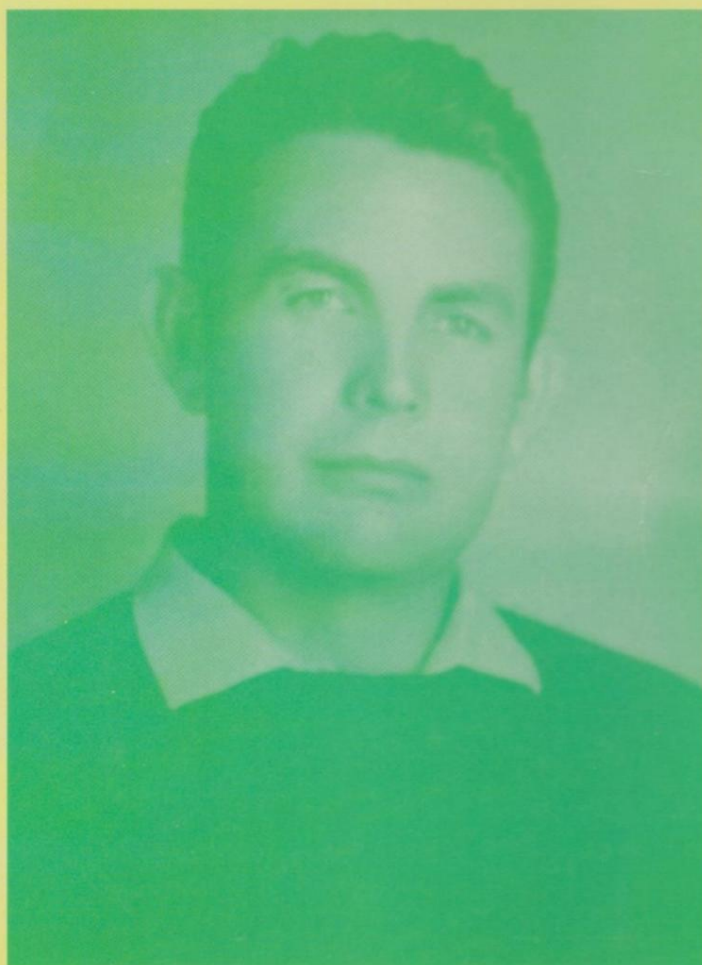




Popular Tradition

The Bicycle Pilgrimages to Esquipulas

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Introduction

For many years, pilgrimages have existed to the Esquipulas Shrine, where the image of the Black Christ of Esquipulas is venerated. These pilgrimages have traveled the roads of Guatemala from different points in the country, where they originated. They also come from neighboring countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico.

Pilgrims have made these pilgrimages on foot, in vehicles, trucks, bicycles, horses, and on motorcycles,

as is the case with the Caravan of the Fox, currently attended by several thousand motorcyclists.

In this case, we recount a series of pilgrimages made by bicycle between 1947 and the early 1960s by Don Antonio Cabrera De León, who recounted, from his memories, events that recreate facets of life at that time and the difficulties they faced while traveling the road that led to the city of Esquipulas, which, at that time, was a dirt road.



Don Antonio Cabrera De León at 81 years old.

The city of Esquipulas is located 222 kilometers east of Guatemala City. It is the municipal seat of the municipality of Esquipulas, which belongs to the department of Chiquimula. Esquipulas was founded by the Spanish as a town between 1560 and 1570 under the name Santiago de Esquipulas and was elevated to city status by Government Agreement of October 14, 1968.

The municipality covers an area of 532 square kilometers and includes a city, which is the municipal seat, 20 villages, and 111 hamlets. According to data provided by the XI Population Census and VI Housing Census, the municipality has a population of 41,746; of which 20,011 are men and 21,735 are women. The urban population is 16,368, and the rural population is 27,378.

The municipality's agricultural production is based on the cultivation of coffee, corn, beans, tomatoes, chili peppers, and tobacco, as well as the raising of cattle, pigs, and poultry. Its artisanal production is due to the presence of the Basilica of Esquipulas and the cult

of its image, which generates a strong trade in the region. It includes traditional and glazed pottery, toys, wooden furniture, braids, palm hats, iron products, tinsplate, jewelry, leather goods, clay tiles and bricks, fireworks, candles, images and religious wooden articles, and piggy banks. Sweets, a toquilla factory consisting of hat ornaments, rosaries, and keychains.

The city has all the necessary public services, such as primary and secondary schools and colleges, hotels and lodgings, extra-urban bus services, drinking water, electricity, a health center, bank branches, and a market building. The patron saint's day is celebrated on July 25th in honor of the Apostle Santiago. But the celebration of January 15th, when the Holy Christ of Esquipulas is commemorated, is of even greater solemnity. For centuries, this celebration has been an object of veneration, not only by the faithful of Guatemala, but also by those in other Central American countries, Mexico, and even South America.



Fellow cyclists in front of the Esquipulas temple.

