

Mary Harris' Christmas Letter — 1958

My Christmas letter will be different this year, for I will tell you about my recent trips to Amarillo, Texas & old Mexico. Last summer I decided I would like to see Mexico as I had heard so much about it from people who had been there. So one day in early Sept. I went over to the travel agency & made reservations on a 20 day Greyhound escorted tour, leaving Los Angeles Nov. 9th.

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A Visit to the Tylers in Amarillo

In Oct. I got vaccinated (U.S. requirement), then went to Amarillo via Greyhound to spend a couple of weeks with Patty, Owen & boys. Enjoyed getting acquainted again with my 2 livewire great grandsons, as it was 7 months since I had seen them. Eddie was 3 on Jan. 3rd, & quite an active child. He has a cheery smile, bright eyes & talks & acts like a much older child. His red hair is now the color of gold, & his eyes have changed from blue to hazel. I was sitting opposite him at the table & he sat there looking at me, & suddenly he said, "Grandma Harris, you talk funny." At first I didn't understand what he meant. Then it dawned on me. I didn't talk like a Texan. Owen says I talk like a Yankee. Even Patty is getting the Texas drawl. Little Ronnie, 18½ mo. Old. In Oct. has a time trying to keep up with his brother, but he learns fast. There isn't anything he can't climb, & he even can hang from the stunt bars. He hadn't started to talk much & would only say a word or two, but he would look at you & tell you a whole string of words, understandable by none but himself. He has dark blue eyes & blond wavy hair.

Sunday afternoon we went to Palo Duro Canyon, a big surprise in that flat country. It's a beautiful deep, colorful canyon with red & white walls & a stream winding back & forth

across the road on the floor of the canyon. There were many colorful formations & the canyon itself has quite a history.

Arranging for the Trip of a Lifetime

After I got home I went over & picked up my ticket & Mexican tourist card & packed my bags for my trip to the new & strange country below the border. I wanted my husband & Ruth to go, but he felt he couldn't be away that long, & she had been having trouble with her back & thought so much riding on a bus would make it worse, so I got my neighbor to go, as we would each save \$40 by sharing the hotel rooms.

Phoenix & El Paso

On Sun. Nov. 9th we boarded the Special Greyhound bus in downtown Los Angeles & headed for Phoenix, Ariz. (altitude 1092 ft.) where we spent the night at the Adams Hotel. The next day we picked up several more tourists, making 25 in all. Some were from Canada, Minn., Mo., Riverside, Calif., Encinitas, Lake Isabella, Altadena, Pasadena, La Puente, Glendale, Long Beach & Los Angeles. We each were given a badge to wear with our name & reading "Saludos Amigos! Soy Miembro de la jira A Mexico organizada 7 conducia por Greyhound." (Greetings Friends! I am member of the tour to Mexico organized & conducted by Greyhound.)

We left Phoenix with our Mexican guide Daniel Gomez (who remained with us until we returned back to Los Angeles) & arrived in El Paso, Texas (alt 3762 ft.) at 5 p.m. The country was most scenic, the real west, land of the Apache Indians, the cowboy, the dude ranch & great ranches where cattle & sheep in countless thousands roam the sagebrush covered plains & plateaus, supplying meat for America. Where rain falls or irrigation is provided the earth yields rich harvests of grain, cotton, fruits & vegetables. The cotton was ready to be picked & quite a thrilling sight. The mines in the mountains. Also pour out treasure — gold, silver, copper, lead, uranium & other metals. To reach El Paso, we traveled across Calif., Ariz., half across New Mexico & into the corner of Texas.

After spending the night at the Hilton Hotel & changing \$20 into \$247 pesos (Mexican dollars) & boarding a Mexican Greyhound bus, we crossed the Rio Grande to Juarez (Wha' – rez) Mexico (alt. 3700 ft.) where we had our tourist cards validated. By this time we were pretty well acquainted with each other.

Chihuahua City

We then headed south on the Pan American highway(central route) to the city of Chihuahua (Chee – wah' – wah) (alt. 4593 ft). The scenery in the Mexican state of Chihuahua is very similar to that in the U. S. Southwest around El Paso. Broad plains & deserts surrounded by the Sierra Nevada Mountains. In some areas there were sand dunes & also lakes formed by the cloudbursts in Oct. We saw havoc wrought by the heavy rains all the way to Mexico City. Now for a bit of humor. I saw a bug on the window of the bus & asked the guide what it was. He laughed & said, "Oh! That's a cucaracha." (cockroach) We killed several before we got to Chihuahua where we had some in the hotel rooms. That's all that we saw in Mexico. Thank goodness I didn't bring any home.

