

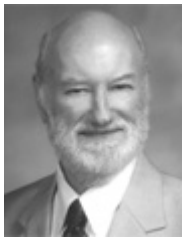


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President's Message

A Repository of History



By John Loofbourow, MD

HIGH ABOVE THE PLACE where Aconcagua River becomes the Pacific Ocean, is a *Ferreteria*. To simply say it is a hardware store, for that is what it pretends to be, is like calling *Tyrannosaurus rex* a robin. To believe that Oscar Vega Vega is merely the owner of the store, or that the people who work there are employees is to trip over a living archaeological site and move on unaware; because entering Su Casa, for that is the name of the store, is to find oneself at the edge of time.

Upon entering, the customer becomes a time traveler immediately surrounded by thousands of artifacts from the present and the past which coningle, to visually announce the nature of the *Ferreteria Su Casa*. The artifacts peer fixedly and silently from the ceilings, and every available vertical surface, wall or counter front. They are restrained by screws or fine wires, as if to protect the unwary visitor from attack.

Three or four clerks wearing worn smocks move silently, purposefully, behind a long worn counter/display case. They disappear intermittently for long periods, into dimly lighted recesses lined by floor to ceiling cubbyholes filled with partly visible artifacts. The storage tunnels stretch on back, and back, crossed by other dimly perceived cross tunnels. At the entrance, among bright colored plastic encased modern artifacts from China, are items wrapped in distressed browning cellophane or stored in ragged discolored boxes with labels wounded and bruised by thousands of fingers. To the extreme right and left of the counter, worn wooden stairs between artifact festooned walls ascend into an unseen second floor and descend into an imagined basement. To the left a cashier sits in a small cage behind a glass window.

Here in the flesh is that classical Spanish fiction called magical realism; here it seems merely ordinary. The intruder, innocently leaving the present tense, is affected by the physical presence of thousands of formerly real items, in the care of men and women who are themselves tenuously real, yet offer the only clues to the purpose or functions of the artifacts they tend.

Su Casa *Ferreteria* is in Con Con, Chile, a small fishing village and resort town that exhales history as the region's first coastal port city, founded 1543 by Spaniard Pedro de Valdivia to provide his ships with a way to supply Santiago, which had been destroyed two years before on the rather signal date of 9/11, by the Araucanos under Michimalonko.

I had asked the clerk, and then the store manager, for permission to take photos of the interior of Su Casa, but was refused; photo taking something that is usually strictly forbidden in most South American stores. Yet I was so intrigued by the aura of the place that I could not give up easily. And finding a man I assumed to be Mr. Vega outside in front of Su Casa, I approached him. He is slightly portly, wears a newer version of the store clerk's beige three quarter length smock, under a full head of steel gray hair, holding a simple wooden cane in his right hand. He listened alertly, and I thought somewhat skeptically, as I introduced myself and made my request. He said nothing, continuing to regard me fixedly, but without apparent disapproval. I continued to explain why I hoped he would be kind enough to permit my picture taking within the store. Still, he remained silent, so I began to ask him about the history of the store, which, as will become clear is the personal history of Oscar Vega Vega.

Don Oscar had not started life easily. He began an itinerant peddler in 1934 at the age of 10; a person who traveled on foot from one coastal village to the next, carrying items for sale, pulling a cart with a modest stock of items he believed most likely to be wanting in local households: cloth, items for sewing, soap, brushes, spices, coffee, salt, clothing.

Throughout the world depression he gradually built a clientele and a route. The young Oscar, like the young Ben Franklin, was astute, frugal, focused, and organized. Even so, it was not until the 50's that he acquired a used 'Citroneta', a small car that looked like a sardine can, only lacking the windup key on top to open it up. It had a gear shift that projected horizontally from the dash, a 12 hp motor, and the reputation of a goat: ugly, indestructible, intrepid and tolerant of baling wire.

In 1958 at the age of 24, Oscar bought the store and prophetically named it Su Casa. It became the existential expression of Oscar himself, nominally his own house or home. He married, and raised a family, but never took a vacation, with one revealing exception. In the words of an old employee: four miserable days in the Lake District far from Su Casa.

