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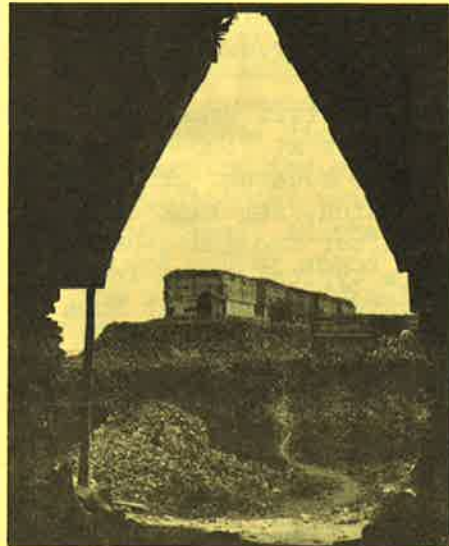
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CONTRIBUTORS' BULLETIN

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MEXICAN MUSINGS



DEAR FRIENDS:



about April 1, 1931, I concluded a lecture tour which had extended over a period of six months. The circumstances then made it possible for me to make a trip to Mexico and the peninsula of Yucatan. It may interest some of our friends to have a glimpse of traveling conditions in those areas nearly fifty years ago. I traveled by boat from the port of New York, and we made a brief stop-over in Cuba. At that time Havana was a playground for opulent Americans and there was little to be seen there of cultural importance, so we departed without regrets.

We arrived off Progreso, the port of entry for the peninsula of Yucatan about two o'clock in the morning. The harbor was too shallow to permit large vessels to dock and passengers had to cover the last six miles of their journey on a specially lightened tug which drew less than eight feet of water. Seismic disturbances in the remote past submerged part of the peninsula which now lies just below the surface and prevents adequate harbors. I was informed that the Mexican immigration officials, whose presence aboard the ship was utterly indispensable before the tourists could disembark, were creatures of moods and fancies. Maybe they would arrive today, maybe tomorrow. I was told that immigration officials included breakfast or lunch aboard the vessel as part of the ritual of their duties. If there was another ship in the harbor and they had already received breakfast, we did not need to expect their presence until lunchtime. Good fortune favored us and a small tugboat soon drew alongside.

The immigration ceremonials were impressive. The officials were immaculate in appearance, voluble in language, and courteous to a fault. After the mandatory breakfast, the passengers were transferred to the tug where we all shared quarters with several blue denim sacks containing noisy roosters for local cock-fights. Our ship also carried a large cargo of Flit, the full significance of which we did not appreciate until a few hours later. From Progreso it was but a short trip by auto to Merida, the capital of Yucatan and a city of nearly one-hundred-thousand population. Merida is one of the oldest cities on the American continent, having been founded seventy years before the Pilgrim fathers landed

on Plymouth Rock. Our hotel in Merida, like many similar institutions in Italy, was originally a palatial private home. It had cut glass chandeliers, inlaid marble floors, intricately carved Spanish doors, and exquisite Italian statuary. The hotel was a delightful combination of fine art and bad plumbing. There were bathtubs fully seven feet long, but the hot water was brought in pint pitchers.

I decided to visit Uxmal first. In those days it was quite a difficult trip and we had to rise at 5:00 A.M. and take a private car supplied by the Ferrocarriles de Unidos de Yucatan. The private car proved to be a gasoline-run device of one cylinder which, for lack of any other possible thoroughfare, ran on the railroad tracks. After two-and-a-half hours, the contrivance pulled into the little town of Muna, a typical Mayan Indian village consisting of one main street, a plaza, and a massive church. At Muna we changed to a Ford automobile driven by a Mayan boy whose face resembled many of those upon the ancient carvings. He skillfully covered about fifteen kilometers of the worst road on earth. This highway was originally built for the Empress Carlota so that she might visit the ruins in her imperial carriage. Hot, dusty, and severely shaken, we literally crawled over huge boulders and around sharp rocks. The general discomfort was intensified by the fact that the farmers along the way were burning their corn-fields and the smoke made it almost impossible to breathe.

