



Caminos of San Bernardo

HOWARD SCOTT GENTRY

The caminos of Mexico have no beginning and are without end. For, having set out upon a road, one can take up a foot-trail common to pack-beasts and men; from this one can branch out upon a side trail connecting dimly to another side trail by a deer or cattle path which leads one back again by a circuitous route to a main trail and eventually to the point of departure. Thus the land is covered with a maze of trails, over plains and valleys, through mountains, deserts, and canyons, from seashore to seashore; a young man could grow a gray beard following them and in the end reach only his own grave. Graves, as a word in passing and not as evidence for the above statement, can often be seen along the trails of Mexico; the mounds of stones are like periods to sentences and their little wooden crosses like asterisks suggesting foot-notes to lives never written. By the trails also are other mounds of stones bearing crosses at the apex, which in the sentence of life may be likened to commas. In passing these the pious journeyman lifts his hat and tosses on another stone. These heaps of stones, though topped with the Catholic cross, preserve nevertheless an old Indian custom.

The trails are not young. Until the coming of the Spaniards Mexicans were without the wheel, the burro, or the horse. For generations their bare feet and *guaraches*, in coming and going, outlined and smoothed these trails in forming the great maze of Mexican relationships. When the Conquistadores marched northward they followed wide clear foot-trails from tribe to tribe. The Road to Cibola¹ was one of the most

1. Carl O. Sauer, *The Road to Cibola*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1932.

HOWARD SCOTT GENTRY was a brilliant ethnobotanist and explorer who did groundbreaking work in Mayo and Guarijio (Warihio) communities in southern Sonora in the thirties and forties. His classic book of that region, *Rio Mayo Plants*, is being revised, augmented and re-issued by the Southwest Center at the University of Arizona. Gentry's plant explorations have inspired a new generation of ethnobotanists and ecologists whose field study in Sonora is sponsored by the Southwest Center. Gentry died in April 1993. "Caminos of San Bernardo" is reprinted with permission from *The Quarterly Review* (now published as the *Michigan Quarterly Review*), Winter 1942. The original incorporated a map detailing the various caminos of San Bernardo. That map is not reproduced here. Consequently, certain minor emendations have been made to the text. Nothing else has been changed.

ancient and important highways of North America, stretching from the pueblos of the Southwest to Mexico City and on southward, how far we do not know. Before the human trails were the feral ones, formed by a vast miscellany of past-shadowy beasts, going and coming between water and pasture, on reproductive pursuits, and upon migrations.

Trails are not static elements, as we usually think of them, but shift and alter with the passage of time. The trails of Mexico changed with the waxing and waning of tribes and their migrations. Now they change with innovations and habits, yet over a large part of Mexico most of the old Indian thoroughfares remain. Portions of the Road to Cibola and the trail from the land of the Warihios at San Bernardo to the land of the Chínipas at Chínipas are such remnants. In places the latter trail is worn to a depth of four or five feet in disintegrating granite by water and foot of man and beast, so that one walks embanked on either side to his head or shoulders. Many trails have been most radically altered since the coming of the Spaniards and some established in recent times have already been abandoned—as in the case of the wagon roads in the vicinity of Baroyeca, old capital of Sonora, a city which in itself has fallen to emptiness and decay. The small footpaths from rancho to pueblo and from rancho to rancho are numerous and shifting. New property ownership, milpa clearings, floods and wind-felled trees are some of the causes which result in changes of route or complete abandonment.

During my residence in San Bernardo, Sonora, a small pueblo of 300 to 400 people lying in comparative isolation and surrounded by the short-tree forest wilderness, I became intimately acquainted with the particular pattern of trails leading in and out of the pueblo. I found that these trails revealed many things about San Bernardo and its inhabitants: that San Bernardo is on a highway of local commerce, connecting the mountain isolated valley of Chínipas with the more worldly lower Rio Mayo country; that the natives come and go with a rough regularity between their houses and their outlying milpas, pastures, and forests; that within the town itself as well as on its outskirts is a great maze of pathways beaten by visiting neighbors, who tend to form self-centered groups.

In addition there are some paths for which at first I could find no practical use. Why, for instance, should a winding trail run around the town walls, wandering through the encroaching shrubbery from a house at one end of town to a house at the opposite end, when the shortest distance is by the open obvious route straight through town? Natural

obstructions such as gulches and rocks have played but a minor part in determining its course. To be sure, such paths wind around particularly dense thickets and rock abutments, but in general they lead over terrain less hospitable to the foot than the more direct central trails.