This cult arose, according to Navarrete (1999, 96), when on August 20, 1595, Bishop Fray Cristóbal de Morales's supplier signed a contract with the famous sculptor Quirio Cataño for the carving of said image. The loss of said contract until 1695, when it was rediscovered, gave rise to varied oral traditions about appearances of the image in a cave, which is nothing more than the shaft of a mine dug some time after the image existed, and other versions place the event on a hill or in a cornfield. One remaining doubt was based on whether the sculpture was originally light or dark in color. This discussion was already present in 1723 due to the news published at that time by the priest Nicolás de Paz, who indicated that the dark color of the image was the representation of a dead body, covered in dark purple blood, dead blood. According to Navarrete (Ibid.), this indicates that the image had blackened by the early 18th century. The church attributes its color to constant exposure to the smoke from thousands of candles and votive candles.

The image had a great impact among the indigenous and mestizo populations, and Navarrete indicates that, if the color is due to pre-Hispanic roots, as some researchers believe, then we are faced with an intelligent substitution by ecclesiastical authorities based on an ancient cult that was impossible to eradicate and could be channeled along paths close to the recently arrived Christian religion. The first to postulate the pre-Hispanic origin of the Christ of Esquipulas was Lothrop in 1924, based on ancient reports of deities whose distinctive color was black, among whom Ek'Chuah, patron saint of merchants, stood out. Both Lothrop and later Borhegyi in 1959 only raised the possibility of hybridization with the pre-Hispanic deity related to the color black that was venerated in Copán but they did not find documentary evidence to support their hypothesis and as in fact, they lack it, it is important, says Navarrete, to transcribe the words of President Arcos y Moreno in 1759 where he mentions the cult of Ek'Chuah in Copán and how they placed with the help of the Divine Majesty the Crucified Christ in the town of Esquipulas ten leagues from the Copán valley, to ward off the demons that possessed that land and that the popularity that said cult reached from the 16th century onwards, according to Borhegyi's hypothesis, was mainly due to a pre-Columbian heritage manifested in the healing power of the earth geophagy, which in Esquipulas is associated with the cult and in the sacred symbolism of the color black. Secondly, well into the colonial period, the spread of the fame of its miraculous cures attracted both

indigenous and Spanish peoples.

Currently, the persistence of geophagy is manifested in the sale of small tablets of white clay or kaolin, called "breads of the Lord." This white clay is cleaned and compressed to form the tablets. When compressed in special molds, they are engraved with relief figures of the Virgin, the Saints, or the Black Christ. These tablets are blessed by the priest, and people eat them or dissolve them in water to drink and cure illnesses. It has been determined that kaolin produces constricting effects on the large intestine and, therefore, controls diarrhea.

But the reality, Navarrete (2006, p. 8) points out, is that it must have been during the 19th century when the darkening of the image acquired the value of popular worship due to the blackening probably caused by constant exposure to candle smoke, copal and ocote slivers.

In 1995, Navarrete (2006, p. 10) indicates that during the restoration process to which the image was subjected on the occasion of celebrating 400 years of worship, a study prepared by a group of experts who analyzed the incarnation of the image determined that the tonality of the incarnation is dark brown; almost black, achieved due to years of veneration due, mainly, to the accumulation of impurities of all kinds that have accumulated over the centuries, coming to merge with the original color. These impurities were added by pilgrims who, in an act of devotion, touched the image, transferring wax from candles, grease from their hands, soot, hair, dust, etc.

Experts conclude that the overall polychrome of the Christ is a lighter shade, showing traces of two previous incarnations than the current one. This layer of paint has been darkened by the passage of time and the accumulation of solid waste in the environment, which caused the image's dark color.

This demonstrates that the dark color is a product of time, and none of the three incarnations found by experts had that shade. Therefore, the hypothesis that postulates the pre-Hispanic origin of the devotion and that the image was made in black to represent the black deity of Copán is not true.

It is also not true that the Esquipulas temple is located

where the Spanish discovered a pre-Hispanic site, since the Esquipulas archaeological site is located approximately one kilometer northeast of the basilica. According to Navarrete, this site dates from the Classic Period and was uninhabited when the Spanish arrived.

The cult has expanded, and "Black Christs" currently exist in Chiapas, Central America, and South America. In recent decades, Guatemalan immigrants have spread the cult to the United States, and an image exists in New York.

Among the pilgrimages to Esquipulas, the most notable, due to their originality for the 1940s and 1950s, are those undertaken by bicycle by a group of friends led by Don Camilo Gatica, who organized and led the journey for several years. Among those who participated in these pilgrimages, Don Antonio Cabrera De León is still alive today. At the age of 81, he recalls these pilgrimages and offers an account of his memories of those adventures, which we present below.



Don Antonio leading the way on the old road to Esquipulas, in front of the Ranch.



Don Antonio Cabrera De León in his home.

Don Antonio was born at number 25, Del Fino Alley, on May 31, 1926, and attended elementary school at the Serapio Cruz public school during the reign of Don Jorge Ubico and the Minister of Education, Mr. J. Antonio Villacorta, a historian who, according to Don Antonio Cabrera, was nicknamed "Mamut" and was a very serious person who never smiled.

After completing elementary school, he enrolled in the School Gymnastics School, which opened in 1936, along with other similar schools for nursing, music, and telegraph. These schools offered two years of study and awarded a diploma upon completion. Don Antonio says it was only two years of study, but those two years were enough because they opened the way for them, so they thank those governments for having the vision to put them on the right path.

