



A New House in Colonet, a Free Clinic in San Quintín



By John Loofbourow, MD

I WONDERED. What could be accomplished over a few days among workers hundreds of miles away who scrape a marginal living from the windblown desert and an exhausted trash-littered sea? During recent visits to Baja I found out.

First, I drove with my daughter, Amy, to Colonet, a small agricultural town 80 miles South of Ensenada, to work with Volunteers in Mission (VIM)¹ building a small single family house.

Later, I went with the Flying Samaritans (SAMs)² Mother Lode Chapter to their monthly medical clinic near San Quintín. My impression over several trips like these is that while Baja California may be 50 years behind the US in many ways, it's filled with chaotic growth; vibrant technologic, and cultural exchange between the US and Mexico enriches both cultures.

The House that VIM Built

Colonet is a dreary looking strip town of a few thousand people and one Pemex gas station, stretched along the only paved road in the area, a truck-clotted, two-lane, asphalt, north-south highway. It's a long drive from Sacramento, nicely done over two days with an evening in Ensenada. The border crossing is almost invisible going down, though it is wise to cross at near noon going back to minimize congestion.

Ten miles west of Colonet is the Pacific Ocean, and 40 miles east is a mountain range that reaches several thousand feet in places. These earthy sponges suck up the meager rainfall, providing enough underground water for carefully manicured drip irrigation in labor-intensive cultivated fields tucked among low, cactus-dusted hills.

In the long growing season, the population explodes with migrant workers, mainly non-Spanish speaking indigenous peoples from the conflicted Mexican far south. There is a bitter taste of John Steinbeck country, as well as the nourishing fare of explosive economic growth.

We found the one hectare building site half an hour of deep, dust-choked road from Colonet. It sat on a gently sloping hillside, overlooking hundreds of acres of lush crops, grown vertically tied to posts, and surrounded by plastic sheeting against wind. A cement slab had been poured in advance, including plumbing and cesspool.

The lot owners were a family of four who lived in a nearby wrecked bus. They managed the drip irrigation system for a farming family who run multiple similar operations. The VIM group of 15 men and women of varying ages and abilities were directed by a few who knew construction. Table saws, chop saws, generators, and Makitas were unloaded from pickups.

Incredibly, a truck from Home Depot in Tijuana appeared to dump lumber and materials. Over the next 4 1/2 days, a turnkey one-bath house was completed. It was ready for electricity and water, although the generator and the water hookup would have to await

later installation.

Driving back and forth from our motel, we discovered where old yellow school busses go to die. *In extremis*, they freight farm workers back and forth from these fields. One late afternoon, my daughter had to return to Colonet alone, and passed a broken down bus. Fifty men, women, and children were scattered about on the hot dusty road. She stopped.

The vast majority didn't speak Spanish, but when it became clear that she was offering a ride to Colonet, the men quickly filled the Tundra inside and out, leaving the children and women in the ditch.

Despite explanations that the pickup was overloaded and could not travel at all unless some people got off, no one budged. Nothing was particularly threatening, yet the situation was static; so she waited about 45 minutes until another bus finally arrived. *¡Hasta la vista, baby!*

Scorn of religious do-gooders and missionaries is common. Yet this work had significance for us even though it didn't sell any newspapers or Coke, or make the earth turn.

This was the 18th house built by VIM in Colonet, and went smoothly, reflecting experience, organization, ingenuity, and a complex process requiring the conjoint effort of many on both sides of the border. The idea that action speaks louder than words is at the heart of John Wesley Methodism.

With another daughter, Sandi, to keep me in control, I worked at another house-raising during Easter vacation, a family affair with few equals. People raised money; gave of themselves, and paid to do so. Sun-burned bodies and ill-trained backs and arms complained every night.

But there were authentic home-cooked meals by friends in Colonet, lunches provided by the land owner and the new home owners. There was the simple pleasure of physical work with physical results.

We become more aware that Time is merely a utilitarian invention of humanity, nearly as illusory as life itself. And few would deny this was also just plain fun. If you would like to participate, contact the VIM program by email. One can do far worse with free time than help build a house.

A SAMs Clinic at Los Pinos

At the end of a 3,200-foot, packed clay airstrip owned by Rancho Los Pinos, reportedly the largest tomato growing operator in the world, 11 beautifully equipped single engine planes baked in the August heat. Four were from the Mother Lode SAMS chapter; the rest from Arizona and San Diego SAMS groups, who held nearby clinics.

