

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-24 Walking to the Center of San Pedro: From My House as Far as the Outhouse

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Ocotlán, Oaxaca
México
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017
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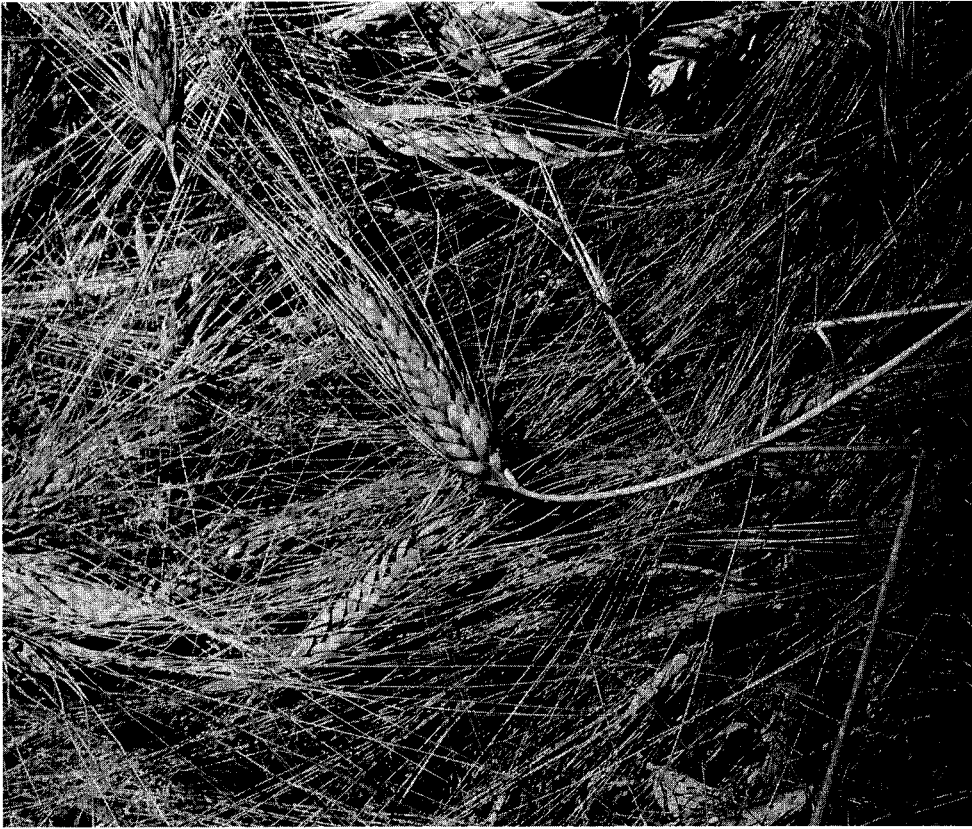
Dear Mr. Nolte:

My house in San Pedro is a one-room adobe with dirt floor and a roof of corrugated, galvanized metal. Venancio built it for me on a small plot he received from his mother-in-law when he married Maria. Uphill from my house, behind a retaining wall, is the mother-in-law's compound: a sleeping house and a cook-house facing each other across a dirt patio. Venancio and Maria and their three-year-old son Oscar still live in the mother-in-law's compound with her and Maria's three younger sisters. My house is neither a part of that compound nor entirely separate from it. The mother-in-law makes my tortillas for me, and her daughters water my garden when I am absent. I am under the mother-in-law's wing.

Venancio dug the dirt for the adobe bricks used in my house from the hillside where the house now sits. He mixed it with wheat-chaff and water on the spot that is now my dirt floor. We left growing a cherry tree that stood at one edge of the excavation. It dominates the dirt patio before the house. Around it I have planted mixed annuals and, along the house-wall facing downhill, Heavenly Blue morning glories and white poinsettias. The mother-in-law's turkey s and chickens appreciate the tender leaves of sprouting plants, particularly dahlias and morning glories. While I was in the valley in April, they ate most of what I had planted. I replanted, and fenced the patio with chicken wire. Now the poultry go elsewhere for their greens, except for two big turkeys and the rooster, who occasionally swoop down from atop the retaining wall.

My chief ally against the turkeys is Emiliano, who walks with a limp and carries a big stick. We do not know for sure that Emiliano killed the tom. The mother-in-law says she saw it follow the turkey-hen and her young down our path toward Emiliano's house and the oven and the tap, and later saw the hen and little ones come back intact. Then the tom wobbled home with a broken wing and died. The three younger daughters say Emiliano whallops the turkeys with his walking stick whenever they enter his yard. They say they see him do that when they go to get water at the tap. The mother-in-law is convinced he killed the tom. She says he has resented her family ever since they moved onto that land 20 years ago and built the two houses. Before they arrived, Emiliano had used the land as if it were his own.

