

## *Agnese Nelms Haury: No Armchair Traveler, She*

GARY PAUL NABHAN

Most of all, I remember sitting next to Aggie in the sand on a flotsam-strewn beach on Tiburon Island, looking out across the waters of the Gulf of California toward the mainland. The rest of our group of a dozen or so companions had decided to hike toward the island's interior, while we decided to stay in that tension zone between desert and sea. We had an hour together, I suppose, without any interruption from our colleagues, from telephones, doorbells, or honking horns. The cries of seagulls and terns were all that intruded on our dialogue.

Aggie held the palm of her right hand above her eyes, and glanced at the empty beaches that stretched out along Tiburon's coastline.

"Somehow this place reminds me of the coast of Yemen, that stark contrast between the richness in the ocean's waters and the scarcity of the desert itself. Have you had the chance to go to Yemen, Gary? It's so fascinating."

"Oh how I wish it was safe to go there now..." I began to reply. "You know, on that first trip to Oman that you helped me prepare for, I went south toward the Hadramaut in my search for frankincense bushes, but could not cross over into Yemen because of political tensions. So we followed the Frankincense Trail south past Suhar, but never to Yemen. But near the Marib Dam in Yemen—that's where my father's people were said to have originated—the Banu Nebhani..."

"Well," she frowned, "that's a shame. You could say, I suppose, you were being prudent. There is too much turmoil there now. But the coastal villages of Yemen's south coast are as colorful as any I've ever seen anywhere in the world. Drat! I wish I could still travel as I was able

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*Agnese Nelms Haury and Gary Paul Nabhan, Baja California, 2002.*  
(Courtesy Loren Haury.)

to do since I was in my twenties, but all this medication makes me far too sluggish, even when I get to a marvelous place like this. I'm so relieved that there are still such places completely off the beaten path."

Although she had never been out to Tiburon Island, she had remembered stories that her friend Julian Hayden told her about going out there in 1941. She also recalled that she had catalogued and curated seashell jewelry derived from the Gulf of California while working with Dr. Emil Haury—the man she later married in 1990, a quarter century after their friendship began among many friends in the mid-1960s.

"Gary, do you think these are like the shores where the Hohokam came on their salt pilgrimages?"

"Could be," I replied. "I've always been intrigued how my elderly O'odham mentors regarded this sea with such fear and awe. They claimed that their own pilgrimages here were as much about songs that came to them in dreams as the visions that occurred when they arrived at these shores."

“No wonder,” she said quietly. “I’ve felt the same awe myself when I had the chance to visit the desert coasts of Libya, Peru, Ecuador, and Yemen too, of course.”

She’d worked in South America, too? I thought to myself. Perhaps I never knew that, or perhaps I had forgotten it. But she had not merely visited South America; she wrote *Indians of the Andes*, published by the Carnegie Endowment in 1956. It was followed by *Libya, Building a Desert Economy* (1957), and *The Burma Road to Pyidawtha* (1958).

Because of our mutual interests, I was most familiar with her work in “the Near East” going back to her days as a history student, and continuing during her time with Eleanor Roosevelt exploring the issues of human rights and community development for the nascent United Nations. I knew that she had also traveled elsewhere in Asia and Europe as editor for the Publications Department of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. But most of the time together, we spoke of our shared interest in the spice trade from the Arabian Peninsula and Mahgreb up to the Black Sea, and out across the Silk Road, or the trade between Mesoamerica and Arid America. Those were the conversations which had inspired me to write *Camels, Cumin, and Caravans: A Spice Odyssey*, a tome that became so rambling, so intricately layered, and so damningly difficult to edit that the University of California Press didn’t get it out until after Aggie died.

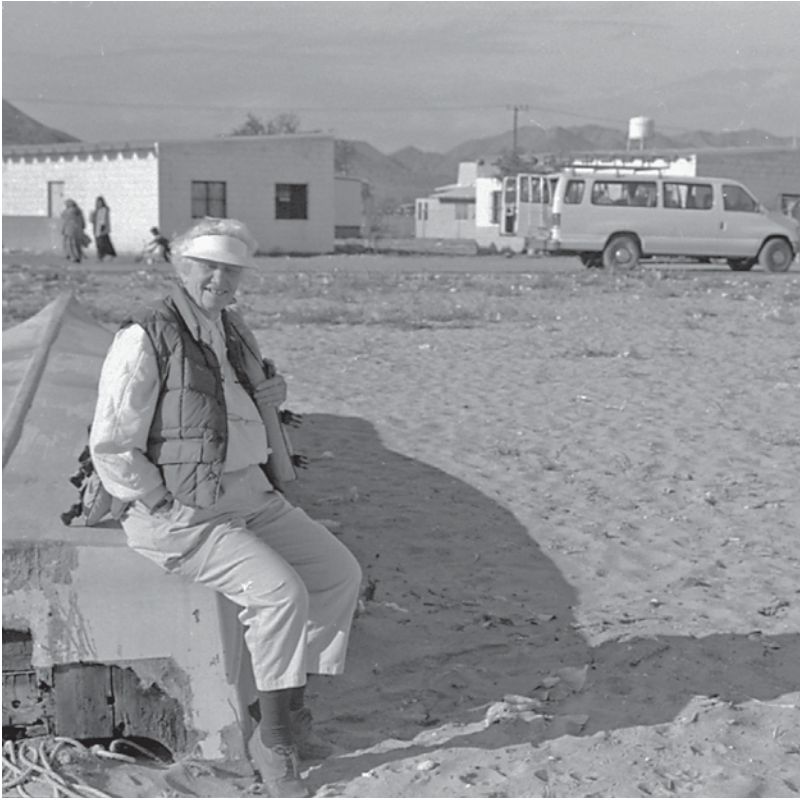
No matter. Aggie and I had already talked through most of the wildest parts of it over the years. She lived and breathed such stuff, especially in her later years. In fact, one mutual friend of ours from that era once suggested to me that Aggie was the “consummate armchair traveler.”

