

MI PANCHO

We traveled for over twenty-five years and Mexico became our favorite visiting place, in particular, the capital city in Tamaulipas, Ciudad Victoria. We came to know one family well and watched, from visit to visit, their twelve children grow up and marry.

I reflected on old times today and thought about a young boy who became my friend without us really knowing one another.

In 1976, on our Christmas season visit, I, along with two sons of our host family, drove near a poverty shack area about two miles away to give some of the load of clothing and shoes that had been brought for that purpose. Small dwellings, usually one room per family, had tin tops or straw thatched roofs overlapping the next, held up by crooked poles, with bare uneven dirt floors, rotting canvas or rusty pieces of tin, and strings holding collected empty aluminum cans for walls. No indoors water, no toilets, no electricity; not even a street or road for cars closer than two blocks away. Just washed out ruts from years of human traffic up one hill and down another. A stream of slow shuffling people trekked their familiar paths, going somewhere but I could not determine just where.

Rafa, Paco, and I slung bulging plastic bags over our shoulders, sort of like Santa, and headed up the first hill. Kids and grown-ups alike gathered around us. We distributed some things here and then moved on to there.

From our first stop on the hill and all along the way, I noticed a tall, skinny boy about eight years old or so, watching us. He moved up the hill as we did but kept to the back of the small crowds, never smiling or really showing any emotions, except the look of being ready to run if given direct attention. Once he stuck his hand down into his pant

pocket but it had no bottom and he wiggled his exposed fingers against his leg. I almost laughed but he wasn't playing a game with me.

His long toes and thin feet looked like Huckleberry Finn's except for the caked-on dry mud. I pointed to him with my finger and pretended to snap my unseen pistol at him. "Pancho!" He didn't flinch -- eyes fixed on me. I repeated my playful act and asked him if he was really Pancho Villa. Other kids laughed and looked at me and then at the reserved boy. His head remained high as he ran his fingers through his hair, and then straightened his terribly worn stovepipe looking trousers. After standing as straight and tall as he could, he looked again at me but without a smile. We communicated at that moment for the first time, eye to eye, but no words were uttered.

Bags of gifts were emptied and we returned down the path while avoiding mud holes and big rocks protruding from the clay walkway.

I looked back to see the boy in an open entrance of a shack with his hand shielding the sun to better watch us. I could not forget his face, that look of neglect, yet a look of hunger for knowledge, and standing like a statue for liberty.

The next day, back in the comfortable home of our friends, presents were wrapped and placed under the small-decorated tree. I used a lot of 8mm film on family, house, dancing, eats, and just about anything around. Neighboring children peered through the front window or stood in the open front door to listen and study the Americans laughing and living with the local family.

Little girls wore plain, washed out, cotton dresses, mostly no shoes, uncombed hair scattered all over their heads, a lot of play dirt from elbows to big toes, and smiles that never left while tracing my every move.

The boys, too. They shoved one another in playful jest to jockey for a better view. More than twenty kids often crowded inside and just outside the home. No family member seemed to think odd about all the kids coming and going in their house.

I pointed my camera in their direction. Most of them increased smiles and sort of stood in a still pose for posterity. Then, I saw Pancho. He stood among the little people at the far curb in view of the action and wearing the same dirty clothing as the day before. I felt his lost limited life flood my heart. That boy got to me. He asked for nothing but seemed to search for an unknown world located somewhere beyond this foreign man and where he came from.

As I stepped out the front door, I raised my pointed finger and snapped another volley in his direction. “Pancho.” At first I thought I saw a little smile on his face; but as I got closer, he turned and went quickly up the street.

The next few days were the same. Little staring eyes attached to little bodies watched us come and go, laugh, sing, and joke with one another. And, there was the boy in the background. I pulled my invisible pistol from my invisible holster on my hip and fired a round or two at him. He began to like it. He slapped his side and drew his wished-for pistol, too. I felt good having hit my target with results.

It was the day after Christmas when my new friend drew his pistol before I did. We smiled and I motioned for him to come through the little crowd to me. He melted back and turned, disappearing, lost to me, down the street.

Some of the kids had new toys, not much, not expensive, but a gift for the season. My friend had nothing.

Soon, I stood on the near-by corner, holding my bus token (less than a nickel) for my ride downtown in a crowded, rattling, no muffler, no brakes, dents on dents, multicolored Volkswagen bus. However, it had the best loud horn in town. The big department store was my destination. I bought a two-gun, two-holster, toy set with belt and leather tie-downs in a big box with clear plastic covering. It didn't need to be wrapped or even have a ribbon.

As I stepped off the bus on my return, there was Pancho walking alone towards me. I stopped to wait for him. When he looked up and saw me, he turned to run or walk away. I called to him and called again. He looked over his shoulder and then faced me. I held out the gift and told him it was for him. He had never lit-up like this before. He smiled and practically ran to me while holding out his hands. But he didn't pull on his gift. He held it and looked into my eyes. I turned loose. I could hardly see him because his humble, inside crying, had me crying out loud.

I rubbed his head of thick black hair and said, "You are my Pancho." In some ways, our friendship was as invisible as our pistols had been. But we understood.

During the next ten years or so, Pancho showed-up less and less when we were in town. Sometimes he circled the neighborhood when any Americans could be seen there – looking and then leaving until I came. I guess it was three years before he didn't wear his guns. It seemed that when he found me, he'd run back home for his guns and return. He was still the tall boy in the group and kept outgrowing the pants I brought. I believe he wore a pair of soccer shoes sparingly because they lasted over two years. And, one blue shirt with black pistol designs got so small that he had to tear off the sleeves just to keep wearing it. Near the end of my visits in Mexico, I inquired about my missing friend.

One of the men in my amigo family told me that he had seen Pancho on a construction job. He took me to the site and pointed to a young man busy mixing concrete and sand.

When Pancho looked up and saw me, he simply dodged my pistol-finger quick draw, leaned on his shovel with one hand and fired a shot back to me with the other. We didn't even say hello. He smiled. I smiled. We were only a few feet apart as I turned one last time to him. He shoveled another dab of concrete mix and fired one more love shot to me. I fired back, got in the car, and drove away.

No, I never knew his name, or his family. He was Mi Pancho.