We got there early enough to drive around the city & visit the home of Pancho Villa's widow. He was a famous Mexican bandit. We each paid her 1 peso (8¢) for showing us the house, Pancho's guns, swords, portraits & relics. The house has 50 rooms that are livable. It was destroyed 3 times during revolutions & rebuilt. We had a group picture taken with her in the center, in one of the patios. I had her autograph a couple of post cards for me.

Our hotel was rather quaint with tiled floors, tiled steps up the hand-made wrought iron stairway, & beautiful huge wrought iron chandelier hanging from the ceiling of the lobby, & the massive iron doors which grace the palatial entrance. (All the hotels & motels we stopped at in Mexico had tiled floors, except the one in Mexico City had carpet.) Across the corner was a modern mkt where I bought several bananas for 1 peso (8¢). In the evening a group of us toured the downtown with its poorly lighted narrow streets, although the one our hotel was on was a nice wide one, but the sidewalks were poor.

Durango

The next day we left for Durango (Doo – ran' – go) & passed thru many small town & villages. The big bus went along the very narrow streets where shops & homes crowd the roadway & we could look into doors, windows & patios. On the way we stopped in Parral (Pah – ral') (alt. 5450 ft.) to take pictures of the beautiful old cathedral & were shown the tree where Pancho Villa stood when he was shot to death by soldiers. I saw children in the plaza with hula hoops. I took a movie of them in action. Along the highway many bridges were washed out & our bus had to ford the streams. After leaving Parral, we were in the mountains all the way, with altitudes over 8000 ft, hairpin curves & gorgeous scenery.

We spent the next night in Durango (alt. 6314 ft.) which is the center of a mining region rich in gold, silver, iron, sulphur & rubies. In fact, all the towns & cities in the mountains seem to be centered around mines. Even though we were in the mountains, there were miles of level land where huge crops of cotton, wheat, & corn are raised. And all along the way were beautiful wild flowers. We stopped for lunch in Zacatecas (Sah – ke – the' – cahs) (alt 7377 ft.) at a typical Mexican restaurant in the center of town on a narrow street where we were greeted with a mariachi band & served a 7 course meal for 18 pesos (\$1.44).

Leon

And on to Leon (Leh – own') (alt 6183 ft.) our next stop. We crossed the Tropic of Cancer & the bus stopped for us to take pictures & sample the cactus apples growing on the tuna cactus. We passed miles of these cactus with their ripe rose-colored apples. I picked a dozen different kinds of wild flowers including zinnias. One of the women thought the Tropic of Cancer was where all the people have cancer. We passed thru a town where blue-eyed Indians live. They look odd.

Leon is the "Shoe Capital of Mexico." When we arrived at the Hotel Leon, we were given a postcard with our names with welcome greetings on it, & attached was a tiny pair of leather shoes. The card was a colored picture of the beautiful roof garden with gorgeous colored tile benches & beautiful tile walls. A wrought-iron fence enclosed the owners beautiful patio on the roof. Our room had massive old colonial furniture in it. Leon is in a wide fertile valley up in the mountains, famous for strawberries, hand-drawn work, leather goods, tobacco & corn.

We passed thru many small villages, each with its cathedral spires rising above the city. Each with its parks & plazas & narrow streets. Saw the native milk peddlers with their cans of milk hanging on each side of burros. The women wear black rebozos & each seemed to have a baby wrapped snugly in it. The children had hula hoops everywhere we went & some were real experts.

Mexico City

The next day we arrived in Mexico City (alt 7349 ft.). After leaving San Juan Del Rio, we traveled on the new super highway into Mexico City. We were greeted at our hotel in downtown, with refreshments, tequila, potato chips & salted nuts. We were also given corsages of orchids & pansies. We spent a couple of days sightseeing before leaving for Acapulco. Visited the oldest & largest cathedral in America. It has 14 beautiful chapels, lots of carved statues covered with gold leaf. All the churches we visited in Mexico were centuries old, but well kept & were most beautiful inside.

There are 160 fountains in the city, lots of statues & many flat-iron buildings. Very wide blvds; the widest has 12 lanes, with 3 divisions of trees & grass. The side streets are very narrow and are one-way streets. We visited all the important places in & around the city, including the National Palace, the museum, the new university with its beautiful bldgs, Chapultepec Castle of Maximilian & Carlotta on top of a hill overlooking the city, a boat trip on the canals of Xochimilco (Soch – che – meel’ – co). We saw them making Mexican glass & each of us received a glass flower.