At that time, Don Antonio couldn't enter the university because they only admitted bachelor's degrees, and usually, they graduated from the Central Institute for Boys. He couldn't study there because they paid Q4.50 a month, which was a lot of money back then. At the Physical Education school, they only paid 25 cents of a quetzal. But it also caused problems because many couldn't graduate because they hadn't paid due to lack of resources.

Two years later, he graduated with his diploma from the Physical Education School.

Since he had studied typing in elementary school, upon graduating from sixth grade, he was also a typist, which made it easier for him to find work. He applied and received an immediate response, assigning him to the farthest school to train in walking: the José Clemente Clavería School located in Guarda Viejo.

The school principal was Don José Víctor Portillo.

There I had my first experiences as a teacher and began to acquire Argentine books on physical education, as they had very good, well-structured books.

He recounts that plans were made for teaching classes, for which he had to create his own daily plan. Once, he received a visit from the director of Physical Education, Pedro Ortiz Guerra, who told him: "You have a future because with what you're doing, you can write a book." Mr. Ortiz had realized that he was taking models from Argentine books but adding elements from his own experience.



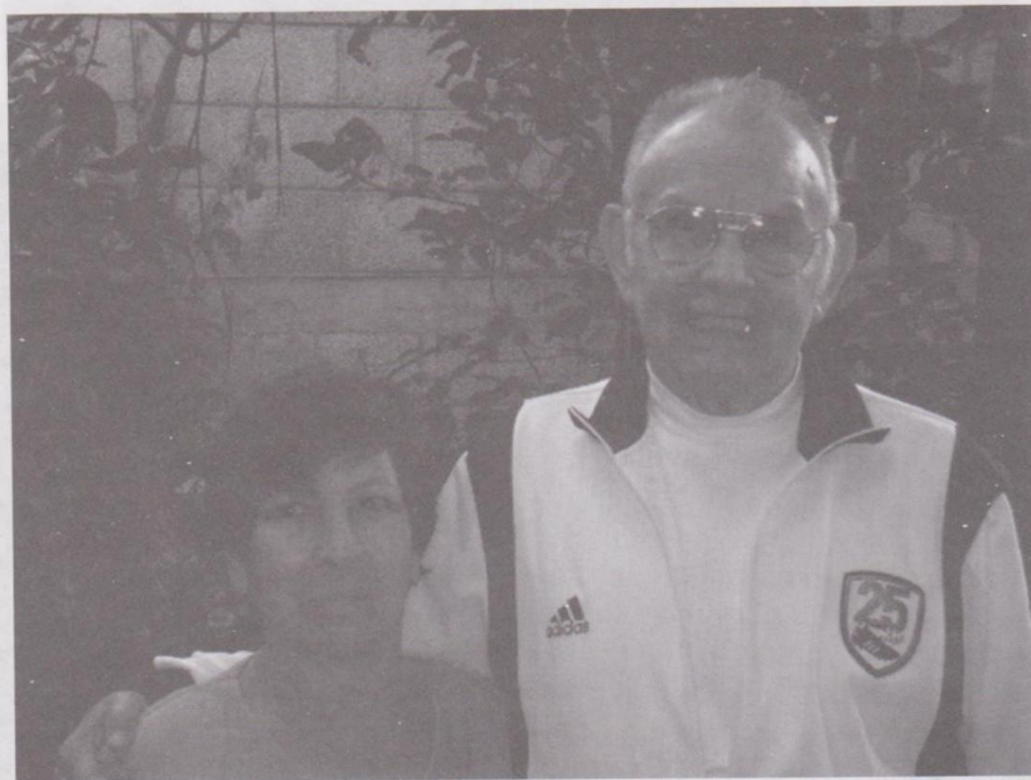
Old-time cyclist, Don Antonio Cabrera De León.

After attending José Clemente Clavería School, he went on to teach at the República de El Salvador School, also located in Guarda Viejo. From there, he was transferred to the Antonio Liendo y Goicoechea School, where he had two classes of students to look after.

He spent a long time without studying, only teaching gymnastics classes. He then continued his secondary school studies, which at that time included six years because they included elementary school. It wasn't easy for Don Antonio to resume his studies after a certain period of absence. He indicated that *afterward, one just can't get into the swing of things*. He always told his students who studied during the night shift: *"Don't worry, you'll think you're stupid," and he gave them this example: "Raise your hand if you can run 10 laps around the block fast?" "None!" Why? "Ah! It's just that we can't keep up because we're not trained. It's the same with the mind. The brain is the same; you have to train it. So don't panic. It won't stay with you anytime soon." Little by little because I already suffered that process.*

At that time, he had a friend he can't forget, who now has a degree in Pedagogy and *writes for a newspaper*. His friend told him, *"Tono, keep studying! Don't just be a physical education teacher! I study humanities and I teach at the humanities night school. I help him, I guide him!" We were very good friends. I'm going to play sports for two more years and dedicate myself to studying. And so I did.*

After finishing his secondary education degree in teaching, he was also able to complete his secondary education program as a teacher training teacher and complete his physical education teacher training program because he only had a diploma. He applied for equivalencies to complete that last degree, and it turned out he only needed three courses that *weren't difficult*, so he took them. So, in addition to his primary education teaching degree, he earned both his degree and his diploma as a physical education teacher.



