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The Further Adventures of Merle¹

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

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Figure 1. On the Usumacinta River on the way to Yaxchilan, 1965.

"No! You can't go into the unknown wilds of Alaska!" That statement from my mother nearly 70 years ago is what changed my life forever. I went to Mexico instead, at that time almost as unknown to us in the U.S. as Alaska. And then later came the jungle, the jungle of the unknown that I loved, no trails, just follow the gorgeous *guacamayos* in their brilliant red, yellow, and blue plumage, who let you know where they are before you see them, by their constant mocking "clop, clop, clop." Mahogany trees so tall you wonder if, someplace up there above the birds and howler monkeys who keep throwing broken branches and *zapote* fruit balls at you, there is a blue sky. Early morning is filled with the songs of hundreds of different

birds, all letting each other know where they are. Evening comes early—dark by four o'clock. Colors are lost in pools of darkness. Now the owls are out lording it over the night, lucky when you see one.

But we didn't wait for nightfall to pitch our camp. *Champas* made for our cooking, *champas* for my helpers, and a

¹ Editor's note: This memoir—left untitled by the author—was completed in 2010, in Merle's 97th year. The following note appears at the beginning of an early draft: "I have been asked by so many people why I don't write a sequel to *Never in Fear*, telling more about the times I worked in the jungles of Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, more about the Round Tables, and more about my painting trips around the world, that I decided to give it a try."

champa for me—takes time. One doesn't go roaming around the jungle after dark. This is the home of the jaguar—king of the forest who hunts in the dark of night, and his slightly smaller neighbors, the ocelot and the puma. I have seen all three in daylight, but only for the flash of a second before they disappeared, the jaguar at Bonampak, the puma at Tikal, and the ocelot at Itzan. Snakes, yes, but at night, they, like us, don't go roaming around. In daylight, just watch for old rotten leaves they like to hide under, or by a log we jungle lovers have learned not to step over without a thorough investigation first. Corals—they are beautiful—I have painted with them sleeping on the ground by my side, paying no attention to what I was doing, or whether I had the honor of having them in my painting. It is rather startling, however, when unexpectedly you run into a perfectly harmless boa—but this guy was twenty inches in circumference and ten feet long. Just get out of his way.

What was I doing roaming all over this mysterious jungle? I was making rubbings—accurate reproductions on Chinese rice paper in either sumi ink or oil paint—of all of the ancient Maya monuments. Now, where did I get so enamored with the jungle? It actually started during my three seasons at Tikal working for the University of Pennsylvania as an artist, and doing rubbings of all the stelae and altars at Tikal, and painting in watercolor besides. Little did I know then that we would be having Mesoamerican conferences over a period of twenty years at Palenque dubbed the “Mesa Redondas,” nor did I know then that I would be painting watercolors in 28 countries around the world, splashing gorgeous pinks, gold, purple, and orange from out of high mountains. One thing led to another, and it all started because my mother had such a fit about my



Figure 2. On the landing strip at Tikal.

taking her two grandchildren to Alaska. How thankful I am to have had such a wonderful mother.

All of this has come back to me as if it just happened. How is that? Well, I have 70 of my letters that I wrote to my mother while in the jungle, and from my deceased husband Bob (Lawrence W. Robertson) the detailed dairies that he faithfully kept year by year. Then, of course, my Stevenson students (now men) still remind me about some of the crazy things that happened when working with me, also a letter from a former San Rafael Military Academy student of 40 years ago, who lives in Japan with his Japanese wife and two children. You see, I have lots of reminders—so let's get started.

PART 1. THE JUNGLE

Tikal

My first introduction to the Maya world, and the big turning point of my life, was in 1959 when I went to Tikal, the huge Maya site in El Peten of Guatemala that was settled over 2000 years ago by what we call a Middle Preclassic (1000 bc – 400 BC) people. Their descendants built one of the most astonishing civilizations the world has ever seen, where most of the structures seen today date from the Classic period (AD 250 – 900), although the Lost World platform falls in the Late Preclassic (400 BC – AD 250). Huge temples towering above the dense jungle—the ceiba (sacred tree of the Maya), mahogany trees that rise 150 feet into the clouds. From a plane all one can see is the white tops of the roofcombs of these temples. It was at Tikal where I became a confirmed Mayanist right off the bat, first day. Wait a minute. Back up there. I should say that it was the beginning of my becoming a Mayanist. Patrick Culbert and Peter Harrison, I must say, were responsible for this. Although Bill Coe was the Field Director, in the three years I worked at Tikal he only showed up for one weekend, so it was really Pat and Peter who were in charge. Both are now retired, Peter living in Albuquerque with his wife Alexandra and son, who is an artist, and Pat has retired from teaching anthropology at the University of Arizona and now lives in Santa Fe with his wife Bobby who has been putting on dance programs for years there.

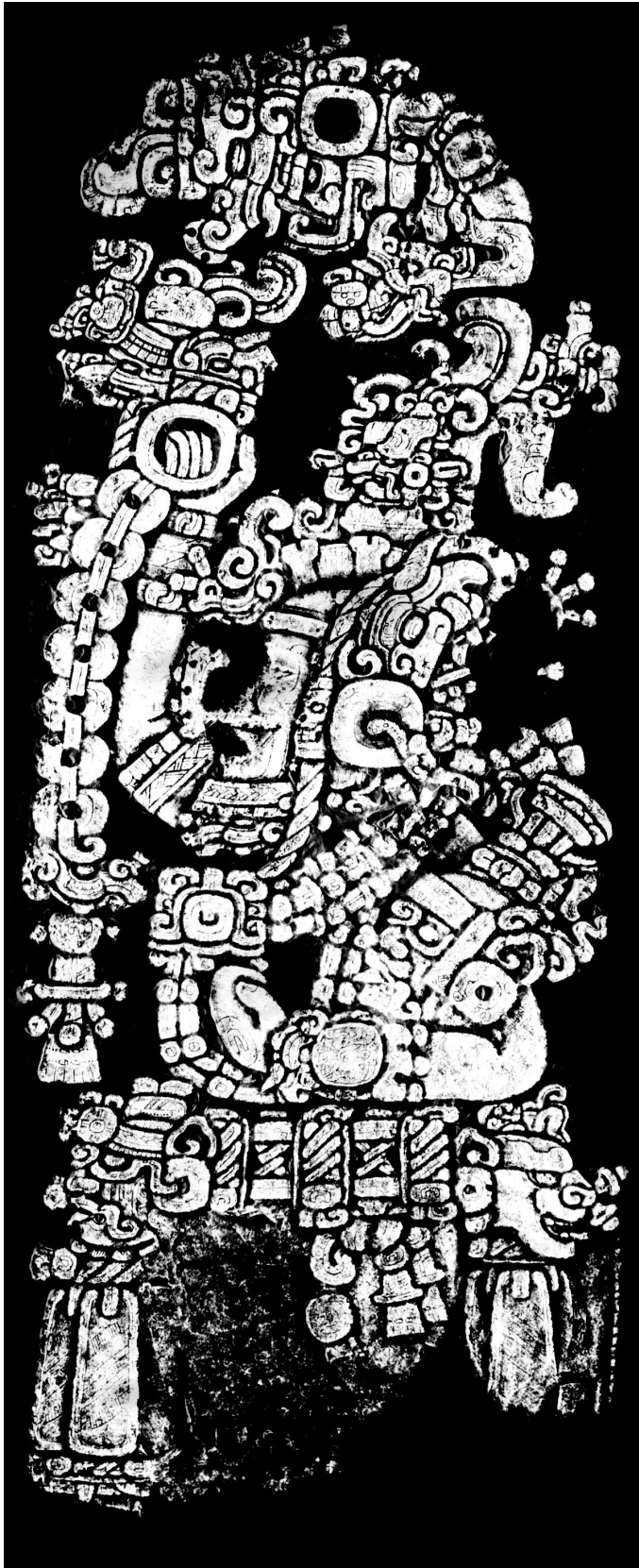


Figure 3. Rubbing of Tikal Stela 31.

Much happened in the three years (1939-1941) I was with the University of Pennsylvania (taking time out from my MFA studies at the University of Guanajuato, in San Miguel de Allende). Probably the most scary thing I did was recording Stela 31 in Temple 33 sub. The destroying of this temple caused international concern when William Coe ordered it dismantled to find out how it was constructed. I had done a large watercolor painting of this temple while standing under a huge palm tree in the pouring rain before this happened. I had to make a rubbing of the stela inside somehow. A makeshift plank about 25 feet long had been suspended from one side of the temple across a deep cavity to an opening that went into a cavern where the stela stood inside the temple. I had to carry my rubbing paraphernalia across this shaking plank a little at a time, so after about five trips, I had it all inside this dark cavity. It wasn't as easy working there as I thought it would be as the cavern was littered with piles of rocks. When finally cleared, doing the rubbing was most interesting as I did not know what it was supposed to be. Just revealing the head of the king was surprising, so perfect in execution. Every little dab of ink on the nearly-dry paper revealed something new—a surprise. Getting back out was this whole process in reverse. It turned out that Stela 31 was the most important stela at Tikal.

