

Bosque de Chihuahua

by
Jim Sayles

Ned Butler's younger sister, Terry, was a cheerleader and track star in high school, and, while attending the University of the Americas in Mexico City, she landed a position on the Mexican home show, "Feria de Hogar". As she quickly gained popularity, "La Rubia" also appeared on several magazine covers. The now famous, smart, beautiful young American blonde was instantly sought after by the most eligible bachelors of Mexico City. Among these was one of the wealthiest men in Mexico, Carlos Truyet.

In March of 1965 Terry invited Ned and myself to visit her in Mexico City to enjoy the reflected glory of her fame as she was entertained and courted by her suitors.

Terry informed Carlos that Ned and I loved to hunt, and Carlos, who owned lumber concessions in the Yucatan, promised to send us on a jaguar hunt.

The American ban on spotted cat skins being brought into the United States was still well into the future, and we were elated with the prospect of such an adventurous hunt, all at the expense of Terry's primary suitor.

Shortly thereafter an untimely hurricane closed all the back roads of the Yucatan, and, as we waited to see whether or not the roads would open up again, Carlos and his brother, Jorge, took Terry and us to their ranch near San Miguel de Allende, a town now famous for its festivals and its artistic community.

The Truyet ranch was used primarily to produce Mexican fighting bulls for the plaza de toros in Mexico City, and our first entertainment after checking into the Truyet castle was to participate in the ranch activity of testing the aggressiveness and fighting tendencies of the breeding cows.

The bulls themselves could not be tested, even at a young age, because to place them in the ring to face men with capes before going into the plaza de toros would educate them to the tactics used by the matadors and thus make them even more dangerous than they already were.

The cows, though, could be tested with capes, to determine their aggressiveness and the specific fighting tendencies displayed, which were believed to be passed on genetically by the cow to any bull calves she birthed. Therefore, the testing of the cows in the ranch's own ring was an important management tool.

It was fun for the ranch hands as well, all of whom strongly identified with the sport of bull fighting, and Carlos awarded us the great honor of participating in the event. Terry was first, and she held one side of the capote, the large, full cape, with one red side and one yellow side, while one of the ranch hands held the other.

The gate opened, and a wild, black, Mexican cow was let into the ring, spotting the two "matadors" immediately. As the angry cow charged the dancing cape, it passed through the capote a little too close for Terry's comfort. As the cow turned on her hooves to find the elusive cape, Terry dropped her end of the cape and made a dash for the wooden barricade that covered a hidden escape gate.

If Terry had not been as fast as she was, the cow would have run her down, and when the cow slammed into the barricade it knocked one horn off, the horn that would have easily penetrated soft flesh.

Ned and I might have backed out at that point if Terry had not already gone first, but there it was. We had no choice. We could not back down from what Terry had been willing to try.

I think I would have preferred using the cape alone, because it was a bit like dancing with a woman who wants to take the lead. I had to respond to whatever the ranch hand decided to do, and more than once I sucked my stomach in at the last minute to keep from getting hooked.

To keep us occupied and satisfy our hunting instinct, Carlos sent us out on horses with a couple of ranch hands to try some varmit calling on the remote areas of the ranch. Our guias did not know what to expect, but, in a whispered tone, as we tied our horses off at the first location on the side of a wild canyon, I asked them to sit apart from us and to keep quiet while they kept their eyes open.

The first squalls on my Weems Wild Call brought giggles of repressed laughter from our guias, which irritated me, because it reduced our chances of calling in a predator. The dying jackrabbit screams made by my Weems mouth blown call continued to amuse our part Indian guides until they both began to point with wild gestures as they yelled out loud.

“Gato! Gato montes! Gato montes!”

Their screaming and hollering turned the wary cat away, of course, but, after seeing a big tom bobcat come to the call, they were no longer skeptical about the hilarious gringo antics. Yet, for the rest of the afternoon, as they eagerly guided us from one spot to another, we called up no more predators, not even a gray fox.

In 1974 my mother organized a trip to San Miguel de Allende for the Abilene Photography Club to film the fiesta and the running of the bulls, and I went with them.

Our hotel was on the main plaza itself where all the fireworks and parades took place, but to adequately photograph the running of the bulls I had to join in on the running. This was thought to be extremely dangerous, but, for an old bull catcher, it was just fun. And, truthfully, none of these bulls came as close to getting me as the bulls I ran down on a daily basis in Crocodile Dundee country.

The small plaza de toros also hosted an unusual event that Sunday afternoon. Somehow they had convinced Mexico’s top bullfighter at the time, Manolo Martinez, to engage in a “mano a mano” with a local “novillero” (novice). A “mano a mano” is a bull fight in which only two matadors participate, and it is seen to be a kind of competitive match to see who is the best bull fighter.

Either Manolo Martinez was extremely confident that he could make the brassy young novillero look bad, or he was being paid a lot of money to appear on the card with a novillero at an unimportant rural plaza de toros.

The plaza was packed with standing room only, and spectators crowded the windows and rooftops of all the surrounding hillside buildings as Manolo opened with a ho-hum performance that only drew a few oles during his opening moves with the capote.

The novillero, a local boy with the chance of his lifetime, came out in his bright pink suit of lights and knelt down with his capote spread in front of him where the bull would come charging out of the gate as he entered the plaza angry as hell and looking for a fight.

The crowd was instantly on their feet as the bull charged the young novillero and then jumped completely over the matador under his swirling capote.

It was ON! And, for the rest of the afternoon, we were entertained with some of the most beautiful and daring displays of the “mano a mano” bullfighting art one could possibly hope to experience.

After returning to Mexico City Carlos and Jorge took Ned and myself to the Tiro de Pigeones, an elite pigeon shooting club where shooters from all over the world were gathering for The Championship of the Americas, one of the most prestigious pigeon shooting events in the world.

Carlos and Jorge had a closet full of high grade shotguns for us to choose from. Ned chose a Spanish made over and under, and I chose a Browning Diana Grade over and under. Neither of us at that time had ever been to a skeet or trap shooting range. Our entire experience with shotguns was the dove, quail, and duck hunting we had done in west Texas, and it was slightly intimidating to think that we were going to step up and shoot pigeons in front of the hundred or so experienced competitive shooters with medals and patches all over their shooting vests and caps.

The setup was similar to trap in that there were five shooting stations from left to right, but instead of a central target throwing dugout in front of the stations, five small boxes stationed left to right, about thirty yards from the shooters, held the pigeons. When the shooter, with the shotgun at his waist, yelled, “Listo!” one of the boxes flipped open and a pigeon flushed. At the sight of the bird in the air the shooter could raise his/her shotgun and shoot.

The pigeons sometimes flew straight up, straight away, right, left, or even in overhead spirals, and a short two foot high fence marked the escape perimeter where a pigeon, even if dead, was counted as a “miss”.

Ned and I in our boots, jeans and sleeveless western shirts were conspicuous newcomers, but we each downed our pigeons one after another with the first shot. After Ned’s first shot the range captain had to tell Ned, who didn’t want to waste shells, that he had to shoot his second round, even if the first round resulted in a kill. From that point on, we punished the dead pigeons falling to the ground with our first shot by blasting them again as they fell.

In pigeon shooting matches, including championship matches, a 10 out of 10 score is all that is required to be in the shoot-off rounds, as opposed to 25 out of 25, 50 out of 50 or 100 out of 100 required to qualify for a skeet or trap shoot-off. The reason for that low number is that a perfect score of 10 out of 10 is difficult to achieve.

On the first round, I already had my 10 out of 10, and Ned stepped up for his tenth bird. The bystanders and the other shooters in our round were already beginning to talk about the young gringo shooters, and when Ned’s pigeon came out of the box flying fast and hard to the right every shooter watching was glad they were not having to make that shot.

Ned was on a left side shooting station, and the bird launched into the air at full speed from the box at the far right. Ned’s first shot resulted in an puff-ball of feathers, and the bird slammed into the perimeter fence six inches from the top.

Ned had to shoot his second barrel up into the air, and the entire gallery erupted into a series of “Oles”.

Each of the other two rounds was the same, except that one of my “dead” birds escaped over the fence on the last round, and Carlos and Jorge, being familiar with pigeon shooting and having heard the buzz of admiration for their young gringo guests, were ecstatic. In a state of tremulous enthusiasm they offered to pay all our entry fees,

including the actual championship fee of \$2500 (which would have bought a new truck in those days), and they agreed to split the winnings with us just to sweeten the pot.