Don Antonio Cabrera De León and his wife Mrs. Emma Victoria Vargas de Cabrera.

Finally, he had the opportunity to enter the University in the Faculty of Humanities, and it was a wonderful time for him, as it had eminent professors like Mata Gavidia and Gustavo Chavarría Flores, who had extensive teaching experience. He was persistent in his studies until he completed the curriculum, not with great grades, but always passing his classes.

Before he knew it, he was working at the humanities night school, and when he went to find his friend who had encouraged him to study, he found that she was no longer the director and that the director was Adrián Ramírez Flores, who was his friend, but they had separated years before when Don Antonio began studying at the Physical Education School and Don Adrián at the Normal School for Boys. After years of separation, they reunited. Regarding his work experience, Don Antonio says that he stayed working in an elementary school as a physical education teacher and, as he always continued studying, the director of Physical Education at that time, whose name was Jorge Micheo, called me to be a physical education supervisor. Although he had no experience in that field, he accepted the position and remained there for a long time as a supervisor.

He also worked as a physical education teacher at the Girls' City Reformatory. He recalls that perhaps his best performance was there because he understood the students very well, and that satisfies him because now, when he meets one of those boys, some of whom are now professionals, they always greet him with great appreciation. He stated: *"That's what teachers live off, satisfaction, not financially, but from the praise of those who were their students."*

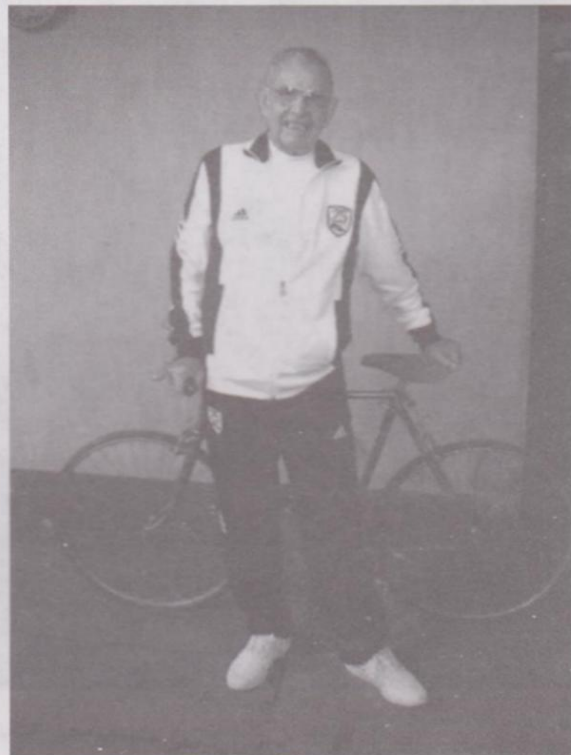
Another very valuable experience Don Antonio recalls was when he was studying at the Faculty of Humanities and was called to teach the pedagogy course. All his students were hard workers, but he believes he got along very well with them because he understood their problems as workers, and it's important for good student-teacher relationships that the latter understand the students and what their main problems are.

He recalls a very interesting anecdote: he had an elementary school teacher named Don Max Orozco who divided the class into *outstanding*, *good*, *poor*, and *the trash can*. He said the outstanding students were Luis Sicavizza and Rufino Morales Chúa. He adds:

"Maybe they ate well, and then their minds responded." Over the years, when he had finished his studies at the Faculty of Humanities, Don Max Orozco came to him and said, *"Ha! Are you studying here?"* And he replied, *"No, Don Max, I'm done here."* Don Max taught at the Central and was forced to take courses to become professional. He had to go study at the Faculty of Humanities, and when he ran into Don Antonio, he said, *"Look, they sent me here. What are the studies like? Aren't they difficult?"* *"No!"* And I was going to remind him about the trash can, but I felt it was disrespectful. I could have told him, but I better kept it to myself, and he must have sensed it. *Studying here isn't difficult. This is just a matter of studying. Nothing complicated here. Although there were difficult courses, because whoever beat Mata Gavidia in the philosophy course was considered king.*

His passion for cycling

Around 1947, Don Antonio recounts, *I was a cycling enthusiast, that is, a novice, and at that time I began a tremendous feat sponsored by businessman Don Augusto Mulet Descamps. At the time, he owned a bicycle parts and accessories store and sold bicycles imported from France. He also owned a bicycle repair shop run by Don Camilo Gatica. This shop provided free services and repairs to members of the Mulet team.*



Don Antonio and his racing bike.

He started with a touring bike he had bought, and about eight days after getting it, he took a trip to El Salvador on it. Since it held up well, he raced it in a race around Guatemala City and placed second. That was his first cyclist. He then sold the touring bike and bought a racing bike. At that time, racing bikes weren't yet manufactured in Guatemala, and *the ones they sold were imported from Italy or France.*

He bought a French bike they called the "mulet." He says *it probably had another name, but here in the contracts they put "mulet."* After he acquired his racing bike, he raced a novice competition and placed third, and from there he began competing in the various races held in Guatemala.

