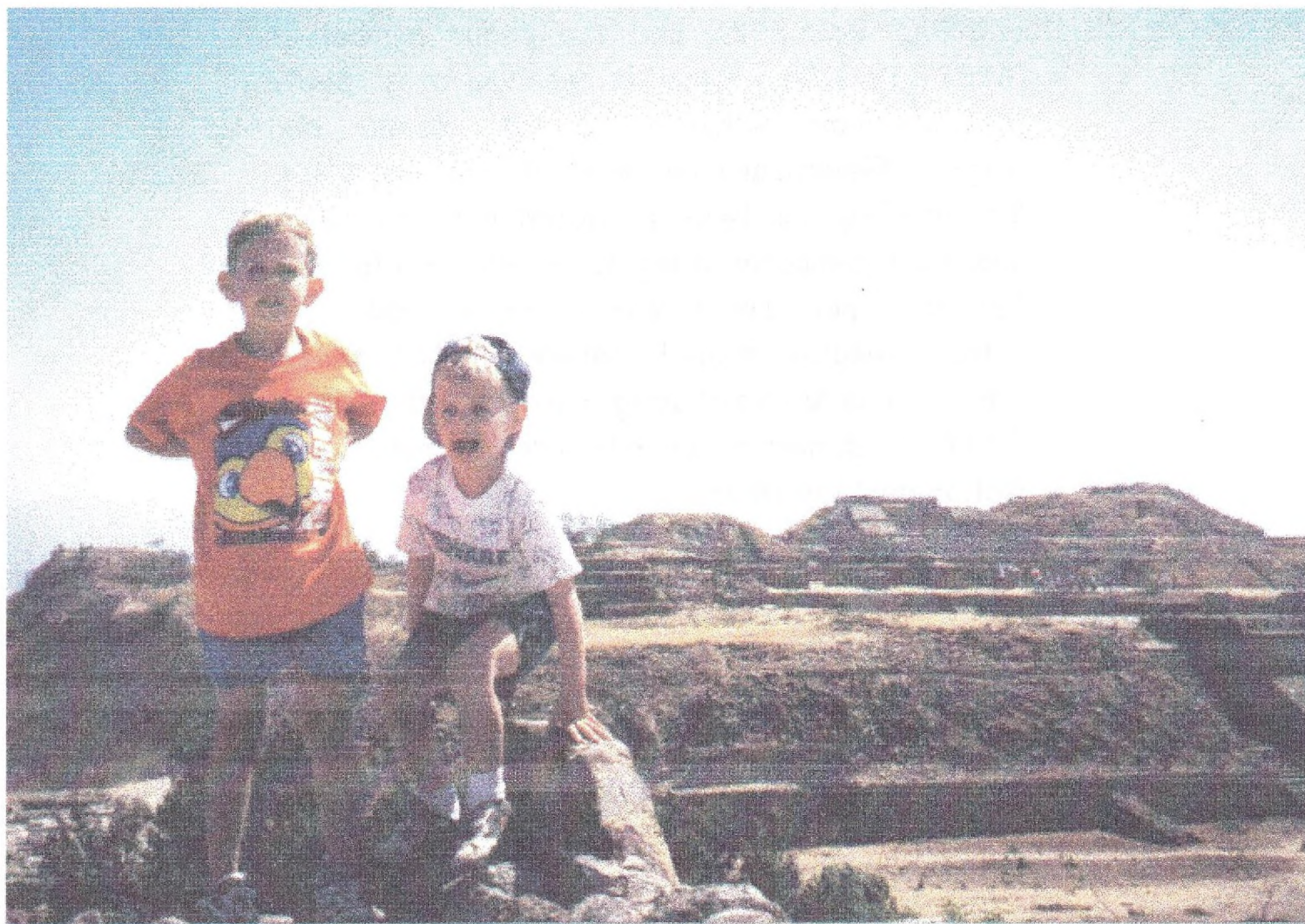


# TENNESSEE TRASH 934

THE ROBE EXPERIENCE VISITS MEXICO  
COUNTRYSIDE ON FIRE AND OTHER  
DISASTERS NATURAL AND OTHERWISE



Tennessee Trash Number 34 was produced by the Rubble Award Winning Gary R. Robe (and I did not eat the Krystal meal). The address is still P.O. Box 3221, and the phone number is (423) 239-3106. E-mail is received at grrobe@preferred.com when I'm at home and garyrobe@eastman.com when I am travelling. This mailing has been produced with my newly upgraded computer using Windows '98 which so far has performed exceptionally well, and actually resolved some hardware conflicts that I was never able to fix using Windows '95. The W '98 Plus Pack also comes with a really cool science fiction desktop theme.

