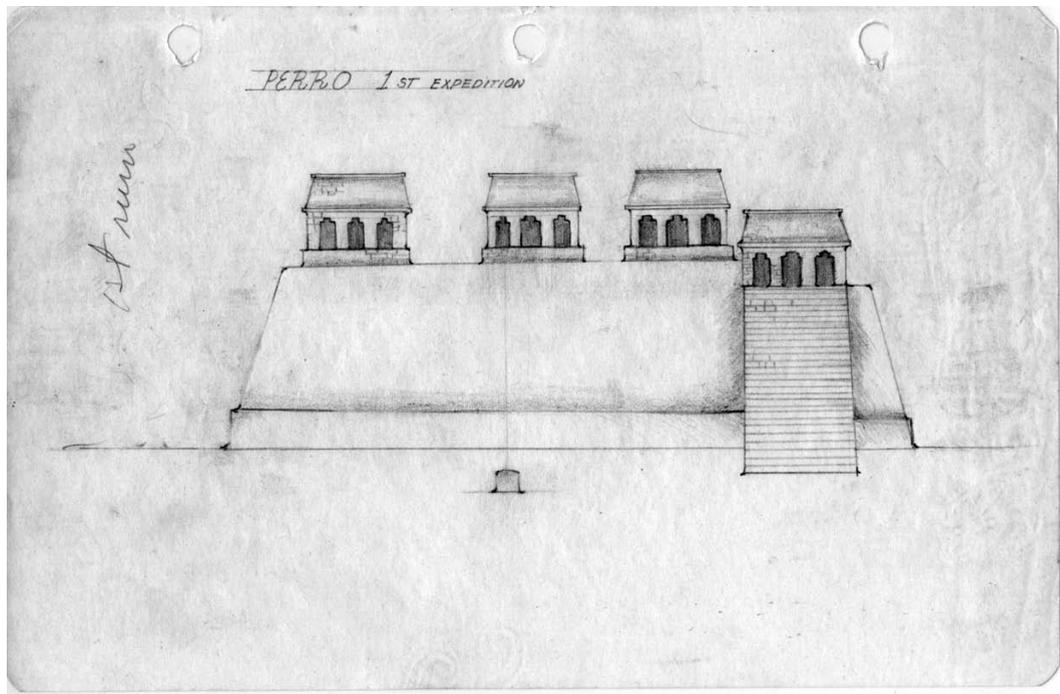


RECOLLECTIONS OF MY EARLY TRAVELS IN CHIAPAS

Discoveries at Oxlahuntun (el Perro),
Miguel Angel Fernandez,
Bonampak and Lacanhá

JOHN BOURNE



Reconstruction of Oxlahuntun site. Drawn on site by John Bourne

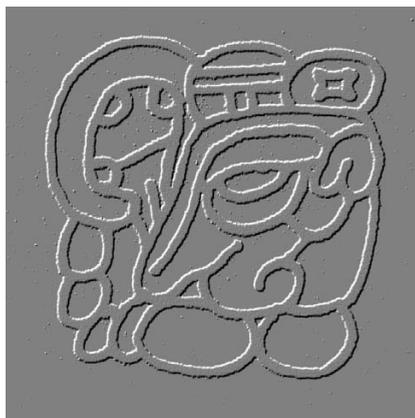
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Bonampak Emblem Glyph from Stela 2 at Bonampak

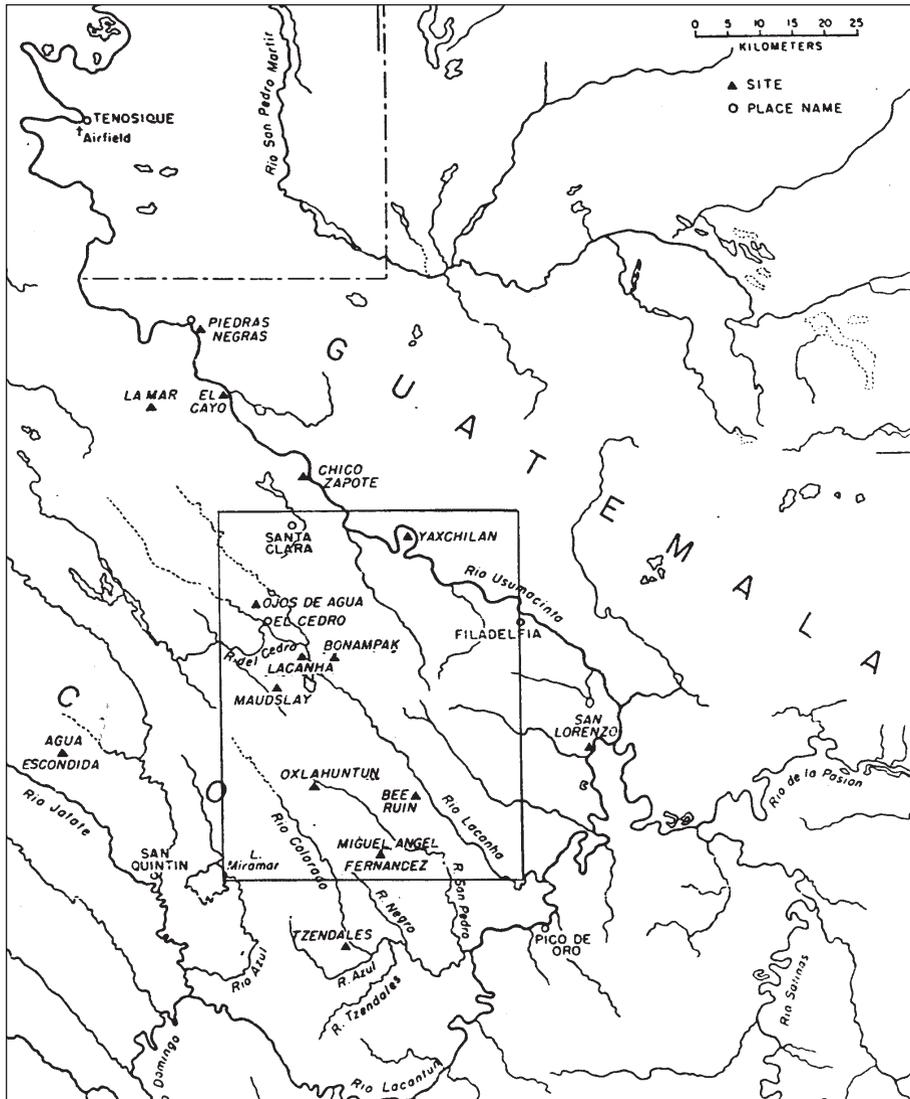
*There have been many different stories
about events that happened
on the expeditions of 1945 and 1946 in the
Lacanhá jungles of Chiapas, Mexico.*

The following account is an attempt to set the record straight.

—J.B., December 2000, Santa Fe, New Mexico

I FIRST MET GILES HEALEY in Los Angeles. My mother's cousin had introduced us, and we met at my mother's home sometime in mid-September 1945. I recently had been discharged from the Army, and Healey had come to Los Angeles to see one of his backers, Kenneth Macgowan. Healey was completing a photographic assignment, "The Maya Through the Ages," for the United Fruit Company, and Macgowan had just finished producing the feature film *Lifeboat*, starring Tallulah Bankhead, the year before.

Macgowan learned of my interest in the Maya from either Healey or Dr. Frederick Hodge, the Director of the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, and telephoned to invite me to lunch at the studio commissary. During lunch, Macgowan told me about Healey's recent explorations in the jungles of southern Mexico. It seems that Healey had heard about some newly discovered ruins from *chicleros*, itinerant workers who tap the chicle tree for sap, a substance that's processed and made into chewing gum. The *chicleros* had been working in the Lacanhá region, and Healey was going back to Mexico to photograph the find.



Map showing the eastern section of Chiapas

Macgowan wanted to know how I had become interested in the Maya, and I told him that when I was in high school I had been captivated by a documentary film and lecture that had been presented by Dana and Ginger Lamb about their travels in the jungles of Chiapas. After reading their book, *Enchanted Vagabonds*, I picked up as many books on the subject of the Maya as I could find, and from that time on I was forever hooked.

After touring the Paramount lot, Macgowan asked me if I would like to join Healey when he returned to Mexico. I knew Healey wasn't too happy about having a nineteen-year-old kid tag along, but Macgowan had taken a liking to me, so to please his mentor, Healey included me. At the time it never occurred to me that Healey would put me to work as his lackey.