While on the Mulet team, Camilo Gatica, the captain of that cycling team and a highly experienced bicycle mechanic, decided to organize a trip to Esquipulas. He had already cycled to Esquipulas and knew the route and the problems that could arise; so he managed to organize a group of 17 people for the trip.

The day before the departure, he gathered the cyclists at his house and instructed them *authoritatively* on the tasks they would be performing. He assigned each one to carry one or two bicycle spare parts: *brake cables, brake pads, a derailleur, spokes, and others.* Each one carried items that could be transported by bicycle, since at that time they didn't have supply trucks because *the roads were so bad. Who would dare to take a trip to Esquipulas by car, if it wasn't necessary?*



Aracely Esquivel Vásquez and Don Antonio Cabrera, in their home.



The group of cyclists accompanied by Mr. Augusto Mulet Descamps.



Don Antonio on his Harley-Davidson model 47 on the old road to Esquipulas on the Engineer's Hill between Zacapa and Chiquimula.

So, the spare parts they carried would be used to repair the bikes if they had any problems. They also carried *ropes and needles because the tubes were sewn from the bottom and glued to the aluminum rim. Therefore, each of them carried a bottle of glue and two spare tubes strapped to their chests.* Since Camilo Gatica was the mechanic, he was in charge of repairing any problems the bikes had. The trip to Esquipulas was approximately 225 kilometers one way, plus the return trip. Back then, mileage wasn't marked as it is now. They needed an average of five days to make the trip, which consisted of two days to go to Esquipulas, one day to rest there, and two days to return.

Personally, Don Antonio points out that by that time he was already using a French bicycle for competitions, *equipped with aluminum rims, an aluminum handlebar, and a leather seat. The problem with the seat, according to Don Antonio, was that even though they applied certain oils, it would warp when it rained. The bicycle handlebar was only one size, which caused problems for different body types. A small metal plate was attached to the aluminum pedals to prevent them from tearing the shoe, as the so-called "platelets" (plates) that were glued to the shoe and prevented the foot from slipping out were not known at the time. The pedal had a clip and a leather strap that served to tighten the shoe.*

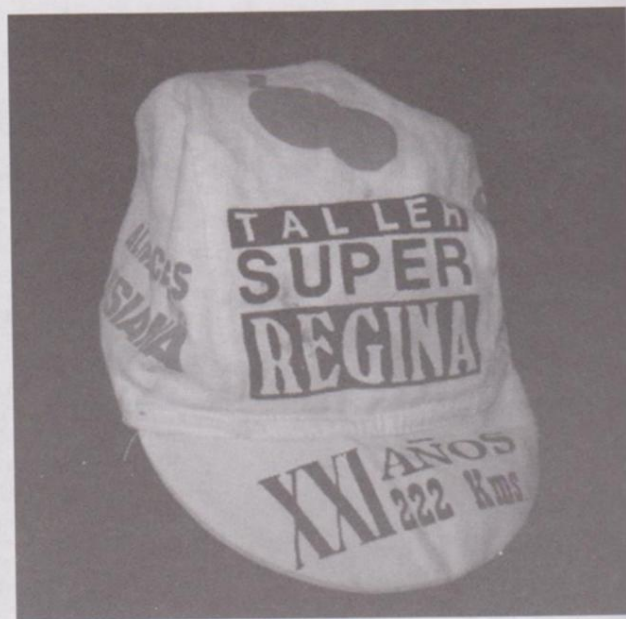


Don Antonio shows the shoes he wore on his bike trips.

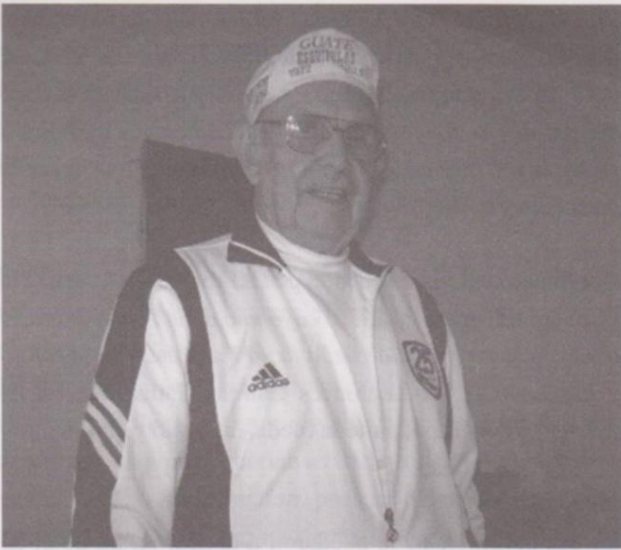
The bicycle's gear ratio was simple, with 46 teeth, and the rear wheel sprocket had pitches of 14, 16, 18, and 20 teeth. Thick tubular tires were used, which, in case of a puncture, were repaired on the road.