Gradually, as my acquaintance and understanding of the people grew, the trails with all of their psychological implications became clearer, and in their very nature they helped me to an understanding of the people. With these two sources of information (trails and people), each reacting upon and explaining the other, I have been able to form the following explanation of the San Bernardo trail pattern which, I think, will come out most clearly if I list the trails according to their uses. Indeed, use is the source of their existence and to understand that fact in its full implications is to understand the social life of such a Mexican community. I shall dispose of the obvious trails first, skipping only the auto road, which ends at San Bernardo.

THE HIGHWAY

It enters San Bernardo from the west, as the road from Alamos to Chínipas and Chihuahua, and fans out like the synapse of a nerve. The one trail becomes several. This fanning is due to the branching of the trail to different parts of the town, principally the main *Barrio* and *Frijole Barrio*; and also to the uncertainty of the pack trains in knowing just which route to select.

Sometimes the pack animals will split into two or three files, each following its own trail, depending usually upon the independent whim of a pack beast leading others less headstrong behind it. Perhaps the weary *arriero* is too listless to guide them, knowing that it will not matter anyway, eventually they will all unite again into the outgoing trail on the other side. This independent streak in the pack animal is the strongest factor in keeping so many highway routes well beaten through the tiny pueblo. Perhaps the animal remembers a particular route, or a house where once or several times his burden was unloaded and he was allowed to rest, while his driver sipped the inevitable coffee. One must not overlook, however, the most obvious use of these branches; they are a natural convenience leading more local travelers to different parts of town.

Upon this main trail goes all manner of merchandise. From the merchants below in the railroad towns come cube sugar, coffee beans, rock

salt, and other groceries—some in cans—and even dates from Baja California, matted together in great balls and sewed up in hides; hardware such as axes, hammers, machetes, and gasoline cased in tins. Once a piano was taken over the mountains balanced on the back of an exceptionally strong mule with two men on either side to steady it. From the mountains come lumber; two planks, strapped at one end over a mule's back, and with the other ends dragging along behind; oranges, apples, potatoes, beans, hides, raw metal from the mines. The pack trains bring cattle, brides, and sick people on the way to a doctor. Idling townsmen sit by the hour waiting to enjoy the stir the traveler makes when he tops the arroyo bank and with one stride is in town.

OTHER MAIN DEPARTURES

By these trails enter, for the most part, those visitors known to San Bernardans: rancheros, neighbors, friends, relatives from nearby ranchos and pueblos. To them San Bernardo is a purchasing point, a social center, the home of a part of their family, or merely a neighboring town. Half the inhabitants they know casually and one or two closely. Both horsemen and footmen use the trails, as do the occasional beasts of a wandering peddler bearing cargoes of poles, wood, hides, corn, oranges, or of coffee and sugar. The professional *arrieros* with their trains of from ten to thirty pack animals are not expected to be met on these lesser trails. Rather, it is the provincial old man threading his lonely way with a *morral* slung under his shoulder; or a group of youths on runty ponies laughing and thudding along; or a small boy with his two burros loaded with firewood. Often there exists a fellowship between the boy and his burro, shown when he takes the long-eared head in his arms, turns his beast about on the trail, so that it stands reversed while the boy readjusts the pack.

TRAILS TO MILPAS AND FOREST

By these enter the staff of life, maize, *calabazas*, and a hundred and one other miscellaneous articles in the raw state from the surrounding areas; poles for building, wood, brush for brooms, kapok for pillows, wilted bundles of divers medicinal herbs, wild fruits, corn fodder, grass

in huge bundles, *otate* poles, palm leaves, milk, cattle, rocks and woodland oddities, dead birds, trapped foxes and coyotes. The *pobrecitos* (little poor ones) are most upon these trails going to and fro, from milpa to house, tending maize for themselves or for another owner on half shares. Whether ragged and dirty Indians or ragged and soiled Mexicans they are ready to stop for a chat and usually will answer eagerly your questions about what they carry. Out of their simple naive minds they can tell you more about the half-wild world around than was ever dreamed in a more sophisticated philosophy. For the *campo*, with a roof of sky and walls of wilderness, is as much their home as the mud-wattle house in which they live.

TOWN TRAILS

To the north of town you may see the camino to the *Campo Santo*, which is literally the "Saints' Ground" where lie the dead. We shall not enter it lest we be distracted from our general subject by the fantasy of graveyard art as it is most extensively practiced in Mexico. The trail is not well used; the town is too small to provide sufficient deaths with their consequent processions of mourners and decorators.

One may also note a series of small trails leading from the houses down a cliff into the arroyo. These are water trails going to little *positas* scooped out in the gravel wash. Some time in the past Mexicans learned that water taken from such little gravel wells is fresh and pure, so now, even though a clear brook sparkles and bubbles through the wide arroyo bed, they still carry their drinking water up from the *positas*.