In October Healey headed back to San Cristóbal, where he lived with his wife, Sheila, their baby girl, CeCe, and his mother. Because I had to wrap up several loose ends before I could leave, I was unable to join him just then; however, a few weeks later I was on a Mexicana flight to Mexico City. The following day I flew to Oaxaca and then to Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas. In the capital city I slept in a top-floor room of a slummy hotel in the center of town. Although the room was enormous, it had only a bed and two old crates that served as bedside tables. Because the room had no roof, a canvas tarp had been stretched wall-to-wall to keep out the rain.

The next morning I ran into the owner of the hotel. When he asked me where I was going, I said I was headed into the jungles of Chiapas to live with a group of Lacandon Indians. He appeared shocked and told me he had just met some travelers who had recently returned from there. They had reported to him that the Lacandon were still cannibals. Of course I told him this was nonsense, but he vigorously pleaded with me to reconsider my plans to visit these "savages."

After breakfast I hitched a ride on a weathered, mud-caked, station-wagon bus leaving for San Cristóbal. It was crammed with Mexicans, rope-tied baggage, and open-weave baskets filled to the brim with squawking chickens. The trip, which took all day, was hot, dusty, and anything but fun. A few kilometers from town the paved section of the as-yet-unfinished Pan-American highway ran out and turned into a rutty dirt road. After a while, we started climbing a narrow road into the cool, pine-covered high country. A couple of times we had to stop to fix flat tires, and another time we had to get out to clear away some rocks blocking the road.

By late afternoon, as we were nearing our destination, I noticed small groups of drunken Indians weaving back and forth across the road on their way home from the markets of San Cristóbal.

Healey and his family were renting a small Colonial house (Número 10 Calle José María Santiago) within walking distance of the center of town. It had a small neglected inner courtyard and tiny windowless rooms with doors opening onto a U-shaped portal. A door at the north end of the house led to a walled-in vacant lot and a wooden outhouse that we all used. In one of the rooms of the house Healey had set up his photographic studio. Against one wall of his darkroom was a large, empty, dugout canoe. When I asked about it, Healey said he filled it with water and used it to wash his prints. He also told me that it substituted for a bathtub, but I never saw it put to that use. He and his family rarely bathed.

Daybreak in San Cristóbal always began with the crowing of roosters, followed by the mournful rings of cracked bells, the hiss and blasts of skyrocketers (an Indian mix of Catholic and pagan ritual to celebrate a new day), and other irritating sounds coming from the more than twenty churches spread across town. The unnerving morning clamor lasted until sunup. After breakfast I would gather my bedding and hang it on a line stretched across the courtyard. Then, using a flit gun, I'd douse the sheets with insecticide, hoping to kill the fleas. The house was always crawling with them. Somehow they



Painting of Giles Healey by his wife, Sheila

got mixed in with the fresh pine needles the Indians brought us each week to carpet our rooms and kitchen. Unfortunately, my spray-soaked bed linen had a small checkered pattern that made it almost impossible to locate any flea that escaped the spray of the flit gun, and so I got little sleep because I had to spend a good part of the night chasing down fleas with a flashlight.

Healey's mother was a short, bony French woman with quaint peasant traits. When Healey was around she spoke only French. Her English was limited, but it was good enough to ask me to help her with a chore I really detested. At least once a week she would call me to the kitchen and hand me a live chicken, which I had to hold over a bowl while she cut its neck and let the warm blood drain. After the last drop of blood was spent she'd pick up the bowl, hurry across the courtyard to her grandchild's room, and give the warm blood to the baby. After watching the baby drool blood from the corners of her mouth I decided to give CeCe the nickname "The Vampire Baby."

San Cristóbal, once the seat of power for all of Central America, was well off the beaten track and by 1945, an almost forgotten city. It had few vehicles and no banks. To cash a traveler's check I had to go to the hardware store where, tucked into a dark corner, was a tiny safe stuffed with pesos. Telephone service was even worse. For a city of a few thousand people, there was only one telephone in town. The phone was in a government building on the main plaza, and direct calls could be made only to the capital of Chiapas. If you needed to call any other place, an operator in Tuxtla Gutierrez had to listen to your message and then relay it to its final destination.

Healey told me a black woman who had modeled for some of Diego Rivera's paintings came to the town a couple of years before. When Healey took her to the main plaza to visit the Indian market, they were suddenly surrounded by a group of frightened Indians who picked up rocks and began pelting the terrified African woman. She finally was able to escape into a building unscathed, unaware that the Indians were convinced she must be some kind of black devil.

While I explored the city and got my supplies together, Healey began packing equipment: some nonperishable foods, mosquito nets, hammocks, rubberized ponchos, and such essentials as medicines and toilet paper that we would take with us on our trip. I had been there three weeks when we finally were ready to leave. Healey telephoned a friend of his in Tuxtla Gutierrez and arranged to charter his plane for our trip. It turned out to be a handsome vintage Ford Tri-motor built in the early '30s. We hired one of the town's scarce trucks to take us and our gear to a large cemetery that adjoined a pasture on the outskirts of town. There we watched our pilot dive-bomb the field to chase off a group of agitated cows before landing. Once he landed and taxied over to the truck, we loaded our gear, then got in and took off and circled the town before flying south, barely clearing the jungle canopy. We were headed to Ocozingo to pick up Carl Frey. Carl, who was thirty, had been in the Lacanhá area with Franz Blom in 1943, and Healey was planning to use Carl's familiarity with the region to his advantage. An hour later we landed in Ocozingo and I met Carl, who later became a close friend.

A neighbor of Carl's had lent him a portion of his *finca*, a ranch called El Real. Carl had stocked it with chickens and pigs and also had set aside a few acres for growing corn and loofah, a dried fibrous vegetable sponge that he said the Navy used to filter oil in submarines during World War II. Carl despised the war and hated the United States, especially his hometown of Staunton, Illinois. He told me he preferred living in the jungle rather than register for the draft. Sometime in July 1945 Carl had taken a wife, a fifteen-year-old illiterate *mestiza* named Caralampia Solis.

The one night we spent in Ocozingo could have been a scene taken straight from a Wild West movie. The pool-hall bar was loud and rowdy. We were sound asleep in the early hours of the morning when gun shots rang out, followed by the distant cries of the wounded man repeatedly screaming for a doctor.

The next morning, Carl's wife came to watch our plane take off for Tenosique, Tabasco, a frontier town on the Usamacinta River, and the center of chicle and

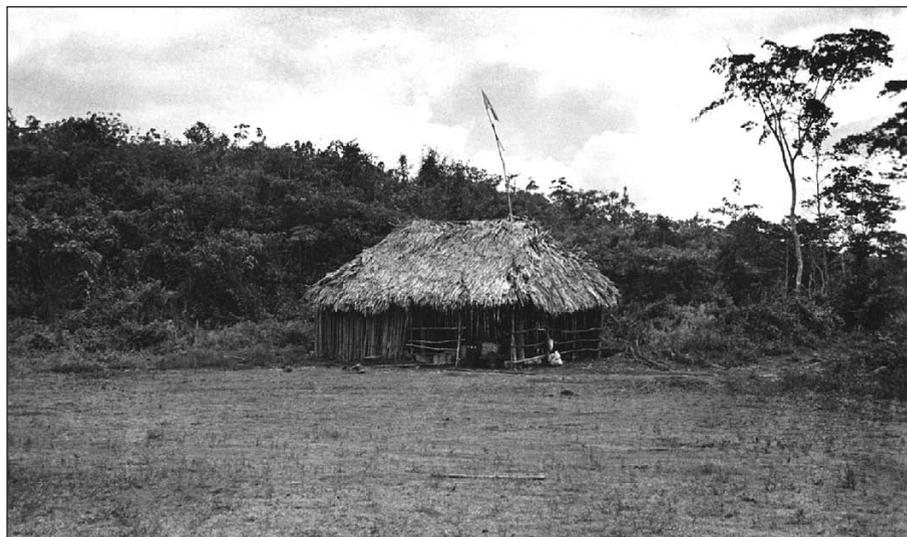
mahogany operations. After landing there, we transferred our gear to a small, single-engine plane for the one hour flight to El Cedro. There were no seats, and we had to sit on the floor next to a pile of crates. The outer skin of the plane had a large rip that flapped in the wind, and through it I caught glimpses of the jungle treetops below. The plane began to drop abruptly, gliding along a steep path and landing on a short,