The first thing I was assigned to record was the roof sculpture on Maler's Palace in the Central Acropolis, where Teobert Maler, the early explorer, lived during his explorations in Tikal in 1895 and 1904. As I was used to climbing all over everything, this was fun and not hard. They first had to build scaffolding for me. Just finding the planks and tying them together with vines took forever. In the meantime I was studying and measuring the bench inside the main room that was covered with green moss and some of the best graffiti at Tikal inscribed into it. What was it used for?—a sleeping bench? (there was plenty of room for a whole family), a throne? (not exactly centered at the entrance, but bending around three sides), a storage room? (there were much better storage possibilities nearby). I had about decided it would have best served as a family room as there were so many little curtain holes that could have portioned the room into family sections, when the announcement came that up on the scaffolding I should go. It took a long time to record this roof as I was standing right against it, so seeing what I was doing was not the easiest thing when my face was almost next to the carving. Maler's Palace was so beautiful with the moss growing all over it. I loved it. Today progress has taken over and it is now all clean and shiny white.

I was doing rubbings of everything at Tikal, but no one else was allowed to do this. One day a very large woman came to where I was working and told me she wanted to do rubbings also. She was told that was not



Figure 4. Tikal Project, 1963: (upper left) “Project shacks,” Pat Culbert in white shirt at front right; (upper right) Merle’s room, aka “The Fairmont,” bucket is water supply; (lower left) Merle’s room, the lamp is a laugh, goes off at 9:30, note candle in beer bottle; (lower right) our “living room.”

permitted. Well, at lunch that day in the dining room where only the archaeologists ate, this woman burst in and held up her very large underpants on which she had done a rubbing. Lots of queer people in this world. The reason people are not allowed to do rubbings is that they do not know how to keep paint or ink from sinking right through the paper onto the stone monument. If ink seeps onto the stone it is next to impossible to get it off. There would be a lot of ruined monuments if amateurs were allowed to do rubbings.

The best food we had at Tikal was frijoles, and they were the best dark-bean frijoles I have ever had. The rest of the meal depended on how the cook was feeling. Once in a while we had yummy biscuits, once in a while meat,

maybe a little bit of beef or lamb made into a kind of stew. One time someone must have gone to Guatemala City and brought back a whole leg of lamb. Now that was something. Our cook didn’t cut it up into little day-pieces, but showed off his culinary skill by serving, to our great surprise and delight, the whole thing done just right. We bragged about that for weeks, but he didn’t do it again. Oh, I forgot. We had turkey one day. There was a little pond right in front of where our quarters were, and in this pond was a crocodile (how it got there no one knew). One day one of the workmen’s turkeys wandered down to the pond. Up comes Mr. Crocodile—grabs the turkey—but a workman grabs Mr. Turkey also. Who wins? The workman, of course, or I should say, we won,

because that is the night we had turkey for dinner. Just wait until we get to Seibal. That was gourmet all the time.

A lot of funny things (or I should say strange in this case) happened at Tikal. On August 17, 1969, I was up in the Great Plaza doing a rubbing of one of the stelae, when I noticed a huge platform all decorated with palm fronds and flowers at the base of Temple I. Then people started milling about—men in tuxedos with their shirts open and ties hanging loose (it was a very hot day). Then my friend Betty, an American who was married to the Guatemalan who owned the gas station on the road to Tikal, came dashing over to me. It was to be a wedding of a Guatemalan who had the franchise for the Gulf Oil Company in the Peten and his bride-to-be, a girl from Miami, who knew no one and could not speak a word of Spanish. Betty wanted me to come to the wedding and sit next to the bride at the banquet under the trees. Me in jeans? No way could I do that. She insisted: the poor girl would be all alone, and Betty had to be with the caterers so could not sit with the bride. The whole thing was crazy anyway so I agreed, and it was a good thing I did because the groom did not say a word to his bride at the table. Before the banquet, Guatemala government planes started landing in the Great Plaza, pouring out dozens upon dozens of women in beautiful gowns and men in tuxedos. Then the groom wanted me to climb up Temple I and take pictures of the whole wedding. I put my foot down on that. I would not do it, but Tranquil did, with my camera. The outcome of this story is that the couple were divorced within a month of the wedding.

We had fun also at Tikal. Sometimes, on a full-moon night, when not meeting in the *sala* in the evening, we would go to the Plaza Mayor and climb Temple II where we would dance to music from a recorder that another fellow had put on the platform at the top of Temple I. The acoustics were perfect.

Probably the hardest rubbings to do were the overhead *zapote* wood lintels in Temples I and IV. This extremely heavy wood (70 pounds per cubic foot) was probably carved when freshly cut, as it becomes much harder upon drying. These lintels were undoubtedly carved before installation and laborously transported up the steep temple stairs. Lintel 3, in Temple IV may have been painted red, as I found traces of cinnabar on the carved areas. Standing on the floor of the temple,

it is not possible to get a good look at the lintel. So step by step as I proceeded with the rubbing, different parts of Yik'in Chan K'awiil's story unfolds—the lord seated on a captured palanquin in victorious glory. I worked on metal scaffolding that stationed me just below the lintels. Getting on and off the metal scaffolding was not easy, as the metal rungs were set far apart—a long hoist for me.



Figure 5. The author with Lintel 2 of Temple III (Structure 5D-3) in situ and the processed rubbing.

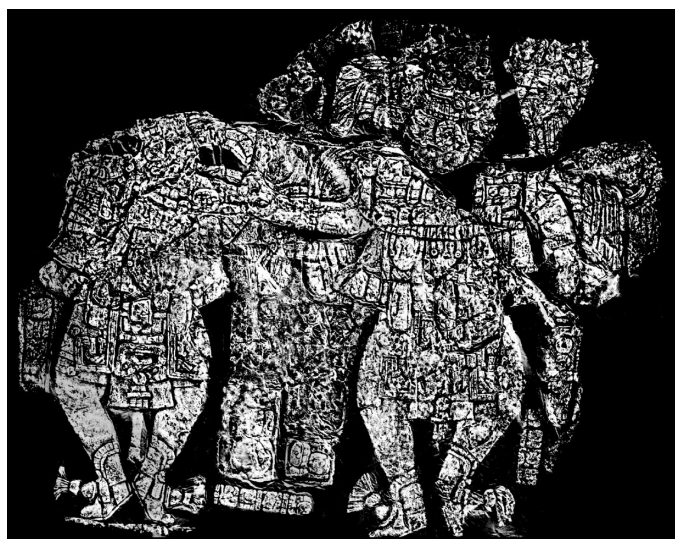


Figure 6. Photo and rubbing of Motul de San José Stela 1, showing two lords in short skirts facing each other in a dancing position.

Motul de San José

One of the closest sites to Tikal was Motul de San José, a little-known small site across Lake Peten from Flores, a town on an island that covers another site entirely—everywhere one walks there, you know you are walking right on top of a Maya ruin. The boys playing basketball in the street reminded me of the Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque of the Popul Vuh, who were playing ball in the upper world. As is said, “The Lords of Xibalba, hearing them, said, ‘Who are they who play again over our heads and disturb us with the noise they make?’” The Popul Vuh, the sacred book of the Quiche Maya, tells of their cosmogony, mythology, history, and traditions.

I finally found a man with a small boat who agreed to take me across the lake and wait for me a couple of hours while I did the rubbing. A couple of hours was nothing, as the site was up a muddy hill with no actual trail. When I finally found the stela it was in the process

of being stolen, evidence being all of the new saw blades and other implements for cutting, freshly discarded cigarette cartons, and sardine cans with the oil still inside. Where I had expected to find one figure, the monument showed two rulers or lords in short skirts facing each other in a dancing position. I barely had enough paper to do this monument it was so large; it took a long time to complete even though I worked rapidly—worried the looters would return. When I got back to the lakeshore my boatman had left, given up on me. I waited half an hour to hail another man with a canoe.

The Pasión

I had been doing rubbings at so many sites along the Pasión River that I just loved that river. Bob and I were having dinner one night with our friend Romeo Samayoa, Director of FYDEP (the department for the colonization of El Peten), when he asked me where we would like to have a piece of property in El Peten. I told him, “Anyplace that has those big pink trees will be fine.” The next summer when we returned and were again having dinner with Samayoa, he asked us if we had decided where we would like our property. It was then that I realized he was serious. I had thought it was just a joke when he asked us the year before. The government was giving property to responsible foreigners, and it so happened we had been chosen. We knew that one would be expected to either raise cattle or vanilla on the property. This was something we knew nothing about. All we knew about cows was that they gave milk and meat, and vanilla we knew absolutely nothing about. Neither Bob nor I had green thumbs. We explained that we appreciated the offer but could not accept. He said they would supply the men to get us started and build a house for us. But to be honest, we could not accept. He then said he would give us the small island off Flores, not the big island with the weather station, but the small one on the opposite side. Here they would build a house for us for a research center for the work I was doing in El Peten, and provide a caretaker for when we were not there. We had been thinking about a place for our research for some time. After long deliberation, knowing how much we loved the jungles of El Peten, we finally decided that Palenque was where we really wanted to settle. Samayoa understood, but was disappointed.

Yaxha

When I was in Flores in July, 1968, I was told about the site of Yaxha, the road that goes into Yaxha being just 45 miles from Flores. The site was reported to have stelae, so I hired Oscar Echeniva with his truck to take us there. This was going to be easy, as I was also told that a road goes right to the site, just eight kilometers in. But when we got there, Oscar, Bob, Tranquil, and I found



Figure 7. Lake Yaxha.

that the road in had not even been started, there was just a huge bulldozer sitting there ready to start a road. We had brought all of our gear—tent, hammocks, food, etc., much more than could be carried in. It was decided that 8 km would be an easy hike, so Tranquil, Oscar, and I decided to hike in, leaving Bob with Oscar's truck and our equipment and extra food. We would be back before dark. A *chiclero* came along, who said he knew the way and would lead us. The four of us then started out, bringing only four sheets of rice paper and the things to do the rubbing, a jug of water, a can of spam, and fruit juice for lunch. Our new fellow told us it would be steep at first and then level off. We soon found that this was not true, as it was steep all the way, and up and down in the blazing sun, and me with no hat. My bandana came to a partial rescue draped around my head. At what we thought was half-way, we stopped and ate our lunch. After a while Tranquil said to me, "This is the longest eight kilometers I have ever seen—something must be wrong."

When we finally got to the *chiclero* camp by the lake, we found out that it had been 15 kilometers in, not eight. It was at this camp that the *chicle* was brought in to be boiled down in a huge iron pot. There was still the lake

that had to be crossed, and then three more kilometers further to where the stela was. We knew that we would never make it back that day, so sent the young *chiclero* back to the truck with a message I wrote to Bob explaining why we did not return. This very nice woman at the camp fixed supper for us and then put a sheet on a cot in the corn crib for me to sleep on, and set up hammocks for Tranquil and Oscar. In the morning after a great breakfast, a young man took us across the lake in a small *cayuco* and then led us to where a stela was three kilometers further. The stela was 9 feet high, 3 ½ feet wide, and 15 inches thick, carved on all four sides. It had just recently been hoisted out of a hole three feet deep. The top third was missing, and much damage had been done to the rest of it. Looking around, we found another stela which, fortunately, was not in the process of being stolen. This later was identified as Stela 6. When I finished doing a rubbing of it we went back to the camp, where this nice woman had cooked a chicken for us with all the trimmings. A few years later, when Yaxha was opened up but the road still went only part way in, I returned and did rubbings of everything there.

[To be continued.]

The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Uaxactun

Because Uaxactun is only about 20 km north of Tikal, I shall discuss it now, although it was somewhat later that I did work there (1970). This time Don Hart, a student of mine from Stevenson School, Pebble Beach, California, and Bob Robertson, my husband, were with me. The caretaker of the ruins was the policeman Aldana. He hunted all over, in the rain, for stelae. He built scaffolding in front of one very tall stela. I was perched on top, with no way to get down, so he maneuvered huge sheets of plastic that I always carried with me so I could work up there. To dry the paper, he then used pine sticks to build a fire at the base of the stela, but the smoke all came up to where I was working. I was gagging on smoke, my face wrapped in a wet handkerchief, but my eyes were crying continually. We were having so much rain that it was hard to believe that there are long periods of time (sometimes six months and sometimes a year) during which Uaxactun gets no rain at all. We did have a field day though, even if most of it was in the rain. One of the first stelae I did a rubbing of was Stela 1, which had the upper portion broken off in ancient times (Figure 1). A typical example of Cycle 8 early carving, it showed a heavy chain attached to the side of the belt supporting a grotesque ornament. Another Early Classic stela was Stela 3 with a head dangling from the back-mask that is identical to the head held in the crook of the arm of the Tikal Stela 31 lord (Figure 2). Another stela I did a rubbing of at Uaxactun was the unusual Stela 5, a warrior armed with an *atlatl* (spear thrower) in his left hand and a *macuahuitl* (wooden club into which obsidian blades were set) in his right hand, both unusual weapons in Classic art (Figure 3). I don't know if it was the surprising *atlatl* or the perky parrot balanced on top of his headgear that intrigued me the most. A bustle-like arrangement of feathers hangs from the striding figure's waist, in the manner of the Teotihuacan-related warriors at Tikal.

As no one had worked at Uaxactun since the Carnegie staff of Ed Shook, Jesse Jennings, and Ledyard and Robert Smith, the Aldanas, caretakers of the ruins, were more than happy to see us. It was not an easy place to get to at the time we went. With no place to stay, and it raining most of the time, the Aldanas took us right into their very comfortable home, where kids, chickens,



Figure 1. Uolantun Stela 1. As this is the only monument found on the only mound at Uolantun, Morley postulated in *The Inscriptions of Peten* that this tiny site was an offshoot of nearby Uaxactun.



Figure 2. Uaxactun Stela 3.

rabbits, and a pig lived happily together. Don played soccer with the Uaxactun kids, who were happy to have someone who new the game, but as usual, he hurt his leg—no more use to me in helping with rubbings. I made dozens of paper dolls for the Aldana children; they loved it but didn't realize that some children must have different outfits for school, for play, etc. as they had only two changes of clothes, both alike. As Blanca didn't have a doll, I made one for her from an old tee shirt and stuffed it with pieces of cloth, then made its yellow hair from nylon rope. And of course this doll had to have a dress. We hated to leave Uaxactun, we were having so much fun despite the rain. In my field book I made many



Figure 3. Uaxactun Stela 5.

detailed drawings of the entire Aldana compound.

I first became acquainted with Ed Shook when I was working in Antigua, Guatemala, the city of "Eternal Spring." Ed and his wife Ginny lived in the beautiful old ruined cathedral at the edge of town that has become the most upscale gorgeous hotel in Antigua, Casa Santo Domingo. I have visited it when Ed and Ginny lived there and also when it became the "in place" for elegant weddings. Ed always had a large library that he sold, and then acquired another library which he also sold. I believe his last library was the one he sold to the archaeological museum in Villahermosa, Mexico. Of course each library had fewer of the rare books than the one before it. Ed started his work as a young man of 21 in Campeche, Mexico. I have his diary during that

time with such perfect handwriting, I couldn't believe it. This from Ed—getting him to write anything was like pulling teeth.

Jimbal

Jimbal is half way between Tikal and Uaxactun. I had been asked by John Graham from UC Berkeley and Harvard to go in and do a rubbing of the monument in late June 1970. I had asked Sr. Sandoval, who was at that time keeper of Tikal, and his helper, to take us in, starting at 5:15 the next morning, and to bring their own water. He did not want to go, and quoted such a high price to take me, that he was sure I would have to refuse. But, as I had already been paid for two round trips from San Francisco, and expenses while doing this, I had no choice but to pay his price. He told me that we didn't need to bring any water because there was plenty in the

aguada. There was no trail, nor was there any water in the lanai vines—everything dry. When we arrived, quite dehydrated, there was no water at all in the aguada. Sandoval said he did not know where the stela was. Don and I started hunting and found it immediately, of course. Right away we saw that the entire upper portion had been sawed off. Sandoval just shrugged his shoulders and said we would turn around and go back. I told him that we would not go back, that Don and I were too beat, and without water could not possibly do it. I still had the drinking water in my canteen, but I was not going to share that with them. I proceeded to do the rubbing of what was left of the stela instead.

We then put up my tent and placed our cooking pots all around the edge to catch water if it rained. We had nothing to eat that didn't need water for its preparation except one tiny can of tomato juice apiece. Don and I



Figure 4. Jimbal stela.

got in our tent to get some sleep. In the middle of the night we heard pelts of rain coming down. Out of the tent we jumped to get the water in the pots. The rain had then stopped, and there was no water in the pots. We got back in the tent. There was muddy water on its floor. So we slurped up this muddy water with our mouths on the floor of the tent. No, we did not get sick. Returning to Tikal the next morning was torture. We were so dehydrated that when we were picked up by the Tikal jeep at the airport, we were literally holding each other up, and were taken directly to the kitchen and given coffee that was already made, into which we poured the whole bowl of sugar. We were sure we knew who had stolen the upper portion of the Jimbal Stela.

Sayaxche

As we spent so much time in Sayaxche, a small two-street village at the junction of the Pasion River and the Petexbatun Lagoon, something should be said about it now. It became home away from home. Julio Gadoy was the owner of this tiny two-room—what shall I call it?—not really a hotel or a house, just someplace where we stayed and where from season to season as we worked in El Petén, we stored our equipment. Julio became a very good friend and a big help so many times. There was no store in Sayaxche, so when we wanted to buy eggs, Julio would have his young son go scampering into the woods to find as many as he could. They were very good fresh eggs. Julio's little porch looked right out on the Pasion where we could see all of the cargo being sent by cayuca up and down the river. Here is where we met so many interesting people who often became good friends, like Trudy Blom. Trudy was the wife of Franz Blom, the Tulane University archaeologist. Trudy lived in San Cristobal at her home Na Balom where she befriended all of the Lacandon Indians. She was also a wonderful photographer documenting much of the life of the Lacandons. No matter what the occasion—breakfast, dinner, a public meeting, or whatever, she was always dressed as if going to a fancy ball—loads of jewelry. She visited me once in San Francisco when she was on her way to Switzerland to meet with her family. Was it the isolation we were all feeling or the comradeship of being together in so remote a place as Sayaxche? All of the Peace Corps people made their headquarters here, as did doctors helping out in El Petén. While we were there a heart specialist, a pediatrician, and a dentist spent time there. Sayaxche was, also, the home of Tranquil Flores and his family. Tranquil was a young fellow whose family was from Belize. Tranquil worked with me all through El Petén. Later, when he married, he had a little girl he named Merle. I was so proud. I have since met this Merle and had a silver bracelet made for

her with “our” name engraved on it.

Sayaxche is where jaguar hunters would bring their pelts to be sold to someone going back to civilization. Can't be done today. Jacques VanKirk, whose partner in Mexico had committed a crime and told the police that it was Jacques and not he who had done it, had been put in the position of being an outlaw from the Mexican police. He was hiding out in Sayaxche, and had become one of the jaguar hunters. He had at one time been a hunter of polar bears in Alaska, as well as other weird occupations. He came to remote Sayaxche with only his gun, his wife Parney, and his two little girls, nothing else; he had to escape so fast. Who was out to kill him, we never found out, but when he went out jaguar hunting, he told his wife that if anyone came to their camp, she was to shoot first and think after. Their home at the edge of the Petexbatun River was a small tree house built on stilts so it wouldn't get flooded. They climbed a wooden ladder up into the tree house. They would pull the ladder up when they were in. The one room was about ten feet by ten feet with every inch taken up. A bed was built on one side of this room, and a double bunk on the opposite side, and a very narrow bunk was on the third side. The fourth side was taken up with a tiny cupboard. A coffee-like table was in the middle of the floor, with just enough room to squeeze around it. You sat on the bunks to eat or talk. Five people lived in this tiny room that wasn't big enough for even one person. They cooked on a campfire underneath this tree house. Jacques was what we called our “hiding guide.”

He would take us into off-the-beaten-track sites like Itzan, where howler monkeys interrupted me when I was doing a rubbing by firing branches down at me all the time. When I first met Don Robertson in Mexico City, he told me the story of how they had gotten their apartment, when apartments were hard to find. The woman who owned the apartment told the Robertsons that the people who had lived there before left suddenly, leaving a closet full of little girls clothes and clothes for adults, all sorts of personal belongings, including a polar bear rug (maybe he really was a polar bear hunter). Putting two and two together, we knew it was the apartment of Jacques VanKirk.

Today Sayaxche is quite a village, and the headquarters for driving, yes driving, into Seibal. It was when I was working at Seibal that one noon we heard a terrible crash. A yellow bulldozer was hacking its way into the site, preparing for this new road. There are now several hotels, a grocery store, a mechanics shop, and much more in Sayaxche. The lodge in the Petexbatun is now the very best place, and really the only place, to stay for those going into the sites in the region—Dos Pilas, Aguateca, Tamarindito, and Seibal.

The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Itsimte

One time in April, 1970, when I was in Sayaxche with my students Paul Saffo, Jeff Smith, Don Hart, Dick Millard, Jim Kinslow, and Steve Hyde, getting ready to go to Dos Pilas, Joya Hairs, an archaeologist friend who worked at Kaminaljuyu, said she was going to Guatemala City, and that we could have her jeep to go to a new site that she just recently saw—Itsimte. We took her up on it as Itsimte was quite a ways away with no road or trail to it. So we set out the next morning with Joya's brother, who lived in Sayaxche, driving—driving like crazy, through savannas, through fences, and banging into trees—but we finally got there without losing anyone. We parked the jeep at the foot of a high mound and proceeded to climb up the grade that had previously been ascended on horseback when the soil was soaking wet, so it was rutted dried mud we were negotiating all the way. Having to walk crooked because of the dried mud, we were all pretty sore campers when we finally reached the site, six kilometers up.

Upon arriving, we were immediately struck by the looting that was going on. One stela that was lying down had a saw cut that went all the way across the top. The base was still standing, but portions were already missing. Another stela had a three-inch-thick slab neatly sawed off the top. Another had large holes drilled in it, I suppose where they would next be sawing. As the students gathered evidence about who the culprits might be, I hurriedly did rubbings of two stelae that were still intact (Figure 1). We almost ran down the hill, we were so eager to get away before the looters returned. I was taking my boots off before getting in the jeep when a fellow in a white tee shirt came running toward us. Then from behind the bushes, four more men in army uniforms came at us with machine guns. I wasn't afraid, as I had papers from FYDEP in my pocket asking for police protection in the jungle of El Peten. I thought that as soon as they saw who we were, they would apologize and that would be it. No. They practically tore the jeep apart looking for "their loot" that we were stealing. Tranquil kept telling me not to show them my papers, but after enough time had gone by with this guy's gun at my stomach, I showed them my papers. They took a look, and then let us go, but said nothing. We drove off. In a minute Paul said, "You know, the insignias on their arms were paper." When we arrived at Sayaxche,



Figure 1. Rubbing of Itsimte-Sacluk Stela 1 (Maler's Stela 4).



Figure 2. Camp at Naranjo.

we told Julio. He called the police, and the first thing they asked me was what the mens' hands looked like. I had noticed that they didn't look any different from mine. He said they were probably from the city, off for a lark, stealing monuments and selling them.

The problem now was that the driver of our jeep and our guide were from the area and might be recognized by the looters, so their whole families might be in danger of being killed. Another possibility was that the rest of us would be taken as hostages, or killed. The policeman was surprised that they hadn't already killed us. We were advised to leave Sayaxche as soon as possible. I got in touch with Samayoa, our FYDEP protector, by radio, and told him what had happened. He said he would be in Sayaxche and take us to safety in two days. That was too long for me. We already had *permiso* papers to work at Naranjo near the Belize border so, packing all night, by morning we were ready to hide in a truck that took us to Melchor.

Naranjo

By 3:30 on April 3, 1970, we had arrived at the junction into Melchor. The truck dumped us and all of our gear in the middle of the road and turned back. While the students stayed with the luggage, Tranquil and I walked into town to find a place to stay and someone to take us to Naranjo. There was no hotel, but a kind woman said she could put us up in three rooms. As there were not enough beds in the rooms, Paul Saffo, being the youngest, and Tranquil were assigned to mattresses on the balcony. It turned out that they were the only two who got any sleep. There were so many bedbugs in the others' beds that they got no sleep at all. These beds cost \$1.00 each, and that is all they were worth, considering the bedbugs. Breakfast, however, was gourmet—armadillo, fried eggs, frijoles, tortillas, and all the coffee we wanted—35 cents a person. All of the policemen in the area were eating breakfast at the same time. They took their breakfast and dinner there every day. Finding someone to take us to Naranjo was our problem then. Plenty of men wanted to do this, but then they had no truck, or if they had a truck they said it would be wrecked trying to get up the climb to Naranjo. We finally ran into Rafael Morales, whom I knew from Tikal, and who also worked with Ian Graham at Naranjo earlier that year.

He said he would get a fellow with a truck and take us. Off we went, muddy road all the way, and so steep that in places we all had to get out and push the truck.

We finally arrived in this beautiful deep jungle—carosa palms 150 feet tall, sweeps other palms of 40 feet. As both Rafael and our guide Julio had worked there, it was easy finding the stelae. Our camp was already set up from Ian's trip, so we just cleaned it all up, buried the tin cans, and made ourselves at home (Figure 2). A deer-skin chair was still there. I had my tent, and the boys all had their hammocks. Don was made cook. Dinner the first night was rice curry, shrimp, chutney, tortillas, apricots, coffee, and one small drink of rum mixed with Tang. We always had good food when in the jungle. Our "john" was an immense ceiba tree with high folds at the bottom that was just perfect.

Everyone was assigned a monument to clean and take notes on—size, condition, depth of carving, etc., while I did the rubbings of everything there. We all worked constantly all day long for five days. The only problem was the ticks. We all had them, but Jeff Smith managed to always have the most. We figured they came from the deer-skin chair. Evenings were spent pulling ticks off each other. On the last day at Naranjo, I had been working non-stop from breakfast, finally finishing Stela 25, the earliest example of the formative phase of the Late Classic period at this site (Figure 3). It showed a simply clad figure holding, almost vertically, a ceremonial bar with serrated knives protruding from the wide-open jaws of a serpent, instead of the manikin figures usually shown on ceremonial bars. When I arrived back at our camp at dusk dinner was ready. They sat me down on a stool, and proceeded to take my boots off. Now that is when I should have been suspicious. Next I was offered my



Figure 3. Rubbing of Naranjo Stela 25.

glass of rum and Tang, and we all cheered. Why wasn't I suspicious by then? I got up and was going to my tent to get a dry shirt, when I tripped over a vine and fell. Now, here the story changes. All of the boys insisted I was drunk. They had put all of their portions of rum in my glass, and as it was mixed with orange Tang, I could not tell the difference. To this day these now-grown men insist they were right.

Dos Pilas

Dos Pilas was the first site I went to in the Petexbatun. This was in 1971. Ian Graham, from England, and I were the only non-Guatemalans working in El Peten, Ian recording the hieroglyphs and I recording the art. I worked at Dos Pilas three times, always more-than-sharing time with the darn mosquitoes. I thought they would be so heavy with my blood that they would just fall and die, but no, they were very persistent buggers. And if it wasn't the mosquitoes it was the constant rain, or always being on the alert for stela robbers who were known to be in the vicinity. Just getting to Dos Pilas was a major undertaking. Seemed straight up, up, up, mud all the way, so much mud that I could hardly walk in my mud-encased boots. The second time was even worse. It took one and a half hours to get from Sayaxche to the starting place in the Petexbatun where you start to go up to Dos Pilas. The river was so high that there was no place where we could see to pull up to the shore. As a matter of fact, we had to get out of the boat and, standing hip-deep in water, pole the canoe into what looked like a shore. It took about fifteen minutes to get the gear all sorted so it could be carried by the workers with tump lines on their heads. Tump lines are made by stripping the green bark from a tree about 2½ inches in diameter and pulling with all one's force to skin it. This bark strip is then tied to a gunny sack that has been oiled, making it waterproof. The tump line holding the sack of supplies is then put across the carrier's forehead.

Where there should have been a trail, there was none. It was 17 kilometers up to Dos Pilas, but climbing over and around the huge trees made the distance much further. A hurricane had blown down many huge mahogany trees that we had to climb over. Watch for snakes when doing that: they love logs to hide behind and snatch archaeologists. I knew, so I was careful. It took five hours to reach Dos Pilas. After managing to get there with a storm that was fast approaching, I discovered almost immediately that looters were either still there, or upon hearing our approach, had hidden, or went down to the river below. This was the time looters had just stolen the eight-foot-tall Stela 17 that I had done the rubbing of two years before (thankfully it was documented). The stela was cut into three pieces, and the entire front sawed off with a power saw. In doing this, the inscriptions on the sides were also ruined. One of my workmen went to Sayaxche to report the theft. Six policemen came to investigate, but there was

nothing they could do—it was gone. Later, this stela was found sandwiched between two slabs of marble, ready to be shipped to Puerto Barrios. The prisoner panel, however, was missing.

While Poncho went back to Sayaxche to report the theft, we were fast making our camp—*champas* for our hammocks and a *champa* for cooking. The storm did come roaring in the middle of the night and blew the ridge pole of my *champa* on top of me, just missing my head. I was not hurt, but it was a tricky business building another *champa* in the dark, in pouring rain. That night we all slept in soaking wet clothes. Nevertheless, Dos Pilas was always my favorite Maya site. The stelae there are spectacular, and for the most part in pristine condition. It was a joy doing rubbings of them, in spite of the mosquitoes. My favorite was the 14-foot-tall Stela 2, depicting an over-life-size figure who wears an immense eagle-down headdress with a Mexican year-sign in it (Figure 4). What captured my astonishment and awe however, as the ink was tapped on to the paper little by little, was the nine-inch-tall owl wearing a “bow tie” that hangs just below the skull necklace around the figure’s neck. This stela took forever to finish, not just the figure, but the piles of hieroglyphs above the figure’s head that had to be very carefully done for interpretation by the epigraphers.

Doing the rubbing of the elegant Late Classic Stela 16 was a challenge, working in alternate periods of rain and sun. Everything was so overgrown that at first I did not realize that the stela was so high up, but as I climbed, I saw that it was half buried in forest debris. A pit had to be dug for me to get to the bottom of the monument, but as it rained so much, the pit soon filled with water. That meant the water had to be bailed out continually, leaving me soaking wet and muddy. All the time I was doing this rubbing, I was balancing myself on the side of this steep, muddy mound.

The ultimate highlight at Dos Pilas was the “Processional Stairs” (Figure 5). I came upon them accidentally while struggling through the underbrush and bumped into what looked like a step. It was so dense there that the brush and trees in front had to be cut to let in sunlight so I could take pictures and also to see what was there. Voila! When the area was finally cleared by Tranquil, his brother, and me, we were looking at something that had not been seen for over 1000 years. On one stairway is a long row of dignitaries, some standing facing the central figure, while the others stand facing forward. All wore long flowing wide gowns highly decorated that were split down the middle. All wore decorated boots, some low and some high. At the center of the stair were two bound bundles like the Tikal Emblem Glyph with hieroglyphs above them. Surprisingly, these figures were in almost pristine condition. They were so beautiful and so unique that after photographing everything, I then spent two days making detailed sketches of all of the stairs, as well as notes on the depth of carving and differences in designs on the figures’ gowns in my field book.

Since I was there, a new hieroglyphic stairway was discovered in 2001 by the caretakers of the site, and then excavated by Federico Fahsen and a team from the Cancuen Archaeological Project of Vanderbilt University and the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala. From these newly discovered steps much more of the history of Dos Pilas has come to light. Today you can even drive to Dos Pilas. Don’t think I would like that. So much of the beautiful forest will be gone, as well as the hundreds of parrots and other rare birds who made this area their home.

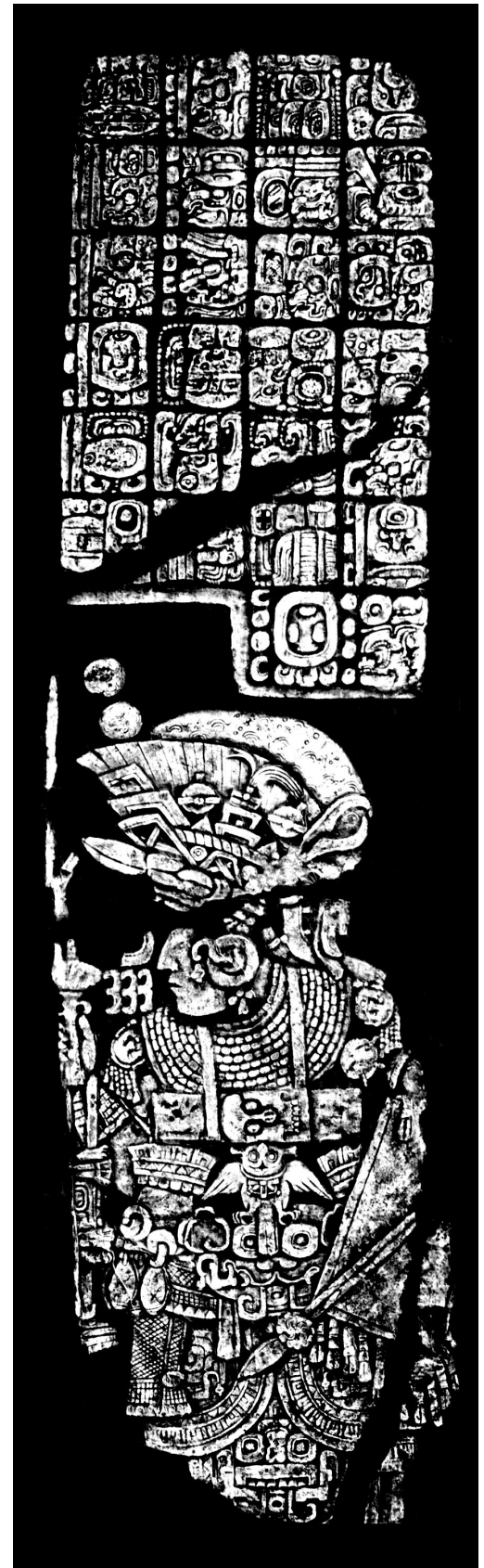


Figure 4. Dos Pilas Stela 2.



Figure 5. Making rubbings of the Processional Stairs.

The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON



Figure 1. Tamarindito Prisoner Stairs, from cover of *Maya Sculpture from the Southern Lowlands, Highlands and Pacific Piedmont, Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras*, by Merle Greene, Robert L. Rands, and John A. Graham (Lederer, Street and Zeus, Berkeley, CA, 1972).

Tamarindito

When I had finished doing the rubbings of the Dos Pilas Prisoner Stairs, I then went to the not-too-far-away site of Tamarindito where I had been before but had not done rubbings of the Prisoner Stairs there. This time I did those beautiful stairs. A picture in color is on the front of my book *Maya Sculpture* (Figure 1). When I finished, it was so beautiful and peaceful that I stood there thinking, “Now this is where I would like to build a small retreat.” Just then Tranquil and Jesus grabbed me and yanked me backwards. With that a huge mahogany tree came crashing down, just missing me—hit by lightning.

I could have been hit also, or at least crushed under the huge tree. End of “Retreat” idea.

Aguateca

When Bob and I went to Aguateca, Carl Landegger and his ten-year-old son Cary went with us. The jungle was nothing new to Carl, as he had discovered an ancient site in Bolivia a few years before. His company sold paper-making machinery worldwide, so he was intrigued by the process of doing rubbings on rice paper. Later, I did original rubbings of Palenque sculpture (the Tablet of the Cross, the Tablet of the Sun), that covered

two whole walls in his New York office. I didn't think Aguateca would be any place for a ten-year-old boy, but Cary did his part by keeping our fire going all the time and getting water that I needed to wet the paper before a rubbing could be done. The water came from the *lanai* vines, and that was something new to Cary.

Just to get to Aguateca we had to climb, climb, up muddy steep banks, and then we had to cross a chasm so deep, we couldn't see the bottom but could tell it was

full of water and decaying brush (Figure 2). To get across this chasm, we had to crawl over a two-foot-wide bridge that was very slippery with piles of decaying leaves and brush. One slip and down we would go, with no way of getting back up. Working at Aguateca was very cramped by forest. We couldn't cut the whole forest down, so we had to somehow manage to work in very tight quarters. Doing the rubbing of Stela 2 was such fun, and as interesting as Stela 2 at Dos Pilas. Almost as



Figure 2. The chasm at Aguateca.



Figure 3. Aguateca Stela 2.

tall, and very similar, it also showed the figure wearing a down headdress, again with the Mexican year-sign in it (Figure 3). And again this royal figure wore an owl pectoral from his neck. This figure was a jaguar impersonator having jaguar feet. He also carries a baby jaguar head in a bag slung over his shoulder. Seeing each element come to light as the ink was applied was most exciting.

Takeshi Inomata, the archaeologist in charge of the site, recently reported that a noble residential compound was found in which the residents suddenly evacuated when struck by an enemy. As things were left as they were, it is possible to see a Maya household—a bolt of oliva shells carved into skulls, and a human skull re-shaped into a bowl. But on the negative side, Stela 1, of which I did a rubbing in 1970 (Figure 4), had a portion of the glyphic text sawed off with power saws in 1993. It is not known where the stela is now.



Figure 4. Detail of Aguateca Stela 1.

The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Palenque

By 1965 Palenque was headquarters for going back and forth to sites in Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. Bob Robertson and I were married in 1966 and built our house Na Chan-Bahlum in 1970. Before that I was living by myself in one of Moises Morales's small rooms in La Cañada but spending all of my time at the ruins in our quarters at the campamento where Robert Rands and Ed Sisson hung out. Ed would come to pick me up at six in the morning—no breakfast that early. As Rands wasn't interested in eating, all Ed and I had was coffee and bananas that grew by the campamento.

Robert Rands initially was interested in Maya art, as can be seen by the things he wrote in our book *Maya Sculpture* about the art of so many of the monuments (Robert Rands and John Graham were co-authors with me). But it turned out that Rands's life work was to be ceramics. His work has become the "Bible" on Mexican ceramics. Working with him at Palenque, I was initially supposed to be illustrating ceramics half of the week and doing rubbings of Palenque art the other half. This arrangement didn't quite work out, so it resulted in my doing ceramic illustrating one half of the summer and rubbings the other half (Figures 1 and 2). This worked out fine. When illustrating ceramics I would work all day, and I mean all day, then Rands would spend all night going over my work. If I was off just the width of a fine pencil mark, it was wrong—I had to do it over. It didn't take many times doing it over before I became very proficient at it. You can bet I became an expert under Rands's supervision. As a matter of fact, later when I was doing ceramic illustrating of Dzibilchaltun for Bill Andrews (E. Wyllys Andrews IV) in Merida, he said he wouldn't even bother correcting my work, as he knew what a perfectionist Rands was. Bob Rands, although a perfectionist, is the most gentle man I have ever known. I have never heard him raise his voice or get angry at anyone. Really, he is one of a kind.

Before Bob worked with me—or rather, I worked with Bob—at Palenque, I worked for him in a large mansion with no heat in the Lomas district of Mexico City. I remember when I first was welcomed at the door and walked inside, the first thing I saw was this huge circular stairway with bags on every step that said "For Merle." What was this all about? Well, all of the

potsherds in those hundreds of sacks had already been analyzed by other scientists, and now they were waiting for me to draw them. The reason Bob had rented this particular house was that it had a large tower on top with windows all around, so I could work, with natural light, at illustrating no matter what kind of weather it was outside. I did work there all the time in freezing cold—no heat in the building—until finally I got pneumonia. Result: get better and back at it. Wouldn't do that for anyone except Bob Rands. Bob got pneumonia also, so we were both in the American Hospital.

Na Chan-Bahlum, on Calle Merle Greene in Palenque, was built mainly as a place to come back to after working in dense jungle with no conveniences such as hot water, a change of food (no more freeze dried), and a comfortable place to sleep. It turned out to be much more than that—a gathering place for all of our friends who were working in Chiapas, Tabasco, or the east coast of Belize: Eric Talladoire and Claude Baudez from Paris, working at Tonina; Annagrette Hohmann from Austria; Paul Gendrop from Mexico City; Karen Bassie-Sweet and David Kelley from Calgary; Ursula Jones and Andrew Weeks from London; and Hans-Jürgen Kramer from Germany, to name a few. Most of them came to do research at Palenque. With our good stove and refrigerator we could cook gourmet meals to share with all of our friends, both in Palenque and those passing through. Good food and drinks, as well as good conversation was always welcome. Bob, my husband, who had been a school administrator all of his life, immediately took possession of the Cuisinart my son David had given to me for Christmas. He became a chef. Just like that. His crepe suzettes with their flaming brandy were the very best. I could just stay out of the kitchen—he was the chef. We had so many banana trees on our property that Bob made banana bread almost every day, way more than we—or even all of our neighbors—could eat.

Na Chan-Bahlum at first consisted of one large room that was a cooking and eating area as well as a sleeping area, plus a very large bathroom. We soon knew that we needed more room where we could carry on with writing, drawing pictures of the sculpture, and pasting large rubbings together. So a large library was built with mahogany bookshelves on two walls, built-in tables for



Figure 1. Rubbing of full-figure glyphs from the Palace Tablet ("11 Tuns" of the Initial Series), an example of what Merle did with the "other half" of her time at Palenque.

drawing, and a comfortable place to sit and read. For this last, we bought a davenport, three chairs to lounge in, and a coffee table. We put in air conditioning and a dehumidifier to keep the books safe. Many pleasant evenings were spent there with our dog Chinkultic and our cat Cele curled up beside us. We added a small bedroom and storage room to the house at the same time, as well as large screened-in rooms up above. The roof was thatch, the most expensive kind of roof there was at that time, as a fee had to be paid to the village that had good

thatch, another fee had to be paid to the workman who carted it, and yet another fee had to be paid to bring it into Palenque. Also, only certain men knew how to correctly put on the thatch so small animals wouldn't crawl under it or water seep through. I have a whole set of video prints, done by Kathryn Josserand, showing every step in the process of putting up this thatch roof. Later, we built another bedroom and bath with small porch, off the large porch at the rear of our house, that we called "La Selva."



Figure 2. Rubbing of Intaglio Stone from the Palace.

The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Palenque and the Florida Project

The space underneath the new addition to our Palenque house had a cement floor, lights, and water, and was used mainly when working on the “Florida Project” reproducing replicas of Pier D from House D of the Palace, Pier C from House A of the Palace, the entire south end of the east room of House E, and one of the masks from the wall of House C, for the Florida State Museum in Gainesville. Two of my students, Mark Turner and Pete Mokler, were a great help during the entire Florida Project—Mark rolling out all of the clay ready for making the molds and Pete for helping the Gainesville scientists with the mother molds (Figure 1). This project took nearly a year to complete, Gainesville sending two professionals to help make the mother molds. When finished, it took half of La Cañada building mahogany crates and loading them into a truck to send everything off to Florida after receiving the official stamp of approval by INAH. We had to start work early in the morning when making the mother molds, as we had to be finished by 8:00 am when it then became too hot to set the chemical material. Doing this so early in the morning, we consumed barrels of oranges that whoever had a free moment would squeeze into juice. Sections about one meter by half a meter were first made in clay and stored in our upper rooms at Na Chan-Bahlum under wet towels, until the entire project was ready for the fellows from Gainesville to come and help. One day when I went to check on these clay sections, upon lifting the corner of a wet towel, I saw the most beautiful little gold toad one inch long. Yes, gold color, not yellow or orange, just golden. I took dozens of pictures of this golden gem. I have never seen a gold toad since. Then when finished with all of this, I had to go to Gainesville and paint all of this sculpture in its original colors.

Later this work area was made into a three-room apartment for Chencho and his wife Deleri. Chencho (Ausencio Cruz Guzmán) was my Chol Maya friend who was so smart that he could read, write, and speak the Chol language fluently, the only person in the area who could do this. He worked with me on everything I did at Palenque, rubbings, photographs, and measurements of buildings. His wife Deleri was a perfectionist at keeping Na Chan-Balam clean and neat. In the yard



Figure 1. Working on the molds for the Florida Project.

we had a cacao tree that bore perfect pods. Right next to the cacao tree there was a small pond where I kept a little alligator that Karl-Herbert Mayer, my Austrian archaeological friend from Graz brought to me, much to Bob's disgust. Of course my alligator mysteriously disappeared one night, and to this day I blame Bob.

La Cañada, the area of Palenque where our house Na Chan-Bahlum was built, was nearly all taken up by the Morales families—Moises with his eleven kids and his brother Carlos with his ten, plus all of the Morales cousins and grandparents. I was sort of squeezed into

