INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-25 Walking to the Center of San Pedro: To the Arroyo

Apdo. 27
Ocotlán, Oaxaca
México
21 June, 1975

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017
EE. UU.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

If one stands where the path from our houses meets the main path to the village center, Emiliano's house on the left, the oven and water closet on the right, the tap is straight ahead. Open the faucet and you get a strong jet of cold, clean water. It is carried in lead pipes from a concrete sealed holding-tank about 700 feet further up the mountainside. Water flows into the tank from an artesian well close by. This is the source of water for the roughly 250 households in San Pedro. So far in my experience, the system is unfailing. No one walks more than fifty yards to a tap. Ours serves just our two households and Emiliano.

The system was installed in 1964, at the instigation and under the leadership of Venancio's remarkable godfather. (He is also responsible for the creation of a community cattle herd, a town treasury, two new school buildings, and the first store in the village!) That was many years before other, more acculturated towns in the Oaxaca valley, towns with electricity and telephones and bus service, installed potable water systems with the help of federal government agencies. In San Pedro, the installation was accomplished without government aid. Friends of mine who know rural Mexico and come to visit San Pedro are regularly struck by a certain quality— they say San Pedro seems "progressive," or "advanced," or "together." Some of the evidence is subjective: the cordiality and enthusiasm of the people, the sense of order and civility. And some of the evidence is quite concrete: the water system, school buildings, teachers' quarters, basketball court, road maintenance, all done with care and intelligence by voluntary unpaid cooperative work groups involving all the adult males of the village under the direction of the town government. On Saturday night at sundown, the youngest municipal officeholders (topiles) climb to three points overlooking the village and shout out across the rooftops a reminder that the next day householders should clean the paths near their houses. The next day, people get out and clean the streets.

Turning into the main path to the village center, one passes on the left a vacant house not inhabited for more than ten years. It sits on a plot of land about 25 yards square, slightly larger than average in this densely populated town. San Pedro people insist that there are very few unoccupied houses in the village, but I see a great many. To a Pedruno, this house is not unoccupied. Its owner lives in Mexico City, returning every year or two at All Souls' Day.

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When a house does become truly unoccupied, through death or out-migration, it may be sold together with the plot of land, but rarely does the buyer move into the abandoned house. Ordinarily the new owner constructs a new house. When a man marries, he proves himself by building a house for his family with his own hands and the help of blood and ritual kin. For example, Venancio inherited a house in which he and his wife and child could now be living. Rather than live there, Venancio lives with his mother-in-law (experiencing the apparently universal difficulties that entails) in order to save money to build a new house on another plot of land. He says it is a matter of pride.

Further down the path, on the right, is the vacant lot that Maria said I should use after Doña Aurelia threatened me with public exposure. Soon after Venancio and I finished the water closet, relatives of the absentee owner of the vacant lot cleared the underbrush from it. Whether that was their way of driving off me and other bad neighbors I will never know.

Opposite the lot, on the left as one descends, is the compound where Eva lived. When I came back to San Pedro last August after writing those newsletters about Eva's illness, I found that she had been dead five days. I attended the remaining four nights of the novena, which culminated in the carrying of "her cross"— actually the image of a cross painted on a brick— to her grave in the cemetery on the hill above the village. On the first evening following a death, the remains are buried in a pine coffin. During the nine-day mourning period, the painted cross becomes the object of ritual as if it were the deceased. During the first eight days of mourning, friends and family gather after dark for several hours of sung Roman Catholic prayers. On the ninth day, they stay up through the night, praying, singing, eating, and cat-napping. At dawn the cross is carried to the grave. A layman hired to lead the prayers throughout the novena takes up a thick length of an oak branch, narrow at one end and stout and gnarled at the other, the whole thing looking like a huge, naturally formed war club. With this he pounds on the grave to secure the body in its grave and discourage the spirit from returning.

Eva's father Manuel greeted me at the door of the sleeping house where the mourners were gathering to sing and eat. I told him I was sorry to hear that Eva had died. He acted cheerful.

"Yes, she died!" He beamed up at me. "We did everything possible, but her hour came. It was her destiny."

Eva's mother and one sister were rarely seen. They worked in the cook-house preparing beans, coffee, and tortillas for the guests. When they did come into the sleeping house, it was only to clear dishes or relight copal incense in the three-legged pottery burners placed among the flowers by Eva's cross.

Other women, some with children, came into the sleeping house midway through the prayers and settled onto mats at the far end of the room, while we men sat on benches and stools near the family altar and Eva's cross. By the ninth night, the altar and cross were covered with wax dripped by candles brought during the mourning by the guests

Since the wake, I have not seen much of Eva's family. Her brother married this month, but I was not invited to the fandango. The mother-in-law recently hired Manuel to help make bread, so he was around our compounds for the day, but we scarcely talked. I got a glimpse of Manuel's view of me, though, from

something Venancio told me. Venancio was kneading alongside Manuel. Manuel asked him why the gringo had chosen to build his house on that particular site. Venancio said I built there because that is the land Venancio offered to lend me. Manuel rejected that explanation. He said he thought he knew the truth. There must be minerales in the ground beneath the house. The gringo must be mining minerales in secret.