Trails also lead to the stream side, where women wash clothes with loud flapping and beating upon chosen rocks. There everybody bathes, infrequently, but almost invariably on San Juan's day, which falls the twenty-fourth of June and about the day the very welcome summer rains begin. "Of all the fiesta days," my *mozo*, Juanito, said, "San Bernardans like best the day of San Juan. At the first suggestion of dawn the father rouses his household and they all go down to the arroyo to bathe. Later they return to the house and gorge upon watermelons, the fruit they love. These have been raised by irrigation in little arroyo side gardens during the hot spring dry season. They put up gay paper decorations; visit one another's houses and in the evening dance and sing. It is the day for the beginning of *Las Aguas* when the verdant summer growing

season begins." Women, particularly girls, with *ollas* on their heads, are more commonly seen than men on these trails to the arroyo, and boys often run up and down in play, or with the yoke carry ten gallons of water at a time.

The plaza is a bare open area without shrub or tree, through which everyone passes according to the particular angle of his destination. In two of the buildings are small *tiendas*, to which the people are incessantly running for a few centavos' worth of sugar, salt, coffee, candy, matches, or other commodity. I have omitted many of the interhouse trails, chiefly because they would provide only a needless repetition. Some of them are more worn than others, indicating the intimacy of some of the dwellers.

The trails between the houses of Carlos and Carlota, and between those of Renalda and Leandro are examples. They suggest closely affiliated families more or less distinct from the others, an indication borne out by a personal acquaintance with each of the two. It is seldom that the members of the Carlota-Carlos set visit those of the Renalda-Leandro set, since a slight animosity or jealousy exists between the two in pueblo affairs. They are politically and ethically separated, although some of the sons and daughters have married across the feudal line. Other trails indicate similar lines of demarcation between inhabitants, which can be explained only on such grounds as that of social status.

In this respect the pathways to the west of town loom up conspicuously. On a map they would reveal more quickly, perhaps, than actual inspection, that they are used for going from one end of town to the other by a side route, which does not lead through the public square or past the front of houses. In other words, those who use this route are persons who do not wish to be seen. A visit to the two ends of the town discloses that the houses there belong to the poorer class, those to the north being pure Indians, either Mayos or Warihios. These Indians, for reasons known only to themselves, often avoid persons outside their own little group. Observation, however, disclosed several causes of this exclusiveness.

The adolescent youths of the town may take a keen delight in casting upon them the stones of aspersion, mocking their dress, their Indian identity, and such personal peculiarities as a limp or protruding teeth. Even the elders will indulge in laughter at an Indian's expense. I recall also the story of my *mozo*, Juanito, who one day was hunting a burro in the *monte*. He heard the excited cries of a woman calling her husband. Going to the edge of a deep arroyo he looked down to see a Mexican

attacking a woman. She was only an Indian, he said, but acknowledged that it was bad.

In Alamos, a beautiful and stately old neighboring town, I have seen boys in diabolical and sadistic humor taunt and tease cripples and simple-minded people beyond the limits of the observer's patience. Such persecution, however, is fortunately not prevalent in San Bernardo, where the line between the upper and lower classes is not so sharp. It is obvious, however, that the Indian's contact with the Mexican is not always happy.

The Indian may also take a bypath because he has some business which he wishes to carry on secretly with someone at the other end of town. Or he may not wish to be detained, as he is likely to be if he goes through the main part of town, for there he might meet someone who wished to talk awhile, and he would be too polite or interested to refuse.

Finally one must not forget that the Indian, particularly the Warihio, is a shy person with a long heritage of solitary ancestors behind him. The bypaths will lead him inconspicuously to the milpa or forest as well as to almost any house in town. He can travel back and forth from field to house for weeks at a time without the ordinary people taking the least notice of him.

From the foregoing evidence we can assume that the particular maze of bypaths lying on the west side of town is really due to the fact that San Bernardo is a biracial and class-conscious town. Not only do the upper class have their own houses and district in a vague way; they also have their own caminos in the same vague unconscious way as the peasant or Indian has his paths.

On the whole there is amity between the two groups and as they mix in town and field one is not aware on the surface of any distinction. They have too much in common in their way of life to appear otherwise; Indian and Mexican may sit visiting under the Mexican's portal, while their children romp together upon the arroyo sands below. It is the new Mexican democracy with survivals from the past; not until the last pure Indians of Mexico have gone will the differential undercurrent cease to flow and make a ripple here and there.

It would be interesting to know if the pattern of side trails is found in other biracial towns, so numerous through Mexico, and what other idiosyncrasies might be detected therein. The trails are an inherent and useful product of the brown man, whose feet write riddles in the earth. They are an ever-present, yet labyrinthine and ambiguous source book, expressing the flux between the vanishing old and the imperative new. ❖