

# VI

## 1946 - 1951 Introduction to Mexico

The year 1949 heralded a big change in our lives. Leonard Brooks, a war artist in the Royal Canadian Navy, went to Mexico in 1947 taking advantage of the Canadian Government's funding for veterans for further study. He returned to Toronto on a visit. An enthusiastic fellow, during lunch at the Arts and Letters Club he gave an enticing picture of Mexico for a painter. York decided then and there that we were going to Mexico as soon as we could get ready. That evening we discussed all possibilities.

Was this the moment to give up commercial art and try to live on painting alone? Only a bachelor, A.Y. Jackson, had been able to do this and he was well supported by relatives and friends. Would our savings tide us over six months? Could we manage on the \$1,500 that Canadians were then allowed to take out of the country? Could Virginia be taken out of school for six months? What about Suzi-Q? The only answer for optimists was an unqualified "yes." And we laid plans to depart by car, a month later, in September, 1949.

When Standard Oil of New Jersey heard of our plans, they got in touch to see if York would stop off in New York to do a little job. Of course he would; his guardian angel had solved the money problem. Rose and Don Pringle's children, across the street, adored Suzi-Q, and they would be delighted to have her for six months. Bit by bit everything fell into place, and I was able to rent the house for the six months.

Cleeve and Jean Horne gave us a send-off. As people arrived, women were sent one way and men the other. The women emerged with rebozos, some were in bare feet and generally as Mexican-looking as possible. The men had rolled-up trousers, bare feet, serapes, and sombreros. In Cleeve's studio his model stand became a throne for us. It was decorated with iguana skins, rebozos, and serapes. There were three chairs, with a small chamber pot beside each, and we were told that our drinks would be served in the little potties. The food was so hot that it burned our mouths - supposedly in preparation for Mexico.

Cass (Casson, Group of Seven) and Margaret appeared a little

late. People were already eating, but Cass descended the long stairs into Cleeve's studio in a sombrero, rolled-up trousers, a serape and a drink in his hand. Margaret was a little more demure, with a rebozo. They were handed a plate of food, and all eyes were on Cass as he took his first bite. He quietly announced, "If anyone would like to light a cigarette, I will breathe on it." En route at last we sang most of the way, we were so happy. In New York we settled into the Wellington Hotel and York called Standard Oil. He was to go right over to get his instructions, and started to work in the hotel room in watercolour, using a drinking glass as his water bowl. He wanted to be alone and wondered if Virginia and I could find something to do for the day. We went off to the Bronx Zoo, no difficulty spending the day there. We returned to find York was getting along well and would probably finish by noon the next day. Pushed out in the morning, we stayed until noon in Central Park. Everything was so new to us, and so different. Returning at midday, York had just finished and was cleaning up. He was so excited that he grabbed his glass (water bowl) and took a long drink before realizing - but didn't seem the worse. He delivered the job to Standard Oil right after lunch, returned about 4 p.m. in high spirits with a cheque for \$1,500. He cashed the cheque, we hid the money and checked out.

It took an exasperatingly long time to get out of New York, but we stepped on the gas as soon as we hit the highway. I watched the route from our Ontario Motor League marked map, but the names of places turning up were not those marked! It was nearly supertime, and we decided to have a celebration drink and a bite to eat. We discussed the route with the manager and suddenly realized that we had been heading back to Canada, a sinking feeling! Such an inauspicious start and we had 3,000 miles to go.

Through the Kentucky Hills, we saw actual hillbillies and wondered if they had stills in them thar hills! We were amazed at Louisiana's swampland, with so much bird and animal life and Spanish moss hanging from the trees. The turnoff for New Orleans was tempting, but our goal was Mexico. Arkansas' cotton plantations came before our eyes. In Texas, the land of wonders, we saw tall cowboys with big hats, tall beautiful girls and straight flat highways for miles. Navajo Indians were selling their wares along the edge of the highway. We stopped for gas, the attendant, looking at our car plates, said: "So yo all are from Ontario, is that one of them northern states?" We said: "No, it's in Canada."

“Canady! Say why don’t you nice folks all move to Texas? We have everything here, never have been out of Texas my whole life, don’t need to.” To say the least, that made our day!

We settled for the night at Laredo, ready to cross the border in the morning. At the motel, there were trees with real oranges, and we had to touch them. Huge brightly coloured parrots were eager for conversation. At bedtime, I thought I saw something move on the white bedsheet. I investigated and found the biggest black insect I had ever seen. Others were jumping in and out of my purse. Our introduction to cockroaches, we went in search of the management, who promised to spray right away. He sprayed, but we had an uneasy night and were up before daybreak. We later learned that it was far more unusual to find a place without cockroaches.

