THE NATIONAL HIGHWAY*

By Beatriz E. Garcia

It was not built in one or two days. It lasted years, somewhere between thirty and forty years. They worked ten hours daily, Monday through Friday. They left in the morning and came back in the evening. The work was with pick and shovel; and since there were no wheelbarrows, baskets on the backs of the workers were used to cart the debris. They called them harvest baskets. Some would dig, some would load the baskets, and others would carry. If the terrain was high, it was left so; and in order for the highway to be level, dirt had to be carried from another area in order to maintain a level surface.

People came from many areas to work on the road, but the first workers were from here; my brothers were among them, for the pay was good. The road was of compacted dirt for a long time, and much later it was paved because it was the first national highway.

In those days if one wanted to go from Tuxcueca to Chapala, one took a steamboat to cross the lake. Several times we were unfortunate enough to encounter strong winds, and we thought of nothing but dying, for the waves were huge and soaked us. The steamboat rocked from side to side, went under the waves and came back up again. With the highway we no longer feared death by drowning.

I remember going to Guadalajara in a small bus, the Red Arrow. It took all day to get there. In the rainy season the tires of the bus made canals which appeared in the highway. We bounced and bounced on the dirt road, but what other choice did we have? People were satisfied with the service, because they could leave at seven in the morning and return at eight or nine in the evening with the same bus. The fare was less than one peso. Before the bus, nothing passed by our town, only a few mules and wagons. Those who owned horses or donkeys went to Tizapan to bring back what they needed.

White drawstring pants, white shirt, sombrero and sandals. The people in charge of the highway demanded, yes, *demanded*, that those who went to Guadalajara wore proper trousers. If not, they were put in jail. I remember that my father carried his dress trousers over his shoulder, and put them on only when he had arrived in Guadalajara. He was not accustomed to wearing trousers, and putting them on over his drawstring pants made it even more uncomfortable. The trousers were store-bought, for none of us knew how to make them; they had no label and were available only in blue or green.

There were many large dugout canoes transporting grain, firewood, dairy products - milk, cheese, sugarcane, sugar made from molasses, salt (all of this was brought by mule and wagon from Colima); and all of these products were shipped to Ocotlan. The canoes sailed only on weekends, leaving Tuxcueca on Saturday and returning on Monday. There were powered by sail. There were no motors at that time. With the new highway all of this ended. Tuxcueca was finished as a port, and San Luis Soyatlan became the new commercial center.

There, after the curve, was a footpath known as *“los terrenitos”* (the small properties). It was a flat path, and up there was a ranch called
Las Coronas
(The Crowns) - I don’t believe anyone lives there anymore. There, men waited to rob and kill others, especially the merchants who came from Sahuayo. They were salesmen on horseback; selling shoes, shawls, sandals, sombreros…they brought many goods to us.

Then, the government gave out rifles in order to protect the trails. *Acordada*, they were called, which loosely meant “men with arms to keep order.” The
acordada
roamed the area armed, and of course, used their weapons to create more problems: rob and kill the same merchants, only now with firearms. Those who had businesses and were required to leave early in the morning or return late in the evening were afraid of that place.

Those who feared the most were the merchants who returned to Tuxcueca with money. The women were never robbed because they never went to Tizapan alone; they always went with a father, brother, or husband. For this reason alone the women were not assaulted.

All that was transported in canoe is now transported in trucks. There were no trucks or cars here until men began to leave and work in the United States, later returning with enough money to buy a vehicle. Before that time, there were none.

Few cars were seen, most of the traffic consisted of rented trailer trucks - transport service. The trucks came from as far away as Zamora to transport merchandise to Guadalajara. Later, they made the same trip in reverse. First were the passenger buses, and then later the trucks to transport merchandise. With this, the lucrative business of killing and robbing finally stopped.

Those who worked on the highway used their money to buy clothing. The women purchased factory-made dresses for the first time, and those who could sew purchased fabrics. Likewise, those whose homes were constructed of abode and straw bought clay roof tiles. The people were happy to work, because prior to the highway, we worked only at that which we always knew: the fields, the cows, and fishing. That was all that existed. When the work on the highway came to us, many people changed jobs because they knew that every fifteen days they would receive cash. The people were happy.

(*) This passage is the result of a conversation with the Maestra Hilaria Origel in October of 2008. While corrections were made in order to present a more fluid reading, the remembrances of the Maestra regarding the theme have been respected and left as intact as possible.