“Nah, we’ld rather go huntin’,” we replied.

After much effort to persuade us to enter the Championship of the Americas, Carlos reluctantly offered to send us to an island they owned that was overrun by whitetail deer and American crocodiles. They bought the island with the idea of establishing a resort there and on the mainland beach just south of the little fishing village of Zihuatanejo.

“We’re having trouble with deer eating everything we plant, and it seems that you could be of help to us while enjoying yourselves at the same time,” Carlos offered.

“Nah, we hunt deer in Texas,” said La Rubia’s ungrateful hermanos. “We’d rather do something more exotic.”

The final bid came in as a horseback hunt in the Bosque de Chihuahua of the Sierra Madre mountains with Yaqui Indian guides. There was no open season in March, but, because no one else would be within many miles of where our guides would take us, we could hunt deer, javelina, mountain lion, coyote, or whatever else we encountered.

In the 1960’s Aeronaves de Mexico bought all of its airplanes from various American airlines when those airplanes were considered to be too old to stay in service in America, and the old DC-6 with oil leaks running down the cowlings of its four engines, made Ned nervous.

Only six years earlier Ned was on one of the DC-3s that carried the Abilene High School football team out to El Paso for the bi-district championship. The second DC-3 flew close enough to them that they could recognize other players staring out of the windows, but over Big Spring, the DC-3 Ned was in did an emergency wing-over dive of several thousand feet to avoid a mid-air collision with a jet fighter from Webb Air Force Base.

The dive was totally unannounced, and Ned remembered being on the roof of the aircraft, looking at the seat behind him while one of the trainers, buckled into his seat, reached for his glasses, floating in the air as if weightless in space.

By the time their DC-3 recovered from the dive, the other airplane was just a tiny silver dot above them, and Ned never got over that experience.

When I was only seven years old I had my own frightening experience at Webb Air Force Base. My dad, president of the West Texas–New Mexico League at the time, frequently took me with him on his summer rounds of the ball parks. As we passed by Webb Air Force Base on old Highway 80, a huge billow of black and white smoke revealed a burning, single engine, AT-6 trainer plane that had crashed very near the chain link fence bordering the highway. The pilot was plainly visible in the burning cockpit, and my dad’s shout, “Don’t look!” came too late.

During our flight from Mexico City to Chihuahua the stewardess announced that the Chihuahua airport, with winds gusting to 80 mph, was shut down, and that the airplane was being diverted to a small, single runway airfield at Torreon 268 miles away. When we arrived at Torreon, the airfield was largely obscured by a dust storm of epic proportions, and, even with the DC-6 yawed at a 30 degree angle into the wind, the pilot could not stay lined up with the runway. A second pass, with the airplane yawed at an even more radical angle was aborted with the same result.

By this time some of the passengers began to puke without resorting to the brown paper “air sickness” bags, and the wailing and crying of the terrified passengers could not be pacified by the stewardess as she pleaded loudly, “Cálmese! Cálmese! El piloto tiene todo en el control.”

As a pilot myself, having a grand total of 60 hours flying time with the Longhorn Flying Club and seven jumps with the Longhorn Skydiving Club, I remained calm, gleefully provoking Ned’s fear as I said, “We’re gonna crash! We’re gonna crash!”

In my sophomore year at Texas University my fraternity brother, Mark Wilson, borrowed a freshman pledge’s brand new, black, fuel-injected Corvette, and he invited me to go for a ride.

“Let’s go out to 2222 and see how it drifts around the corners,” said Mark, immediately after the pledge, Curt Goetz, handed him the keys with a warning to please be careful, because his daddy told him he wasn’t supposed to let anyone else drive his ‘vette.

The banked curves of 2222, just above Lake Austin, were made for ‘vettes and motorcycles, and the brand new black stingray growled aggressively as it sucked down fuel and air audibly while we slid around the corner under control at 85 miles per hour.

An old red Ford pickup, with an inebriated driver, suddenly appeared in our lane, and Mark instinctively hit the brakes.

