

“La Pinta” Mountains 1978

By Marco Lopez

When I was serving as the UFW’s house counsel in La Paz, and Vickie was working to get the UFW radio off the ground, Cesar came up with the idea of sending some of the union’s volunteers to Mexico in order to study Spanish and better equip them to be union contract negotiators, contract administrator’s, paralegals and otherwise be better able to serve the membership. Although I am not familiar with the genesis of the project, from the start it struck me as being quite similar to the “*servicio social*” that university graduates in Mexico are required to perform before entering their chosen professions.

Vickie was chosen as one of the students. Although Mexican-American, she was only able to speak a limited Spanish when she first went to work in the union in 1977. The program was set up to work as an exchange of services-for-lessons, both practical and class-based. Essentially some fifteen to twenty students went to the fishing hamlet of San Felipe, Baja California; which lies at the Northern coast of the Sea of Cortez. Pete Moya, director of education for the new UFW training programs, would be their resident teacher and coordinator. The students were placed in the homes of local families and daily volunteered their services on various community work projects.

Approximately three weeks into the program I accompanied Cesar to Phoenix where we had a meeting with his friend Bill Soltero of the laborers’ local. There were a number of us that went from La Paz: Cesar, Ramona, Marc, myself, and two or three of Cesar’s bodyguards. We traveled in two cars, leaving La Paz very early in the morning and arriving to Phoenix by mid-day. The meetings there were relatively brief, but Cesar was pleased with the outcome and was in a light mood afterward. Before we left Soltero’s offices, Cesar asked me whether I wanted to go see Vickie in San Felipe. I thought at the time he might be teasing as we had already driven 500 miles to Phoenix, and were due for a meeting with the workers and union staff in North San Diego County that evening before our drive back home. I told him I would very much like to see her (*and thought to myself that if the opportunity arose, I could use a conjugal visit as well*). Before long I heard him tell the rest of our group that we would be swinging by San Felipe to visit with the students. I couldn’t see at the time how we would be able to fit this all in one day, but that was the pace Cesar often kept on the road.

We were off to Mexico!

I was not in Cesar’s front-car driving down, so I don’t know when, or with whom, arrangements were made for a Baja State police escort, but when we got to Mexicali two friendly *judiciales* greeted us and undertook to escort our now three-car motorcade all the way to San Felipe. The uneventful drive in the warm late-September afternoon took us approximately two hours. One thing of note for me was that like in our own California, Baja also had a saline lake near the border, known as *Laguna Salada* (*Salton Lake*). Some geologists maintain that these two lakes are joined beneath the earth through a series of underground channels or rivers. On the land above, on both sides of the international line, were of course of the same flora, fauna, and natural wild life.

Man-drawn boundaries are indeed a figment of man’s imagination.

Driving into the small village I saw a number of children greet us by running on the shoulders of the dirt road. The warm desert dust that swirled behind us hid them at times, but then they would reappear. Their glee and smiling faces lit us up, breaking the monotony of the long drive. Word of our visit had apparently preceded us, for upon our arrival all the students were there to greet us. They were very glad to see Cesar, and I was happy to see Vickie.

After a couple of hours, during which Cesar and we ate with the students, and met as well with some of the local officials regarding the Spanish educational program and the feasibility for future exchange programs, it was time for us to bid farewell and resume our trip to San Diego where Cesar was scheduled to hold his meeting. Farewells were said, and once again escorted by the two *judiciales*, we began our trip over the “*Sierra Pinta*” mountains northwest to Ensenada, north to Tijuana, and then across the border onto North San Diego County, some 300 miles’ distance.

As we drove west there was still plenty light but the sun had already started to set in front of us. After driving for approximately forty-five minutes and already climbing the mountains, we came upon a horrible multiple car accident on the highway. It had just happened a short time before and there were still injured people lying strewn about the lanes and median divider. Nearby were a number of totaled vehicles as well as a semi-truck. Our escorts immediately exited their vehicle and hurriedly went about checking on the injured and other travelers at the scene.