To hydrate, the bicycle carried a container they called a *pacha*, which was *made of aluminum*. Due to the high temperatures of the road, the liquid immediately heated up. According to Don Antonio, the *pacha* had a serious drawback: because it *was made of metal, liquids like coconut water would decompose, making them impossible to drink.*

Cyclists' attire at that time consisted of a *cycling cap, a sweater, and regular pants. They didn't wear shorts because at the time there was a lot of prejudice regarding a person wearing that garment. They also wore shorts, special shoes, and special glasses, but they did wear helmets.*



The cap he used to cover his head on trips to Esquipulas.



Don Antonio shows how he wore his cap.



T-shirt he wore on trips to Esquipulas.

On those trips, they didn't carry food. Sometimes, they brought a sandwich or an orange, as it was very inconvenient to carry them. This was the reason they didn't carry flashlights, extra sets of clothes, or sleepwear. They didn't cover up and slept dressed as they were. Don Antonio laments that since they couldn't carry much else, they were never able to take a photo in front of the Esquipulas church.

They made their trips to Esquipulas during Holy Week to take advantage of the holiday. They left on Holy Wednesday and made the outward journey between that day and Holy Thursday. On Friday, they rested in Esquipulas and returned on Holy Saturday, entering Guatemala on Easter Sunday night.

Don Antonio sometimes also went to Esquipulas by bicycle in December, so he made two trips a year. But in December, only two or three people went, and that way, the trip was faster and they returned in less time because traveling in a group meant losing more time.

By January 15th, the date of the Esquipulas rite, they couldn't go because almost all the cyclists were at work, although sometimes he managed to go by car or motorcycle. The trips started from Central Park toward the Gulf Guard, and that's what they did on that first trip he participated in in 1947. The road was dirt, and the Belize Bridge didn't exist. What existed

was a small colonial bridge that still exists down below in the ravine that crossed the Las Vacas River. From there, they went up to another place called San Rafael de la antigua (the old road) and reached Agua Caliente, crossing the river on a small wooden bridge.

On that route, they passed through several villages, such as El Fiscal, Los Ocotes, and San Antonio. They continued from Aguas Calientes to Sanarate, arriving at El Progreso Guastatoya. On that trip, a companion nicknamed "The Nazi" took a wrong turn and ended up in Palencia. They saw him again the day after they had arrived in Esquipulas.

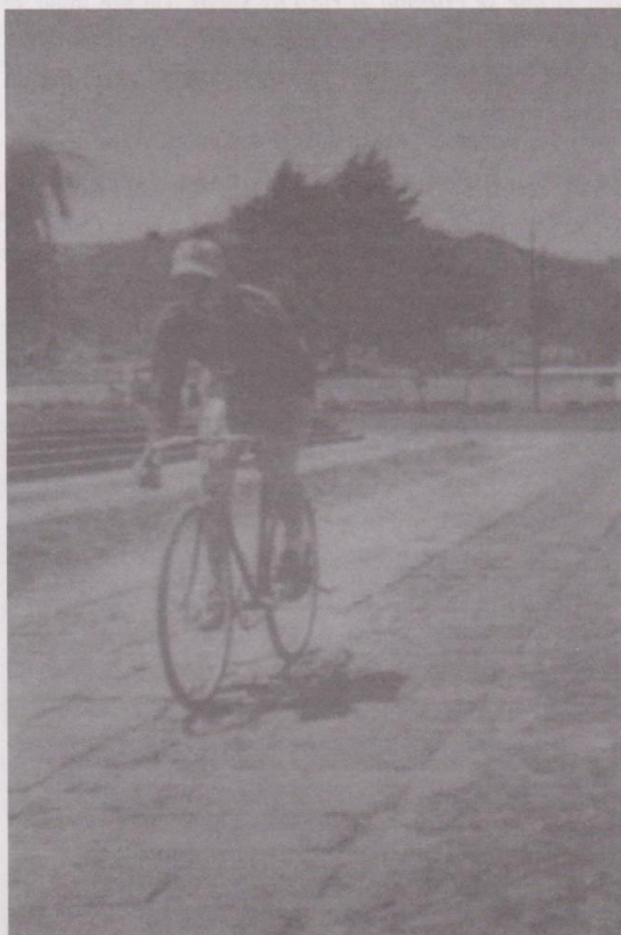
This is the part of the route he considered the most dangerous of all the trips they made, because many things always happened to them along the way. According to Don Antonio, since the road was dirt, it presented many risks because it had rocky sections, dusty others, sharp curves, and precipices at the side of the road. In some places below, the railroad tracks could be seen. He says there were large precipices and the road was narrow, built by hand with pickaxes, crowbars, and hammers. According to him, people said it was built by prisoners and he never noticed any machinery working on the road's maintenance.

The most dangerous area was between Sanarate and El Progreso Guastatoya because, he said, if a cyclist tripped on their bike, they could be thrown into the ravine. Along that stretch, cyclists had to ride close to

to ride close to the wall. He says that once, as they were passing by that place, moving very close to the wall, an iguana, which in those parts is called a *jota* because of its dark color, was catching the sun's rays. It got scared and jumped down from the bush where it was, jumped, and landed in front of my bike, knocking me off my feet. I was about to fall to the ground.

