

Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

Columnist Looking for “Guide”-ance

Last March I told you about my great grandfather Eugene Ring’s return from the California Gold Rush in 1850, “... hiking, horseback riding, and canoeing across southern Mexico’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec, after being abandoned by his [Panama-bound] ship while he and nine others were ashore foraging for food and water. Five of Eugene’s fellow travelers died of cholera, before the survivors reached Veracruz and were able to catch a ship to New Orleans.”

Next March I have the opportunity of a lifetime. Pat and I will be in southern Mexico in the colonial city of Oaxaca, where Pat will be participating in another knitting retreat. That will put us only 150 miles northeast of the barren Pacific beach that Eugene’s small boat crash-landed on, amid “boiling and foaming” waves, more than 160 years ago.

I would very much like to retrace Eugene’s frantic trek across the 125-mile-wide Isthmus of Tehuantepec, following the path and visiting the places that Eugene described in such detail in his fascinating memoir of his Gold Rush experience. (See *Detour to the California Gold Rush: Eugene Ring’s Travels to South America, California, and Mexico, 1848-1850* – details on my Web site.) I’m thinking that three days would be enough time to see what I want to see.

I have recent maps of the area that appear to show that good roads now exist - remarkably close to Eugene’s route - from the Pacific Coast to the Atlantic Coast. I need to get from the city of Oaxaca to Tehuantepec to start this adventure. Pat and I hope to explore Eugene’s landing area on the Pacific Coast around Tehuantepec, then head across the Isthmus to Minatitlan, and then northeast to Veracruz on the Atlantic Coast.

Here’s my problem. I don’t feel comfortable at the prospect of renting a car and driving myself around this far-flung, unfamiliar landscape. How much of this adventure could be done by bus? Could I hire a driver for the entire (or part) trip? Is this area of Mexico relatively free of political turmoil, drug problems, and crime?

I’ve been trying to contact US and Mexican travel agencies, Mexican Government tourism offices, the US State Department, and Oaxacan tour operators, but so far I’m not getting anywhere.

So I turn to you readers. Is anyone out there familiar with traveling in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec? Does anybody know of a good travel-arranger person for the Mexican States of Oaxaca and Veracruz?

I would greatly appreciate any suggestions to help me realize this dream!

Accordingly we pulled in to the shore until we could feel the swell of the incoming wave, and as we felt it take our boat we pulled with all our strength so as to be immediately behind the crest as it combed over on the beach. The moment the boat struck we jumped and ran, keeping hold of the boat's ~~feet~~^{ropes} and dragging it with us up on the beach just escaping the following counter as it dashed after, ~~us~~ boiling, and foaming about us. And when we turned and looked at the rushing, thundering waters through which we had passed, it seemed a miracle that we all stood there safe.

Eugene Ring's handwritten California Gold Rush memoir describes his rough landing on the Pacific Coast of Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec.
(Courtesy of Ring family)



This illustration of Mexico's Bay of Ventosa (just north of Eugene Ring's landing site) was included in an early cross-isthmus railroad survey.
(Courtesy of Railroad Survey of Isthmus of Tehuantepec, 1852)



*On his trek across southern Mexico, Eugene Ring described this El Barrio church as an “old stone building standing on a rocky eminence just at the edge of the village.”
(Courtesy of Railroad Survey of Isthmus of Tehuantepec, 1852)*