After crossing the border, we found the scruffy little town on the other side so different. Our Spanish was a few poorly pronounced phrases. We knew that we mustn’t drink the water or have salads, so we had beer and cooked foods, mostly boiled eggs. Driving down the Pan American highway towards Mexico City, we passed thatched huts, a little distant among the scrub bushes, but only rarely did we see figures disappearing among the bushes. We passed small towns and late in the day came to Ciudad Victoria where we stopped for the night.

We learned from other tourists that we were about to have a day’s drive in the mountains, with very tortuous and dangerous curves. We must not set out before 10 a.m. because the mist was heavy. However, it was a beautiful experience in these lovely mountains, so high at times, with tremendous drops without protective barriers! The colours and forms greatly excited York, and at one point, the car radio was playing “Bach,” one of his favourites. This thrilling moment led to the painting “Bach in the Mountains.” Among the small towns was Tamazunchale, where men’s beautiful shoes were made, combinations of suede and leather, lacing the uppers to the leather soles. York bought a pair cheaply, they sold in New York for \$40, a high price at that time. Coming out of the mountains towards evening, we entered Queretaro, just a small town. A sign “Hotel Centro” stood out. The room was spartan and the shower ran all over the floor. We soon found this was not unusual.

Starting out next morning we tried asking directions of peasants on the road or in the fields, but most seemed afraid of strangers and ran away. Finally, we saw a priest. We stopped and carefully asked,

“Buenos dias, por favor, donde esta San Miguel de Allende?” He answered in English, “This is San Miguel de Allende, where did you want to go?” Hearing English was such a shock we thought for a moment that we were beginning to understand Spanish! We had stopped just outside the town. We found Sollano 35 and discovered Leonard and Reva Brooks were staying in John and Florence Johnson’s house, while they were on a trip. The Allen Smarts were staying with them while house hunting. Allen was a professor of English at Ohio University, had written a book-of-the-month selection, “R.F.D.” He was later to write a book on Benito Juarez, Mexico’s first Indian president.

The Brooks had a house ready for us on Calle Recreo. It was complete with maid and gardener and cost US\$50 a month. We learned later it was one of the best in town, a 2 acre estate, built by an American. The maid Matilda was paid US\$8 a month occupying the entrance house, at street level, on the property. The gardener had a house at the back of the property and made his living growing produce on the land, keeping the mansion on the hill supplied with vegetables.

The mansion was stunning with black tile floors and white leather furniture and even sterling flatware. There were three bedrooms with baths, York quickly claimed the largest facing the mountains as his studio. In his bathroom, the toilet paper holder, when pulled, played “Whistle While You Work.” There were two bedrooms in the other wing, we took the front one, with Virginia’s adjoining. There was a large swimming pool with an overhanging pecan tree.

After we settled, we returned to the Johnsons’ with our friends. A fiesta had been arranged with mariachis (Mexican musicians) to celebrate our arrival. The mayor was there among many others, Mexican and foreign. It was held in the garden, mariachis played, we were introduced to the guests, and learned about local life, customs and food. Most get-togethers in those days were accompanied by mariachis, in their typical costumes, black with gold braid and epaulets, with matching sombreros. They sang their doleful songs about love and life, all very gay. The peso was worth 12 cents to the Canadian and American dollar and living was cheap.

The food served included tamales (cornmeal cakes filled with meat or sweets, wrapped in a corn leaf and steamed), guacamole (a dip of mashed avocado with lime juice and spices) often topped with red pomegranate seeds, and scooped up with a fried piece of

tortilla (like a pancake). Jicama (looks like a white turnip) is served cut in pieces and sprinkled with lime juice and paprika. No celery then and this seemed to replace it as something bland and crisp.

Here we met Sonia and Enrique Cervantes, agents for our American landlady. They lived next door. Sonia was English, with a Russian mother, and Enrique Mexican, (Rufino Tamayo's cousin), both were artists. They had met in England when Enrique was serving in the US army. Sonia was expecting their first child. We met the Don Newtons, Time's representative in Mexico and South America. There was Sterling Dickinson who had come to Mexico in 1937. He managed the art school and taught Spanish at the Instituto Allende, located at that time in a building behind the old market which later burned down. For Spanish lessons we sat on little stools in a bare room of the building. Leonard Brooks, Jack Baldwin, Jim Pinto and a few others were either teachers or students. Arturo Suarez taught photography, Howard Jackson, jewellery, Judy Martin, weaving and so on. The first three taught advanced painting, taking their students out in the marketplace or the surrounding hills. York never taught there, but his name was used as being on the board of directors, without his confirmation.

