

CANDELARIA

The Candelaria River basin in southwest Campeche has been a place of several personal beginnings. On February 2, 1964, the NY Times reported that a good number of landless families from upland Mexico had been settled on forested land along the Candelaria River. I decided to investigate and thus advance a long-standing interest in colonization in tropical lowlands. In 1968, while monitoring developments in these new communities, I came on the remains of Prehispanic Maya planting platforms and canals, which took my interest in another direction. A substantial investigation was planned, but was not feasible because we were denied a permit. On October 15, 1994, I overflowed the basin again in order to begin a new phase in the examination of Prehispanic wetland agriculture in lowland Mexico, now with a permit in hand. A good deal of field and writing time has been expended around and between these two subjects: modern and ancient adaptations in tropical lowland river basins. Much gets left in the field books, many slides are never shown, and of course one must guard against anecdotes in conference papers and in the classroom! Here then is some of that interstitial material.

The town of Candelaria at the junction of rail and river was always the point of departure for the basin - there was no all-weather road until sometime in the 1970's. Trains always seemed to arrive and depart around 3:00 am. Pools of light, boxes and bags; eventually some eggs, beans and coffee at a one-table

eatery in a nearby shack and then dawn over a line of unpretentious buildings and the river.

Riverboatmen are to be sought out for their wisdom; I think Thomas Mann develops that idea somewhere. There were several memorable riverboatmen in Candelaria. The first one had been assigned to me by the local office of the government bank that administered credit to the colonists. He knew many people in the new colonies along the river, he was a cynic and he was funny. When I came back from inquiries in one community, ready to go on to the next, he would give me the real goods *en route*. At one stop he would go to look up a lady friend. At another, already late in the day, we would all go swimming where fresh karstic water came up to the surface and entered the main stream. Reeds surrounded us and fireflies made them into a cityscape.

I've flown over the colonies many times. Their townsites always seemed heartless grids hastily drawn out on someone's draughting board. At first the houses were raw concrete cubes. As I came back again and again, trees grew up around them, thatched leantos were added to some, others were abandoned. The crumble of those poorly built houses, the rusting machinery that the colonists had not been able to keep up, the decay of the whole project for that matter, comes to focus now on one afternoon's walk through such a community. Corners of houses were giving way and mud had splashed up the walls in a recent rain, but radios

were playing, the world was here among the weeds and the puddles around the standpipes. I could hear a newsbroadcast; first out of this house, then the next. Robert Kennedy had been shot; they were bringing his body to Washington by train and we were being told of its progress, house by house.

Colonies, rehabilitation projects, credit programs, all that was quickly relegated the day we found patterning in some of the wetlands along the river. A perceptual switch took place in the cabin of that Cessna - the "whoop and holler" phase of research, a new beginning indeed! Good old Carl Sauer, he of the "superorganic" concept of culture, a bogeyman of the postmodernists, had been right again. If you see something in a landscape that is aberrant, as for example the straight lines among rounded vegetational forms in a wetland, you have an interesting research problem.

I brought home slides, of course. At a meeting of the Society of American Archaeology in Seattle, Bill Denevan gave me several of his precious twenty minutes and I showed a few of the slides. The word was out. Afterwards a blond bearded guy wearing a coat and tie came up to me and wondered if I needed the help of an archaeologist. I did, of course, and the collaboration with Denny began. This would validate and activate the discovery. For me personally it was a new direction in field inquiry; I was new to archaeology, certainly, and to full fledged cultural ecology.

I would need to improve my ethnography; in fact I was beginning on another Ph.D., so to speak, the one I really wanted.

In Candelaria town - always the point of departure for the new investigations too - there was another boatman Don Beto, already at least sixty years old, wise and funny in his own way. There was one morning when we started out in what I would have sworn was complete darkness, at full throttle into the endless curves. Memory? Sensitivity to slight variations in temperature between the middle of the stream and its sides? Never mind, this guy seemed to know, and no one of us was prepared to admit we were scared. Returning one evening we were shown the remains of a boating accident. One motor boat had encountered another broadside in the dark, gone up and over and decapitated the occupant.

One further image always comes up when I retrieve the Don Beto file. It is a fine late afternoon, we're coming back into some lovely light, talking our heads off. We often raised ducks; this one duck, this "chachalaca", set a course that intersected with ours around a curve. It hit Don Beto on the temple and fell dead in the boat. There is a fine photograph of him, barefoot, pants rolled up, a smile on his face, holding up the dead duck.