# TENNESSEE TRASH 34

A ZINE BY Gary R. Robe FOR MAILING NUMBER 203 OF  
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A MEXICO CITY SMOKE-OUT, AN OAXACA FLY-OVER,  
THE ROBE EXPERIENCE ABROAD, AND OTHER  
DISASTERS—NATURAL AND OTHERWISE...

With all of the travelling I have been doing of late, the boys have shown an increasing interest in just what their father does when travelling. Normally Corlis and I take the ANIQ meeting in Mexico as a little family vacation without children. This year, however, I decided to cash in a few more frequent flier points and take the whole famn damily to Mexico.

There were several things about the trip that could have been planned and done better, but after the dust has settled, I'm very glad we made the effort to take the boys with us to Mexico. There were, of course, several adventures along the way, but that's what makes international travel fun interesting.

There was no problem in getting freebee tickets for the group on the dates we wanted. This in itself told me that the gods were smiling on the effort, since I have not been able to cash in frequent flier points for two years due to unavailability of seats. Nick's school year was scheduled to end on Wednesday, May 27<sup>th</sup>, so I booked the gang for flights on Thursday the 28<sup>th</sup>. This would later prove to be a bad decision.

Since this was a working trip for me, I had to leave on Sunday the 24<sup>th</sup> and go to Monterrey, then Mexico City, and finally Oaxaca. Due to my multi-stop itinerary, I couldn't just bring the whole group along for the entire trip. Spencer Snook's wife, Linda, was also flying on freebees, and due to seating limitations, she was arriving on Wednesday. Our brave little tour group ended up as Spencer, Linda, Francisco Albo, and myself going from Mexico City to Oaxaca on Wednesday afternoon, followed by Corlis, Nick, and Isaac the following day.

One adventure turned out to be finding a place in Kingsport that makes passport photos. We tried several places, but all were either out of film or had broken cameras. After several days of frustration we ended up at the Kinko's in Johnson City. On the way there, Nick and Isaac got into a fight in the back seat, and Isaac acquired a large cut on the nose in the ensuing brouhaha. For the next five years, Isaac will have a raw cut on the schnoz in his passport picture.

Two weeks before I was scheduled to leave, we started hearing reports of the wildfires burning in southern Mexico and Guatemala. A few days before I was to leave, Francisco called me to tell that Oaxaca was in the firs zone and flights to

the city were being cancelled every day. This was not reassuring.

As my plane descended into Monterrey, the sky was a dull gray that kept intensifying and getting darker as the plane approached the ground. I arrived in the mid-afternoon, and the sun was dim and red like a hazy summer sunset. The problem was that it was only 2:00 p.m., and the day had a long way to go yet.

The next day only developed sunlight bright enough to warrant sunglasses from about 11:00 a.m. to 1p.m., and then it was never very bright. There was some relief in the afternoon in the form of a lazy thunderstorm that hung over the city. This only served, however, to make the sky darker and the humidity higher. As an added attraction, there is something in the asphalt they use in Monterrey that develops a slippery scum when it rains. As we headed for the airport the traffic was snarled by several wrecks caused by the nearly icy slipperiness of the roads.

The next day in Mexico City was even gloomier. In fact, the city was experiencing the highest smog levels in 80 years during those last days of May. The government had declared a level 1 environmental alert on Tuesday. This is the most severe pollution abatement measures they can take without ordering factories to start shutting down.

Seven years ago in Mexico they tried a program to reduce the traffic on Mexico City streets. Each car was issued a sticker along with its license plate. The stickers came in five colors, and the idea was that drivers could not use their cars on the day of the week that corresponded to the color of the sticker. Instant 20% reduction in traffic, right? Not really. It worked for about 6 months until almost everyone saved enough money to buy a

second car. In most cases this was a real junker. Mexico City went from 1.8 million cars and bad traffic and pollution problems to 2.5 million cars and *horrible* traffic and pollution.

They have finally gotten smarter in that cars are now issued stickers based on the quality of their emission controls. During the air quality crisis while I was there the 30% of the dirtiest cars were barred from the road. There is one customer located so far to the north of the city center that we normally allow 90 minutes of travel time to call there. This time we got there in 30 minutes.