We went to San Juan Teotihuacan (San Hwan The - o – tee – wah – cahn’) 29 miles northeast of Mexico City, where we followed the “Highway of the Dead” connecting Pyramid of the Sun, larger than any in ancient Egypt, the Pyramid of the Moon & temples of ancient gods, all built by races who lived there before the Aztecs. The sculpturing of the stone slabs & the enormous serpents’ heads on some of the outer walls & stairways are skillfully executed. The road was lined with pepper trees loaded with rose-colored pepper berries. I bought 2 hand-carved & colored baseball bats for Eddie & Ronnie from a boy outside the pyramids.

Acapulco

The next morning we left early to have breakfast in Cuernavaca (kwehr – nah – vah’ – cah) (alt 7412 ft.) at a gorgeous place with the most beautiful garden we had seen so far. Then over the mountains to Acapulco (Ah – ka – pool’ – ko) (alt sea level) with its blvds, up-to-date stores & luxury hotels, its deep-sea fishing & semi-tropical climate. On the way we went thru pine forests, banana & cocconut plantations & all along the way were gorgeous wild flowers, fields of rice & sugar cane, olive orchards, bee hives, thatched huts, heavily laden burrows plodding along the road, cattle & horses.

Acapulco is a famous sea shore resort with 160 hotels. Ours was a lovely modern one right next to the ocean where I could hear the waves & watch the sunset from my balcony. It was hot & humid there night & day, even in November.

Taxco

The next stop was Taxco (Tahs’ co) (alt 5500 ft.) where we toured the city by taxi as the streets were cobblestone (as were the streets in most of the towns) & too narrow & steep for

our bus. We visited the quaint shops & bought jewelry. Our hotel, Posada de la Mision, was up on the mountainside with a superb view of the city below. At the entrance was the most gorgeous bougainvillea vine I have ever seen. Its clusters of red flowers were wonderful. We had a lovely room done in maple furniture with the door on the outside balcony. The climate is the best in the world in Taxco, I have read.

Morelia

Leaving Taxco, we wound around over the mountains on many hairpin curves to the colonial city of Morelia (Moh – reh' – lyah) (alt 6234 ft.) where we spent the night at Hotel Virrey de Mendoza, once a colonial mansion. Superb oil paintings, massive furniture, huge carved fireplace & tall leather-embossed entrance doors from the original Spanish villa are still in use. The hotel faced a large park.

I was awakened at 5 am with church bells ringing & rockets exploding. This went on for 15 min. Then every 15 min till we left, the church bells rang & the rockets continued to explode. At 6:30 I heard a band & looked out my window & there it was coming along the street with a man going ahead throwing rockets into the air. I found out that they were celebrating St. Cecelia's Day. The Mexicans celebrate all the saints days & many others. They love to celebrate with parades & processions. The cathedral was across the park. I liked Morelia best of all the cities I visited. It was high in the mtns, the air was so pure & clean & the climate was mild & agreeable & seemed like such a clean city. I wish I could have stayed longer. I saw oranges growing in a patio.

Guadalajara

The next day we traveled over the mountains toward Guadalajara (Gwah – dah – lah – hah' – rah) thru green country side dotted with towns, church towers, brightly painted houses & stores grouped around the plaza. On each side, we saw fields of beans, corn, & peppers, peons guiding wooden plows behind teams of oxen, horses or mules, flowering trees making splashes of color here & there & always the high mountains in the background. We passed by two large lakes with villages along the shores. I almost forgot the snow covered volcanoes outside Mexico City.

We spent the night at Guadalajara (alt 5220 ft.) at a hotel downtown near a large park. The climate here is ideal at all seasons of the year. Along the way we saw great fields of the maguey plant (century plant) from which tequila is made. It is the Mexican national drink with about the potency of beer. Lots of Americans live here & in some of the villages along Lake Chapala.

Mazatlan

Next day we went over more mountains where we saw waterfalls tumbling down the sides, went thru Indian villages, past waving coconut palms, banana groves, jungle, papaya trees, & other tropical trees including coffee, to our next stopover Mazatlan (Mah – sah – tlah') (alt 3 ft.) which is the loveliest & most entrancing seaport on the west coast of Mexico. The climate is lush & tropical & the beaches, where the water is warm enuf for swimming the year around, extends for miles. Our hotel was on the beach where we had a wonderful view of the Pacific Ocean. We had a tropical storm there which lasted about an hour. After it stopped raining & some of the water drained away, I walked several blocks to the big mkt a

block square, opposite the cathedral, where I bought a big bunch of bananas for 3 pesos (24¢). After leaving Mazatlan, we went thru more jungle where we saw some flocks of wild parrots which were green with red on their wings. Saw a lot of trees along the way covered with clusters of beautiful rose-colored bloom. The wood is very strong and used for building & posts.

