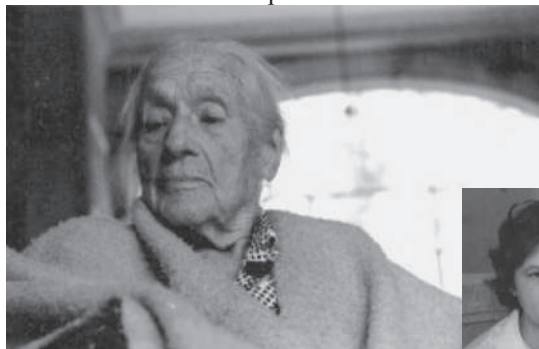


A ROAD TRIP IN 1980: finding Mrs. Francisco Villa

By Maria Eugenia Guerra

A friend and I drove in my VW diesel Rabbit from San Antonio to Chihuahua City — a 600-mile trip — to find Luz Corral de Villa, Pancho Villa's widow. The adventure was hastily planned with a quick look at a map and the expectation that we could find Mrs. Villa at La Quinta Luz, the 50-room mansion that Francisco Villa first rented and later purchased and renovated to Mrs. Villa's



Pancho Villa's widow, Luz Corral de Villa, was interviewed by Maria Eugenia Guerra (inset) at her home.

liking.

The paradoxical life of General Villa — vili-



fied by some as the treacherous, cold-blooded commander of La División del Norte during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and honored by many as the Robin Hood of agrarian reform and for his cunning brilliance as a military strategist — began in Durango and ended on the vast, dramatic landscape of the Chihuahuan Desert.

CHIHUAHUA

“One way or another,” it was Blondie who got us across West Texas and to the border, and thereafter, inexplicably, it was Cuco Sanchez's lament to cuckoldry, “Arrastrando la covija.”

The terrain turned craggy and mountainous, the canyons deepened, and there against the grandeur left by the shift of tectonic plates I experienced a nano-second introspection that we were little specks of carbon navigating the narrow scar of a man-made road on a billion-year-old landscape.

A cop in an unmarked car, a man out of uniform — save for a badge and a revolver in the waistband of his pants — shook us from our reverie, asking, “No tienen miedo, dos mujeres viajando a solas en este camino?”

I thought to answer, but didn't, “Hasta este minuto tuve ningún miedo.”

He asked us our business so far from home, laughed, and with a little menace in his gesture, he waved us on.

That was the most infelicitous part of our road trip, eclipsing the realization that my friend and I — each assuming the other had packed cash enough to cover fuel, meals, and an overnight stay at the Hotel Chihuahua — understood that between us we had traveled to another country with about \$70 between us.

Diesel was 17 cents a liter, a bargain. The \$23 hotel room

would be our greatest expense. Panaderias would provide inexpensive feasts of just-baked pan frances.

AT LA QUINTA LUZ

Once in Chihuahua City, we asked for directions to La Quinta Luz, and we found Mrs. Villa precisely where we were told she would be, a few steps up off Calle Décima on the porch of her colonnaded home, ready to greet paying visitors who wanted to tour her museum and its courtyard.

The former glory of the place was evident in the clean lines of the massive compound and the exterior details of its fenestration and doors.

I purchased a ticket, and Mrs. Villa kindly gave me her attention.

“My husband was a hero,” she told me, and then grouched bitterly about the widow's pension she had been promised by one administration and denied by another. She said she lived on a trickle of income from visitors to the museum and from sales of the book she authored, *Pancho Villa En La Intimidad*. She said she enjoyed sharing her husband's story and that of the Revolution with visitors, many of them Americans. Others, she said, came from as far away as Germany and Japan.

I had with me a book I had read a month earlier, *Under the Fifth Sun, A Novel of Pancho Villa*, which I had purchased at *Whole Earth Provision Company* in Austin. Reading this well-told story by Earl Shorris had fueled the quest to find Mrs. Villa and to do so on the landscape on which she and Villa had shared their lives.

“I am left with the memories. Someone writes a book or makes a movie and makes a lot of money,” she lamented. “They all come here to talk to me.”

