

Chapter 2. WALKING OUT

The mules had just been hobbled and I was tightening the straps on the plant press, thinking about the day's discoveries. I was amazed to find a colony of white-flowered *Odontoglossum*, not only an astounding northern record, but it looked like an undescribed species. I even managed to catch one of the iridescent green orchid bee pollinators.

We were on the Chihuahua border, several days into the Sierra Madre Occidental from the end of the road at Don Nacho's ranchito, and had stumbled onto poppy fields. We were about to have late afternoon coffee when a couple of gun-toting locals rode up and slithered off their saddles. Don Nacho gave them coffee and they talked about the weather. Turning to old Nacho they said, "you can go but we're not going to permit the Señor to leave." That means they're going to kill you.

We offered more coffee, which they drank sitting on their haunches around the smoldering fire. I was never very good at it, but managed macho stoicism sitting on my haunches too. They went off as it got dark, reminding Don Nacho about returning later.

The situation seemed unreal. There were interesting specimens to prepare, but I was too rattled to work on them. Don Nacho let the fire go down. I tried to talk to the old man but he wasn't in a talking mood, and besides, his Spanish wasn't that good and I only knew a few Guarijio words. He was so steady it almost calmed me.

It was soon so dark that I dared not move and sat up against the hard scratchy trunk of a giant-leaved tropical oak. Tough leaves so large you can use the water in upturned leaves to

wash your face in the morning. Howard Scott Gentry said those leaves were handy in a dry camp.

Don Nacho touched my shoulder and put his old dry hand over my mouth before I could say a word. In his steady way he got me up and led me to the pine forest just beyond the clearing where we had our camp. He hooked a finger into my belt and led me on. I wondered what he wanted, and even before I could ask he covered my mouth with his scratchy hand.

He was taking us somewhere. I wanted to go back and get my jacket and maybe some other things. It was pitch dark and I kept stumbling. He took us up the mountain, almost straight up and over the rocks, and then down through a canyon where earlier in the day I had found red-leaved bromeliads and yellow-flowered orchids clinging to shaded cliffs. I had tried to catch the male orchid bees attacking the flowers as if they were other male bees invading their territory, a special orchid trick evolved for pollination. And then back up over another steep slope.

We worked around agave colonies that bloodied my legs. On the narrow animal path he was using for a trail I started to fall, but he pulled me hillside, away from the abyss. Heavy darkness continued for hours when mercifully the moon rose and I realized our campsite and the poppy fields were already on the other side of the mountain. I thought we might be going for help or to the home of friends, some safe place.

Tiny orange kerosene lights flickered far below and again he took us up higher and away from the occasional valley-bottom echoing dog barks and warm light. We went hour after hour, away from ranchitos. I was getting cold even though part of me was drenched in sweat. There were good jackets, canteens, blankets, flashlights, and food at our camp, the two burros, and my specimens. My camera too.

Still he would not let me talk. Up and over mountains. Don Nacho was not stopping. He did not step on anything that made a noise. I tried to copy him.

Although the quarter moon gave some light I had a hard time finding a good place to put my foot at almost every step. In the worst places he again took hold of my belt and led me like a stubborn mule. It must have been midnight when I stopped to turn for a piss and felt my legs and body quivering trying to catch up and rest. He wouldn't even give me five seconds after I finished. I plodded on after him.

In the moonlight I saw we were thousands of feet above the canyon floor. We went so silently that I could hear every night noise of poor-wills calling, bats squeaks, and once in a while a far off cowbell.

We went way around well-worn paths. At stream crossings we slowed only to drink. A carpet of big dry crackly sycamore leaves nested among water-smooth granite boulders and the medicinal aroma of seep-willow mixed with cattle smells on the damp canyon soil. Coming around a huge rock there was a large animal growl.

My feet were numb and my mind opened to the sky. We seemed to drift over spinescent slopes and through tree-darkened rock canyons. I thought of nothing as new senses washed through like waves on childhood beaches. The trees and grasses and rocks and cactus and sky and night creatures and old Nacho himself were in sharp focus. Streams of light and heat seemed to flow from every living thing including the rocks.

We walked in the black and white night world until the east sky slowly glowed warm with birdcalls. More steep crumbly slopes and hours later down to a valley bottom. Here and there a few small edible fruits like a *bebelama* or *uvalama*. Don Nacho led us up a hard climb over sharp rocks and finally into the dusty floor of a cave smelling of mammals next to a rock seep of cool clear water. We slept past midday and waited for dark. I forgot about talking. There were new colors and sounds and I almost forgot about being hungry.

We walked easy in the black and white night world and came around the backside of the

village as the roosters called. Crumbly adobe brick walls and palm thatch roof, the house open to the warm south, beneath great quiet sabino trees along the now dry riverbed. We sat on homemade chairs balanced on the hard packed dirt floor, the seats and backs of interlaced rawhide strips with the fur still on. Doña Martina brought coffee and fresh warm tortillas wrapped in a white cloth, dark beans and eggs. I slept like never before or since.

It was bad enough losing hundreds of specimens and all my field notes and camera, but I had to pay for both pack burros. We said nothing about what we saw.

Some months later I heard that the *federales* raided the poppy fields. The pioneer botanist Howard Scott Gentry told me about his harrowing encounter with poppy growers in almost the same place more than 30 years earlier. Nowadays there is a road to where the poppy fields were once incognito but the place is noted for armed robbery. And not too far from where locals say if you go to Guiricoba bring your gun and if go to Choquincahui bring your coffin.