We remained in our cars waiting, and watching.

A few minutes went by when one of the *judiciales* returned and informed Cesar that they would have to stay behind and wait until other help arrived to take the injured. They suggested we drive on ahead, assuring us that we should be OK.

We did.

The day was coming to an end and the sun cast its shadows over the entire roadway and a good part of the high, rocky, mountains. The winding road climbed steeply as we ventured ahead to the unknown summit. Looking off to the distant barren mountaintops, I saw in my mind’s eye the injured, and thought how a couple of them looked to be more dead than alive. No one spoke. The mood in our car was somber.

Our original caravan continued on and my thoughts purposely turned to the meeting ahead of us.

Several long, winding curves ahead, and about half hour later, I saw in the distance a man swinging a smoky oil lantern. He was facing in our direction, standing just to the side of the road. Our guards were in radio contact with each other and from the lead-car came the order to continue on and not stop.

We passed the man by and barely seconds passed before shots were heard from behind us. As I turned and looked behind my shoulder, I saw that a vehicle had entered fast into the

highway leaving a tall cloud of dust behind. It was in hot pursuit. At first David, our driver, sped up, but then, perhaps seeing that the military vehicle behind us was rapidly approaching, he began to slow down, reluctantly, like a tired wild horse. I caught his worried eyes reflected off the rearview mirror.

In moments time we were being signaled to pull off the road.

It was a jeep--filled with *federales*-- that escorted us back a couple of miles to where had stood the man with the lantern. Then, as we exited the highway I saw another group of soldiers gathered around a campfire. They were armed. Their piercing gaze was focused on us.

“*Federales*” are Mexican federal soldiers, mostly of humble and indigenous background, who come mainly from the southern states of Mexico. They are crack units, extremely loyal to their government, and having a reputation for being able to put a bullet right through the middle of your forehead, from ample distance. They proved their fierce loyalty to the regime in 1968, when hundreds of students and union protestors were killed at their hands in Mexico City. As a child I had seen them eye-to-eye when visiting Mexico City museums and archeological sites. They never smiled.

And neither did these.

We were ordered off our vehicles at gunpoint. The one giving the orders, *el Capitán*, remained seated near the fire. In a funny sort of *Mexican John Wayne* drawl he bellowed out orders for us to line up next to our cars. Funny thing isn't it, how sometimes when one is under the gun one is able to notice things that even under the poignant circumstances can be quite humorous. Marc, from as far back as I can remember, when nervous, sometimes twitched and rolled his eyes upward as his head moved rapidly from side to side, sort of like an old manual typewriter in the heat of battle; and Marc was known to type more than one-hundred words a minute, and a hell of a writer. It was for this reason I believe the guards had nicknamed him “*Radar*.”

Well, I caught a glimpse of him to one side and sure enough, here Marc was, now doing the old typewriter bit for the *Capitán!*

As any military officer anywhere in the world would ask under these circumstances, the Captain's first question was: *why did we not stop when signaled?* (“*Yeab, Cesar?*”...*I thought to myself.*) Our inquisitor was obviously angered by what he clearly perceived to be a blatant defiance of “*la antoridad*.” Authority is *sacrosanct* in Mexico you see, and this did not look good. All our faces showed it.

I was standing next to Cesar who nudged me and in a calm voice said, “*Marco, you do the talking.*”

The captain's grubby face was lit up orange by the dying campfire, which partially revealed his five-day-growth of beard and his dangling toothpick which he adeptly moved from one side of his mouth to the other. He exchanged cursory glances with each of us in the line-up before he stood up and slowly made his way closer.

“Muestran sus identificaciones, todos!”-- The Captain demanded. His commanding military cadence broke the relative tension for me. I stiffened up and took up the task of communicating with Mexican authority. Though a far cry from a courtroom, it was time to perform.