Refueling plane before takeoff



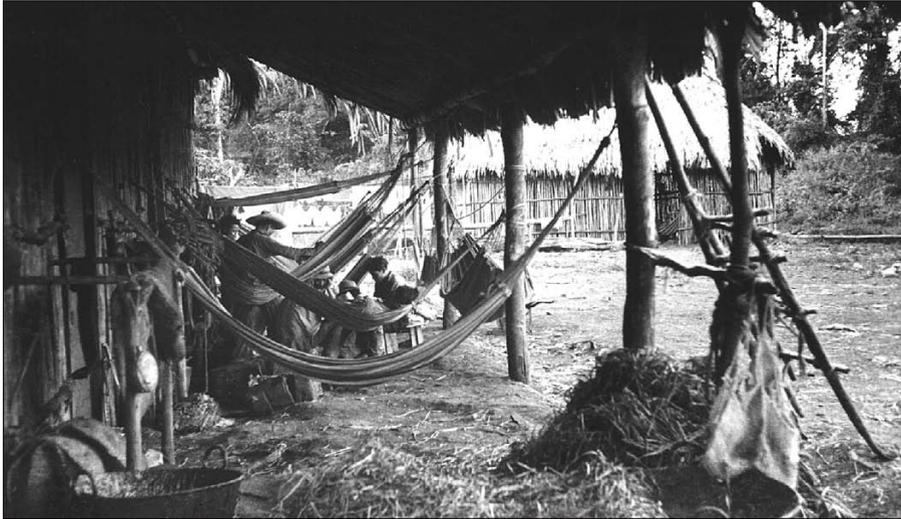
El Cedro's airstrip



Airstrip “terminal”

grassy runway that had been hacked out of raw jungle. At one end of the airstrip was a small, open, thatched hut with a windsock attached to a pole stuck in the roof. We had arrived at El Cedro’s airstrip “terminal.” The sky was cloudless that day, but the ground had been thoroughly soaked from a recent *Norte*, a steady, almost endless drizzle.

It was early November when we reached El Cedro, a chicle camp named after the Cedro River, which ran alongside. There were four thatched huts in the camp. The largest hut was used as operations headquarters and contained a small office and one large room that had five canvas beds strapped to four posts that were stuck in the dirt. The kitchen was housed in a much smaller hut that had a doorless entrance and a small, eye-level window. A wood dining table, six chairs, and a large, double-bottomed cauldron completed the kitchen furnishings. The unlidded cauldron sat on the floor and was filled with drinking water brought up from the muddy Cedro river. Normally these containers were used only for cooking raw chicle. The two remaining huts were used by the families of chicleros. From them we learned about some chicle gatherers who were fugitives from justice and said to be avoiding capture by the police by hiding in isolated chicle camps deep within the nearby jungle.



Under the porch of the chicle headquarters



Chiclero's hut

In the middle of the dining room table sat an old rusty can filled with damp sugar. The first one to reach for a clean spoonful had to stir the sugar and then wait while an army of roaches spilled over the sides and disappeared under the table. Every night a few rats would fall from the thatched kitchen ceiling into our clouded water supply, and each morning the cook would toss the drowned rats out the door by their tails, but their hair and droppings always polluted our drinking water.



Bor wearing a colton and carrying a jaguar purse



NaBor, one of Bor's wives

The day after our arrival was overcast and light rains fell: another Norte had arrived. A few Lacandon Indians had wandered into camp, some holding banana leaf “umbrellas” over their heads. They had come with food to trade for goods, mainly for shotgun shells, although they still relied on bows and arrows when ammunition was not available.

While we waited for the weather to clear, Healey spent most of the time cleaning his two movie cameras. His one treasured piece of equipment was a fancy 16mm Eastman Kodak movie camera he kept in a carefully wiped black leather case. His backup was a less costly Swiss-made Bolex. One day I watched him empty a jar of silica gel desiccant into a pan and heat it over a fire to drive off the moisture. After the crystals turned from pink to cobalt blue, they were cooled and then packed with his cameras and film to keep the equipment from being damaged by the humidity, which averaged 95 percent.

The next day our mules were loaded, and we prepared to leave for the first ruin we planned to explore. We poled a small dugout across the Cedro River and were supposed to be followed by five or six pack mules, guided by two *arrieros*, mule drivers. However our mules were swept downstream by the strong current and landed on a muddy bank some distance away. Luckily we were able to catch up with them and found our equipment still intact. Because of the constant rains, the trail was a quagmire, with an endless series of two-foot-deep trenches filled with pools of soupy muck. Every hoof beat dug the trenches even deeper and splattered us with globs of sticky mud. To stay dry we hurriedly put on our ponchos, and just in time; the rains started again, and the showers pelted us for the rest of the day.

We arrived late in the evening at Ruin Number 1, unloaded our gear and fed the mules with leaves cut from the Ramón tree. After we put up our hammocks and mosquito nets, we rain-proofed our makeshift enclosures with rubberized ponchos. We were careful to keep our toes away from the netting so vampire bats wouldn't bite our toes and infect us with rabies or some other nasty disease.

The next morning we found that vampire bats had attacked three of our mules; their open wounds were still oozing red. Long after the bats had left for the caves and vaulted rooms in Maya temples that were their homes, the anticoagulant they had injected into our mules had still not worn off. Eventually two mules succumbed from the nightly bat attacks.

This was the morning I discovered that Healey expected me to carry his equipment around as we explored. Only later, during some free time, was I able to take my sketch pad and draw elevations and floor plans of the ruins, after using a tape to measure the buildings. Healey was annoyed, claiming he could get all the measurements we needed from his photographs of the ruin he named El Perro after he saw what he believed to be the figure of a dog carved in the plastered doorpost of one building. Later, El Perro was renamed Oxlahuntun.

That night, after we had gone to bed, I was awakened by a sudden, eerie silence; all jungle sounds had abruptly stopped. Seconds later I heard a splintering noise followed by the crashing sound of a large tree knocking down the forest as it fell. It was pitch black and I held my breath in fear, having no idea where the tree trunk would land. Then, finally, I heard it hit some distance away. It was several minutes later before the sounds of the jungle fully returned to their normal pitch.

Early the next morning we packed our mules and headed for Ruin Number 2, which later was renamed Miguel Angel Fernandez by Healey in honor of the renowned Mexican archaeologist. We traveled for hours through the rain forest without a bite to eat, but Healey, unaware that I suffered from hypoglycemia, was angry with me for stopping to untie a bag for food. I think it was on this leg of the journey that bad feelings started between Carl and Healey, when Carl heard him say, "To get ahead in this world, you have to use people like rungs in a ladder."

During our preliminary exploration of this large site, in one temple we found twelve "god" pots, which Healey said we would divide among us. "God" pots are small bowls with the face of an idol attached to the rim and were used for burning copal incense. Later that afternoon I took one of them back to camp to examine it. Carl came over and warned me to be careful to keep it out of sight. Not only did he feel that the Lacandon would be upset if they saw the god pot had been removed from the temple, but also that Healey would have a fit if he knew I had taken it. I didn't want to cause any trouble, so I wrapped it in a towel and put it in my duffel bag.

After locating Ruin Number 3, which Healey named the Bee Ruin, we headed back to El Cedro. (I didn't go with them to this ruin because I was running a high fever at the time and stayed in my hammock all day.)

When we got back to the chicle camp the next day, Carl overheard Healey talking to the *jefe*, the boss of the chicle camp. He wanted a letter typed and sent out on the next plane. Healey dictated a letter in Spanish in which he bragged about how

he alone had found three important Maya ruins in the Lacanhá area. In his letter he said he would mail photographs of the ruins to the proper authorities when he returned to San Cristóbal.

Carl was furious and rushed to tell me how Healey was taking all the credit. Carl said he had a plan to make sure we received credit where credit was due. Believing there were still plenty of ruins waiting to be discovered, he wanted me to fly to Mexico City, buy a camera and film, and come back with him to El Cedro. We'd meet in Mexico City after Christmas and later return to comb this area of the jungle to look for more ruins. The three of us were all preparing to leave soon, but I was really excited and started to plan my departure immediately. It was already late December, and I told Healey that when I got back to Mexico City I would be staying at the Hotel Montejo, on the Paseo de la Reforma, where he could ship the belongings I had stored with him in San Cristóbal. I told him that after I received my things I would be returning to the United States.