The ‘vette spun out of control, and, after one complete spin at 85 miles per hour, the front passenger’s side corner of the ‘vette clipped a massive liveoak tree that threw us backwards through a barbed wire fence and down the steep, cedar covered hillside with dust, debris, and body parts flying off as we plowed, rear first, down the mountainside toward the lake.

I remember being absolutely peaceful through the entire ordeal, intentionally alert to the details of my impending death, in the knowledge that there was absolutely nothing I could do to change or effect the outcome in any way.

I was so peaceful that I never pulled my elbow in from where it was resting on the window of the ‘vette, and that was the only bruise that either Mark or I had after the wreck.

We heard a loud hissing sound with dust boiling up all around us as we came to a stop, and Mark said, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, are you?”

“Yes. Let’s get the hell outta here.”

I had to kick the door open, and, after we scrambled away from the wreck we looked back to see what was left of Curt’s brand new stingray, wrapped with barbed wire where it came to a sudden stop against some boulders perched above the lake.

A trail of body parts extended like a blood trail from the final resting place of the ‘vette all the way up to where we exited the pavement, and, on the way up the steep hill, where a crowd had already gathered at the site of our rapid departure from the highway, I found a piece of black fiberglass with the crossed checkered flags emblem. I picked it up as a souvenir, feeling elated to be alive and unhurt.

Some time later we got a ride back to the fraternity house, where an anxious pledge requested the return of his keys.

“Well...uhm...Curt...uhm...” said Mark as he avoided eye contact and shuffled his feet.

“Where’s my ‘vette, Mark? I’ve gotta go. I’m already late.”

“Ah...Curt...uhm...”

“Here,” I said as I handed him the piece of broken black fiberglass with the crossed flags, having to force myself to restrain a sardonic grin.

It was exactly that same feeling of absolute helplessness to do anything to change the outcome of our experience that filled me with total calm, as well as a perverse sense of glee at everyone else’s apparent panic, when we made our third approach to the dust-blown Torreon airstrip.

After the third and final approach failed we gained altitude, and the pilot announced that we had just enough fuel to make it to the Monterray airport, where it was reported that the high winds were beginning to subside.

“Just enough” was not exactly a slide rule calculation. It was the anxious pilot’s futile attempt to calm a cabin full of sick, freaked out passengers, but I did not like the sound of “just enough”, and I made sure Ned shared my concern. Too many other things had gone wrong to trust in the pilot’s estimate of “just enough” fuel to make it to the Monterray airport.

And what if the Monterray airport was closed, too?

An hour and a half later we landed safely at Monterray, where the winds had recently died down to gusts of only 40 to 50 miles per hour.

The stewardess announced to the passengers that the airline was putting us all up for the night at a hotel with a voucher for meals, and that the taxis would pick us up in the morning to complete our flight to Chihuahua. Then she announced that the airline was providing each passenger with a bottle of “Superior” at the airport bar.

The next morning as we left our roach hotel on the way back to the airport, we passed our pilot and his crew getting into their taxi at the best hotel in town, but no one complained as we finally boarded our plane again to get this terrible ordeal over with.

On the way down the runway at liftoff speed the starboard outside engine failed, and the airplane began to shudder and shake with the tires squealing as the pilot applied the brakes.

The screaming and crying and puking started all over again, and, as the airplane spun around and lurched to a stop, the starboard wing extended out over the fence line 100 yards from the end of the paved runway.

For some reason we had to walk all the way back to the terminal, a small dot on the horizon, and, in the lobby we were gathered together where we were told that the engine problem was minor and that we would be back in the air shortly.

Four hours later the DC-6 pulled up at the gate with all four engines going. The engines were killed as required to board passengers, and, after we were all aboard, the pilot started three of the four engines. But good ‘ol number four wouldn’t start

After fifteen minutes we were offloaded one more time with the promise that the problem would be fixed shortly.

Thirty minutes later another Aeronaves de Mexico DC-6 flying from Mexico City to Monterray and then on to Chihuahua and El Paso, landed and offloaded passengers.

When it was apparent that there would be some empty seats on the other plane, a mob of passengers from our plane boarded the other flight even though the gate attendant attempted to stop them.