After looking us up and down and side to side he instinctively came to stand in front of Cesar. One of his men made his way down the line looking at our identifications.

“De donde vienen?”

“Somos de los Estados Unidos...de California. Y el es Cesar Chavez, lider sindicalista de los campesinos...” I looked to Cesar who was looking straight-out at the captain; I next looked at the Captain for a reaction as I was telling him who Cesar was and that we were all union volunteers who worked with him. I got the distinct feeling that all this was not registering at all. It certainly did not seem to impress him.

He remained surly but calm. *“Y que hacen por acá?”*

I explained why we had come to Ensenada; about the practical Spanish-learning program and the students we had just visited. I also told him of our State police escort which we had unfortunately lost at the accident site. By the way the Captain was starting to look at us, I thought I was *finally* beginning to make some progress; *must have been the escort I thought*. Or, it might also have been Ramona, standing there all lined-up in her brilliant white Egyptian poplin blouse, long colorful linen skirt, and her thick-black single braid reaching down to the small of her back.

“Esculquen los carros.”—*el Capitán* said to his men, almost inaudibly.

Now that our identities had been scrutinized, the soldiers began searching our cars. *No problem, I thought. What could they find? Our notebooks; Cesar’s books and Union literature?* Cesar was a voracious reader. His interests were diverse. When traveling long distances he would often prefer to read past scenery he’d seen so many times before. For night-time-reading he had a clip-on light, which could be seen reflected off the car windows as the odometer clicked away miles and miles.

As the captain momentarily wandered off to the other car, the campfire’s short flames temporarily mesmerized me. Off to a distance I heard indistinct Spanish murmurs not much different than those heard in Catholic churches, confessionals or funerals. The flames danced slow and gently under the clear evening sky.

I came to myself when I heard *“pistolas.”* *Pistolas?* The thought reverberated in my momentarily vacuous mind. Cesar and I exchanged quick glances as any attorney and client would in open court.

Guns where? I turned to look at the bustle at one of our car’s trunks. One of the soldiers had pulled out two automatic revolvers. Looking in the *Capitán’s* direction, he raised them at eye level as one proudly would a trophy.

Shit. Now what?

One learns early on in life that in awkward moments such as these, the best one can do is to *look* innocent. It really doesn't matter how you do it, just do it; and the sooner, the better. Well, I looked over to Cesar and sure enough-- he *looked very innocent*; and I, I must confess, *very perplexed*: two sides of the same coin, variations of the same theme?

Despite this most recent discovery and turn of events, I felt confident. Hell, what could they do, shoot us? I *wasn't* about to ask.

"Estan detenidos." There was no need to ask *why* we were being detained. I well knew that unlike in the United States, where the right to bear arms is protected by the Constitution, in Mexico that is not the case. Something to do with her revolutions, insurrections and instability; the *same* instability *el Capitán* was sworn to protect against.

I asked the Captain where we were being taken. *"Para Ensenada,"* to the Ensenada Jail he said in a now more respectful tone, *"todos a sus coches."* *Had the guns bestowed upon us more respect?* It sure seemed that way. He now even sounded a bit like a tourist guide—*"All aboard!"*

Whatever the reason for the Captain's change in attitude, I found solace in the thought that at least we were not going to be shot and buried out there somewhere in the desolate *La Pinta* range.

Cesar gave me a *"good job"* kind of look and off we went to the Ensenada Jail.

The Ensenada Jail

Leaving *La Pinta* range, I was now riding in Cesar's lead car being driven by a *federal-*courtesy of the Mexican federal government. Sitting in the back seat with Cesar, we talked shop for the one and one-half-hour drive to the jail. As we always did, we'd alternate between English and Spanish; a bi-lingual, bi-cultural, linguistic weave we felt most comfortable with. Not a word was said by our chauffer, in the presence of whom we of course did not broach anything privileged or confidential: purely legal and administrative chat.