I had stayed at the Hotel Montejo while in Mexico City, on my way to San Cristóbal, and I went back there because it was small, informal and popular with many of the archeologists who came down from the States. I hadn't bathed in weeks, and so, before I did anything else, I took a long shower—*after* soaking in the tub. After a quick nap I got dressed and went down to the hotel restaurant for my first civilized meal in months. After dinner, gorged and ready for a much deserved rest, I finally went to bed.

I was awakened in the middle of the night by a tickling sensation in my throat. I jumped out of bed, rushed to the bathroom and coughed up a handful of long, squirming, pink worms. I was scared stiff. Knowing that only one drugstore in town was required to stay open all night, I dressed as fast as possible, flew out the door, flagged down a taxi, and yelled for the driver to take me there. The pharmacist laughed hysterically when I told him what had happened. He gave me some pills and told me that I would be fine by morning, and I was. I never did find out what kind of worms I had, but they looked like the common garden variety.

As planned, I located a first-class German camera, a 35mm Contax with a built-in light meter. I also bought twenty-five rolls of Super X X black-and-white film. It was just after the war, and color stock was unavailable. In addition to photographing the Lacandon, Carl and I had also talked about recording their chants and flute music. In 1945 tape recorders hadn't yet reached the market; however, I was fortunate to locate a machine called a SoundScriber that was about the size of a standard typewriter and one step up from a Dictaphone. I paid 1000 pesos for it, then about \$80 U.S. When the SoundScriber was hooked to a microphone and turned on, a needle cut a groove in a five-inch, green plastic disk, and a pick-up arm played back the recording. There was only one problem: because the SoundScriber operated on alternating current, I had to buy a generator that ran on gasoline because El Cedro had no electricity. I finally found one, for \$64 U.S., that would generate enough electricity to power the recording machine. It was too dangerous to carry around a highly flammable liquid, so I decided to wait until we got to Tenosique, which would be our last chance to buy gasoline. I added almost 500 feet of electric cord, an assortment of plugs, sockets, and one light bulb. Our plan was to hang the 100-watt light bulb over the jefe's desk at El Cedro and turn it on one hour a night for two or three nights. This was to be our small token of appreciation for his assistance and was limited only by our need to conserve the fuel we needed to make the recordings.

In late December my mother came down from California for a one-week visit. At one point during her stay, I put her to work stringing glass beads as gifts for the Lacandon women. I couldn't remember if any of them had ever seen a mirror, so I picked up a bunch of small, round ones from a sidewalk vendor to take with me when I delivered the gifts.

In mid-January the hotel desk clerk handed me an envelope; it was a letter from Healey, dated January 7, 1946. He agreed to ship my things, but only if I sent his hammock back, along with Photostat copies of all the drawings and measurements I had made of the first two ruins. I wired back to tell him that his hammock had

been cleaned and mailed weeks ago. I didn't know what had happened; perhaps it had been lost or stolen. I remembered he had told me he could get all the measurements of the buildings from the photographs he had taken and promised to mail to me. I never got them, so, since he clearly had no intention of keeping his part of the bargain, I decided not to send him Photostats of my drawings.

Carl arrived Sunday, January 13, and we went to the flea market to look for a Victrola, hoping to bribe the Lacandon to show us some more ruins. We found an old wind-up phonograph with two bottom doors that opened to let out the sound. We also picked up a few extra needles and a stack of 78-rpm records, including jazz, a few operas, and one or two platters of rancho music.

A week later we flew to Villahermosa, the capital of Tabasco. It was a filthy, humid city with open sewage ditches running down the middle of the dirt roads. We found a hotel next to the river front and stayed in the city for three or four days while we waited to book passage on a launch going to Tenosique.



Launch, anchored on the banks of the Grijalva River

Our boat left a few days later and moved slowly down the muddy Grijalva, passing rich farmlands. Near the stern was an open galley where a Mexican with drooping paunch prepared our meals. At night hammocks

were strung shoulder-to-shoulder across the deck. When we arrived in the gulf port of Frontera the next day, we found the estuary cluttered with floating stalks of bananas drifting out to sea. They had been thrown into the river, too ripe to be shipped.

As we headed up the Usamacinta River, passing fertile grasslands and banana plantations, clusters of overgrown Maya temple mounds appeared at almost every turn. There were

many delays along the way because, among his other duties, our pilot had to visit friends and deliver the mail.

When we finally docked in Tenosique, we stayed overnight in a ramshackle hotel on the only road that went straight through town. The next day we filled two 10-gallon



Hammocks strung across the covered deck



Street scene in Tenosique

tins with gasoline and caught a plane back to El Cedro, arriving on January 31. The chicleros, and a few Lacandon who were lined up along the grass runway seemed happy to see us.

While we were gone, Healey had hired a muleteer to remove all the “god” pots from the second ruin and put them in a box tagged with his name. After paying the arriero for bringing them back to El Cedro, Carl told the jefe the three of us had agreed to split the twelve pots between us, and he immediately gave us permission to open the carton. Instead of Healey getting all twelve, we each ended up with four pots. Carl wanted the rare and important drum pot. Because there was only one of these, I agreed he should have it.



Lacandon “god” pots from Ruin 2

Leaving El Cedro, we walked two hours to one of the Lacandon caribals, a cluster of thatched huts. Carl told me that the word caribal derives from “Caribe,” the name the Lacandon call themselves. There were only five of these caribals in this part of the Lacanhá region, with a total combined population of twenty-five; eight males and seventeen females.

We made our home at the caribal of patriarch ChanKin, who lived with his mother; his two wives, NaBor and NahaKin; two sisters, and three children. ChanBor and his two wives lived in a hut close by. Because of the redundancy of Lacandon names, the chicleros had given Spanish names to the Indians with whom they had the most contact. They named ChanKin, Obregón, and called ChanBor, José Pépe.



ChanKin



ChanBor

We had found a book with pictures of another Lacandon group in a bookstore in Mexico City and brought it with us. We showed ChanBor and ChanKin the photographs of a Lacandon man and woman wearing native Lacandon coltons, a kind of long *serape* with closed sides. Having never seen a photograph before, they had not learned how to “read” them, something they share with a number of other, nonliterate tribes. They carefully studied the images, first turning them upside down, then sideways, then flipping them over. I suppose the subtle contrasts of light and shadow were confusing to them. Laughing, they quickly became bored, gave up, and walked away with puzzled looks on their faces.

ChanKin’s house was by far the largest hut in the caribal, with a tall, A-shaped entrance. The sides

and back of his hut wore skirts of palm thatch that almost touched the ground. Several woven native hammocks were strung along the perimeter of the room, tied to posts that held up the rafters. A covered clay jug filled with water stood next to the hearth. Beans, corn, and rice were kept in lidded clay pots, and cooked meat hung in nets draped over the wood beams to keep it out of the reach of dogs and

jabelinas, wild boars that somehow had been domesticated and had become the Lacandon's favorite pet.

Looking around I saw what looked like human body parts dangling from nets hanging from the rafters. Stunned, I looked closer and discovered they were only the arms and legs of roasted monkeys with all traces of hair singed off. Now I understood why the owner of the hotel in Tuxtla Gutierrez thought the Lacandon were cannibals.

Each day began with the wives making tortillas. These were not the ordinary round variety we are accustomed to but large, square ones. Carl said he thought the *masa* must have been ground of fermented corn because the cooked tortillas tasted like sourdough bread. Unlike our daily ritual, the Lacandon don't eat three meals a day but nibble on food all the time.

Considering that they didn't have soap, the Lacandon were amazingly clean. Every day they would bathe in a stream, scrubbing their bodies with coarse sand; however, this practice didn't rid them of lice. I often saw them sitting on the ground, one behind the other, chattering in Maya while parting hair and catching lice, which they promptly gobbled down. I suppose they copied this behavior from watching monkeys preen themselves.

One day two Lacandon women came over to my hammock and started parting my hair, looking for lice. They were baffled when they couldn't find any and broke into laughter. They then proceeded to pull back my shirt sleeves exposing the hair on my arms. Giggling with delight, they said I must be a relative of some funny kind of monkey. Unlike Europeans, the Lacandon have no body hair except for eyebrows, eyelashes, and the thick black hair on their heads.

Their babies are born with a purple spot at the end of the spine that varies from the size of a saucer to a half-dollar. The spot usually fades away by the time they reach eleven. Someone told me this discoloration, which looks like a bruise, is known as

a Mongolian spot because it is commonly found on children from that part of Asia. A few Lacandon have a fold in the upper eyelid, called the epicanthic fold, a feature that is also found in Asia.

The Lacandon were terrified of catching a cold. If they heard someone cough or sneeze, they fled into the jungle for days, sometimes abandoning their caribal for good in an attempt to escape death. They had never built up an immunity to the cold or flu viruses, and, as a result, usually developed pneumonia after catching a cold. While we were at El Cedro, the Lacandon called Carranza had contracted pneumonia and was dying. Fearing the worse, his mother, her legs crippled by disease, had literally dragged herself along a trail from a distant caribal to be at his side. The next day the plane arrived with some vials of penicillin, and the camp “doctor” was able to save his life.



Lacandon girl with epicanthic fold



Carranza

Because the Lacandon were delighted with all the trinkets we gave them, each of us got a “wife” to enjoy during our stay. Carl’s “wife,” Ko, was only eight years old, and mine, NaBor, was fourteen. Unfortunately, she gave me an unwelcome gift, and I had



Ko



NaBor (Carmita)

to have a series of shots to rid myself of gonorrhoea. The camp had run out of penicillin, so we sent to Tenosique for another batch of penicillin and treated all the Lacandon who showed signs of the disease.

NaBor and I slept side-by-side, in a large native hammock, her feet by my face and mine next to hers. Before going to bed she would go over every inch of the hammock and eat any fleas she caught, and when the nights were cold she would keep a fire going underneath our hammock.

Some of the Lacandon customs seemed odd to us. They would sneak off to bury their nail clippings and strands of cut hair, afraid that someone might use them to cast an evil spell. Although they never talked about their religious beliefs and kept the place where they performed their rituals a secret, ChanBor confessed that the most important god they wor-

shipped was called Nohoch Zac Yum. A chicleiro who spoke Yucatec Maya told us it meant Great White Father.



ChanKin posing with two chicleros

Most of the chicleros looked down on the Lacandon because they were polygamous, traded wives, and worshiped pagan gods, but we found them kind, generous and without guile. They treated us like family, and, unlike the untrustworthy chicleros, the Lacandon *never* stole.

One day Carl told me a story that was so bizarre it was hard to believe. It happened sometime in the early '40s when the dictator Jorge Ubico, popularly known as “Tata” (Spanish for daddy), ruled Guatemala. Soldiers from Guatemala crossed the border into Mexico and captured two Lacandon Indians, manacled them, and took them back to the zoo in Guatemala City and locked them in a cage. When Mexican government officials learned that two Lacandon Indians were on exhibit at the zoo they were furious and immediately contacted their embassy in Guatemala and swiftly obtained the Indians' release.

We gave ChanBor the Victrola and showed him how he could sharpen dull phonograph needles using a stone. His favorite records were the operas, which he played over and over. He especially liked Caruso arias; however, the jazz and ranchero music didn't seem to interest him at all.

He was so pleased with his new toy he agreed to take us to a very special ruin the Lacandon kept secret. This place, only three hours away by foot, turned out to be the now famous ruins known to the world as Bonampak, or Painted Walls, a name

given to the site by the famous Maya archaeologist Sylvanus Griswold Morley. Actually, Bonampak is literally translated as “vat-dyed” or “tanned,” as in fabric or leather.

One chiclero, Acasio Chan, was already at the caribal, but we needed one more helper, so we sent word to El Cedro for another chiclero to accompany us. The young man they sent, Luís Huchin, was a half-witted Yucatec Maya from Valladolid, Yucatán. He was clumsy with our gear but was able to follow simple directions. Once he arrived, the four of us started our trek to the ruins. ChanBor led the way, and the chicleiros carried our supplies.

After an hour we came to a wide river and crossed the surging rapids astride a slippery, moss-covered log. ChanBor was the only one agile enough to walk it like a professional tightrope artist.

Later that morning, we crossed the same river again, this time following a four-inch-wide ledge on the lip of a twenty-foot high waterfall. I stared straight ahead, afraid if I looked down I would lose my balance and plummet over the falls. Fortunately, despite the precarious location, the water was less than an inch deep, so there was little chance of being pushed over the rim by the current.

About ten minutes from the ruins, close to a small encampment of chicle gatherers, Acasio found an abandoned hut and we unloaded our gear. Carl said the chicleiros looked like a bunch of escaped convicts. The meanest one must have been in a machete fight at one time because he had a nasty scar starting where an ear should have been and ending at his collar bone. We both wondered if they were the same escaped convicts we had heard about who were hiding from the Mexican authorities.

On February 6 we headed west across a shallow stream and got our first glimpse of the ruins. The first building we saw was a large, well-preserved temple on the top of an overgrown platform. We named this Structure 1. The building had three

doorways that led to a small, empty room with a plaster floor covered in a thick layer of bat guano. On a steep terraced hillside behind Structure 1 there were six smaller buildings that we numbered 2 through 7.



Structure 1 at Bonampak



Buildings on level 2

Four of these temples contained columnar stone altars set in the plastered floor. Structure 4 had a beautifully carved stone lintel depicting the bust of a dignitary holding a ceremonial bar and wearing an elaborate headdress of quetzal plumes. Hieroglyphic panels decorated both sides and there were four more glyphs next to the profile. On one of the side exterior walls, just below the coping, were two wide bands painted blood red. On the lower part of the right door jamb of Structure 4, Carl and I scratched our names in small letters on the plastered wall. In a cliff behind Structure 4, a rubble-filled niche looked like it might be an opening to a shallow cave.

Structure 6 had a high roof comb that had once been decorated with stucco reliefs. The two doorways of this building framed interior columnar stone altars. Just around the corner from this temple was a large building, Structure 7, with a corbeled roof and a large, half-fallen, stone lintel.

I had brought along a Brunton compass and a fifty-foot tape measure, and Huchin helped me measure Structure 1 on the lower level, and the six temples on the



View of roof comb on Structure 6



Carl Frey



Niche in a hill behind Structure 4

terraced platform behind it, which I sketched in my notebook. All the dimensions were correctly recorded, but because I was so weak from the onset of malarial fever at the time, I was barely able to scrawl an outline of each building. To further document the site I had the two chileros clear brush from around the temples, and then I loaded my camera with film and snapped different views of each building.

As I was busy mapping the site, Carl and Acasio were hacking down jungle growth just west of Structure 1. This was in the same area where four months later Healey found the temple

with the fabulous murals. Both Carl and Acasio were working in that same location for hours, and to this day I don't see how they could have missed it. The temple with the murals turned out to be only 115 feet west of Structure 1.

We had been working at the ruin for two days when ChanBor came to warn us that chicleros at a nearby camp planned to kill us while we were asleep. They wanted our money, our watches, and my camera. Heeding their warning we quickly packed our things and quietly slipped away, following the same trail back to the Lacandon caribal. In the middle of the sunlit path, a fer-de-lance was coiled and



Fer-de-lance found on the airstrip at El Cedro

ready to strike. This large and venomous pit viper is common to the American tropics, and I was about to step on it. I was so startled I let out a yell and jumped high into the air, scaring it—and everyone else—deep into the forest shadows.