Immediately we began studying Spanish. This was essential as no one in the marketplace, stores or the servants spoke a word of English, excellent conditions for learning a language quickly. York became absorbed in his painting, had little time to study but he had a good ear, and his pronunciation was excellent, but to learn the verb tenses was too much and he settled for infinitives and got along nicely. He learned a few typical phrases, using them with a flourish, and occasionally someone would say to me, "Why he knows more Spanish than you do." Grinning he basked in this praise never admitting that I had to take care of the details. I was studying the language properly, could read, write and understand it, I never minded and laughed with him. Max Beerholm, after living in Italy for many years and never learning a word of Italian once said: "Genius doesn't have to learn another language!"

The light, the market scenes, the mountains were new for York and he became absorbed in his surroundings. He went on occasional sketching trips near San Miguel with Brooks and Cervantes, but often further afield to places like Patscuaro, Tzintzuntzan and Janitzio Island. The fishermen still used butterfly nets (scooping up many at a time) and dugout canoes. The nets stretched out to dry and mend, and the stately Tarascan women all became exciting new

subjects. We were so amazed to see very young children painting charming designs on the dishes at Tzintzuntzan. The whitefish from Lake Patzcuaro, famous for their delicacy, were threatened by over fishing and eventually the butterfly nets were banned, but as usual too late. The Indian women there wore black skirts with pleats piled one on top of the other in back, a style seen nowhere else. The men everywhere wore white cotton shirts and pants, with a sort of apron over the front, scarcely seen anymore. All the men wore sombreros, which differed by region in colour and ribbons. Everywhere were burros but few cars. The burros carried everything from bundles of firewood, bags of rich black loam for gardens and pottery on its way to market. Many pottery handles tied together made unbelievably large loads, either on burros' or men's backs. On the return trip, often the man was riding on the back haunches of the burro while the women walked. Men also carried other loads; sometimes we would see an upended table or dresser going along the street, with only a pair of legs showing.

Our stiff, previously unpopular friend in Toronto, Alex Panton had slowly mellowed with the association of our small group of artists humanizing him, mostly through York's ridiculous antics, aided by Syd Hallam and Cleeve Horne. One reason it worked was that he had great respect for York in his painting as well as the man. He wrote this poem which reached us soon after we had arrived in Mexico.



## To Mexico.

There were many bars and drunkenness was a problem. It was not unusual to see a drunk lying on the street; and you stepped around him. Now drunks are picked up and sleep it off in jail. Their fine is to do free work for the town. Often it would be peasants from surrounding ranches who would be enjoying a few drinks before leaving. A sad sight was a poor wife waiting outside the bar for her staggering husband to emerge, then trying to hustle him out of town before the police saw him. It was not uncommon to see people begging, even young children, though the government tried to stop this. The people generally are happy, and food is never denied, each shop giving a little something.

Most foreigners pull a faux pas occasionally with the language. Often a suffix ending in 'o' or 'a' is added to an English word, and sometimes it works. In trying to explain to a new model that it was necessary to draw from the nude and there was no reason to be embarrassed, York used the word "embarasada" which in Spanish means pregnant. The young girl would look surprised, to say the least. To excuse oneself, one might say "excusado," which means toilet.

Across the street lived Fleta and Mac MacFarland, who had arrived in San Miguel on horseback in 1933. There were five San Miguels in Mexico; they had visited some of the others before finding the right one. Mac had been a druggist in Oregon. They built a charming, large house on Calle Recreo, where they grew most of their own produce and had a beautiful flower garden. Fleta was a nurse and worked for many years for Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ in his clinic in Queretaro, going back and forth each day. In retirement she worked for the Biblioteca (library) and other charities, wrote a weekly column on gardening for the local paper "Atencion," until she died in her nineties in 1993.

The MacFarlands regaled their friends with stories of their early years. One time they were away on a trip and returned earlier than expected. Their maid was nowhere to be seen the afternoon of their return. Her work should have been on the main floor at this time, upstairs was always finished before noon. Fleta started upstairs as a flustered maid came rushing down. Fleta carried on to the bedroom, and seeing a strange lump in the bed, threw back the covers. There lay a naked little Mexican, who jumped up and saluted her, saying, "A sus ordenes Senora" (At your service Senora).