On Wednesday morning the ANIQ meeting planners called the office to inform us that all flights to Oaxaca had been cancelled on Tuesday, and that no guarantees were being made for Wednesday or Thursday. As we ventured through the city between calls, Francisco checked with the airlines and the travel agent to check on flights to Oaxaca. The reports we get were more encouraging. The story was that the flights were departing on schedule for Oaxaca. We crossed our fingers as conditions seemed to improve during the day. I briefly considered staying in Mexico City to wait for Corlis and the kids, but the news at that point was that there was nothing to worry about.

We met up with Linda Snook in the Mexico City airport, and checked in for the flight to Oaxaca. The flight is not long—no more than 45 minutes. Several people had opted to drive the 5-6 hours to Oaxaca instead of trusting the airlines. Our flight departed with no problems, and I asked the stewardess if there were many problems with the smoke in Oaxaca. She told me that the conditions there were greatly improved from the day before, and that we should have no problems.

As we approached 40 minutes into the flight, the air grew noticeably hazier, but more worrisome were the thunderheads that the pilot was weaving us through. We headed straight into the airport, and were only seconds from touching down when we aborted the landing. That has happened to me only once before, and that was because the plane landing before us had not cleared the runway. This time, the pilot explained that there were dangerous winds, and that he had aborted because of weather conditions.

We circled around the airport again, and this time we made a rather eventful landing in the middle of a thunderstorm. I thought to myself that if we could make it to Oaxaca in these conditions, then Corlis and the boys should have no trouble the next day. Right.

The next morning was quite foggy, and the visibility was less than a mile, still it seemed improved from the day before. The rain had cleared the air somewhat, and it looked like it would be a fine day. Francisco headed us into the city center for breakfast at the central market.

Oaxaca has a cuisine all its own. It includes many variations of roasted chicken with various types of mole sauce. My favorite is black mole made with a combination of chocolate, molasses, and pepper. I would not have thought that sweet and how would go together in a single dish, but it really does! For breakfast, however, we had several varieties of hot chocolate, fresh baked bread, eggs, tortillas, sausage, and cheese. My arteries clogged just looking at it, but oh, my was it good!

Next we made a tour of the city center, including the Saint Dominic's Church, one of the most famous sights in all of Mexico. I can't begin to describe the level of detail in this church. The entire ceiling was covered with sculptures, and

the huge altar was covered totally with gold leaf. It was awesome.

During the tour of the church we ran into some of the other ANIQ meeting attendees, and we all decided to go to the Camino Real Hotel for a drink. The Camino Real is Oaxaca's finest hotel. It started as a convent, and was later converted into the city jail. Today it is a luxurious hotel with clusters of rooms opening out into garden courtyards. We sat in the garden sipping drinks and watched the filming of a Mexican soap opera in the hotel lobby. Salvador Alvarado, the chairman of the ANIQ meeting, joined us. He informed us that all the morning flights from Mexico City had not made it into Oaxaca. Furthermore prospects for the rest of the day did not look good.

We sprung into action with plans to intercept Corlis and the boys at the Mexico City airport with help and alternative arrangements in case they didn't make it. The 3:00 Aeromexico flight did make it to Oaxaca, but Mexicana was not making any guarantees about the 5:15 flight that my gang was supposed to be on. I headed to the airport to hopefully meet the plane.

There was no public announcement made, but when the plane was over 30 minutes late, I started asking questions. As I questioned the counter people I got the first straight answers about the operation of the Oaxaca airport, and I then wondered why I had been so anxious to bring myself and the family there.

The Oaxaca airport is a small operation in a poor country. They don't have the money for modern conveniences like flight control radar or ground based navigation equipment. The ground-based landing aids at the Oaxaca airport consist of the wind-sock, painted lines on

the runway, and at night a searchlight and runway lights. To complicate matters, the approach to the airport is through a mountain pass. The mountains are several miles across, but with no radio beacon to guide the plane in, a couple of miles is not a large margin of error. In Oaxaca, the pilot *lands* the plane! If the pilot doesn't like the looks of the conditions, or can't see the mountains to avoid them, he turns the plane around and returns to Mexico City.

On Wednesday, the airlines were playing a little game with us. Yes, the planes were departing on time for Oaxaca. The rest of the story is, however, that only a few of those planes were actually landing in Oaxaca!

Meanwhile, Corlis and the boys were blissfully unaware that anything was amiss. They had almost missed their connection in Atlanta due to the 10 a.m. flight being delayed out of Tri-Cities. They had to run from gate C-32 to E concourse. They made it with only minutes to spare. Once on the plane to Mexico, Corlis figured that her karmic balance for the trip was tipped in her favor now with the close call in Atlanta.

