

Shortgrass In Mexico Finds Relaxation Hard On His Nerves

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DEL RIO, Tex. — The Shortgrass Country ends at this outpost, and a more significant boundary originates — the dividing line between the United States and the Republic of Mexico.

In the past few days, I've spent quite a bit of time studying the people on the Mexican side of the border at Ciudad Acuna. While my wife attacked the curio joints, I've lounged against the doorsills, watching the hordes of Mexican citizens tearing up and down the narrow streets and near-nonexistent sidewalks, seeing such sights as gangs of weary prisoners digging ditches, and ladder-climbing hod carriers packing buckets on their shoulders — all to the tune of street vendors hawking their wares above the continuous sound of automobile horns threatening the jay walkers and horse-drawn carts.

To increase the turmoil, tourists swarm amidst the throngs of native gentes. These visitors blend in with the resident populace about as well as a roan cowpony would with a span of trained circus horses. Included in the scene are scatterings of Mexican-Americans, citizens of the U.S. who are probably only a few generations removed from the culture of this land, yet obviously as different from Acuna residents as the Anglos

In short, what you have is this; If corral facilities were available, you could take a two-wat cutting gate and separate the two nationalists as fast as they could be choused through the chute. A few would have to be hand-sorted, but not many.

The big attraction of this border town, and all the other ports of entry, are the fantastic bargains to be found. In a brief afternoon run, a smart buyer can fill her shopping bag with trinkets at only 10 percent above what the same items can be purchased at home. Seasoned hands at invading the shops can add to the savings by bartering. People who live immediately across the river can further beat the wheel by rodeoing much of the same merchandise from the Indians f.o.b. New Mexico or Arizona.

Horse traders, pawnbrokers, and bankers can run up an even bigger score. Mexican merchants are behind the times and it isn't uncommon for them to lose money on one out of every 500 deals.

Newcomers to the frontera, like people anywhere else in the world, can be cheated. American-printed guidebooks are the best source of misinformation. The theme of these tomes of propaganda is the Mexico is the "land of manana" where everybody relaxes and takes things mighty casual. What the book actually means is that the publishers hope to come across a sucker who is so careless of his future cash position that he'll pitch off 98 good pennies today for two bits worth of bad advice.

On our trek, for instance, I saw one of the Land of Tomorrow hombres sell a lady a marble-topped table one size too small for a canary cage for \$169. Two stores down, another lady was being relaxed out of seven \$10 bills for a lamp that wouldn't fully light a telephone booth. Still another place close by was doing so well relaxing the customers that the clients who could see were buying prescription glasses at bargain prices, while those with two good hind legs were over-rushing the walking cane department.

Judging from this action, the only reason to call Mexico the land of tomorrow is to explain that for every day a pack of tourists come across the border, the Mexican business community has to take the next day off to distribute the dividends.

The guidebooks are wrong on some other points, too. The one I was leafing through at the hotel said: "Be sure and do not drink water in Mexico unless it has been treated, or serious digestive disorders may result." That must have been the most popular page in the entire work. All the Americanos I saw were lapping up stuff a lot stronger than water, and with great gusto. Next morning around the swimming pool the same parties were still health conscious: they were wearing the bell boy out with orders for headache powders and nourishing fruit juices. You could tell they'd followed the books' advice, as they were giving the ice water plenty of attention. (One chap told me that he had such a dreadful hangover from drinking tequila that he was afraid to go in the pool while the kids were swimming for fear he'd make the little fellows sick. I think he was just joshing because, later on, I saw him arise from his chair without his wife's help.)

Visiting Mexico is always worthwhile. The binds between the two nations are strengthened annually as the tourists pass across the river. I'll be glad to get home. Saving scads of money is fun for awhile; but as the credit card receipts stack up on my desk at the motel, I can see we must cease investing our money so wisely.