Fleta tried in vain to get her maid to use a folding ironing board, but she persisted in using the table. On returning one day Fleta found the ironing board broken, and asked what happened. The maid said, “Se rompeo, Senora” (It broke itself Senora). This is inherent in the language, things do things to themselves.

Jim and Rushka Pinto became our good friends. Jim was Yugoslav, with a Spanish grandmother, but now was an American citizen from California. He had gained a reputation there as a painter and had come to Mexico on the GI Bill of Rights and remained to teach. He was the most interesting painter here with a good colour sense. York’s appreciation of talent in others had him wondering how he could show Jim’s work in Canada or snare him for a teaching job at the OCA. This seemed another way to speed up the quality of art in Canada but it never happened. Jim remained to teach at the Instituto until his death in the ‘80’s.

Our first maid Matilda began disappearing part of the day, we eventually discovered she was working part time for someone else, sometimes setting up her own stall in the market. This was unsatisfactory of course; we would have to get another maid. Enrique Cervantes had a difficult time getting her and her family out of the house that went with the property. She had been there so long she felt it belonged to her.

Our next maid was Lydia, a tall nice looking young girl and York used her for a model for many paintings, but fully clothed. He paid her extra so she was pleased to model. However, it wasn’t long before models were found and arrangements made to pose in the nude; often art students themselves.

We soon discovered we were paying the highest rent of anyone we knew; the highest among our friends was our Time correspondent friend Don Newton who paid US\$18 a month, so we complained. It was reduced to US\$40.

York had come to San Miguel to work, life was becoming too social. It was the custom of many ministers and ambassadors in Mexico City to come to San Miguel on weekends. Friends started asking if they could entertain their diplomatic personnel at our house, supplying all the refreshments. We made many lasting good friends, but York needed as few interruptions as possible. A strict rule was then enforced — no interruptions until 5 p.m. Practically no one had a phone, so that became a later rule. One sent one’s maid with a message and she waited for the reply.

It was a joy for York to face each sunny morning, knowing that

he had only to go to his studio and paint the whole day long. The large glass doors were opened wide each morning, and as we were on a hill, he had long, interesting views of the town and mountains in the distance. Sometimes he would take his easel onto the patio, where he would have Lydia pose by the fountain, or go into town and paint a market scene. It was less comfortable sitting on his stool in the marketplace as people always gathered and one time a policeman told him there was a charge for sketching. York thinking to end it quickly pretended not to speak Spanish, until it became obvious he wasn't going away. York reached into his pocket and gave him a peso, at which point the policeman said, "And one for my friend too," as another policeman suddenly appeared. However, the selection of subjects was unlimited.

Other diversions, apart from cocktails or dinner in the evenings included the bull fights, Los Toros. After seeing a couple that was enough for me, I was spending most of the time with my eyes closed. However, York became quite an aficionado; he likened it to ballet. He usually went with Leonard Brooks to fights in San Miguel and nearby towns. His excitement knew no bounds, and he often jumped into the ring and out again or behind boards if the bull came his way.

There were many fiestas with fireworks, the Indians dancing, the blessing of the animals, the Day of the Dead (November 1), Candelaria (February 2), Peregrinations, Independence Day, School parades and the many Saints days. Saint Patricio (Saint Patrick's Day) was just celebrated on March 17. The fireworks were the most ingenious, the structures huge, two storeys high, with great horizontal arms and shapes like bicycles and people. One part is lit with wheels spinning and explosions, as one section finishes it lights the next, until the whole has been spent. At the same time, rockets shower the sky with rainbows of colour. York and Leonard were always in there, not missing a thing. Among the Indians dancing, nude except for a hip band, shells or bells on their ankles and great headdresses of feathers; one recognizes the butcher or baker thumping to the tribal beat. The Blessing of the Animals finds great lines at the church door of animals and birds costumed fantastically, waiting for the priest to bless them. York did at least one painting of this event which Hallmark used as a Christmas card in 1954. Candelaria is a great profusion of flowers and plants, filling the entire Jardin (town square). Great truckloads of trees, shrubs, potted plants are unloaded and assembled the night before. Everything that

blooms is blooming, making a fabulous display. It is the big sale of the year for garden renewals.

The Peregrinations are another great religious show. Most lose their maids, gardeners and workers for a few days, as this huge mass start out by foot to reach a shrine a few days distant. People cook, feed their children, and sleep en route, with some traversing the last mile on their bleeding knees. On arrival they buy whips with beads on them from the shrine and whip themselves. Such is the religious fervour. It is hoped education will help disperse this barbaric custom. The money made through the sale of religious objects goes to the shrine.