In Mexico City, they had over an hour to change planes, and the flight to Oaxaca departed right on schedule. Their first indication of trouble was when the pilot announced that after flying over Oaxaca, he had decided that conditions were too bad, and that they were diverting back to Mexico City.

Once back, our increasingly frantic efforts to contact Corlis and help were not very successful. They did page her with a message, but there were no telephones in the gate area. She had to leave the secure area, find a phone, and ask for the message. This was not very helpful, and on her way back through the X-ray machine, they spotted her cross-

stitch scissors and made her give them up. By this time she had to hurry, with two increasingly tired kids in tow, to the far end of the concourse.

In Oaxaca, I waited nervously in the airport as they announced that the plane had left Mexico City and was expected to land there at 9:00 p.m. A group of anxious relatives waiting for the plane's arrival watched the skies for the plane's lights. At night, the runway lights actually improved the visibility of the airport, and we saw the plane on approach about five minutes before landing. The sound of the plane's tires screeching on the runway was sweet indeed.

The relief was somewhat short-lived as none of the checked luggage arrived. By the time we filed a lost luggage report, all of the taxis had left the airport, and the airline had to call one for us. The one that arrived was rather dubious looking, and the airport policeman made sure the driver knew that they were going to call the hotel to confirm our arrival.

Once we arrived at the hotel we discovered that we had not missed much. There had been a two-hour session of presentations, followed by two hours of cocktails. Although it was after 10 when we finally got settled into the hotel, they were just serving the second course of the dinner. We poked some food down the boys, and then sent them to bed. The after dinner speeches, however, were quite boring, so we opted for bed.

I need to explain a bit about the hotel where we had the meeting. In many ways, I wished that I could move it to Kentucky for Concave. The hotel was spread out in individual cabins surrounded by a beautiful garden of tropical plants of all types. The rooms themselves were quite spacious and very private. Those were the good parts of the

hotel. While we were flying from Monterrey to Mexico City, Francisco pointed out the advertisement for the Hotel Victoria in the Mexicana vacation magazine. The picture looked inviting, but I stumbled on the descriptions of the accommodations. I turned to Spencer and said, "I think we're in trouble! It can't be good that this hotel in proudly advertising *a ceiling fan in every room!*

The rooms had one door and one movable window and no provision for cross-ventilation. All the hyped ceiling fan did was stir the hot air. Actually the climate in Oaxaca was quite pleasant, and air-conditioning would have been unnecessary if there was just a way to get some of the night air into the room! As it was, the rooms were sweat lodges with flat black roofs that adsorbed sunlight all day.

This might have been livable if the pool had been in service. When we arrived on Wednesday, the pool was a bright emerald green, and there was no evidence of any circulation or functioning filtration. There was a pool closed sign hung on Thursday, and a letter of apology from The Management. They fought a losing battle of chemical warfare all weekend, but in the end the algae won.

On Friday, the conference presentations started in earnest. Corlis and the boys went off on a city tour while I stayed behind and listened to a day's worth of talks on the state of various segments of the Mexican adhesive, synthetic resin, and chemical transportation industries. Yes, this was just as exciting as it sounds. I did manage, however, not to fall asleep. This was extra difficult since the meeting room was air conditioned, and it was the first comfortable temperature I had encountered for two days.

That afternoon Corlis decided that the green waters of the pool were no worse than a lake, so she let the boys go in. Isaac is terrified of water, and normally clings to the steps in the shallow end. Nick is more adventurous, and likes to explore the limits of accessibility.

What Nick didn't know was that the pool had a gentile slope for the first 15 feet or so, and then there was a step that dropped the depth another foot. The green water made it impossible to see the step, so Corlis had to jump into the pool fully clothed to save a floundering Nick. At the same instant, Isaac decided to leave the step for the first time in his life, and was also suddenly in over his head. Corlis decided that it wasn't too bad to wear wet clothes in the bright Oaxaca afternoon.

That evening was one of the most important events of the Oaxaca meeting—the invitation only dinner hosted by Guillermo Barriochoa. Guillermo owns one of the largest trucking companies in Mexico, and is a bona-fide millionaire. Each year he invites about 100 of his closest friends to a dinner on Friday night of the ANIQ meeting. This is a tradition that goes back several years, and it is one of the high points of the trip.