But what I believe he had inadvertently missed (or dismissed) was that Aggie could not in any way be pegged as an armchair traveler over most of her lifetime; in fact, she had traveled to far more places for far more reasons than any other person I’ve ever met. She was an itinerant scholar, a cultural geographer, and a field historian of travel itself.

The first time that I mentioned to Aggie that I was bound for Oman, she stood up, held up her index finger, and disappeared into a room of her home I had never noticed. She returned with six books for me, all about Oman, with some of the editions dating back a century or more. (Aggie later gave me a “tour” of that room, which served as her archive of travel writing: several thousand books and magazine articles arranged by region and country, often with a page of her own comments typed up on plain white stationery, and tucked inside the cover.)

“Now, you may borrow these for a few weeks, but you must promise to bring them all back. For some travel guide series, like the Baedekers, I try to keep every edition—it is so interesting to see how their advice changed from edition to edition over the decades, almost as a chronicle of globalization in and of itself!”

*Baedekers?* I was out of my league. It was not until I had read through several of her Baedeker guides, amazed, that I read up on the history of this remarkable series, which dated back to the 1860s, if not earlier. The Baedeker guides were the first to attempt to cover every major country on the planet, but were far more astute and lusciously descriptive than any Lonely Planet guide has ever been. Begun before photography was used much in travel guides, they provided enough thick description to allow your imagination to build a sensual portrait of each major place on your itinerary.



*Agnese Nelms Haury, Bahía Kino, Sonora, 2002. (Courtesy Loren Haury.)*

Aggie loved Baedekers like some grown-ups love baseball card collections.

And yet, at the same time that Aggie could demonstrate such extravagance as a collector of historic books and ephemera, she was easily the most humble, imperturbable traveling companion I've ever had the pleasure to wander around with. Nothing seemed to fluster her.

On a week-long trip to the Sierra Madre Occidental in Chihuahua with our mutual friend Anne Fitzgerald, Aggie ate every "mystery meal" placed before us, and slept in every kind of shelter except a manger in a sheep stable! At one point along our route at a campground near Basaseachic Falls, I had to ask her if it was all right for her to share a very small, one-room log cabin with Anne, since there really wasn't any other choice.

"Oh, please, don't make any fuss over me...as if I need something more upscale! As long as we have time for a nice happy hour out on the porch before sunset, with something strong to drink, some good cheese and some crackers, I think I'll be able to sleep here without any trouble!"

Parts of the adventure ended up as an essay in my book *Cultures of Habitat*, but do not fully do Aggie justice. To this day Anne Fitzgerald and I continue to exchange stories from that adventure with Aggie.

There was a leisurely pace and a *style* to the way Aggie traveled into the unknown on our adventures together—something I had glimpsed when I had been blessed by being on the road with other well-trod women of her generation, like Jean Andrews and Betty Fussell...the same kind of style, wit, and verve that we associate with the likes of Freya Stark or Beryl Markham. There was also a bit of self-effacing humor in Aggie about every disorienting encounter—never poking fun at others, only gently at herself. These incidents prompted shaggy dog tales of travels in which nothing went the way it had been planned...and all the better because of it. After all, if a good adventure could be meticulously planned, predicted, and scheduled down to the last detail, why would one need to go out for it at all?

What I am saying is that Aggie had the gift of taking risks, of proceeding wherever serendipity led her, and that is why her own robust life was so remarkable. That's probably why she attracted special notice, even at a young age, from the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, Edward R. Morrow, Emil Hauray, and Alger Hiss. That's why her later philanthropy constantly broke boundaries, exploring human rights, cross-cultural communication, and cultural and ecological issues in a manner that no other foundation had ever zeroed in on before.

In *personally* selecting and funding over 200 projects on applied anthropology, civil rights, conservation, investigative journalism, linguistic restoration, international peace, and social justice, Aggie bet on underdogs, out-of-the-box thinkers, obscure cultural communities, and ahead-of-the-time topics to which no philanthropist before her had given much attention, let alone financial support. She was, of course, guided to some opportunities by her marvelous friends, but Aggie did not leave her selection of projects suitable for funding up to some hired hands; she went out to find and see potential projects for herself.

In fact, Aggie made it through most of her “third career” as a philanthropist without the assistance of a program officer; she would go into the field with the investigators on her own because “that was the fun of it” (*it* meaning her clandestine life as a philanthropist).

Furthermore, Aggie challenged other foundations and endowments to put aside their worries about their overhead, their cuts-of-the-pie, their returns-on-investment, and to go where no one else had gone. She even had her lawyers threaten the University of Arizona Foundation with a lawsuit if its staff did not report that they were taking “handling fees” out of private donations when the donors believed that all their support was going directly to the causes for which it was intended. Her challenge to the foundation ended amicably, in part because the foundation changed its policies and reimbursed accounts for fees that had previously gone unreported.

And so, what I remember most about Aggie was that her self-effacing humor and mild-mannered demeanor were a bit of a diversion, a means to deflect attention away from herself. What she really loved was traveling, walking, talking, or sitting *on the very edges* of our world, where one distinctive “landscape” or “culture” or “language” or “ethic” bumps up against another. These activities shaped her vision of what needed to be done in the world, and it proved to be a vision that is still gaining momentum and generating positive social change to this day.

No armchair traveler, she. ❖