Culican

Our next stop was Culican (Coo – lya – cahn') (alt 216 ft.) where we stayed at the Los Tres Rios Motel (meaning the 3 rivers which pass by & thru this city). It was the newest & most modern place we had stopped at. Beautifully landscaped with trees, shrubs & bougainvillea vines. We crossed the river coming into town on a long railroad trestle as the road bridge was washed out during the Oct. rain. Culican is the tomato center, & it ships 8000 carloads to the U. S. every winter. From here on the the country changed. Miles & miles of irrigated & cultivated land, much of it being planted to tomatoes. Had to cross another river on a RR trestle at Navajoa (Nah- vo – he' – ah).

As we went up the west coast highway toward Hersomillo (Air – mo – see' – yo) (alt 777 ft.) our last stopover in Mexico, we passed thru Guayman (Y' – mas) a popular fisherman's paradise on the Gulf of California. Lost of Californians go here to fish the year around.

Hermosillo

Hermosillo is becoming modernized with wider streets & modern bldgs. I even saw parking meters on some of the streets. It's a popular winter resort because of its mild winter climate. It is a metropolis of a fruit growing region which produces figs, pomegranates, & citrus, especially oranges. Date palms & citrus trees give a semitropical aspect to the city.

After leaving Hermosillo, the country is mostly desert, & we go into higher altitude to Nogales (No – gah' – less) (Alt 3867 ft.) on the border of the U. S., with a high ornamental iron fence marking the boundary. On the Mexican side are colorful adobes, cantinas, restaurants, curio shops with iron-grilled balconies, narrow winding streets — all the atmosphere & excitement of a typical Mexican town. The American side, with its office bldgs, hotels and stores is more prosaic & sober.

Here, at the border – on Thanksgiving Day, we had our luggage inspected, showed our vaccination certificates, surrendered our tourist cards, & changed our pesos to American dollars. I had 12 pesos for which I got 1 American dollar.

The journey between the border & Phoenix took us thru a picturesque region, much of it desert. Cattle raising, mining & farming are the chief industries. We passed through the beautiful city of Tucson.

Back to Phoenix

We arrived back to the Adams Hotel in Phoenix on Thanksgiving night at 5 p.m. We cleaned up, changed our clothes & went half a block to "The Flame," a very excellent restaurant where we were given our Farewell Dinner, compliments of Greyhound. It seemed odd to see

American people again & to hear them talk without a Spanish accent. The next morning we left for Los Angeles, arriving at 4 p.m. The end of a scenic & thrilling trip never to be forgotten. I want to take another trip to Old Mexico, as several others want to do, driving down, so I can take more time to browse around the cities I liked most. November is the best time to go as the summer rains are over & the weather is about perfect. If you want to go to Mexico for the first time, I recommend the Greyhound conducted tours. I have had to leave out much of my experiences as it would take many more pages to write it all. Next time I go, my husband goes too.

46th Wedding Anniversary Trip

I must add still another trip. On Dec. 18th, our 46th wedding anniversary, we took a little trip down south, going down the inland route & coming back up the coast. We wanted to find a place without smog (fog & or smoke). So we took the freeway to Pomona & turned south to Elsinore where we stopped to rest in the park. We were only 6 miles from where the big forest fire started Sunday. We could see & smell the smoke all the way to Escondido, where we spent the night. While there we called on a former neighbor from S. San Gabriel who bought a nice ranch & moved down this summer to get away from the smog. He said there is none there. We couldn't tell because of the smoke.

The next day we went thru the mountains to the small town of Ramona. We liked it for it seemed like a friendly place with no smog. Lots of retired people live there. Think we will visit it again some day. After lunch we would our way back to Escondido & headed for the coast. We spent the Night in San Clemente near the ocean where we could smell the smoke from the fire. They got it under control that night. We just picked a bad time for our trip, although it was nice when we left home a noon. We went 279 miles & had a real nice trip outside of the weather which is unpredictable at this time of year.

My trip to Mexico & return covered 5452 miles. To Amarillo & return 2307 miles. This is all the traveling for 1958 except a trip up the coast to San Simeon. We both extend our greetings for A Merry Christmas & Happy New Year.

Mary Harris