With the boys along, we knew that they would give out before we would, but we went to the dinner anyhow. Due to the smoke and cancelled flights, the schedule of the meeting had been scrambled. Several speakers who were supposed to go on Thursday or Friday did not make it in, so the whole program had to be re-scheduled. I was informed during the dinner that I would be the first speaker on Saturday morning at 8:00 a.m. sharp. I stopped downing the margaritas, and when the boys started giving out, I volunteered to take them back to the hotel and go to sleep early.

I'm not sure when Corlis got back to the room, and she doesn't know how many margaritas she consumed for the duration, but when I returned to Mexico a few weeks later, the guys were still remarking on how much she drank, and how well she handled it.

The next morning I showed up at the meeting room only to discover that the schedule had been shuffled again, and I was now on at 10 o'clock instead of 8. That suited me fine, because it allowed some of the late-risers to sneak into the room so that when I went on there was a larger crowd.

I was really proud of my presentation this year for the ANIQ meeting. I was able to summarize a project that took over a year to do in a 20-minute speech. This was my fourth presentation at ANIQ. The first year was in English, the second and third years were in Spanish, but read from a script. This year I went to the front without even a sheet of notes. I had had opportunities to practice the presentation several times during the week, so I had the material down cold.

The problem was that ANIQ was using a PC projector, but did not spring for a remote control for the speaker. Instead, there was a guy controlling the laptop with the presentations loaded who guessed at when to advance the program. This really threw me off, because he would not wait for me to give him a queue to change the slides. To make matters worse, I had added animation affects and videos to the presentation in anticipation of using the laptop, but the button happy controller just popped up each slide and ran through all of my effects before they had a chance to play properly. I spent most of my concentration on trying to figure out what the guy was going to do next, and ended up rushing through the talk and missed several points I wanted to make.

The people in the audience couldn't tell I was struggling, they must thought I was nervous. By the time the presentation was over, I was fuming, and really felt that I had not done my best possible job. I still got a big round of applause at the end when I raised my hands and said to the effect, "Look no papers this time!"

After the presentations were over for the day, we decided to go into Oaxaca center with Alfredo Carrasco and Federico Ruiz for a late lunch. One of the famous dishes of Oaxaca besides chicken is *chapulines* which translates little grasshoppers. Francisco Albo had been going on all week about how I had to try the chapulines, but I declined. Once at the restaurant, however, Federico and Alfredo ordered some, and made enthusiastic eating noises when the plate came. I had to try some.

To my great surprise, they were quite good. The grasshoppers are chopped up quite a bit, and unless you examine them very closely, they really don't look buggy. The three of us finished off the order, and I would have eaten more if the rest of my lunch was not so huge.

While we were eating, I pointed out to the boys that Alfredo acquired a nickname while he lived in Kingsport—Fingers. The boys were quite amused at the idea of calling someone fingers, and Isaac delighted in shaking his finger at Alfredo and saying, "You are Fingers!"

Alfredo and Federico asked the boys what their nicknames were. Nick explained that his name is a nickname since how full name is Dominic Maurice Robe. His school friends also call him Nickelodeon. Isaac, however, does not have a nickname, and Alfredo and Federico thought they needed a collective nickname. After a few moments of thought, Federico came up with one of



those moments of true inspiration: *Pinky and the Brain*. I can't think of a phrase that sums up Nick and Isaac better, and the nicknames have stuck. Isaac is Pinky and Nick is The Brain.

Saturday night there was a casino set-up, and each participant was given \$100 pesos in play money. They even thought to set up some carnival type games for kids. The boys happily gambled away our stake, and won several armloads of prizes by the time all the money was gone. There was nothing we could have done to thrill the kids more than that.

Sunday, there was a tour organized to Monte Alban. This is a Mexican National Park that consists of a mountaintop covered by ruins. The culture that lived at Monte Alban is quite mysterious. The settlement on Monte Alban first appeared about 3,000 years ago, and went through four cycles of rise and fall. The city was then abandoned about 300 years before the Spanish arrived. Since there was nothing of value there but dirt covered rocks, the Spanish ignored the site. Now, there are 25-30 structures that have been excavated and restored. The best thing about Monte Alban Park is that the whole thing is open to the public, and one can climb every step of the pyramids if one is so inclined. The boys had a large time exploring.