We often started out on this pilgrimage with Leonard and Reva Brooks, Jim and Rushka Pinto and the group from San Miguel; the artists sketching furiously and cameras clicking away. Once they crossed the river outside of town, out came the cooking pots and fires were lit; children, adults, burros and dogs everywhere. At the river Rushka, Reva and I were offered rides on burros to cross, while the men rolled up their trousers, took off their shoes and waded across. After a mile or two, our little sixsome returned. The men studied their sketches in their studios for painting ideas.

When the goal was the shrine at Atotonilco, a few miles from San Miguel, a village boasting a tremendous church, equipped to handle thousands, the religious came from distant parts. The church had co-educational toilets to handle a few hundred at a time. There are many hot springs in the area, and row after row of toilets have the hot water constantly flowing beneath. The tortilla belts heats hundreds at a time, being many meters long. The soup pots, heated from underneath, are so large there is a ladder up the side to add ingredients. It is like a scene from the middle ages. York's Penitantes, 1949, was sent to the Canada/Mexican exhibition in 1992, mounted by Christine Boyanoski of the AGO.

During the winter of 1950, York developed sores that would not heal and Dr. Olsina said that it was because of a calcium shortage, and sent his nurse a few times to give calcium injections. I had mentioned this in a letter to the Hornes in Toronto. The Hornes had a farm at Claremont, Ontario where they spent weekends, often inviting friends. Dr. Wallace Graham and his wife Kay were guests on the weekend my letter had arrived. They began to talk about York's problem and Wallace (Wally) said that he could cure it easily. After a few drinks, they decided they should all come to Mexico and fix old York up. They agreed to clear their calendars and leave

as soon as possible. Back at their work Monday morning, it looked difficult, but still a good idea. They informed us when they would be arriving in Mexico City, and since we had our car with us we agreed to meet them at the Airport.

We decided to go into Mexico City a day early to arrange things. We told Jorge, the manager at the Hotel Francis on the Reforma about our friends coming on their first trip to Mexico. Jorge arranged a luxurious three bedroom, living room suite on the corner, giving us a good view along the Reforma, and invited all of us to have dinner with him the first night. We picked up our four friends at the Airport and drove to the Hotel. In the suite we found a large tray of liquors, mixers, ice and a magnificent bouquet of flowers, "Compliments of the Management." It was overwhelming. Cleeve Horne said, "Well, we certainly feel sorry for the deprived Wilsons living under such hardships."

We invited Jorge, the manager of the hotel for drinks and went down to dinner with him, as his guests. He was great fun, spoke English and everything got off to a good start. After dinner, Jorge invited us to join him at a night club, where a bottle of rum was promptly put on the table. I mentioned this could be a night club anywhere, and we were anxious for our friends to see the real Mexico. Jorge said, "Well, let's have a drink here, and then we will move on." He took us to a second club, much the same; it seemed he wanted us to see the elegant places. The mariachis get together after midnight to play for themselves and we headed there next. Jorge knew them all. Everyone was having a great time, the mariachis played on and on, including any requests from us for a couple of hours under the stars in the lovely atmosphere of the park. We recognized "Poet and Peasant," and York requested "Guadalajara" and "Cumpleaños," the birthday song. We drove back to the hotel about 2:30 a.m.

The next day we discussed what could we do for Jorge? It was decided that Cleeve would paint his portrait and we would buy the materials and frame. We invited Jorge again for drinks that evening and Cleeve painted his portrait. Jorge sat for about two hours and seemed pleased. What a welcome it had been!

Our last day Sunday and our friends wanted to see a bullfight. One was to take place at 4 p.m. in the great bull ring in Mexico City. As we walked the streets Sunday morning and early afternoon, we saw stretch limousines adorned with beautiful girls lounging across the hoods. They were laughing and talking to people as they slowly

went by, inviting them to come to the bull fight — a unique and attractive bit of promotion.

We arrived at the bull ring well ahead of time. It was huge, a large oval area with a dirt floor and two gates each side at one end — one for the charging bull to enter and the other to leave, dead, on a sled pulled by a horse. It was said that the meat was distributed to the poor.

Fifteen minutes ahead the Picadors on horseback walk slowly toward the judges at the far end, the Picadors and the horses both bow to the judges, then back slowly away.