When I sample the early phases of my field collaboration with Denny, somewhat like we would sample the stratigraphy of

test pits into little plastic bags, I come up first, and I've recalled this many times, with a night trip in one of the slow freight and passenger boats that plied the Candelaria. We were lying on some sacks in the hold; above us a vast field of stars rotated back and forth as we followed the curves. He was pointing out the constellations, and he really knew his stars; later I would find a star chart up over his desk.

We would be on the street in some town and he would be doing sleight of hand tricks for shoeshine boys. We would be coming into a cantina in Candelaria at the end of the day, dying for a cold beer, and he would show me some tricks for dealing with drunks who wanted to take us to caves they knew of that had figures of kings, never anything less, always reyes.

One day he faced me with a key challenge; this would become a protracted inquiry into a deeply seated, inherited aversion that most of us share - the hesitation, to put it mildly, at entering a swamp. We seemed to need to get from a. to b. and there was a bit of a swamp in between. "There's nothing for it", he says, meaning you will need to actually get into this swamp and cross it. I did. In subsequent investigations of Prehispanic wetland agriculture in Belize we all did it many times and came to be proud of it - breaching an old horror that can easily be traced back into the Classical Mediterranean, and who knows where else.

I recall at least two demonstrations of good field practise. We often came to a large thatched house along the river, the ancestral home of the Gomez family. It became a base for our investigations of a particularly interesting complex of wetlands. I noticed in the recent flyover that it had been replaced by something out of cement blocks and red tile, still under construction. They fed us and informed us; various members of the extended family worked for us. I would bring medicine from our pharmacist in Vancouver to ameliorate the glaucoma of the lady of the house. When we got back from some foray they would give us tall drinks of river water, and allow us to rest in their hammocks. In one such a rest period Denny began to map out the appointments of the house. It was an obviously sensible thing to do: articulating a curiosity, putting together some detailed and reliable raw material. For what? I have no idea if those maps and observations were ever used, but no matter. It was a way of processing what was all around. It is in fact difficult to visualize Denny without a dog-eared black lab notebook from the University of Minnesota and a ballpoint pen.

On another day we stopped along the river at a point of departure for a trail inland. We found an abandoned house surrounded by scrubby growth, which turned out to be an abandoned garden, which Denny began to inventory. He had a sensitivity to and considerable knowledge of plants. I envied him that. One can't learn everything in one lifetime, no, but one can learn a

lot more than one thinks.

We would do repeat flights over the basin at various times of year and with various films and equipment. On one occasion Ray Matheny, who had come to the Yucatan in his plane, took us up for a photo flight. The grass strip from which we took off was not very long and Ray is talking to us to reassure us. The plane is a low-slung wing-under-fuselage number and needs to accelerate at ground level for most of the strip, we are not to be apprehensive, it will get up in time. Well, the forest wall is coming at us. I am sitting behind Ray, I see a Book of Mormon in the pocket in front of me and am not sure if that is reassuring or not. At the last moment the plane does lift off. On return, I looked at the prop. It was stained green, like the blade of a lawn-mower.

Candelaria town looked good late in the afternoon when the low sun maximized the bright paint and the rusted sheeting on the main drag. One went down to the dock, maybe, to enjoy the air and chat with whoever was there. I often felt at this hour that the light was on a rheostat and the Great Stagemanager was turning it down. In my field book, for Oct. 30, 1972, I found this:

Evening on the wharf
with a drunken tax collector
and a darkening sky,

velvet air,
fireflies,
cigarettes spent in an arc
and a hiss,
beer cans following with a gentle plop
while this man,
this "negro",
black sheep of his family,
left to care for his mother,
opens the ring of his
own private pain.
See how they disperse
from me,
how they hate with
averted eyes,
mumble a few pleasantries
then flee...

I repeatedly stayed at a fine hotel that had head-high partitions between the rooms. Years later I brought my family to the same hotel to give them a taste of what it had been like, and they were not amused. One late afternoon on the veranndah comes to mind. The rains had arrived, hard. There would be no more fieldwork; it was time to go home. When the *aguacero* let up the great annual happy time of the "uo" frogs (*Rhynophrynis*

dorsalis!), the special pets of the Chacs, had come. Solid sound, starting low and going up on a smooth curve, again and again and again, everywhere. You could see the moaning couples in the puddles, locked in copulation. A final bit of light from a low sun lit up a steaming roof and patio, and fringed the trees.

Alfred H. Siemens