That night Carl and I sat around a campfire. After removing our boots and socks we discovered our feet were covered with nigua bites. The tiny insects had burrowed deep into our callused feet and laid their eggs. Our toes and heels were infested with

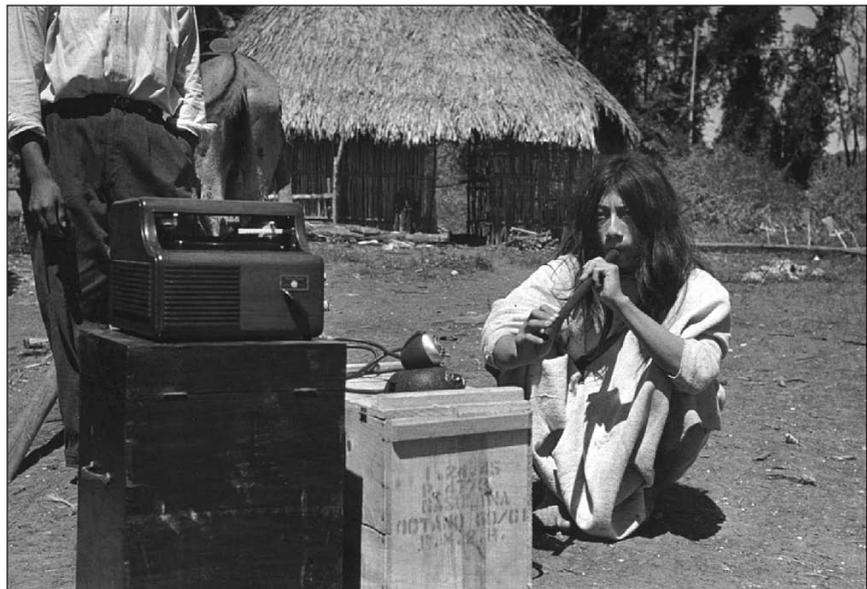


Rear view of headquarters at El Cedro

egg sacks, and to extract them we had to use the tip of a knife to cut out the sacks and then pour tincture of Merthiolate into the raw, sore openings to prevent infection.



Kayom with his flute



Recording Kayom playing his flute

We returned to El Cedro the next day and started unpacking the recording equipment. After running a test, we found the generator made a racket and the microphone was picking it up; so before we started recording, we placed the generator 200 feet away from the SoundScriber. When we checked it again and found that the microphone was still picking up sound from the generator, we placed the generator in a hole dug behind office headquarters (see photo on page 27) and covered the opening with palm leaves to muffle the noise.

The Lacandon watched, spellbound, as we tested the equipment. Once everything was in working order, we started recording their chants and flute music. When we played the recordings back to them, their faces lit up. They recognized their voices and suddenly broke into embarrassed laughter.

By this time I had such a severe case of malaria and amoebic dysentery that I could barely keep anything down. Yet for some reason I had an insatiable craving for Nestlé's condensed milk and consumed more than eight cans of it a day. In a short time I used up the chicle camp's supply and asked the jefe to have the plane fly in



The jefe of the chicle camp (left) and John Bourne standing beside the Cedro River

another case of Nestlé's. The thick liquid helped to coat my stomach but the cramps became unbearable, and the camp mule doctor had to give me an injection of Metina

for the dysentery. The medicine is supposed to be injected intramuscularly, but ignoring directions, the “doctor” made several jabs into my arm with a dull needle, working it back and forth under the skin until he finally hit a vein and injected the medicine directly into it. Being young—and fortunate—I survived both the illness and the cure.

One day, a replacement chiclero arrived in camp. He was only a teenager and was making his first trip into the jungle to tap chicle trees. He made the tragic mistake of confusing a sapling chechem tree for a chicle tree. With the first slash of his machete a white fluid squirted onto his face and into his eyes. The fluid was so corrosive that it immediately started to burn his skin and eyes. We knew that overnight the sap would eat into his eyes and face and slowly blind him. A Lacandon man who was visiting the camp said it would help to flush his eyes with human urine, but this did nothing. Then one of the chicleros took a pinch of chili powder and sprinkled it into the teenager’s blood shot eyes. The boy screamed and writhed in pain, and to keep him from falling on the floor the mule doctor had him tied to the bedposts. As sick as I felt, I couldn’t bear to listen to his screams any longer and grabbed my hammock and went to the hut by the airstrip. The next morning the jefe told us that the boy was completely blind.

We heard that Healey had found out that Carl and I were back at El Cedro looking for ruins. He had notified the authorities in Merida that we were digging in the temples and were removing Maya antiquities. Of course the charges were false. In fact at one ruin we had gathered together the parts of a stucco figure and chunks of stucco carvings that had fallen from a façade and placed them inside the temple to protect them from the elements. As for stealing objects from the temples, there was some speculation that Healey may have been referring to Lacandon “god” pots, although I didn’t believe the pots were what he meant. These pots are almost the only removable items we found at the ruins. While they may have been around fifty to a hundred years old, they definitely were not Maya antiquities.



Fragments of stucco arm



Stucco fragments

On Tuesday, February 12, Carl and I, following the reports of local chicleros, discovered another important ruin which we measured and photographed. The Carnegie Institution later named the site Lacanhá. It was located just below the confluence of the Cedro and Lacanhá Rivers.

I won't go into detail except to say that it was extremely unusual to find a building in this region with two round columns dividing the entrance. We named the site "Round Column." Not far from this building we also found and photographed a circular altar with carved glyphs. When we inspected the interior wall of the one

standing temple we noticed that while most of the plaster had fallen to the floor and crumbled, there were a few places where colored wall paintings still clung to the stone surface.



Temple with round columns at the site of Lacanhá

On this last trip I became so weak from malaria and dysentery that I kept falling off my mule. Carl finally had to rope me to the animal until we got back to the chicle camp. Once there we began packing our things, as a plane was due to arrive early the next morning. The jefe handed us a bill which included the cost of food, mules and hired hands. For the thirty-six days that we had been in camp “and on the road,” the total bill came to \$34.77 U.S., that’s a daily cost of only 49 cents per person.

ChanKin and a few other Lacandon had gathered inside the small hut next to the airstrip to see us off. Two small children squatted by a fire, puffing on large cigars made of native tobacco. We still had a few trinkets left and bargained with the men for bows, arrows and a colton, belonging to ChanKin.

On our return to Mexico City Carl and I wasted no time taking our film to be developed. We had the camera shop, Photo Gante, make two copies of every shot. On March 14, 1946, Carl reported the ruins to Sr. Juan Palacios of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e História, and I left for the United States.

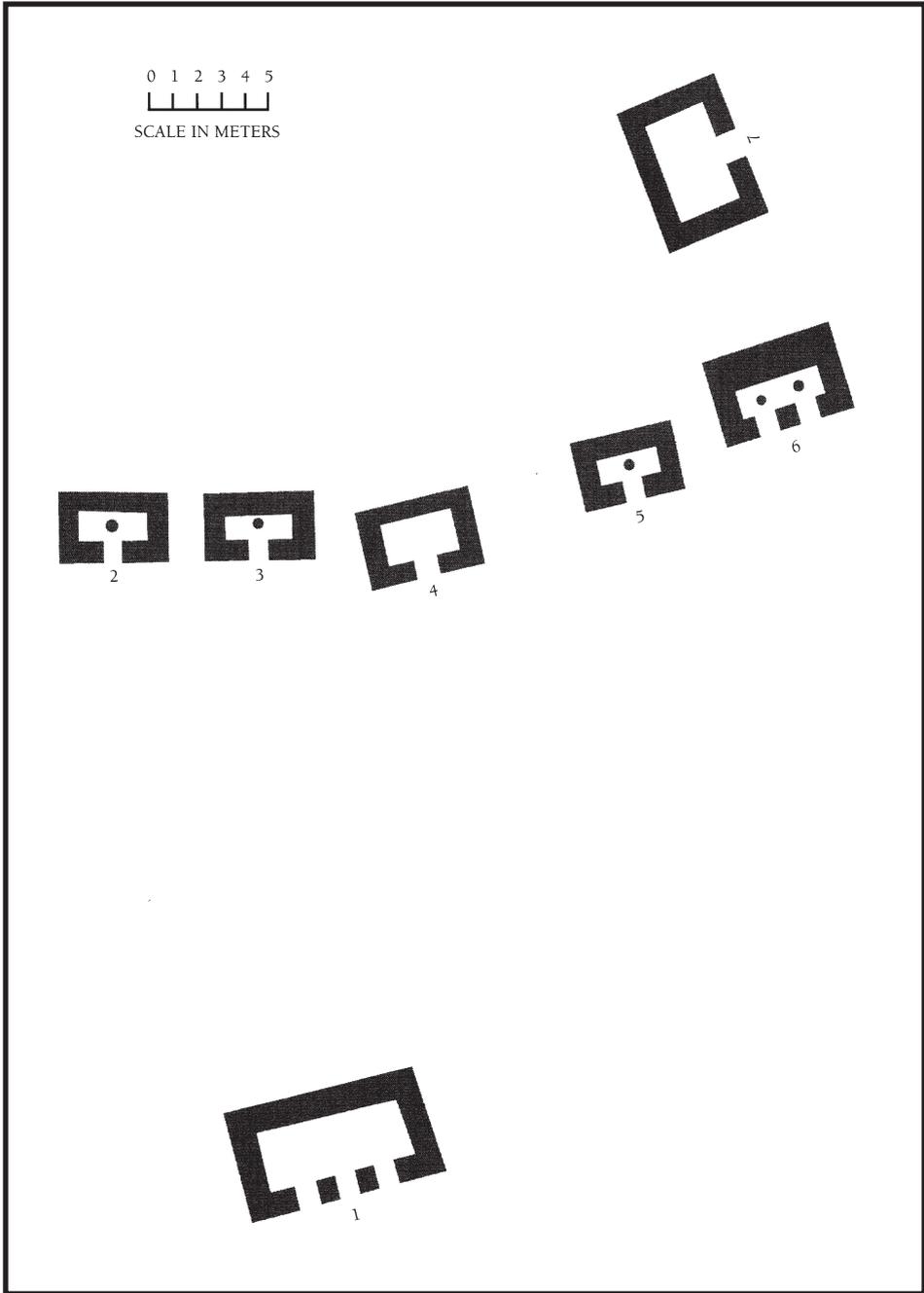
On May 24 I wrote Dr. Alfred Kidder at the Carnegie Institution of Washington. It was my first letter to him, and it stated that Carl and I had found several important ruins in Chiapas in February 1946. At the time, Dr. Kidder was in Guatemala, and his secretary, Eleanor Ritchie, wrote back saying he wouldn't return until July.