I see Eva's mother at the fountain just below their compound, where the path to the center intersects another path that leads out of town. At this intersection the water system feeds a two-tiered tank for watering animals and dipping buckets for wash-water. Eva's mother dresses like nearly all the San Pedro women over thirty: a black or blue-black wool skirt made by wrapping a length of the material twice around the waist and tying it with a red sash; a white, short-sleeved cotton blouse, with hand-embroidered neckline and a narrow strip of embroidery just above the sternum; bare feet or store-bought sandals; hair in braids coiled on top of the head, often with a bright ribbon braided in; and cheap, gold-colored earrings in pierced ears.

The two-tiered fountain is a few feet from a brick-lined, square hole in the ground in the exact center of the intersection of the paths. It is full of water, thick with algae and fallen leaves. This is one of the five neighborhood wells that provided water until the water system was installed. In those days, children used to begin lining up at the wells at two o'clock a.m. to draw water in time for breakfast at six. Although today they are disused, the wells are still open. Last a year a toddler fell into one and drowned.

Walking toward the center from the well, one passes on the left the parcel of land held by the town government in behalf of the teachers. Communal work groups plant and cultivate this land, handing over the produce— corn, beans, squash, apples, and peaches— to the Association of Heads of Families, who in turn deliver it to the teachers. Throughout rural Mexico, teachers typically expect and receive gifts of food, lodging, and labor from the citizenry. It is in San Pedro's interests to earn a reputation among teachers and regional education officers for largesse towards teachers. These isolated Indian towns are hardship posts. If a village is known to make life easy for its teachers, in the long run it will be assigned better personnel than another, less accommodating village. The San Pedro town government is currently working to buy a van to transport the teachers to and from Miahuatlán on weekends. This will be the first vehicle in San Pedro, a community in desperate need of a cargo truck to insure a year-round supply of corn and other basic commodities.

Just past the two-tiered fountain, along the fence of the teachers' parcel, is a three-basin concrete laundry stand. Before it was installed, at the time of the building of the water system, women would carry their laundry to the river, a long, steep walk from the village, or wash it on the rocks of the path near the well. In either case, they did their laundry in large groups. Now that water runs a few yards from most houses, women do laundry at home on stones in the patio. Few women use the laundry stand.

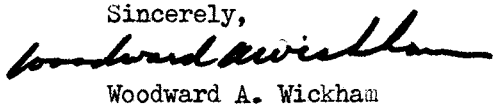
Just before the arroyo, on the right opposite the laundry stand, lives the part-owner of one of the five battery-powered record-player-cum-loudspeaker units that increasingly blast ranchera music into the mountain stillness of San Pedro for 50 centavos a tune. He and his father live in this house by them-

selves. The son stopped me one day to ask that I come in and see his father. He said he had a sore on his "parte mala," (bad part), the penis. The father explained that he had bathed in a cold stream when he was sweaty from a hard walk, and that the cold had caused the sore. His parte mala looked beyond my help, so I sent him to a doctor near Miahuatlán. She sent him to Oaxaca for tests. The exudate from the sore was found to be infested with amoebas. Once the amoebas had been eradicated, the condition did not improve. A biopsy showed cancer. Surgery was indicated. I stopped in to see the father when he returned to San Pedro after the testing and amoeba treatment and biopsy. If he wanted to go ahead with the surgery, I told him, I would arrange it. No, he said, instead he would go to a certain curandera at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. She knows how to cure this problem with herbs and prayers, they say. He wanted to know if I would lend him money for the cure. How much? Three thousand pesos (US $240). I declined.

Later the son came to see me with the same request. We talked about the operation. I asked why the father chose not to have it. The son said his father thought he could not survive it. He referred to a San Pedro woman who had gone to Oaxaca for an operation and died there. I explained that the operation simply (sic) involved cutting away the parte mala. He pointed to his own belly. "You mean they won't cut him open here?" To San Pedro people, "operacion" means abdominal surgery, often ending in death far from home. No one had ever explained successfully to father and son that the surgery would be confined to the parte mala. These doctors cure sick lungs by putting needles in the rump, and test your heart by wrapping a belt around the upper arm. It makes just as much sense to assume they will cure the parte mala by cutting open the belly. The last I heard, the father was waiting for his condition to improve enough to let him travel. He had sold a piece of land to pay for his trip. To the Isthmus.

Two smells meet you as you approach the arroyo: the intoxicating, sweet fragrance of a large datura growing out of the opposite bank, its roots deep in the black soil, and the odor of human wastes deposited by the people of my neighborhood a few yards upstream. But for the datura, the stench would be insupportable. Looking down into the little gully, among the reeds and cast-off plastics one sees mounds of chicken feathers, and beaks and legs. It is the time of the semi-annual chicken epidemic. The dead birds are thrown into the arroyo and forgotten. The disease spreads fast. No one's chickens escape. This year the mother-in-law lost all but one from her flock of seven chickens. Between the semi-annual chicken epidemic and Emiliano's heavy hand with the walking stick, my dahlias and morning-glories have a fighting chance.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham

Received in New York on June 26, 1975.