During the "Chilean socio-economic miracle" of the late 70's that once poor nation of 12 million, mired in the socio-economic and political swamps of South America, escaped into the developed world. The business prospered and was moved uphill a block to expand. Twice during succeeding years it attracted generous offers from buyers: During the 1982 world recession, and again in 2007. Despite his advancing years, health problems, and the thoughtful advice of family, friends, and financial advisors, Don Oscar declined to sell.

"Don't you have a problem with competition from places like Sodimac/Home Center?" I asked. "They are completely automated, electronically connected to a flat world of international commerce. Whenever they sell something, a replacement is automatically placed into production in various places the world over, ordered and produced sent. They can exert economies of scale and the power of volume buying. No one can compete with their prices."

"Never!" He broke into a broad smile for the first time. "They don't even have many of the items we do, don't know they exist, how to find them, what they are for, or how to use them. They know no one who does. Computers and all that, they can't know what is not fed into them. I don't need computers. I have people who know the job. And for me, that is what matters: the people I work with. This is an old town. Home owners often must maintain and repair things made by generations past. I have 15 employees who have worked more than 20 years with me. They, and they alone, know exactly where each of more than 10,000 items is kept. When we sell one we order one. What we don't sell waits patiently, becoming more and more rare. Each of my people has invested many years to learn our system and stock, yet they have few other skills. It's hard to find well paid work in a small town like this; if they didn't work here they might have to go to the city, where they become merely one more among many others just like them. Here they are skilled. Here they have family, and their families are family. Behind every one of us are ten

or more others who depend on Su Casa. I do also, because I am it, and it is me. How could I sell, how could I 'retire', and abandon my own life, my self, and my family!?! First I will fall dead."

Patricia Perez Martinez accompanied me for the photos. Her father had worked in Su Casa. The eldest of five children, she had been in secretarial school in Santiago when her father suddenly died, leaving the family with very limited means of support. While she was in Con Con helping to settle her father's affairs, Don Oscar asked her to help out for a while as secretary. He felt it was about time he had one. That was 30 years ago, and Patricia is now manager.

Though she was busy, she oriented me to the labyrinth of tunnels, patiently attempting to convey to me the order to the layout over at least half a hectare, more than an acre, on three levels. I was awed by the variety, and magnitude of the material. Soon Patricia's cell phone alerted her precipitously to some task, and she left me to explore alone. No cool Pacific sea breeze penetrated the stuffy intersecting corridors, which were either dimly lighted or darkened. I was unaware where many of the light switches could be found.

I began to be uncertain which turn I had last taken, which before that. I recalled Jason and the Labyrinth, thinking vaguely that I needed some string to find my way back. Years past on a tour of the Lima Cathedral catacombs I had slipped away from the group to be alone with the dead and flash photo the neat piles of skulls, femurs, and vertebrae.

But by contrast the dark stuffy tunnels of Su Casa were threatening, and I began to feel an unease, bordering on dread. Individually the thousands of artifacts were innocuous, but collectively they pressed in on me. Protectively convincing myself that it availed me little to explore much further I turned back the way I seemed to have come, but recognized no familiar objects.

Perhaps I should not have been so invasive or abusive of the trust placed in me as to venture alone further upstairs and downstairs. Could I not be lost forever somewhere in the past? Would I find my way back to the 21st Century? Even if I did, would I be someone other than myself back in 2009? I was never to find out. After a few more wrong turns some familiar areas appeared, and I escaped, thanked Patricia, and left.

To steal and corrupt a line from Faulkner: Time is the mausoleum of History.¹ Reflecting on the cruelty of the natural process, I thought of the moribund small hardware stores the world over. Some die like Stewarts Point Store near Sea Ranch, or Newbert's of downtown Sacramento. Some devolve into a zombie franchise, a living death like Emeigh's at Watt and El Camino. Su Casa I expect will one day be entombed with its owner, Don Oscar Vega Vega. One more piece of the past will no longer encroach on or enrich the present.

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1. The Sound and the Fury