Woodward A. Wickham is an Institute Fellow concerned with the condition of Indians in North America. He currently lives in San Pedro Mixtepec (Miahuatlán), a Zapotec village in southern Oaxaca, México.



Wheat has probably been grown in the Miahuatlán Mixtepec region since the early 16th century, when it was introduced by the Spanish. Colonial authorities once required Indian populations in the Oaxaca valley and the highlands to pay their tribute in wheat in order to encourage its production among people accustomed to the cultivation of corn. Today little wheat is grown at the lower Valley elevations, but it is an important crop in the adjacent uplands.

Emiliano's house is on the left at the corner where the path from our houses meets the main path downhill to the village center. Fetching water from the tap nearby when I first settled in San Pedro, I used to hear a man's voice talking and singing in that house, but it was a long time before I saw Emiliano himself. He leaves his house to putter in his little squash patch, or go to the arroyo, or fill his bucket at the tap. He rarely leaves his immediate neighborhood. He lives alone in his house. His god-daughter brings him his tortillas every morning. Otherwise nobody visits him. When I see him, I greet him (in Zapotec), and he always answers (in Spanish). The mother-in-law says he is deaf.

Emiliano is one of the older generation. He still wears the peasant clothes that were universal for men in San Pedro until about 1960: loose white cotton trousers like pedal-pushers; a white, front-buttoning cotton shirt with long sleeves; a gray felt sombrero without a band; and sandals called pie-de-gallo (cock's foot), consisting of a piece of sole-leather held to the foot by a thong around the heel and another between the first two toes.

One afternoon as I sat chatting with the mother-in-law in her patio, Emiliano paid us a rare visit. He asked the mother-in-law if it was true that I knew how to heal. He asked her to tell me that he would later come to my house on an errand. He wanted an injection for his knee. He showed us the exact point where he wanted the needle inserted. Something was "clavado" (literally, "nailed") there and hurt. He said an injection would

dissolve it. The mother-in-law translated. The three youngest daughters giggled at him. When he had left, the mother-in-law scolded them in Spanish for my benefit, and then regaled us with stories of her husband's feud with Emiliano during their first years on this land. Emiliano never came for the injection.

Opposite Emiliano's house, on the uphill side of our path where it meets the path down to the village center, the late father-in-law built his oven. He was a peddler. Peddling is the most common occupation in San Pedro after subsistence farming. Third and fourth in popularity after peddling are masonry and carpentry. Most men farm and work at one or more of the other three occupations. Venancio, for instance, farms, works as a master mason, and occasionally peddles bread across the mountains. The late father-in-law as a young man planted, harvested, and milled wheat, which he made into bread and sold from mules in villages two days distant across the Miahuatlán Sierra, villages in the lower, "hot country" facing the Pacific. His wife and, just before his death, his daughters helped him make the bread. He also made trips selling cloth, plastics, and light hardware bought in Oaxaca and Miahuatlán.

Today his widow still makes bread for sale in the hot country whenever her son-in-law Venancio is disposed to make the trip for her. She buys three 88-pound sacks of second-grade bleached flour imported from stores in Miahuatlán, who in turn buy it from distributors in Mexico City. If she buys the flour in San Pedro, it costs 104 pesos per sack. Usually she takes a mule to San Juan, an hour west, and buys the same three sacks for only 100 pesos each. Four years ago it sold for 57 pesos a sack.

