrupt does not conform to what linguists have learned. Linguists say that the people of San Pedro and San Juan speak slightly different dialects of the same language. The people of San Cristobal Amatlan, they say, speak an entirely separate language. These are two of the more than 40 different Zapotec languages—mutually unintelligible languages as distinct as Portugese and French — now spoken in Oaxaca. These languages, like the Romance languages, have differentiated from an early common antecedent over the past 1500 years. Pure Zapotec, in short, does not exist.

The Zapotec are the predominant Indians, geographically and demographically, in the state of Oaxaca. Zapotec-speaking Zapotecs number about 275,000, about 15 per cent of

the state's population. Four out of five Zapotec also speak some Spanish. Because of extreme variation in the idiona from village to village, Zapotec use Spanish in their dealings with Zapotec and ladino alike.

So this is where I am, in a dirt-floor, adobe-wall, tin-roof house with one window looking north to the Valley, one east to the village center (photo on page 5), and one south along the path to the water spigot; at 7500 feet between the pines and the gorge; five hours from a hot bath when the road is open; at a minor Zapotec trade nexus; in the hometown of itinerant craftsmen and traders, a principal village in the least studied area of Zapotec Oaxaca, the Sierra of Miahuatlan.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham