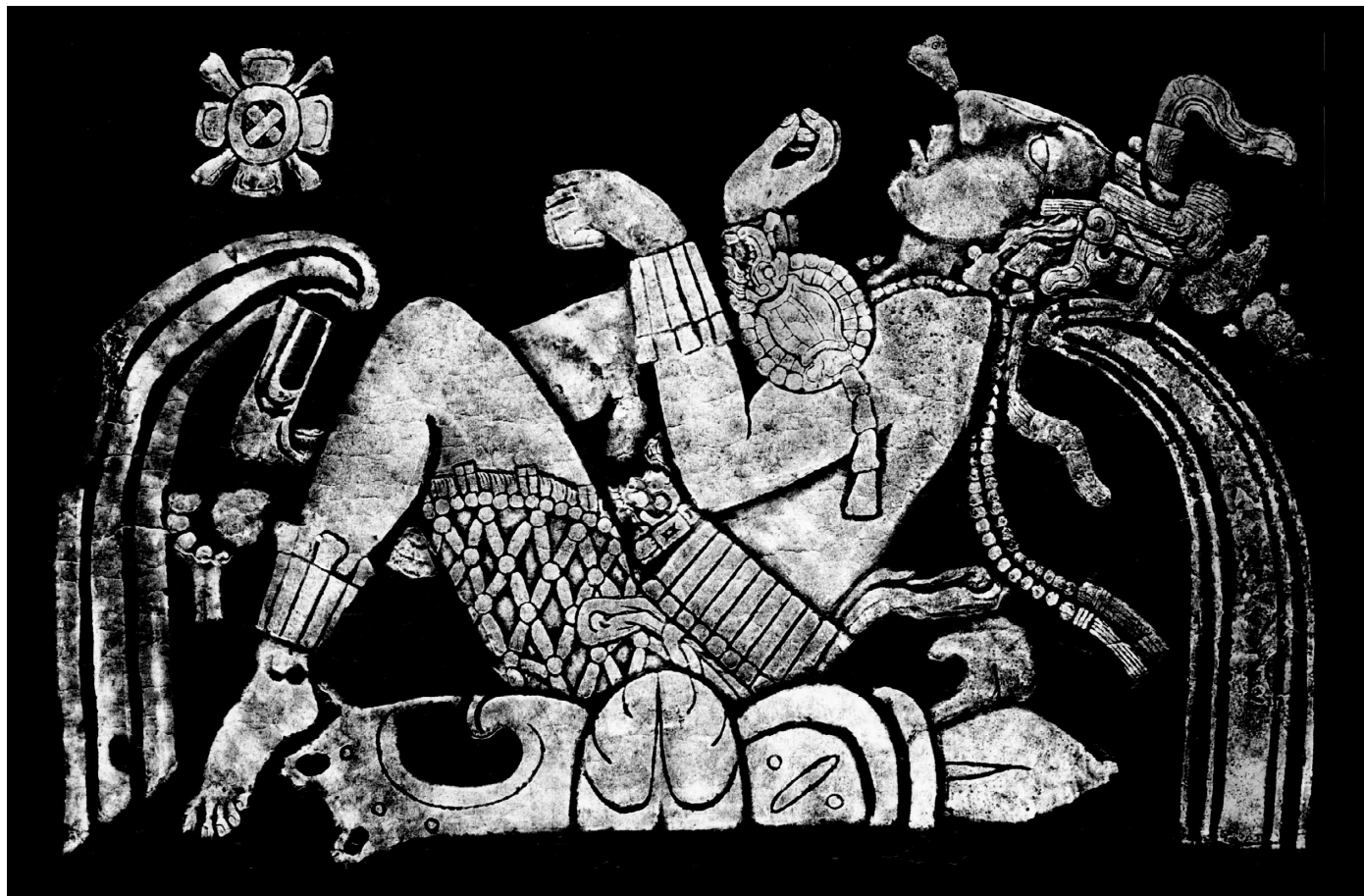


Figure 2. K'inich Janaab Pakal (detail of the Sarcophagus rubbing).

all of this Morales community. Chencho, not a Morales, became my “second in command.” I could not have done many of the things I did without him, like climbing all over the roofs of the Cross Group temples. I probably would have fallen off a roofcomb and killed myself if he had not been bracing me. Not only did he help me with my work, but he could fix anything—just like Alfonso. There wasn’t a thing Alfonso couldn’t fix—open doors or drawers whose keys were lost, drive my jeep with no gas, fix broken projectors, fix a broken water heater, steal water from another tank—anything. On top of that Alfonso spent most of his young years at our house reading, not only “who-done-its,” but archaeology books in English. Good guy to know, and a pleasure to have around.

Other than doing ceramic illustrating for Bob Rands, most of my time was spent doing rubbings of every stone sculpture at Palenque, with the first, and of course the hardest and most time consuming, the Sarcophagus in the Temple of the Inscriptions (Figure 2). Deep within the temple, actually three feet below the level of the Plaza floor, is the crypt, 4 x 9 meters, of the Palenque

King, K'inich Janaab Pakal, who was born in AD 603 and ruled from 615 until his death in 683. To reach this crypt, one must go down a long series of slippery steps in the dark to a platform that has a barred-metal door before the tomb. This is always kept locked so no one can get inside the tomb but can see the Sarcophagus. I had been given permission by the Mexican government to do a rubbing of the Sarcophagus and its cover in June 1964. This had not been an easy task—necessitating letters with gold seals from Dr. Elsasser in Berkeley, from the Mexican Consul, and the Director of INAH. Once inside the tomb, I found I was standing in limestone water over my shoes, and as the cover was at my chin level, I had quite a time boosting myself on top, as the cover was so large (379 x 220 cm). I had to do the rubbing in oil paint, as there was no way I could put a second sheet of this 1 x 2 meter rice paper next to the first sheet if done in sumi ink, as the ink would run at the edges. It took six sheets of paper to do the whole cover and a month’s time. It was a perfect way to do the Sarcophagus Cover, as I could control the shading by pressing thousands of thumb prints of paint against the paper.

The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Doing the rubbings of the sides of the Sarcophagus in the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque was most interesting, but very difficult because everything is so close to the edge of the crypt. There are three ancestors portrayed on each of the long sides and one each of Pakal's mother and father on both the north and south ends. When doing the rubbings on the east side of the Sarcophagus, there was not room for me to get my head behind the Hasselblad camera, so I measured the distance

from the stone to the mirror in the camera, set it, and then pulled the trigger. Fortunately, the pictures turned out well, as can be seen in Volume I of the *Sculpture of Palenque* (Figure 1). When the Maya were doing these carvings, they first made a cartoon in either black or red and then used the drawing as their guide for carving. However, in several places they didn't keep within their cartoon lines. Parts of some of these drawings can still be seen today, and show in my photographs (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Sarcophagus, East Figure 1, Ahkal Mo' Nahb I (from Robertson 1983:Fig. 190).



Figure 2. Guidelines for carving (from Robertson 1983:Fig. 173).

The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

After the Sarcophagus rubbings were finished, I proceeded to do rubbings of every other limestone carving at Palenque—all of the Tablets in the Temple of the Cross, the Temple of the Sun, and the Foliated Cross (Figure 1), as well as carvings in the North Group, everything in the Palace, and the Olvidado. Once when I was doing the rubbing of the Tablet of the Foliated Cross, a Mexican professor came along explaining all about this wonderful “Aztec” tablet. I couldn’t believe it.

A couple of years later I started photographing every instance of art at Palenque. This is when Linda Schele

came to help me, as did Gillett Griffin from Princeton, Alfonso, John Bowles, a student of mine from Stevenson, and Bob. Scaffolding had to be built for just about everything so I could get a view “straight-on.” Chencho was in charge of this, always fastening the boards together with strong vines, but never nails. When a friend of mine from Seattle, who was a contractor, came to visit, he was telling Chencho just how the scaffolding should be built. Chencho listened. Said nothing. The next day, my friend had left, and Chencho went right on building in his own successful way.



Figure 1. The Tablet of the Foliated Cross.

El Chichonal

The eruption of the volcano El Chichonal and its devastating effects on Palenque is something I will never forget. I kept a diary of the happenings that spells it out exactly what happened day by day, so I will quote this diary in part:

This is Sunday, April fourth, 1982, Palm Sunday. I am writing this by candle light at 3:30 in the afternoon, and it is pitch black, like midnight outside. A volcanic eruption from El Chichonal, 25 km southeast of Pichucalco, erupted Sunday, one week ago. The first I knew was when I got up at 6:00 AM and it was dark as midnight, and Moises Morales was at the front door with a handful of gray powder-like substance. He said, "What do you think this is?" Looked like talcum powder. Well, it was ash off a pickup truck out in front of my house, that had gotten out of Pichucalco by leaving at 1:30 AM, when fire was spouting out and the mountain was erupting. There were eighteen people in the truck which was covered with deep ash, and the people looked like they had been shaken up in a flour sack. I fixed four batches of coffee for them and went to town and purchased all the buns I could find. We could not find out anything about what was happening, as all radio contact was cut off.

On Wednesday, (March 31) Alfonso decided to go to Villahermosa to get new tires for my car. What I think he really wanted to do was find out what was going on about the volcano. Just this side of Villahermosa there was a three-car collision, a Renault, a Volkswagon bug, and another car. Alfonso saw this happening directly in front of him, so he slowed down and pulled off the highway. While he was sitting there in my Safari, watching the collision happening ahead, a big bus came from the rear, tried to avoid the three-car pile-up, and smashed full force into Alfonso in my Safari, throwing it twenty feet into the air and smashing it down on the other three cars. Now there were five vehicles involved. Alfonso was knocked out and had a four-inch-deep gash in his head at the base of his skull, bruised ribs, and a huge hematoma on his thigh, but he got out of the car, and in shock, took the car papers, the tool kit, and of all things, an old tire that was in the back seat. He started down the highway, not knowing what he was doing, bleeding all over. A truck came along, and the driver made Alfonso get in, so he could take him to the hospital. He got his head stitched but found out he also had a concussion and was told to stay in bed.

The police took my car, but would not release it to the insurance company. Alfonso's friends bribed the police, who had already taken the 4000 pesos I had given to him for new tires, not to put him in jail. He was charged with criminal negligence, first for being in an accident

(which he had nothing to do with, as he had pulled off the road), and second for abandoning the car, and third, for not having the car papers in the car. He finally came back to Palenque on a bus as the volcano had started in again and he didn't want to be in Villahermosa alone.

...