She said that history and the government of Mexico had alternately regarded her late husband as hero-bandit-hero, and that she had been promised that her home would become a museum operated by the government.

I had brought her a box of milled soaps, which she graciously accepted. She encouraged me to walk through the rooms of the museum that featured some of Villa's armas, gear, hats, spurs, field glasses, and saddles, as well as posters



Doña Corral de Villa at the doorway of Quinta Luz, her home, now a National Museum dedicated to Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution.





La Quinta Luz was renovated by The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) after Doña Corral de Villa's death.

of movies made about him. There were photos of Mrs. Villa and actor Anthony Quinn, who garnered an Oscar for best supporting actor in portraying Villa in 1952's *Viva Zapata!* (which had been filmed in San Ygnacio and Roma.)

I was taken by the faded, though enduring elegance of the Italian tiles of the floors and the scalloped wall murals of urns of flowers (which I would later learn were painted by an Italian artist named Mario Ferrer.)

In the courtyard around which much of the original house had been built and later re-configured by Villa with stables, quarters for his men, a manger, a tunnel, and a basement, I better comprehended the huge, fortress-like footprint of the structure and its high walls, now cracked, that appeared to be constructed of adobe bricks encased in a veneer of plaster.

I came across an old, thin woman in black in a corner of the courtyard. She was sweeping leaves as though dancing with her broom to music only she could hear. She wore round dark glasses and a hairnet. I greeted her, and she stopped briefly to speak to me in inflected, unintelligible sounds. She smiled with an open, toothless grin that was filled with something bright yellow. The color evoked canaries, but I could see that it was plant matter, the stalks of herbs of some kind, that filled her mouth. Our brief exchange offered no clue to her role in this historic place, and I walked away as though entrusted with an un-solved, disconcerting riddle.

In a small, shaded portico I saw the rusted, bullet-riddled 1919 Dodge Brothers roadster that Villa rode to eternity. Nearly six decades after his assassination in nearby Parral on July 20, 1923, the vehicle gave up the sinister essence of Villa's violent demise, something about which Shorris wrote in succinctly crafted detail.

I made my way back to Mrs. Villa, she whose sky-blue eyes had been witness to the Mexican Revolution and whose heart had remained true to one of the driving forces of that 10-year conflict. Her voice with its clear, distinct timbre was weighted with first hand observations of one of the most tumultuous chapters in Mexican history.

"I wrote in your books," she told me.

AFTERWORD

In 1981, Mrs. Villa gave La Quinta Luz to the Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, stipulating that it would become a museum operated by the government. The **Instituto**





Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) directed the work of restoring La Quinta Luz, turning many of its rooms into museum spaces that told the story of Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution. The new displays now include some of the sophisticated automatic weaponry that came from Belgium and other countries.

The museum re-opened in November of 1982 as el Museo Histórico de la Revolución.

The Dodge roadster, too, got a makeover — its numerous bullet holes all the more pronounced in its like-new paint job.

The memory keeper of the life of Pancho Villa did not live to see the museum re-open. Mrs. Villa died on July 6, 1981.

BOOKS ABOUT PANCHO VILLA

There are many, but two of the best are the aforementioned Shorris' *Under the Fifth Sun, A Novel of Pancho Villa*, and the other is Friedrich Katz's extensively researched *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa*, a well-written academic compendium that charts Villa's life from the young bandit named Doroteo Arango to a general who at one time commanded an army of 50,000 soldiers.

Others who have written about Villa have sensationalized Villa's voracious appetite for women and the gore of the ambush that killed him.

Katz's 900-plus pages are a deep well of historic detail — not only of Villa's life before, during, and after the Revolution, but also of the history of the characters who ruled the Republic.

As to the embuscada that ended Villa's life, Katz deconstructs it to arrive at the reason for it.

Of particular interest in Katz's writing is the assembly of stories for how Villa was treated in death by the world press.



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Above: Book about Pancho Villa written by Luz Corral de Villa. Below: A well respected book about Pancho Villa written by Earl Shorris.

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