The judges and VIP's face a huge clock ticking the minutes away. The fight is to start exactly at 4 p.m.; a heavy fine levied for each late minute. They always start on time, the entrance gate swung open exactly at 4 p.m., as the judge signalled the start and out rushed a raging bull. There were the picadors, with long prods to anger the bull, waiting in the ring. They were mounted on horses which were well protected underneath with boards. The picadors were in their ornate costumes and hats, expensively elaborate and both riders and horses were decorated with ribbons.

When the bull charged, jerking its horns under the horse's belly, the picadors speared it in the shoulders to break the neck muscles, so the head would automatically lower before engaging with the toreros, who were on foot. The toreros' costumes are even grander, a red cape covers the hand holding the dagger. They waved their capes to attract the bulls away from the picadors. When in combat the cape is held to one side, enticing the bull to charge the cape. This long drama tires the bull ready for the coup-de-grace. The movements of the toreros are graceful, as York says, like ballet. Finally the dagger is aimed straight for the heart, to kill the bull immediately.

For a good performance, the crowd goes wild, throwing valuables as well as clothing into the ring — sometimes women throw their brassieres or panties. The torero may be allowed an ear of the bull, sometimes two for a top performance. But if the torero fails to kill the bull quickly, taking extra stabs, the crowd becomes angry, booing and shouting obscenities. Good toreros are highly praised and honoured, their performance decides the size of the purse.

An actual bull fight was quite an eye-opener for our friends. I had decided long since I would rather not be there. In contrast, York became very excited hollering his "Bravos" with the crowd.

The next day we were off early for Patscuaro with its large market, and dock for Janitzio Island. We stayed at the Hotel de la Basilica on the hill. The following morning we took the boat for Janitzio Island, seeing dugout canoes and fishermen with butterfly nets en route. As we approached the island, we could see endless lines of fishing nets hung up to dry along the shore. We landed and wandered through the streets that mount the hill, higher and higher. The island is populated with Tarascan Indians, who at that time were very friendly. York did many paintings there; he was impressed with the dignity of the Tarascan women, straight and tall as they mended the nets.

On our return to Patscuaro, we drove further around the lake to Erongaricuaru, a weaving village where much excellent work originated and was sold in Mexico City and other centres. We met and talked with Mrs. Gordan who started the whole enterprise, a devoted artisan. We passed through the ceramic village of Tzintzuntzan and our friends were surprised to see such young children painting excellent designs on dishes. The dishes from there are cream coloured with designs of animals and birds.

We returned to San Miguel. Since we had only one extra bedroom, the Grahams were offered a bedroom at the Brooks' house which was just a few doors away. Our guests enjoyed a few days of sightseeing and meeting our friends in San Miguel.

In 1950 the meaning of abstract art suddenly became clear to York while he was painting in a small Mexican town, Acambay, a high point of land on the way to Mexico City. As he sat sketching a market scene with canvas covered stalls, women with rebozos, and the mountain backdrop, he realized that all the shapes worked together — one complimented the other, taking on the same shapes, and suddenly the meaning of abstraction became clear to him. The title of this painting is Sunlit Street, Acambay. It was purchased by a Sarnia lawyer, Park Jamieson, a strong supporter, with Pauline McGibbon of the Canadian Drama Festival. On Jamieson's death he left this painting to Dr. O.J. Pokorny, who in 1966 gave it to the Art Gallery of Sarnia. While Sunlit Street, Acambay itself is not very abstract, it is nevertheless a key work.

Most kitchens in Mexican towns at that time did not have gas or electric stoves. One cooked brazier-style, lighting a fire with charcoal and wood in a front opening of the tiled kitchen counter, which had a hole on top with a grate for the pot. Water for bathing was heated in an upright tank called a calentador, again lit by a fire

underneath. No one seemed to mind, we were all young then. Many had maids who came from hovels with dirt floors. On cold nights, they moved their animals inside for warmth for the family. Amazingly these maids appeared spotless. They did their family's wash at their employer's house in a pila (a shallow, cement-ridged tub) where there was always a good supply of soap and water. Most houses had servants' quarters where they could bathe and wash their hair. Few had running water in their homes, and went to a public fountain with their pitchers and pails. There is a public pila near the waterworks in San Miguel, with separate pilas for 12 or more, drying it over the masonry walls or taking it home wet. Often they put their children in the tubs after and, occasionally themselves. Sometimes York would discreetly sketch there for an interesting setting and a free model.

So many things happened during those early trips, usually a six month period. York felt he needed at least that much time for a good working session while Mexican law demanded that foreigners must leave and re-enter after six months. A young Mexican gentleman, Armando Garcia became a good friend of the artists. His family was an old, prestigious family, well educated. The family home was central on the Jardin (square) (above where the Banco de Mexico is today) adjoining Casa Canal, the original home of the Counts of Canal.

