

# Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

## Fulfilling a Dream in Mexico

There Pat and I stood – in the village of San Juan Guichicovi in the middle of southern Mexico’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec – staring at a huge old church. One hundred and sixty years ago my great-grandfather Eugene Ring described this church, “the walls were standing almost entire, but the roof had fallen in, leaving a single slight and narrow arch spanning from wall to wall at the height of perhaps sixty feet from the floor.”

I couldn’t describe the scene any more accurately because that is exactly what Pat and I saw last month while retracing my great-grandfather’s unplanned trek across the Isthmus after being abandoned by his Panama-bound ship while ashore foraging for food and water. What an emotional moment on a fantastic trip!

For five wonderful days our driver Pablo and his wife Araceli guided us close to Eugene’s path from Salina Cruz on the Pacific coast to Veracruz on the Gulf coast. All the research and planning paid off – we were able to locate and visit most of the places that Eugene described in his California Gold Rush memoir.

We now truly appreciate the country that Eugene struggled through on foot, horseback, and canoe – the rocky, chaparral-fenced beaches; the green hills and mountain passes; the lush jungles; and the flowering plants and trees of many colors. But for us, the highlight was rediscovering the sights, particularly churches, that so captivated Eugene so many years ago.

Our biggest frustration was not being able to reach Eugene’s probable landing site – a particular beach on the Pacific coast that I had identified from research. Access to that area was restricted by a combination of the Mexican military and Pemex, the state-owned petroleum company.

We found the people of the Isthmus (mostly indigenous Zapotecs) to be friendly and helpful, but few spoke any English and there are very few tourists. Thankfully our guide Pablo is fluently bilingual and was able to help us with everything from hotels to restaurant menus.

It was fascinating to watch Pablo successfully wend his way through the towns and villages to sites we visited. It was “navigation by asking.” He would just ask directions from people at the side of the road.

Sometimes getting around by car was not that easy. The larger cities like Salina Cruz, Tehuantepec, and Veracruz were crammed with busy traffic.

In small towns, speed bumps (called topes or reductores) effectively control speeding. These speed bumps come in bunches, appear to be everywhere, and can really shake things up if you don't slow down. Frequent speed bumps combined with convoys of huge two-section trucks, made for a high-tension ride on the only cross-Isthmus road. Thank goodness I wasn't driving!

Pat wasn't driving either. She kept busy filling a notebook with our impressions of the sites we visited and other subjects of interest such as plants, animals, hotels, meals, public transportation, local driver habits, and our education in Mexican culture.

It's going to take an entire book to adequately describe this family-history adventure; I'll let you know how I'm progressing.

(Photos courtesy of Bob Ring and Pat Wood)



*This view of Salina Cruz harbor is from a high hill on the Pacific coast of Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The city of 80,000 didn't even exist in my great-grandfather's day – just rocky beaches, chaparral, and few cattle ranches. My research suggests that Eugene Ring came ashore in a small boat at the center left of this photo.*



*Remarkably, this church in San Juan Guichicovi appears to have changed very little since 1850. The red curtain provides privacy for the sanctuary behind it – where church services are still held today.*



*My great-grandfather visited a church 160 years ago in the tiny mid-Isthmus village of El Barrio. The description of the church in his memoir, and comparison with an illustration (August 9, 2010 Foothills) printed in an 1850 Railroad Survey report, confirm that this is that same (expanded and restored) church.*



*Having completed retracing my great-grandfather's path to the Gulf coast, Pat and I, with our driver and tour guide Pablo and his wife Araceli, are standing outside Cafe de la Parroquia, Veracruz's oldest continuously active (202 years) restaurant.*