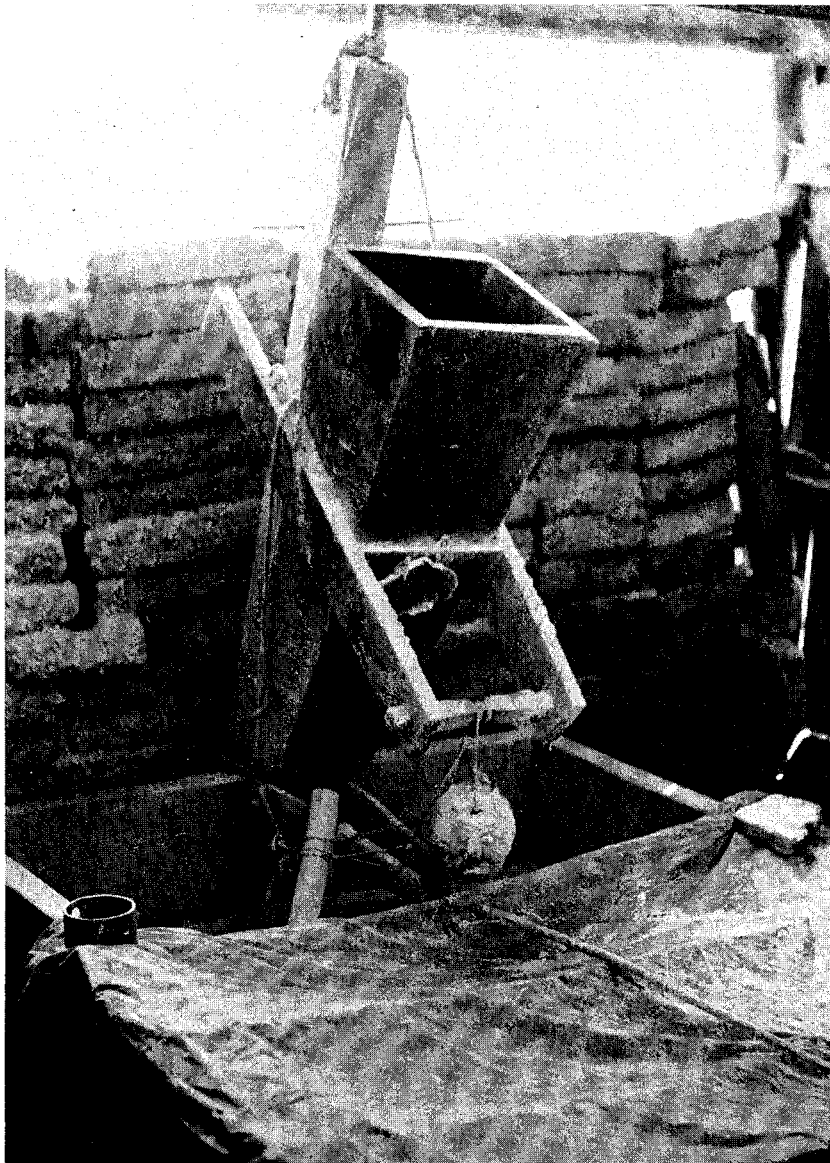
It takes two strong adults all day to mix three sacks of flour (264 pounds) with water and yeast, knead it, and form it into 3900 buns about three inches square. They usually begin about three a.m. At sun-down they fire the oven with wood and bake the bread until midnight, each batch of buns baking for about ten minutes.

To help prepare the dough and bake the bread, the mother-in-law usually hires a day-laborer. Five years ago she paid eight pesos per day. Now she can scarcely find one who will work for 20 pesos (US \$1.60). In addition she pays for dried yeast, imported by local shopkeepers. The yeast adds another ten pesos to her investment, making the total for flour, yeast, and labor about 330 pesos.

Across the mountains, Venancio sells the 3900 breads at 20 centavos each. Gross income from the sale is 780 pesos. Subtracting her investment of 330 pesos, she is left with a profit of 450 pesos. Fifty per cent of that profit goes to Venancio. From about three days' hard work, she makes 225 pesos, US \$20.00.

She can increase her profit by selling the bread in San Pedro, but because the volume of sales there is lower than across the mountains, she can only make one sack's worth at a time. Profit on bread made for sale in San Pedro averages 75 pesos per sack, which she does not split with the peddler because she and her daughters do the peddling at the San Pedro market.