Armando often invited his friends to dinner or to watch a Fiesta from their balconies. He gave many parties in the large pink-walled villa directly behind the Parroquia Church, where the Bougainvilleas billow over the scalloped pink walls, with a fountain below on Calle Cuadrante, corner of Aldama. At one party as we stood talking with a group in Armando's garden, we overheard a conversation between a group of young men. One said, "Have you seen the beautiful redhead who has just arrived?" We realized they were talking about our daughter; Virginia seemed to be causing quite a stir. Armando was so popular, a young, tall and handsome man, who could be seen each morning in his white riding breeches, entering town on his white horse after riding in the beautiful hills of the Atascadero. We were stunned when three years later he died from leukemia!

York was familiar with the work of Mexico's muralists, Orozco, Rivera and Siquieros; they were strong painters, but he delayed seeing their actual murals until he had his own reactions to Mexico. When he did see some he wasn't too interested as they were mostly

political propaganda — large, violent and brutal. They had little effect on his own murals; he had already done his first in 1940 for Roy Thomson (later Lord Thomson of Fleet) and the Timmins Press. He had also accepted the commission to do a mural for Malton Airport and had finished the cartoon which had been accepted. It became a political football and the mural was never done.

Wm. Finlayson of Western Home Monthly asked York to compare Mexican and Canadian art in an article for their magazine. York chose to talk with Siquieros who was delighted to oblige and invited us for dinner. He was in the car from which Trotsky was killed. There was much rivalry between the big three painters and Siquieros was always well armed and surrounded with bodyguards. We were given minute instructions on how to get to his home. We would find a long, narrow lane, the width of a car at a certain point. We were to drive down this lane until we saw him in his garden. We must arrive at an exact specified hour. He would be there with his killer dogs and two bodyguards, heavily armed. We followed this lane and eventually saw Siquieros and his friends waving in a garden. We were greeted with abrazos while being assured we were safe.

We followed Siquieros into the house, surrounded by his guards, their pockets bulging with guns. Inside we met the charming Angela, Siquieros' wife, and were seated around a low, round coffee table, with a tray of bottles. Angela knelt in front of the tray and poured our drinks. She was petite, beautiful and fragile, while right behind her was her huge portrait, done by her husband. It showed a gigantic, strong woman with great fist-like hands which seemed to overshadow us. Such a contrast to the delicate little woman at our feet. York showed many reproductions of Canadian artists' works, Siquieros studied them carefully, asked questions and acknowledged that we had some very good painters. York made notes for his article and acquired some reproductions of the work of Mexican artists.

We were then invited to the dining table, the two bodyguards standing on either side of Siquieros. I was directed to the chair on his right, but with a bodyguard in between. Angela, without protection, had York sitting on her left. Conversation was lively through dinner. Later we went to his studio. He showed us his current work, portraits of movie actresses, not very impressive. Siquieros had dark, mesmerising eyes that seemed to look through you, and the portraits seemed much better then than in afterthought.

York enjoyed discussing art in general with the Mexican master and concluded that Canadian art compared favourably with Mexican. A criterion he often used was whether a work would be accepted by the jury for the OSA, a mighty lively art society at that time.

Anxious to see more of Mexico, we went with the Grant Powers (a cartoonist for a US Army magazine during the war). We drove to Guadalajara, then boarded the train (no road through to the coast yet) hoping we would have seats to stretch out for the night. It turned out to be a slow train, stopping at every station. People pushed their luggage through the open windows thinking to secure a seat. Eventually there was scarcely room to sit and it was bedlam. Passengers brought food and beer, ate, talked and laughed all night. There were aphthosis disinfectant boxes each end of the car, you were supposed to walk through them in the hope of stopping the spread of hoof and mouth disease in cattle, a precaution paid for by the US government. Of course no one walked through them, they walked on the rims instead and threw their garbage in them all night.

On arrival very early in Manzanillo, dead tired, we were confronted by the police asking for passports. We explained they were in our house back in San Miguel. The police were not sympathetic, no excuses accepted. This is a port and foreigners must have their passports. They warned us not to leave without showing our passports, our hotel would be held responsible and we would be watched.

We had planned to stay only a week considering our tight finances. We immediately wrote the agent for the absentee landlord, Enrique Cervantes, hoping he might have a key. More than two weeks went by while York did many sketches in small nearby villages. He would be up at daybreak while the rest slept, pick a banana or two en route to his first sketch and still be back in time to have breakfast with us.