Our caravan had now grown to five vehicles, two civilian and three military. Now that's a worthy entourage! We sped through the mountains, then down a valley and many curves later, over to the fishing town of Ensenada.

When I was a boy my maternal uncle, Yb Quezada, took his daughter Cristina and a number of us cousins for a weekend to this small friendly coastal town. We stayed at a friend's ranch in the outskirts of town that was situated between a Catholic seminary and a small military post. The three days we were there we were awoken by two very loud contrasting ritual styles. At the pre-dawn of day we heard from one side the pealing of church bells, rung in a frenzied, rapid-succession-kind of way; then, almost as if pursuant to some sort of church-state accommodation, from the other side came a bugle: *ta-ta-ra-ta-ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ra-ta-ta-ta-ta,*

ta-ta-ra-ta-ta-ra-ta-ta-ri. Now, if *that* didn't wake you up, the roosters that chimed in next certainly would.

At evening time the same routine would take place, but it was more peaceful without the robust roosters crowing.

In between the ghost stories that were in high demand among us kids, my uncle told us a very interesting story about something that happened sometime after he served as a staff sergeant in the U.S. Army. He saw combat in the Philippine Islands in 1944, receiving a purple heart for wounds received in battle. Like my mother, he was born in Dawson, New Mexico. When the miner's strike there (which all my older uncles and grandfather had joined) got nasty, and their economic situation became grave, my grandfather *Agustín Quezada* moved the family back to *La Norteña*, a small *ejido* in the *Sierra Madre* mountains of their native state of Chihuahua. My mother and uncle therefore, not only had dual citizenship, but each was equally grateful, proud and patriotic of both nations. They did not feel conflicted in the least.

After he was honorably discharged my uncle staked out a claim as one of the first tortilla manufacturers in Los Angeles. He was a very successful business man and very active in a number of service clubs such as the Lions. It was in one of these clubs in San Pedro that he met a small number of high-level retired army and naval officers. After socializing with them for some time, he told us that one evening, very unofficially and privately, some of this top brass had attempted to recruit him in their planned effort of invading and taking over the entire Mexican peninsula of Baja California. I looked at him with eyes and mouth wide open.

"Why didn't you do it, tío?!" I asked. The lesson he gave me is one that I carry to this day. It was then that he explained to me all about the dual-responsibility of dual-citizenship, and the respect a nation should have for the boundaries of another.

"So what did you tell them?"

"Well, I smiled at them," he said as he looked at us with wide eyes, "... looked 'em straight in the eyes and said, 'Why? You already live in occupied territory!'"

Not completely understanding then *why* he laughed, us kids were nevertheless affected by it and soon boisterously joined in with him. Years later, when I was a law student and visiting him at his business in Los Angeles, I heard him telling a couple of his Anglo business friends the same lesson about this being occupied territory. I smiled as they too laughed with him. He was that kind of man.

These memories came to me as we entered Ensenada. Under the circumstances we were in, I thought of my tío Yb who had just recently passed away, and just had to smile.

I looked out my window as we made the turn down a dark city street. The station however was lit up bright by the kind of large transparent bulbs one sees at carnivals and fairs. A number of squad cars were parked outside with a number of policemen milling around. Some were shooting the breeze, others having a late dinner at a taco stand out front on the sidewalk. I imagined them talking about their evening calls and conquests and wondered if

our next inquisitor was among them. Their attention was immediately drawn to our nocturnal caravan, pulling in. Once more we would be scrutinized; once more I would need to state our case.

We exited our cars to the mixed scents of tacos and exhaust fumes in the air. We were quickly led into the jail. A change of guards would now take place and our custody passed on to the local police; men I *hoped* would be more knowledgeable about Cesar and all his good work “*al Norte*,” as some Mexicans refer to their neighbor to the North.

Mexican authorities have a very hierarchal approach in these matters. If unknown, a person is expected to wait, and wait, and wait, as one is handed from one level of public servant, to the next, and the next. This can be the case even when there is no shake down taking place. Of course, if one gives a handsome gratuity at the *start* of one’s official visit, the length of the process is shortened considerably, depending of course on the amount of the “*mordida*,” or bribe one gives.