It was somewhat humbling to crawl over structures that were already a thousand years old at the time of Christ. The sense of mystery of the place is also very powerful. The actual structures are built along the lines of the existing mountain, so the city gives a sense of being in harmony with the environment. It is also well constructed along exact geometrical lines, yet probably not built with any equipment more sophisticated than a plumb line. What purpose did these buildings serve? What was life like back

then? Why did they all go away? There is no way to know.

Monday, everyone from the ANIQ meeting had left, and we were left to ourselves. Over the weekend the sir had cleared considerably, and we saw for the first time that mountains surround Oaxaca on all sides! We were only five miles away from some seriously tall mountains, and for the smoke, we didn't even know they were there! On Sunday evening, however, there were thunderstorms in the area, and lightning re-ignited some of the fires. By Monday morning, the gloom was back.

We decided to change our travel strategy. Since planes had no trouble leaving Oaxaca, and the last plane in for the night can land with the assistance of the runway lights, we decided to change to the first flight out of the morning. This had several advantages. First, if the night plane landed we were home free. If not, we had more time to see if conditions improved for later flights. Finally, there was just enough time to catch a morning bus to Mexico City and make our 3:30 p.m. flight if things totally fubared.

The Mexicana office was a bit of a challenge because the entire country had changed to a new computer system for flight reservations, and none of the existing printers would interface with the new system. The lady had to hand write all of our tickets and boarding passes, so a 10 minute job took almost an hour.

All through the trip Corlis' arthritis was giving her problems. Since Delta had lost her luggage, she went for almost two days without medication, and when it arrived, it wasn't much help. The way the Mexican climate affected her was strange. For the first time, she was almost without pain in her legs and feet, but her right hand swelled up to almost

double size and was nearly useless by Sunday morning.

Outside the US, the medical system is much more casual about prescriptions. We walked into a drugstore in downtown Oaxaca, and with one look at Corlis hand, they offered her *Relafin* which was the second ineffective anti-inflammatory drug that the doctor in Kingsport had prescribed. After she shook that off, the druggist talked on the phone and after a few minutes dug up something called *Volatran*. We bought a box of it, and within 12 hours, the swelling and pain in Corlis' hand was gone. She had quite an interesting time convincing her doctor in Kingsport to give her a prescription for it.

Tuesday morning we rose before dawn with the question "Will there be a plane parked at the airport for us this morning?" There was, and we said goodbye to Oaxaca promptly at 7 a.m.

Since we arrived in Mexico City at 8 o'clock, and our flight to Atlanta was not until 3:30, we had quite a bit of time to kill. We checked our luggage in with Delta, and ditched our carry-ons in lockers, and took a cab to the Mexican National Museum of Anthropology. Nick was quite excited about this since he had read and heard about *La Piedra del Sol*—The Stone of the Sun, one of the Mexican national symbols. He was quite interested in seeing the real thing. Both boys were happy for a while with exploring the museum, although it was difficult to convince them of the idea not to touch anything. Isaac quickly got bored, but Nick could have stayed there all day. We managed to use up most of our layover time constructively at least.

On our way out of the museum, my alarm signals went off at the taxi stand. Several men asking if we needed a taxi and telling us that they could get us one really cheap approached us. None of the

cars in the queue had official taxi markings, and at that point I made an executive decision to walk to the Intercontinental Hotel about a half mile away instead of risking the gypsy taxis at the museum.

While at the hotel, I took the family up to the 37<sup>th</sup> floor where I usually stay, and the boys got a kick out of looking at the city from that vantage point. I think it also helped to take a bit of the mystery out of where I am when I go to Mexico.

The taxi ride back to the airport was uneventful as was the plane ride back to Atlanta. As we were on approach to Atlanta, they started reading out connecting flight information. Before they got to the "T's" I said to Corlis, "Tri Cities, Tennessee, Gate C-36."

Sure enough the stewardess called out "Tri Cities, Tennessee, Gate C-36." I travel through Atlanta too much.

As we arrived at Gate C-36, ASA "America's Shittiest Airline" decided that they were having weather delays or mechanical problems or something, and that our flight would be 40 minutes late. We finally walked in our front door at midnight, and the Mexican vacation adventure was over.

Well, that's about enough for this part of the zine. Tomorrow evening, I leave for Buenos Aires and a three-week tour of Latin America. I've cleared the idea with Liz and Jeff, and I will be filing day-by-day trip reports via E-mail to fill out the rest of the zine. That ought to be interesting, and should be the first time that international E-mail is used to submit a SFPA mailing. I'm sure Dick would have done it before me if he got a company laptop and could manage to get on-line at some of the very *interesting* places that he gets sent!