The hotel was under Italian management and the food was good. A large array of fruit, juices, eggs, bacon and toasted bolillos (hard-crust rolls) would be set out buffet-style for breakfast. The dining room was on stilts over the water. Brightly coloured parrots and chained monkeys inhabited the lovely garden. The monkeys could be cantankerous if one got too close as Virginia learned and was bitten in trying to be friendly. The group went swimming twice a day while I watched the brilliantly coloured schools of fish from the water's edge. Dolphins were jumping offshore and iguanas noisily travelling through the surrounding woods. Many parties

went out from the hotel for deep sea fishing, returning late with their catch, often a huge swordfish. The fish would be strung up, usually taller than the fisherman who would stand alongside to have his picture taken.

After 2-1/2 weeks a large envelope, with our passports, came for us with drawings all over it. A picture of the Wilsons behind bars and Enrique handing in a loaf of bread with a saw sticking out the end and all sorts of advice on how to break out of jail. We didn't find his humour so funny at the time but packed immediately, checked out and headed for the station. We sat down on the train, delighted that no one seemed to be checking us. The train was about to pull out when two policemen entered, walked directly to us, examined our passports and walked straight out. They hadn't been fooling!

The return ride wasn't quite as bad except through a tunnel which filled the train with black smoke even though we rushed to close the window. We picked up our car and drove back to San Miguel full of appreciation for Enrique's having saved the day for us.

On returning we found a sizeable amount of our winter's wood had disappeared. It had been stacked ready for the fireplace, cooking and bathing, on the covered part of the patio. José, our gardener said, "There were some bad hombres around here several nights and they took the wood." But Enrique said, "No, the gardener is the one who took it," and he told us many other stories about José, who tried so hard not to steal but lost out in the end.

Enrique was a chronic builder, adding another guest house each year which ran down one side of his property, so materials were always lying about. A protective fence didn't deter José. A toilet seat was lying temptingly close on the other side. José didn't have a toilet but that didn't matter — he kept arguing with himself about taking it and said to Enrique, "There were some bad hombres around here last night and I heard them say they were going to take that toilet seat. You better take it in." Enrique forgot about it and José came again the next night, "Those bad hombres were around again, and they said they're going to take that toilet seat tonight. You should take it inside." The next morning it was gone, and José went to Enrique and said, "See, I told you so. Those bad hombres took the toilet seat."

We wondered what to do and decided if we were away overnight again, we would make José responsible for the wood. If

any was missing he would be to blame. The next problem was clothespins disappearing from the line, so I never left any out again. I was a gardener and planted a small plot by the house, lettuce, carrots, beets and onions, watered them faithfully and was pleased then they started peeping through the ground. In no time the plants were 1/2 an inch high and while admiring them the whole garden seemed to be moving, in the same direction like sails. On looking closely, ants had cut each small plant and were carrying them away.

I had left the garden tools out one night and they were gone in the morning. Later that day when José wasn't around, York and I went back to his shack, looking into the hedge as we passed and there were the tools. We took them back and curiously nothing was ever mentioned.

We planned a trip to Patscuaro and Janitzio Island. This time we informed José that he was in charge of the wood and would be responsible if any was missing. York handed him a package of Farro cigarettes (then 1-1/2 cents a package) to seal the deal and they shook hands. When we returned no wood was missing. Enrique told us that José had slept by the wood every night to make sure no bad hombres took any. The deal had been made on a Saturday afternoon and it seemed unusual when José appeared, waiting by the hour in front of the studio window Saturday afternoon. Finally York realized that he had given José the Farro cigarettes on the previous Saturday afternoon. That was it and on receiving them José left happily. He reappeared each Saturday afternoon.

The Mexico City daily paper, Excelsior, invited York to exhibit in its great outdoor annual exhibition in Chapultepec Park. He was pleased and sent Ayer y Hoy (Yesterday and Today), based on the modern buildings beside the old. Another regular annual exhibition where he exhibited was with the Anglo/Mexican Artists Group.

Virginia was in the habit of going to Pepe Ortiz' ranch on Sundays. Pepe was a well-known bullfighter and raised bulls. He was training a group of young girls to fight the bulls, believing they had the consent of their parents. The following winter these young girls were taking their turn in the bull ring. Fortunately Virginia was in school and wasn't with us, but we sat with the other parents at the bull ring and breathed a sigh of relief when it was over.

TV and smoking go together.  
Y.W.