A kamikaze crop duster intermittently sand-blasted us; powder-pale dust coated the \$2 million gaggle of planes and filtered through the weary cracks of the clinic building. To the north lay an apparently endless expanse of greenhouses. A mile west was a stadium-sized packing house. Surrounding land thrust up millions of wood poles supporting drip-irrigated crops.

Curiously, Los Pinos is also the name of Mexico's White House; and Tijuana, in (upper)³ Baja California, is the power base for Vicente Fox's PAN political party, which broke the 70-year grip of the PRI party on the Presidency. We were in the guts of a huge agricultural factory and, in a vague way, at the focus of what is happening in Mexico.

By 9 a.m., when the clinic opened, more than 150 people had been given numbers. A Honda gas-fueled generator complained steadily. Water had been bought for the big, open elevated tank. As the day progressed, patient count became meaningless; a given number often admitted four or more. Children prowled the clinic area, as did a few uninhibited

adults.

Three teams provided general medical care, a fourth pediatric, a fifth physical medicine, and a sixth dental. Almost all patients were Spanish-speaking modern Mexicans, employed by the Rancho and Cannery Los Pinos. Some were locals; many were migrants, staying in grower-owned housing that includes showers, plumbing and decent simple quarters.

This is familiar ground to me. In the late '60s and early '70s, I spent seven years operating migrant clinics. I still have, somewhere, a list of 404 Yolo County migrant facilities housing from 2 to 150 people.

There is only one left that I know of - at Madison on Highway 16 on the way to Cache Creek Casino just before getting to Esparto. All except this county-operated camp are gone because agriculture changed so much that local migrant work disappeared. Moreover, the vast majority of health problems of migrant workers were treatable.

The health of a people is most readily gauged, I think, by their children. By that measure, the people at the Los Pinos clinic in 2004 were far healthier than those I saw in Yolo County 40 years ago. These Baja kiddies often had current immunizations, including BCG, though not Hep A or B or MMR.

I saw a clutch of people with scabies and another with chickenpox; but no mouths filled with remnants of yellow rotted teeth, very little chronic otitic deafness or severe anemia of parasitosis.

On the other hand, indigenous people, like those around Colonet, tend to work in smaller operations, are often employed by recruiter/contractors, and probably reflect a harsher reality.

Was the trip worthwhile? Decidedly.

Despite some well people who seemed only to want freebies, or to be entertained by exotic and wealthy gringos, there was much accomplished, and there is still much to be done. In addition to hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and chronic disease, untreated eye and dental problems are common.

There were a few dramatic cases susceptible to intervention⁴ including provision of prosthetic devices, progressive casting for foot defects, and surgically treatable problems that may require transport to Sacramento or elsewhere.

There is also a practical reason to offer free services in Baja: Great need with less risk. Many physicians over 65 remember when it was routine and relatively risk-free to provide free, and low-cost, medical care. The medical "system" today is much better overall; certainly it is better technically.

Yet, it is a pleasure to step back five decades into a relatively unregulated, less litigious past to work with people whose problems can often be addressed simply and directly without risking your license or economic survival.

Rancho Los Pinos is an agricultural giant, the consequence of capitalism and free trade, without which Baja would still be... the old Baja. I'm told Los Pinos is owned by Antonio Rodriguez Hernandez and family. He is a politician, the *Diputado* for the XV region. Some feel that sort of "progress" is unfair, or abusive. Perhaps, though, it is inherent in the course of economic development.

I believe free trade has been and will continue to be a great benefit of all who participate. Baja California now has the highest per capita income of any Mexican state. I believe trade promotes progress and peace, and free trade does so maximally.

There are those who strongly disagree.⁵ Either way, the world will yet have its way with my thinking, and that of us all. In the meanwhile, it was a privilege to build houses and to look at sore throats among the people of Baja California.

SAMS is a vigorous and serious organization. All pilots, in case you wondered, are required to be instrument-rated and current. If you are intrigued, pull up the schedule on line and drop in at the monthly meeting at Executive Airport to check it out.

john@loofbourow.com

1. Volunteers in Mission, of the United Methodist Church. See the detailed Colonet article with photos by Judith Potor at www.perfectplank.com and www.gbgm-umc.org/westernvim.
2. The Mother Lode Chapter of Flying Samaritans. and click on chapters: The Mother Lode.
3. The clinic is situated near the border between two Mexican States on the Baja Peninsula: BC Norte, and BC Sur.
4. See Sacramento Bee story Wed Mar 17 by Edgar Sanchez at www.sacbee.com
5. See www.actionla.org/border/SQ_Background.htm for an interesting if strident rejection of FTAA, and a description of indigenous migrant worker conditions. (click on San Quintín).

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

Copyright © 2000-2008 Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society - All Right's Reserved