Cesar never carried money with him, and even if he did, I’m certain he would not have greased the wheel. No, we would have to poor boy it. The strange thing about it though, is that we had to wait very little before the *Comandante* came out of his office, pristinely dressed and looking very professional and courteous.

“Buenas noches señores, y señorita.” He said as he smiled at Ramona and the rest of us.

Cesar motioned for me to step up to the plate. Not at all reluctant this time, I was pleasantly surprised when Cesar also whispered—*“Ask him to please call my friend, their Senator.”* I did a double take and thought—

Wow, Cesar’s just handed me an ace in the hand.

Now I knew we stood on firmer ground. I stepped up to the *Comandante*, exchanged greetings and respectfully began telling him our story. Only after I’d given him the same *spiel* I felt I’d wasted on the surly captain, I very non-chalantly added that he only had to call his Senator, who’d vouch for us. My eyes caught those of the *Capitán* with a concerned look on his face standing at some distance from the *Comandante*.

“Is my game about to get away?” he was probably thinking.

Cesar called to me and handed me the Senator’s phone number, which I in turn gave to the kind man standing in front of me.

“Me perdonan por favor. En seguida regreso.”

He courteously dismissed himself and went back into his office followed by the *Capitán* who was now beginning to look *quite* worried. Perhaps, as the French officer said in *Casa Blanca*, he had not rounded up the “usual suspects.” But then, why should he have been worried? Ultimately, he knew he answered to a higher *autoridad* anyway. I was beginning to *really think Mexican*.

As we waited, an officer asked if we would like anything to drink. Cesar asked for, and was quickly given water. I exchanged nervous glances with my compatriots as we were awaiting our sentence. A few minutes later I could hear the *Comandante* carrying on what sounded to me like a friendly conversation in his office. Then another five minutes went by before the office door opened and our judge walked out the door, a restrained smile on his face, his eyes turned downward as he walked back to us.

Reaching out to shake Cesar's hand the *Comandante* only said—

"Sr. Chavez, me da mucho gusto conocerlo. El Señor Senador le envía sus más cordiales saludos."

We were going home, I thought, as both Cesar and I thanked him for his kind courtesies. Then I too shook his hand and that of his quiet young assistant standing next to him.

We were going home, but not before Cesar and we first met-- though belatedly-- with our staff up near Carlsbad, California. We were all dead tired after the hour or so we were there. But my day, I soon discovered, was not yet over. Cesar told me his guard was too burned out to continue driving and asked whether I wouldn't mind taking over.

"Not at all Cesar," I said, and we were on the road again, secure now in the thought that we had made it home safely.

We arrived at La Paz at almost daybreak. The guards took the cars into Cesar's yard and we all said "good night." We went off our own ways to rest after our twenty-four hour, one thousand mile journey.

After about three hours sleep, a shower, and a good breakfast I was back in my office. Cesar was also already at his when I came in and no sooner had I sat at my desk, when he called and asked to please step in to see him. I went up immediately. He was alone and ready to start a new day.

"That was quite an adventure wasn't it?"

"Yeab, it sure was. I've got to tell you though, I was a bit worried for a while out there." He smiled and slowly nodded his head. We went over some of the highlights of our trip and other items for the day, after which he thanked me for having spoken up in Baja.

"You're welcome," I said as I walked toward the door preparing to leave. Before I walked out I heard him ask from behind me—

"Marco, can you get the guns back?"

I stopped dead in my tracks, turned to face him, paused, and said: *"No Cesar. I don't think so."*

"No, bub?"

"Nope"

“Besides, they probably belong to the Capitán now, huh?”

“Yup.”

We both exchanged the same innocent looks we'd given *el Capitán*; and then, I believe I caught a smile on his face.

I was getting to know Cesar's sense of humor.