The ruins of Uxmal (pronounced Ushmal) are located in a desolate and isolated area. The Yucatan jungle was a tangled underbrush of short growth through which one must cut his way with a machete. There were no large trees and no surface water. The last part of the trip was over a reddish earth as though the blood of a mighty people was mixed with the dust. Suddenly the underbrush opened to reveal a massive pyramidal structure, its sides gutted by rain and its crest surmounted by a mysterious, fortress-like house with black yawning windows and an intricately carved facade. This was the Casa del Adivino, the House of the Dwarf, also sometimes called the Temple of the Sorcerer. The whole building, including the artificial pyramid upon which it stands, rose to a height of about a hundred-and-fifty feet and on the face of this man-made hill was the ruin of a broad stairway. At that time this pyramid was a profound annoyance to archaeologists. A delightful characteristic of these learned men is that whether they know or not, they are always very sure. Times may have improved and some mysteries have certainly been solved, but when I was there, there was more conflict among the experts than we can take time to describe. It should be remembered that the names given to the various buildings of both Uxmal and Chichen-Itza were bestowed by Spanish explorers and have no relation to the purposes for which the structures were originally built. Near the base of the House of the Dwarf is an open rectangle, bordered by four long buildings, then known by the somewhat ridiculous title, Casa de Las Monjas, or the House of the Nuns.

The walls of most of the buildings were ornamented with carvings or stuccoware representing the sacred Feathered Snake. Everywhere the great snake, Kukulcan (Quetzalcoatl), rears his plumed head, graciously conforming his folds and coils to the architectural forms of the structure. The buildings were originally decorated in several colors, but the pigments had almost disappeared leaving only an occasional touch of red and blue. Of considerable interest are statements made by various experts that many of the stones fitted into the various buildings bear upon their reverse sides mason's marks similar to those found in India and upon the cathedrals of Europe.

From the main gate of the House of the Nuns is the so-called House of the Governor, a large building three-hundred-and-twenty-two feet in length. The decorations upon it are so elaborate and complicated that it has been called an apocalypse in stone. Two other buildings, both near the Governor's House, completed the group that had been excavated in 1931. These structures are called the House of the Turtle, so named because of representations in stone around the cornices; and the House of the Doves, because of a series of apertures which suggest dovecotes. Around this central group, at various distances in the jungle, are several other large mounds of earth indicating the presence of more buildings. When these are excavated, we may have additional evidence of the architectural skills of the ancient Mayas. The name Uxmal, in the ancient language, means Three-Times-Destroyed. This vast culture center stood in all its glory when Europe was still largely barbaric. The builders of Uxmal were men of power and wisdom. It was a Herculean achievement and its every carving denotes it was a city built for a sacred purpose. It may never have been a secular community but a place of sacred pilgrimage and a center of learning.

In my day, there were no facilities for tourists at Uxmal. In fact, few outsiders ever visited the site. When Dr. Le Plongeon established residence at Uxmal, he lived in one of the rooms in the House of the Nuns. He had to bring with him everything that he needed, including his cameras and the facilities to develop his film. The native Yucatecans often visit the ruins, viewing them as the works of their illustrious ancestors. Mexican archaeologists are inclined to regard Uxmal as far older than their German, English, and American confreres. The old codices lend support to the sacred legends which tell that the region was populated by survivors of the Atlantic catastrophe. Le Plongeon made calculations based upon the Mayan chronology and arrived at approximately the same date as that given to Solon by the Egyptian priests of Sais. I am glad that I visited these ruins before elaborate restoration had been attempted. Something unpleasant seems to arise when attempts are made to renovate and embellish the works of ancient peoples. In some cases also the renovations are not accurate, and, after the modern workmen have finished, valuable landmarks and artifacts may be lost forever.

The modern Mayas are a delightful people with the natural nobility of their ancient forebears. I visited in one of their homes, and after a pleasant repast, the daughter of the house played for us authentic Mayan music, and, in several cases, sang the old compositions in a pleasant and cultured voice. The music was in no way primitive, the melodies were delightful, and the harmonies exquisite. The songs had descended by oral tradition only, and I begged of her to have the music recorded. Finally we also had old stories that modern scholars could hear and profit thereby. In our next letter we shall visit another ancient Mayan architectural complex--the city of Chichen-Itza.

Always, most sincerely,

Mary R. Hall

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