Both Aeronaves crews attempted to get the passengers from our plane off of the other plane, but, in the end, it took four policemen from Monterray with drawn pistols to get the terrorized passengers off that plane and back into the lobby.

Ned and I grinned in stoic silence as we watched the pathetic event, and eventually we all got on board our plane and took off for Chihuahua.

As our compensation for the previous ordeals, the Aeronaves crew placed a galvanized tub of iced down beer at the stewardess station with the invitation to “help ourselves”, and Ned and I made sure we got our fair share.

When I provoked Ned by pointing to the oil running down the engine cowlings and the loose rivets dancing all over the wings, he turned to me in complete seriousness and said, “Jim Sayles, if you say one more word, I will, by God, beat the crap out of you.”

At the Chihuahua airport we were met by the Truyet’s private pilot, Carlos Faustion, Mexico’s only WWII ace, having flown with the Esquadron Aero de Caza 201 in a P-47 fighter plane in Europe. Although gray-headed, Carlos was lively and enthusiastic as he flew the Piper twin engine airplane like a P-47 at tree level up the wild canyons of the Sierra Madres.

I sat in the co-pilot’s seat, and Ned sat behind us, gripping the arm rest with every tendon and leader in his body taut as he stared wide-eyed at the ponderosa pines and eerie rock formations flashing by his window.

Carlos frequently banked the wings to give Ned a better look at the ruins of small Aztec runner stations where the young, highly trained Aztec athletes, like the pony express of the American west, carried messages written in heiroglyphics on animal skins, from Montezuma to the extremities of his kingdom and beyond.

Each station was only two or three miles from the next so that the runners could relay messages or fire sticks as quickly as possible, and Hernan Cortes wrote that within twenty-four hours of his landing at Chianiztlan in May 1519, runners had described to Montezuma, 260 miles away, his ships, men, guns and horses.

We spent that night at the lumber camp lodge, looking forward to some great food after our travel ordeal, but a whole fish of some kind with bulging eyeballs, prepared for the lodge’s “special guests”, almost made us gag.

The next morning we loaded up in a jeep station wagon with the tent, bedrolls, fleece-lined leather coats, and rifles that Carlos had arranged for us to borrow, and we drove up a four wheel drive road along a winding canyon above a beautiful whitewater stream until we arrived at a single adobe dwelling with a plank verandah at the end of the road.

While waiting for our guides to arrive with the horses, we sat on the verandah with the caretaker of this outstation, his family, and our driver, who stayed until our gear was loaded onto the pack horse before returning to the lumber camp.

As we waited, a small gray-haired, gray-bearded man in a fall apart straw hat, off-white peasant pants and shirts, and huaraches, along with his son in similar attire, arrived on a horse trail leading a donkey burdened with two pack sacks carrying large ceramic jugs covered with a thick woven baskets for protection.

As soon as the old man was sighted, both the jeep driver and the man who lived at the outstation shouted, “Lupe! Lupe!” as they hurried out to greet him.

Lupe, his son, and the two men attempted to unload the heavy jugs from the pack sacks, but their struggle was in vain until Ned joined them and lifted each jug, one at a time, out of the pack sacks by himself.

Ned’s feat of strength was met with great approval, and, after he set each jug down safely on the verandah, tin cups and glasses appeared from the cabin, carried by the caretaker’s wife and a barefoot girl, four or five years old, in a faded print dress.

The jugs contained Lupe's sotol brew, a liquor made from the "flowering bloom" or sotol plant that grows in the high deserts of Chihuahua. We were each handed either a glass or a tin cup, and the powerful stuff burned like fire all the way down and all the way back up again.

Our hosts laughed at the young gringos' response to their drink of choice, and shortly afterwards our guides, three Yaqui Indians, appeared with the horses.

The head man, Antonio, was the only Indian who was fluent in Spanish. He and Aurelio, an older, wiry-muscled man with a long, deeply lined face, wore faded jeans, t-shirts, unlined blue jean jackets, straw hats, and huaraches made from discarded tire treads.

(Note: If you see Jeep tire marks high in the Sierra Madres where no Jeep can go, it's probably just an Indian wearing huaraches made from Jeep tire treads.)

Javier, shorter and stockier than the other two, wore jeans, too, but he had a red and black plaid shirt and an Elmer Fudd cap with ear flaps. He also wore leather work boots, which, in the days to come, would be envied by Antonio and Aurelio.

Our guides had to have their glass of sotol before loading food and gear onto our solo pack horse, and we watched while Antonio filled a one gallon tin for the expedition's supply of sotol.

This, we learned later, would be used not only for an after dinner toddy, but for starting our campfire as well. Our food consisted only of masa flour, lard, beans, onions, crushed red peppers, salt, coffee, and sugar.

We were apparently short by one horse, so Aurelio, who was to be our camp cook and horse wrangler, led the pack horse on foot while the two guides and two gringos rode horseback along the steep trail leading up the canyon.

The highest peaks of the Sierra Madre mountains in Chihuahua only reach an elevation of 8500 feet, but the terrain is vertical in many parts, and the pinon, pine and oaks provide good cover for wildlife on all but the steepest slopes and rock slides.

I have no idea what that part of the Sierra Madres is like today, but in the early spring of 1965 we were in about the wildest part of the Bosque de Chihuahua a man could get to on horseback, and our camp was set up near a saddle at about 7500 feet.

Antonio requested that we kill a deer if we saw one, so we would have camp meat, and I killed a young eight point whitetail the first morning. We boned it out on site, packed the meat into burlap bags, and carried it back to camp where Antonio cut it into strips and hung it on strings between the trees.

The weather was too cold for flies, so we had "carne seca" to last the entire hunt.

Aurelio made tortillas by hand, cooking them on a hot, flat rock next to the campfire, and our normal diet consisted of grilled venison, beans, onions, and jalapenos wrapped up in a tortilla.

Each morning we had an early breakfast with coffee, then we saddled the horses and followed Antonio through terrain not fit for mules, much less horses, as the mountain bred and trained horses slipped on the steep talus slopes with Ned and myself getting off to lead the horses along the worst parts of the trails.

Day after day we explored the Chihuahuan wilderness without spotting another deer, a javelina, or any predators. One troop of more than twenty coatimundi, a relative of the raccoon, with long prehensile tails, jumped from rock to rock over the trail, but, as a big game hunting trip, my young whitetail buck was the only real game we encountered.

When I developed a bad case of turista one morning on the trail, our guide, Antonio, kept his eyes on the ground for a few minutes until he found a small green, clover-like plant. Then we got off the horses and waited while Antonio built a small fire and made green tea out of the lemon-flavored plant.

Thirty minutes later my turista was gone.

On the last day we woke up with eight inches of snow on the ground, and when I joined Antonio at the fire in my down jacket, insulated boots, gloves, and knit cap pulled down over my ears, Antonio, in jeans, a t-shirt, a blue jean jacket, and his felt western hat sat warming his bare feet against the small flame.

These Yaqui Indians were tougher and more at home in the wilderness than anyone I had yet encountered. They never consulted a compass to find direction, and, yet, they were never lost. They ate and camped as simply as one could possibly imagine. They laughed and enjoyed themselves immensely no matter what the circumstances, and they never expressed their discomfort or fatigue in spite of the fact that they experienced both.

As I joined Antonio by the small cooking fire he grinned and said, “Esta mañana lamento que yo no tuviera algunos calcetines.” (This morning I wish I had a pair of socks.)

We had been entertained by the some of the wealthiest men in Mexico City, and we had camped and hunted with Yaqui Indians in the Bosque de Chihuahua wilderness. To the former we were, and still are, grateful, and, to the latter, still respectful, as I remember looking into Antonio’s weather-beaten face and bright, clear brown eyes, smiling back at him as I thought to myself, “And I wish I was as tough and at home in these mountains as you, old hoss.”

When it came time to leave Mexico, Carlos handed us our airline tickets, and Ned raised his eyebrows with his head tilted slightly to the right.

I could see the wheels turning, and, as he handed the tickets back to Carlos, he said, “Thanks, Carlos, but Sayles and I are taking the bus back to Texas.”

Postnote: Three years after this series of events, Carlos, his brother, Jorge, and their pilot, Carlos Faustion, the WWII ace, were killed in a plane crash. The cause of the crash was never determined.