On that same stretch, on one of the most dangerous passes between Sanarate and El Progreso, a cyclist named Besares, who was riding at the back of the group, perhaps due to the lack of water in those parts, got sunstroke. Since there was no water available, some cyclists who were close behind threw water on him from the small amount they had in the aluminum bucket.

Don Antonio was in the lead group, and when they reached El Progreso, they had to wait a long time for the lagging group to arrive. Finally, they reached El Progreso with Mr. Besares, who had to stay there because the sunstroke weakened him greatly.



Don Antonio travels the old road toward Esquipulas.

On those roads, it was impossible to walk in groups or platoons because of the rocks and dirt. So, after traveling a distance, the person in front would stop to wait for the rest of the group and amuse themselves with the arrival of each of the remaining companions, since they couldn't distinguish them because their faces were covered in dust.

They continued their journey, leaving El Progreso and crossing the railroad line. There, one of their companions fell and fell on another's bicycle wheel, twisting it and unbalancing the rim. Then Camilo Gatica, the group's mechanic, removed the wheel, leveled it, and they continued their journey, a little late.

On that occasion, they stayed overnight in a wooden hotel in the municipality of El Rancho. To their surprise, when they turned out the lights, a large number of rats would climb onto the cots where they were sleeping and climb onto their bodies. When we turned on the light, they disappeared like magic, so a friend of mine had the idea to go buy a lot of food and give it to the rats, and only then did they let us sleep that night.

From the town of El Rancho, the Motagua River was crossed over a bridge called Orellana, which, according to Don Antonio, was built during the reign of President Orellana, and led to the town of El Jicaro. The road then improved because it ran east along the Motagua River valley along its southern bank, passing through the towns of Cabañas and La Reforma, and crossing the Llanos de La Fragua to the town of the same name. At that time, the Llanos de La Fragua were a completely desert area, with only cacti visible from one side to the other. Remember, when Clemente Marroquín Rojas was Minister of Agriculture, he wrote articles in the newspaper La Hora in which he stated that La Fragua was fertile land; the only thing was that water had to be brought to it. Later, the Llanos de La Fragua irrigation project was implemented. And indeed, he indicated, there are now foreign companies that grow melons and extract a huge amount from those lands.

After passing the town of La Fragua on the side of Zacapa heading south, there was nothing on the edge of the town of Zacapa, but that time and several times on subsequent trips, we found a tin shack where there was a small dining room, but the food wasn't very good. Don Antonio says: "You should have seen how much we suffered because the food throughout the trip was very bad and repetitive. That day, I asked for a couple of fried eggs; the ladies who were serving the dinning room

told me: 'You don't want them scrambled because we can't make fried eggs.' The lard they used to prepare the eggs had been used for several days because of the taste of the eggs."

I never liked the food on any of the trips I made. We never found good food on those roads. From the first trip and the subsequent ones, they never had a precise itinerary or goals to reach because the journey was subject to what happened along the way. That's why they stayed in one place, sometimes in another. Other times, they arrived very late at night to the places where they slept because they wanted to advance as much as they could and didn't feel tired, as Don Antonio says: "When you're young, you don't feel tired," and those were tremendous adventures.

From Zacapa, they continued toward Chiquimula. When they left Chiquimula, it was still morning and they passed by a farm where cows were being milked, and we decided to go and get some milk. We drank about two glasses of milk, and soon after, most of us had terrible stomach upsets.

The hardest part of the journey was reaching Quezaltepeque. Remember that in one of the first houses at the entrance to the town on the right, there was a bakery owned by a woman who was a teacher. On that occasion, she served them and sold them soda. Later, on subsequent trips, the teacher provided them with lodging or food if they needed it, and once told them she had set up her shop because business was more profitable than teaching.

After Quezaltepeque came the Stations of the Cross from what they called La Cumbre (The Summit). At that place, she explained, a ritual must be performed that consisted of carrying a stone to the volcano of stones that had formed at the top of the path. According to Don Antonio, the penance consisted of picking up a stone of any size they desired, but it had to be the size of the sin for which they were asking forgiveness. It also included the distance they carried the stone to pay for the sin, because the larger the stone and the distance, the greater the sin. After passing the summit on the descent toward the Esquipulas temple, we passed by the well-known Piedra de los Compadres (Stone of the Compadres).

He says that, at that time, there were no gas stations in Esquipulas, but there was the Central Guest House, which had cots for sleeping and charged fifty cents for

for the night. There, some very pretty girls who were very attentive to the cyclists ran a dining room, and they served them, and the food was cheap. He doesn't remember how much the food cost, but he says that on one occasion they paid twelve cents per person for it.

As time went by, other guest houses opened until they reached the large five-star hotel mansions that exist today, where one can't go to those hotels because they are too expensive. He remembers that one night they spent at the Central Guest House on his first trip to Esquipulas, Camilo Gatica, after the group went to bed, shortly afterward let out a tremendous cry of pain and said that an animal had stung or bitten him. We turned on the lights, checked the cot, and found nothing. We went back to bed, and until then, everything was peaceful. Minutes later, the incident repeated itself. Camilo was screaming in pain, but since he's such a joker, we thought it was a prank. However, when we saw his features, we realized something serious was happening. We repeated the search on the cot and found a scorpion that had stung him.