When Healey went back to El Cedro in May 1946, he heard about our discoveries and was taken to the first ruin Carl and I had seen on February 6, 1946. It was *then* he was shown the building with the paintings. A few months later I received a letter from Carl, saying he had gone back to El Cedro when Healey was there, and that was the first time he had seen the murals.

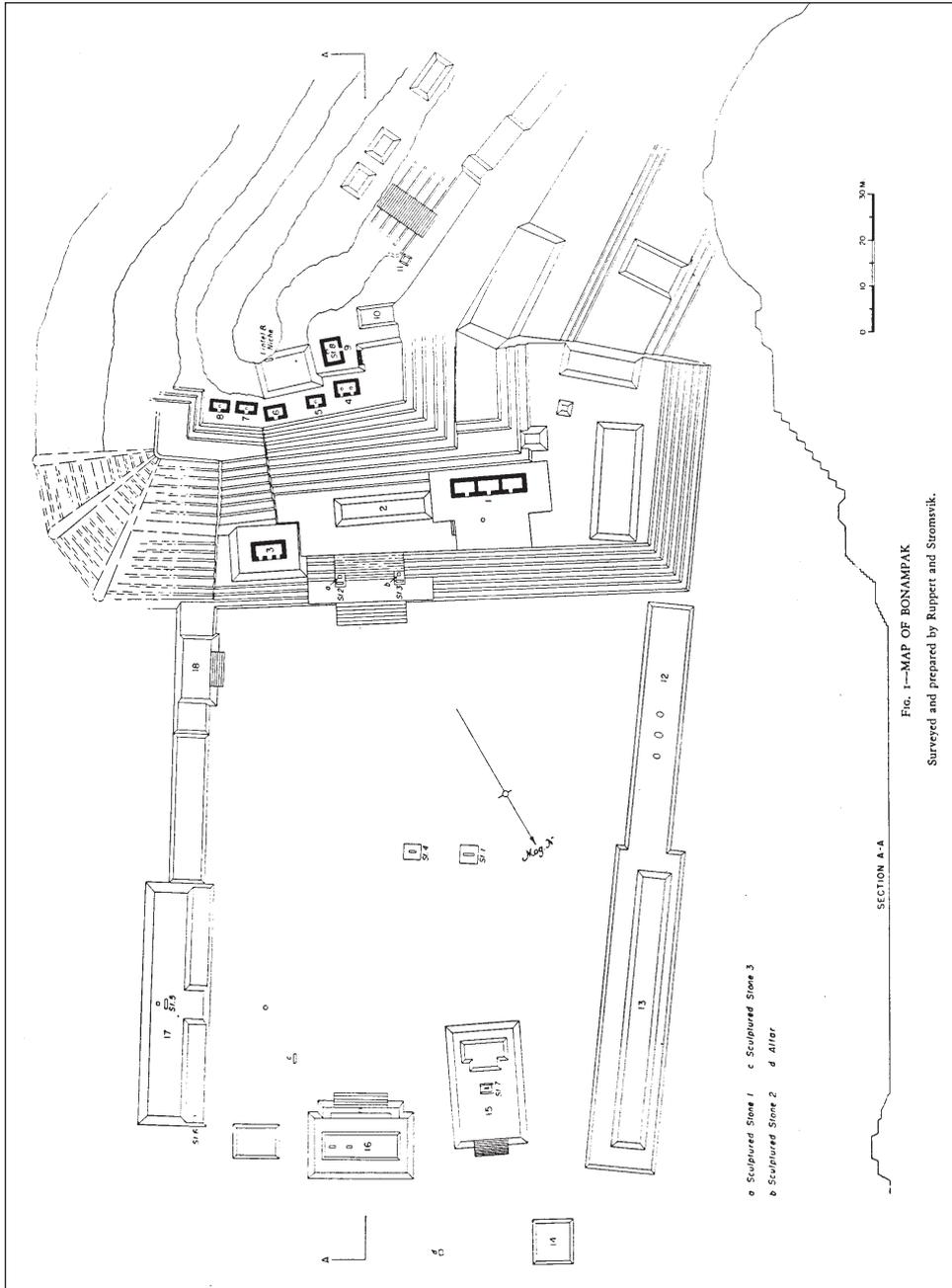
In July 1946, I sent Dr. Kidder my map of Bonampak, drawn to scale, and included Photostats of all seven structures. He answered on October 9, 1946, and said he had received the photostats on July 30 and was looking forward to seeing my photographs and drawings of the buildings.

Meanwhile Healey had written Kidder of his find. At the time, Dr. Kidder didn't realize that Healey's discoveries were of the same ruins that I had already reported to him. It wasn't until June 1947 that Dr. Kidder first recognized that the site Carl and I had discovered and the ruins in which Healey had found the murals were one and the same. In late June 1947, just after Dr. Kidder and Dr. Karl Ruppert of the Carnegie Institution realized that Carl and I were the first explorers to visit the site, Healey's discovery of the murals made headlines in *Life* and *Time* magazines. The murals had received so much publicity, not only because they were remarkable examples of Maya art, but because they also disproved previous contentions that the Maya were an entirely peaceful civilization.

Carl and I finally did get recognition for all the ruins we had discovered but not until 1955 when an account entitled "Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico" was published in the Carnegie Institution of Washington Publication 602.



My plan of temples at Bonampak



Plan of Bonampak taken from Carnegie Institution Publication 602



Painting by Antonio Tejada recreating a section of the mural in room 2 depicting a battle scene

I received a letter from Carl, dated June 7, 1947, informing me that our names were still up when he returned to Bonampak in October 1946; however, later that year a Mexican painter told Carl only Healey's name was there. In his letter Carl said he thought Healey was behaving childishly by erasing our names from the stuccoed doorjamb.

A letter came from Dr. Carl Ruppert, dated June 20, 1947, in which he states: "When I was in Bonampak this last season we made a surveyed map of the site using a transit. Your plan so closely coincides with ours I wonder if you had a transit." In my reply to him I wrote that I didn't have a transit and had taken all the measurements and bearings using only a tape measure and a compass.

A thirteen-member expedition, led by Carl Frey, organized by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, and including artist Franco Gomez, arrived at Bonampak in April 1949. On May 3, the canoe carrying Franco Gomez overturned in the Lacanhá River, and Carl jumped in and attempted to save him. Both were killed in the rapids.

I heard that Carl was buried in the jungle, near the scene of the accident. This account is dedicated to his memory.



Carl Frey (on right) with two chicleros at abandoned chiclero camp

ADDENDUM:

Maya dates given in the Carnegie Institution of Washington Publication 602 follow:

At OXLAHUNTUN: Modeled in stucco on a masonry pier to the right of the central doorway of one of the temples is the recorded Initial Series date 9.13.0.0.0 8 Ahau 8 Uo. In the Gregorian Calendar the date corresponds to March 16, 692 AD.