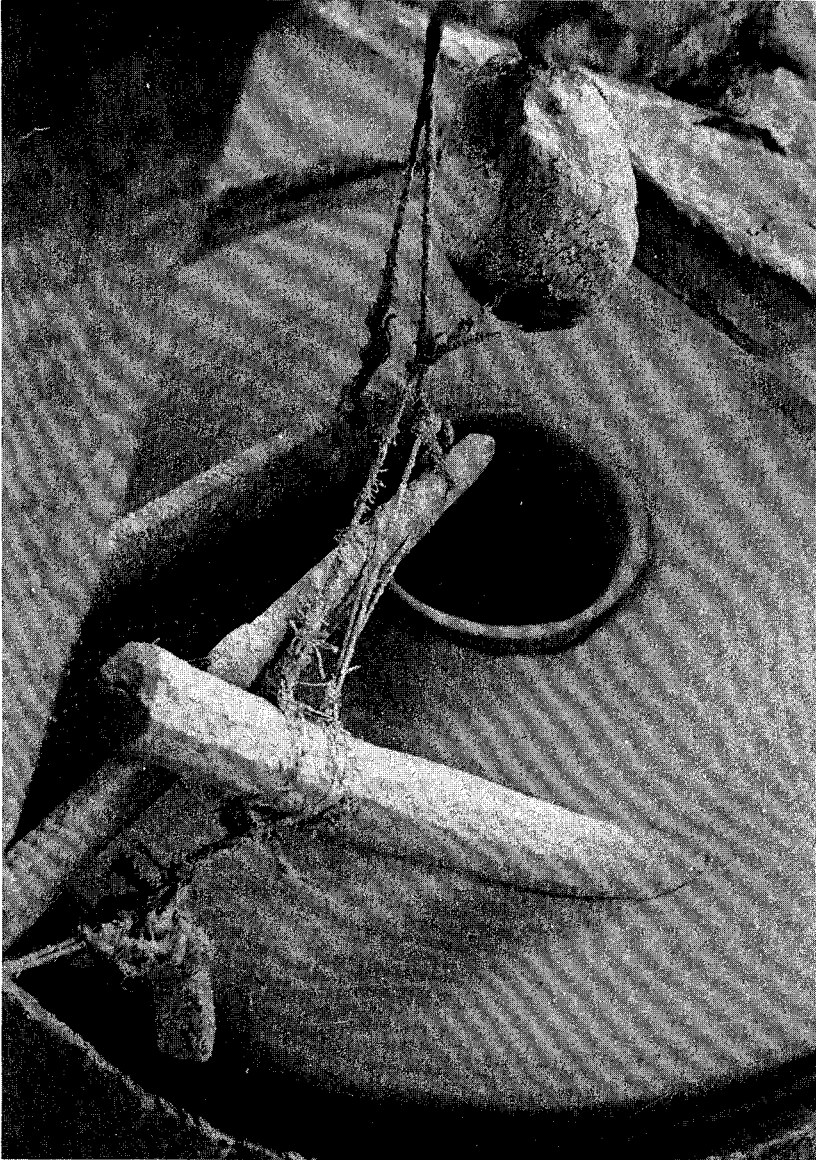
In the time of the grandparents' grandparents, say San Pedro people, bread was made from flour ground from local wheat at the mill on the river below the town, and leavened not with store-bought yeast but with a "sourdough" mixture



This contrivance feeds wheat slowly to the grinding surfaces of the millstones. Wheat is poured into the wooden repository in the morning. It holds about 30 kilograms. In the rainy season, when the water in the millrace is voluminous and swift, 30 kilograms are ground in four hours. To achieve fine flour, the millers usually put the product of the first milling through the mill a second time.

made from flour, water, and pulque. Pulque is the beer-like beverage made from the juice of the maguey agave. Bread is still made from home-grown, stone-ground flour and pulque sour-leavening in San Agustín Mixtepec, a smaller village five hours on foot west of San Pedro. The people of San Agustín Mixtepec depend on profit from bread sales in the Thursday market at Ejutla in the valley for most of their cash income. San Pedro bread, because it is made with second-grade commercial flour, has a brownish cast and some of the characteristic flavor of whole wheat bread made in the old days in San Pedro and still in San Agustín, but it lacks the dense, chewy texture and delicious sour taste.

San Pedro people still raise some wheat, though less is planted each year. Bread made with local wheat ground at the mill by the river is called "pan legitimo," ("real bread"). Once each year, San Pedro people make "real bread." They make it to set before the ancestors' spirits, who are thought to return on All Souls' Day. Usually they add a little lard for extra good-



Here wheat flows from the repository (extreme left) along a narrow trough into the hole in the center of the upper, revolving millstone. It lands on the center of the lower, fixed millstone (not visible) and is carried outward between the fixed and moving surfaces along shallow whorls etched into the face of the lower, fixed stone. The milled product issues from the circumference of the interface and falls into the wooden bin (see photo opposite) in which the millstones rest. A wooden stick is tied so that one end touches the moving millstone and the other helps support the feeder trough. The movement of the millstone vibrates the stick and, in turn, the trough, causing wheat grains to tumble from the trough into the hole. A round, clay counterweight (with a face molded into it) is adjusted to increase the pressure of the stick on the moving millstone, thereby increasing the vibration transmitted to the trough and hastening the flow of wheat.

ness. Each family makes bread for All Souls' Day, and stamps each piece with a distinctive wooden seal peculiar to that family. The use of pulque as a leavening agent has disappeared altogether.