April 5. This is the worst day of all, outside of yesterday. It was a heavy snowstorm of white ash all day and night. You couldn't put your head out the door. All the windows in the house that have breaks in them, like those that push in and out, let ash come in by the buckets full, piling up on cupboards, tables and all over the floor. It is hard to get the doors open, because by the time you shovel the ash out the door, ten minutes later it is all back in. You can't believe it, the amount of ash that is falling here, and falling so fast. An additional six inches fell during the night, and there is now four feet in the street. My banana trees are now all down. You don't hear a single bird chirping, nor a dog barking. I don't know if my cat Ce'le will survive this, but I keep my puppy locked in Xibalba, under the library, where he can't get out.

Cattlemen are worried as their cattle are dying off, and this is a cattle country. Palenque has been declared a "Disaster Area," and no trucks can come in to bring food, that by now has about run out here. I guess those of us at Na Chan-Bahlum are lucky as we do have some food in cans, but we are about out of water. I have piled all kinds of things on one side of my bed, so I can sleep, or try to in 85° heat, on the other half. In the middle of the night, I get up, out of the heat and go to the library to work where it is not so hot. My solution to keeping ash out of the library is to have a wet towel in front of the door. I quickly change into clean pants and shirt, and quickly go into the library. On leaving I get out of the clean clothes, open the door and don the old clothes filled with ash. This ash is like scouring powder. It has taken the cuffs off all of my pants, and the soles of my two pairs of keds.

Easter Sunday – A year ago today there were 6,000 visitors at the ruins, and on Good Friday 5,000. Today there were none, except three locals who wanted to see what El Chichonal did to the site. Actually the ruins were incredibly beautiful – like on the moon – everything white. . . . There is no one in Palenque who had a car and could get out and go to Cancun except Moises, Chencho, Delerie, Charlotte, the microbiologist, and I. Even the mayor. Everyone wanted me to go with them, but I could not do that. All of my negatives, drawings, and material I was working on for Princeton University Press for my books on "The Sculpture of Palenque" – my life work – was here. I had to stay. I had no choice. I stayed.

It took weeks to clean up the ash at Palenque. No



Figure 2. The sloping figures on the eastern side of the Eastern Court covered in ash.

rain and no water. The city water pipes were all clogged with ash and broke open causing more trouble. We couldn't wash our hands, our clothes, dishes—anything. What little water we had at the house was in two gallon jugs, but that wouldn't go far with so many people living at my house. We used it only for our coffee and to drink. Before the volcano, the group of restorers from

Mexico city had started to clean the grit from the figures on the eastern side of the Eastern Court. They had to leave when the volcano erupted. Finally, after six weeks, it rained. Water mixes with ash acted like scouring powder on the sloping figures in the Eastern Court (Figure 2). Where they had once been red, after the scouring, they were now just a row of unpainted figures.

The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Cross Group Project

In 1996, we started working at the Cross Group at Donald Marken's suggestion and with much of his supporting capital to do this. Don was an attorney interested in archaeology, and the father of the young budding archaeologist Damien Marken. He wanted to investigate the Cross Group at Palenque. We were doing Ground Penetrating Radar with Bill Hanna and Pete Patrone in charge. The Project was sponsored by PARI, the GeoOntological Development Society, the National Geographic Society, and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico. Calibration and subsurface testing was recorded, and reconnaissance low-frequency electromagnetic measurements were made at Stevens Plaza, with the focus being on the Temple of the Cross. All the lines on the southwest hillside exposed cavernous sections where a stalactite or stalagmite fragment was found. On the

west-central side of the temple there was suggestive cavernous terrain. The most intriguing feature on the west side was a bedrock spine or column flanked by voids, that showed on the radar as being either a man-made or man-fashioned septum. The southwest side of the temple appears to be cavernous nearly from top to bottom.

Later still, starting in 1998, we excavated and restored Temple XIX, with Alfonso Morales, Christopher Powell, and Kirk Straight in charge. This proved to be an example of how good archaeology could both preserve the past and at the same time allow tourists to safely see what the Maya did so brilliantly. To be preserved for posterity is the masonry pier just inside the one entrance to the building, portraying the Palenque ruler K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb; the tall polychrome stucco relief, on the adjacent side; and the altar-like platform with its sculpted panels on the west and south faces with scenes of figures and lengthy hieroglyphic texts that record



Figure 1. Replica of platform and walkway. Photo: Joel Skidmore, 2000.



Figure 2. One of the nine mural figures inside the Temple XX tomb.
Photo: Alfonso Morales and Pete Patrone, 1999.

mythical and dynastic events. The dates go back into the reign of K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb (formerly known as Chaacal III). The original masonry pier and the platform are in the Palenque museum. Exact replicas have been placed in Temple XIX. The structure has been preserved, even the original red-plastered floor. To make this available for tourists to see without damaging the original Maya work, Alfonso has constructed a wooden walkway within the temple, making it very easy for tourists to walk through and see the original work of the Maya without stepping on the original painted floor (Figure 1).

And finally, our last effort at the Cross Group was Temple XX with

Maureen (Mo) Carpenter in charge. Mo, a Navy brat, got her degree in Greece, where her dad was in charge of the Mediterranean Fleet during the war and was stationed in Athens. Mo was our best archaeologist at Palenque, a hard worker, wonderful at directing the crew under her, and loved by everyone. When not doing archaeology work at Palenque or in Peru or Alaska, she is being called on by the U.S. government to check out everywhere some new pipeline is being planned. She is really good. Temple XX was financed by my grandchildren Carolyn Petree, Annette Pitcher, and Jim Metzler, in honor of their mother Barbara Metzler, who had herself long supported our Palenque work. Although we have not actually entered the tomb in Temple XX sub, we have recorded everything there with digital cameras (Figure 2). It has been published in *The PARI Newsletter* (No. 31) and by Beatriz de la Fuente in her impressive set of volumes on Prehispanic mural painting in Mexico (*La pintura mural prehispánica en México, II, Área maya, Tomo IV, Estudios*; UNAM, Mexico, 2001).

With Maureen in charge, platform after platform was discovered under Temple XX, but most surprising of all was that the platforms were a separate structure altogether with a passage separating Temple XX from the platform, and the passageway was a collector of Maya garbage. As the archaeologists moved upward, a large staircase began just to the north of the end of the platform, and ran along for eight meters. After investigation of this whole mound, which indicated that Temple XX was one of the largest temples in the city, it was found that the Maya themselves were trying to build a building with dangerous support. The substructure was shored up with planks. Why the Maya were so careless with this, when everything else they did was done so perfectly, is a mystery.

The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Chinkultic and San Cristobal

In August, 1972, Linda, Robert and Linda Moore, and I went to Chinkultic with Mario Leon, keeper of the ruins, in Linda's jeep by way of Tuxtla. Everyone was told to bring his own towel and water canteen. Who did? Nobody but me. So everyone was drinking out of my canteen and using my towel. Not a very good idea. As the road at that time was over gushing streams and full of potholes and makeshift bridges and in some places was not even exactly there, we had to spend the first night in Ocosingo. We climbed over mountains where we were high above the clouds. The cattlemen's association was having a convention in Ocosingo—so no hotels. We finally stayed in an empty house owned by one of Mario's cousins. Houses changed from the lower country wattle-and-daub huts, to wattle-daub huts with mud between the poles, to high-in-the-mountains wood huts. These last gave a checkerboard effect with the red mud against the white lime. Some high up even had tile roofs. We arrived in Tuxtla about 4:00 pm and checked into a hotel with five beds in one room—cost 140 pesos. Alejandro Martínez joined our group at this time. We finally arrived at Stephan Borhegyi's place, where arrangements had been made for us to stay. It was just great staying at his place, but we were sorry our friend was not there at the time. The next morning we started out for Chinkultic. Linda was not feeling well, so she didn't get to see the site at all. But it is a spectacular site, so high up with a grand view of the entire valley. I even managed to get a rubbing done of one of the stelae, yes, in the rain. Does it rain all the time? It sure looked like it. In the small town of Comitán that looks over the beautiful Comitán Valley, Linda and I were parked in a narrow street where our wheels were right up on the narrow sidewalk. An Indian was standing there with a little puppy poking its head out of a bag tied around the man's head. I patted the little puppy's head and the man said, "Want buy?" I said, "Quantos?" He replied, "Diez pesos." I suddenly had a puppy—so cute; he snuggled right under my jacket as if he had always been there. I named him Chinkultic right then. Linda was sick all the



Figure 1. Cenote Azul, Chinkultic. Photo: Merle Greene Robertson.

way and could eat nothing, but I bought a 14-inch ear of corn from another Indian on the street who was grilling these immense ears of corn over a large oil drum.

In San Cristobal we stayed at Trudy Blom's. The first night we were seated at her dining table, with Trudy, at the head, dressed as if for a ball and flanked on both sides by her two massive dogs, me sitting next to her, and Linda sitting next to me. When the maid was clearing the table, Trudy saw that Linda had only eaten a small piece of her bread. With that, Trudy rose to full height and practically shouted, "I was brought up to eat everything on my plate." Poor Linda was sinking lower and lower into her seat. I spoke up and told Trudy that Linda had been sick our entire trip and this was the first thing she had eaten. Well, things changed immediately. Nothing she wouldn't do for Linda. And my puppy had to have real meat, roast beef like we were having, certainly not scraps. It turned out that Linda had hepatitis, so we all had to have gamma globulin shots. No one else got sick, luckily, even though we had all been drinking out of the same canteen. After that we said that if you are staying at Trudy Blom's, it's best to either be sick or have a puppy—having a puppy being by far the best.