At MIGUEL ANGEL FERNANDEZ: No calendric data is given for this site in Publication 602.

At BONAMPAK: Lintel of Structure 6 (4 in our numbering), records the Calendar Round Date 9.8.9.15.11 7 Chuen 4 Zotz', the same as May 13, 603 AD. It is possible, however, that the position falls one Maya Calendar Round (52 years) later, or 9.11.2.10.11 7 Chuen 4 Zotz', the equivalent of April 30, 655 AD.

At LACANHA: Stela 7 records three dates:

9.8.0.0.0 5 Ahau 3 Che'n, or August 22, 593 AD

9.6.0.11.0 8 Ahau 18 Zac, or October 26, 554 AD

9.9.0.11.0 2 Ahau 3 Muan, or December 15, 613 AD

Photographs, negatives, and drawings of the ruins, and pictures of the Lacandon, as well as letters from Carl Frey, Dr. Kidder and Dr. Ruppert, are at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Recordings of the Lacandon chants and flute music were remastered and recorded on tape and then transferred to compact disc in 1999. These are also in the archives at the School of American Research.



Enlargement of stamp issued in the 1950s by the Mexican Post Office to commemorate the discovery of Bonampak

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION
RELATING TO THIS REPORT

Copy of original Cedro bill

RELACION DEL GASTOS PAGADOS EN ESTE CENTRAL CEDRO. CHIS
NEGOCIACION DEL SR. FELIPE RIANCHO POR EL SR. JOHN BOURNE
DURANTE SU ESTANCIA

| | | |
|--|----|--------|
| Por alimentacion de John Bourne y carlos Frey D/31 Enero/4 Feb a - \$3.00 Diarios c/u | \$ | 30.00 |
| Por jornales de Luis Huchin D/4/12 Feb a \$3.00Drs | | 27.00 |
| Por alimentacion de John Bourne y Carlos Frey D/12/19 Feb. a \$3.00 Diarios c/u | | 48.00 |
| Por jornales de Enrique Frey D-19/22 Feb. a \$4.00 Drs | | 16.00 |
| Por alimentacion de John Bourne y Carlos Frey D 22/2 de marzo, a \$3.00 diarios c/u | | 54.00 |
| Por alquiler 3 bestias D-19/22 Feb. a \$3.00 c/u | | 36.00 |
| Por alimentacion de John Bourne y Carlos Frey D/4/7 marzo a \$3.00 diarios c/u | | 24.00 |
| Por jornales de Victor Rivero D/2/4 de marzo a \$3.00 Drs. | | 9.00 |
| Valor mercancias tomo tienda Cedro. S/g. Diarios | | 190.64 |
| Suma Total | \$ | 434.64 |



C. Cedro Chis.

Marzo 7 de 1946

Pedro Aldecon F.

Comments:

Enrique Frey who is mentioned above was not related to Carl Frey.
The abbreviation c/u, is translated, cada uno, or each.
The abbreviation S/g, Su Giro, is translated, your draft or bill of exchange.

Carl and I spent 36 days in the Lacanhá, from January 31, 1946 to March 7, 1946.
The rate of exchange was then, 12.50 pesos to the dollar, which comes to \$34.74 dlls.
total. Our daily cost was 97 cents, or 49 cents a day per person.

English translation of the Cedro bill

ACCOUNT OF EXPENDITURES PAID IN THIS CEDRO OFFICE. CHIS.
NEGOTIATED BY SR. FELIPE RIANCHO FOR MR. JOHN BOURNE
DURING HIS STAY

| | | |
|---|----|--------|
| For meals for John Bourne and Carl Frey D/31 January/4 Feb. at \$3.00 a day each | \$ | 30.00 |
| For wages of Luis Huchin D/4/12 Feb. at \$3.00 daily | | 27.00 |
| For meals for John Bourne and Carl Frey D/12/19 Feb. at \$3.00 a day each | | 48.00 |
| For wages of Enrique Frey D-19/22 Feb. at \$4.00 a day | | 16.00 |
| For meals for John Bourne and Carl Frey D 22/2 of March, at \$3.00 a day each | | 54.00 |
| For hire of 3 mules D-19/22 Feb. at \$3.00 each | | 36.00 |
| For meals for John Bourne and Carl Frey D/4/7 March at \$3.00 a day each | | 24.00 |
| For wages of Victor Rivero D/2/4 for March at \$3.00 a day | | 9.00 |
| Price of merchandise from Cedro stock room. daily draft | | 190.64 |
| Sum total | \$ | 434.64 |



Chis. March 7 of 1946

C. Cedro.

Pedro Aldecon F.

1946 COUNT OF LACANDON FAMILIES LIVING IN THE LACANHA AREA

In the Lacanhá area the number of Lacandon in the 5 caribals consisted of 7 males and 18 females, or a total of 25 individuals. Chicleros from the El Cedro camp gave Spanish names to a number of Lacandon with whom they had the most contact.

- denotes Lacandon who were photographed.
- ◻ denotes Lacandon who made recordings.

CARIBAL 1 M•◻ ChanKin (Obregón), patriarch
F• NahaKin 1, mother of ChanKin (Obregón)
F NahaKin 2, wife of ChanKin (Obregón)
F•◻ NaBor 1, wife of ChanKin (Obregón) and sister of ChamBor (José Pépe)
F• Carmita 1, age 14, sister of ChanKin (Obregón)
F Margarita, sister of ChanKin (Obregón)
F• Ko, age 8
M Kayom 1, child
F NahaKin 3, child

9 Lacandon in Caribal 1

CARIBAL 2 M• ChamBor (José Pépe), patriarch
F• NahaKin 4 (Carmita), wife of ChamBor (José Pépe)
F• NaBor 2 (Rosita 1) wife of ChamBor (José Pépe)

3 Lacandon in Caribal 2

CARIBAL 3 M•◻ Kayom 2, patriarch
F• NaBor 3, wife of Kayom 2, and sister of ChamBor (José Pépe)
F NahaKin 5, wife of Kayom 2, and sister of ChamBor (José Pépe)

3 Lacandon in Caribal 3

CARIBAL 4 M• Bor, patriarch
F Rosita 2, wife of Bor
F Nunc, child of Rosita 2
M Kin, child of Rosita 2

4 Lacandon in Caribal 4

CARIBAL 5 M• Kayom 3 (Caranza), patriarch
F Maria, mother of Kayom 3 (Caranza)
F Name not recorded, wife of Kayom 3 (Caranza)
F Name not recorded, wife of Kayom 3 (Caranza)
F Name not recorded, wife of Kayom 3 (Caranza)
F Baby, name not recorded, child of Kayom 3 (Caranza)

6 Lacandon in Caribal 5

MENU OF LACANDON RECORDINGS

MADE AT EL CEDRO, CHIAPAS, ON FEBRUARY 27, 1946

| TRACK | PERFORMER | TITLE |
|-------|-----------|---|
| 1 | ChanKin | Flute melody |
| 2 | ChanKin | Tiger chant and flute melody |
| 3 | NaBor | Chant "Mother singing to baby" |
| 4 | NaBor | Chant "Caribe mother looking for lost child" |
| 5 | NaBor | Chant "song given to mother when her child is lost in the forest" |
| 6 | ChanKin | Chant "The child that cries" |
| 7 | ChanKin | Parrot chant |
| 8 | ChanKin | Chant "On the edge of the Milpa" |
| 9 | ChanKin | Chant "Don't bother me" |
| 10 | ChanKin | Tiger chant |
| 11 | NaBor | Chant "Don't get wet" |
| 12 | ChanKin | Flute melody |
| 13 | ChanKin | Rain chant and flute melody |
| 14 | ChanKin | Conversation |
| 15 | ChanKin | Chant "Where is your mother" |
| 16 | Kayom | Tiger chant |
| 17 | Kayom | Tiger chant |
| 18 | Kayom | Deer chant |
| 19 | Kayom | Flute melody |
| 20 | Kayom | Flute melody |
| 21 | Bor | Flute melody |
| 22 | Kayom | Flute melody |
| 23 | Kayom | Flute melody |
| 24 | Kayom | Pozol chant |
| 25 | Kayom | Chant "Tortillas very little done" |
| 26 | Kayom | Chant "to climb over a house" |
| 27 | ChanKin | Chant and flute melody |