When I smell the little square buns baking on the stone floor of the old adobe oven, and walk out in the cool mountain evening to see them tumbling from the glowing oven-mouth into big wicker baskets, and fill my bag and then my mouth with hot, crusty bread, I forget my purist disappointment that yeast and bleached flour have replaced pulque and whole wheat. I count myself lucky to live where there is always good, fresh bread to break the tedium of the tyrant tortilla.

A few yards uphill from the oven is my outhouse. In the confusion of my first weeks in San Pedro, I had trouble finding out where to go. I think part of the difficulty came from Venancio's not knowing where I ought to go. He and everyone else in San Pedro go to the arroyo. Only the schoolteachers have outhouses, and they are far from my house. The



Before it is mixed with water and yeast, the flour is sifted through two sieves made from flexible wooden hoops strung with the material of nylon stockings. The sieves are knocked against each other on runners placed lengthwise over the five-foot wooden trough in which the batter is eventually mixed and kneaded.

arroyo is awkward and noisome. Only little children and the sick go behind the house. When I asked Venancio about the problem, we ended up agreeing that we should build an outhouse for me as soon as possible. (Venancio called it— or so I understood him— a doble use (DOH-blai OOH-say), which I took to be a local variation of a phrase I had never heard but imagined must exist, doble uso, "double use," which I thought probably referred to a facility that can be used for both functions, sitting and standing.)

I had been in San Pedro less than two weeks when the third-ranking official of the village government (síndico) came home with Venancio, then a minor office-holder himself, to talk with me. Venancio approached me first to say that the síndico had scolded him as my host for not knowing how to treat "la gente," meaning "people of quality." The síndico turned out to be drunk but amiable. He told me Venancio had been very careless not to have built me an outhouse. At the síndico's insistence, the three of us spent that afternoon fashioning a rickety booth of cane and hemp cord over a shallow hole just beside the main path into the village center. I used it gingerly



The interior diameter of the oven is about six feet. The mouth is about two feet high. It is at waist level. The tools leaning against the oven at the left are more than seven feet long. From left to right, they are: a bunch of green branches used to sweep the oven floor clean of embers after the coals have been banked to one side; a flat, spade-shaped tool on which the squares of dough are lined up and then laid onto the oven floor for baking; two hoe-shaped tools, one for banking the fire and the other for shovelling the buns out of the oven. Note the cross on top of the oven.

for five days, until an early rainstorm washed it away.

After that, I would take long walks into the countryside, well beyond the last cluster of houses. But in those early days I had recurring problems with amoebas and the like. Sometimes the walk looked much too long. I increasingly settled for the vacant lot behind my house, where Venancio had suggested I go when I spent my first weekend in San Pedro as his guest several months before. Soon the vacant lot became a habit. I learned not to think about the callousness of a grown gringo's going where only toddlers and the infirm were allowed. I sneaked into that brush and out again hoping no one would notice. Until you have been the only white man in an Indian village, you cannot know how unrealistic that hope was.

"Doña Aurelia says she is going to register a charge against you with the presidente," the mother-in-law tells me. My heart sinks.

"What? Who? What for?"

"She says she is going to bring a charge 'if that gringo doesn't stop going in my cornfield.'"

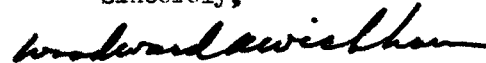
"Oh, well, then I will certainly stop." I am blushing. "I didn't think...." I don't know what I didn't think.

Maria is there. She says, "You can go down there, across the path, where there is no house. The people who own that land do not live here any more. They never come back. They do not care for their land. You can go there."

So I went there. It turned out to be across the path from the house where Eva lived. All the time that I was trying to help her recover from that gastrointestinal illness, I was going twice daily in a vacant lot fifty yards from her door. It was impossible for me to ignore my complicity in the village sanitation problems.

Venancio is the most enthusiastic worker I have ever known. But for some reason, neither he nor I could get around to building the doble use until three months after my arrival in San Pedro. Once it was finally built, I invited him and his family to use it. He thanked me, and they continued going to the arroyo. Doble use, by the way, turned out to be my misunderstanding of Venancio's pronunciation of the abbreviation W.C. What we built was not an outhouse, but a water closet.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham

Received in New York on June 26, 1975.