At that time, the church was the same as it is now, located on a small hill that, Don Antonio says, was covered in bushes. Cows grazed in front of it, and there was a small fence that remained in place. Now, he's surprised that the church is almost impossible to enter because too many people visit it. He believes that as time passes, the journey to Esquipulas becomes more mysterious. More people visit, and since it's at the intersection of the Trifinio River, the name given to the region because Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala meet there, many people from those countries make pilgrimages to Esquipulas.

Don Antonio says he's traveled to Esquipulas during quieter times and has had to wait in lines four or five blocks long to visit the Christ. He believes that as time goes by, it becomes more and more important.

When they started back and reached the summit, the only one with a camera was a friend named Valladares. He took photos and continued the journey. To his surprise, upon reaching Quezaltepeque, he realized he had left his camera on a rock at the summit, so he immediately got on his bike and returned to the summit to retrieve it.

On the return trip, at a place he doesn't remember exactly where it was, a friend got a flat tire, and everyone stopped so he could change it. They were changing the tubular tire when a companion, all dry and

and dejected, who they called Death, sat down on a stone at the side of the road and gave the impression of a dying man. Camilo Gatica, the leader of the group and the one in charge of giving nicknames and telling jokes, went to see him and made this comment: 'Many have seen that death is dying.' This provoked great laughter from the group and the reaction of the companion they called Death.

Don Antonio never kept a travel diary that would allow him to recount exactly how many there were and the dates on which they took them. Nowadays, at his advanced age, he only remembers the approximate route and a few anecdotes from his first trip, which he narrated. He also recalls a few more anecdotes about incidents that occurred on subsequent trips, which are narrated below, and a list of names of some of the cyclists he remembers who made that trip to Esquipulas and back when the road was dirt. The names of the cyclists he remembers are: Camilo Gatica, Vicente Flores, Juan Germán, Juan José Montoya, Antonio Cabrera, Mario Hurtarte, Armando Castillo, Félix Soto, Santiago Valladares, Artemio Noval, Rafael Juárez, Carlos Besares, Vicente Álvarez, Reginaldo García, Juan Larios, Guillermo Zavala, and Julio Villavicencio.



Pennant with the names of the cyclists who traveled to Esquipulas when the road was already paved.

Among the anecdotes, Don Antonio recalls that they had to travel separately because the platoon couldn't be packed together due to the dirt and rocks on the road. There was a risk that some comrades who didn't know the road would get lost, and that happened on one of the trips with a comrade they called "The Nazi." He crossed into Palencia, and the road to that town had some horrific slopes. We managed to see him on the second day when we were in Esquipulas, because he didn't leave with us. Don Antonio pointed out: "No one knew if anything had happened to him because no one knew anything. No vehicles passed along the road." In the distance, a truck or a van could be seen. But the bus had set schedules, so you couldn't say, "I'm going back by van." No!

On a later trip, which he doesn't remember which year, to the town of La Reforma in Zacapa, they arrived at night. It was a dark, dark night. Then we saw a large hut and decided to stay the night, and we entered what we thought was a hut. We fell asleep, and the next day, I woke up completely bitten by mosquitoes. The funny thing was that at dawn when we woke up, we realized we were sleeping in the local cemetery.

The hut was where they placed the coffins. No wonder, when we woke up, we saw a lot of candle wax. He thinks that if they had seen it when they arrived, they would have been scared and would never have stayed there. In any case, he says we slept very peacefully.

On one of the return trips, Don Antonio says, he came with Don Julio Villavicencio and they were surprised to see the presidential motorcade coming down a hill, which stopped when they met them and Mr. President, General Miguel Idígoras Fuentes, got out and came to greet and congratulate us and said: I also cycled. He remembers that on one of the trips, one night when he arrived at Jícaro, he says that those little towns on the banks of the Motagua River were tiny, tiny villages. Upon arriving at those villages, they asked where they could stay and were sent to the inn of Don Juan Clavería. He was, according to Don Antonio, an elderly man who had been a telegraph operator and was retired and owned the inn. Don Juan provided them with cots and they stayed there that night. The curious thing about Don Juan Clavería was that he made cement relief sculptures of women attached to the walls of his inn, and he also painted murals on the walls, which he dedicated his free time to, so he was quite an artist.

He relates that, in 2007, Dr. Rigoberto Juárez Paz wrote an article in the local Guatemalan press, but he doesn't remember which newspaper, about the personality of Don Juan Clavería. A curious fact he relates is that at that time, *General Jorge Ubico passed through Jicaro by train, and since Don Juan Clavería's lodgings were located next to the railroad line, General Ubico saw the sculptures on the walls and mistook them for real people, saying to them: "Goodbye, ladies!" Although I imagine that's a charade he and Ubico created,* says Don Antonio.

Whenever they arrived in Esquipulas, they would visit the temple. Once, in later times, a priest was waiting for them at the entrance of the temple and said the following words: *"Young people! Do you come here to the temple by faith?" We answered yes. The priest told us: "You come by bicycle from very far away!" "When I go to Guatemala by car, I end up bedridden because I'm so exhausted, and you guys come back whole."*

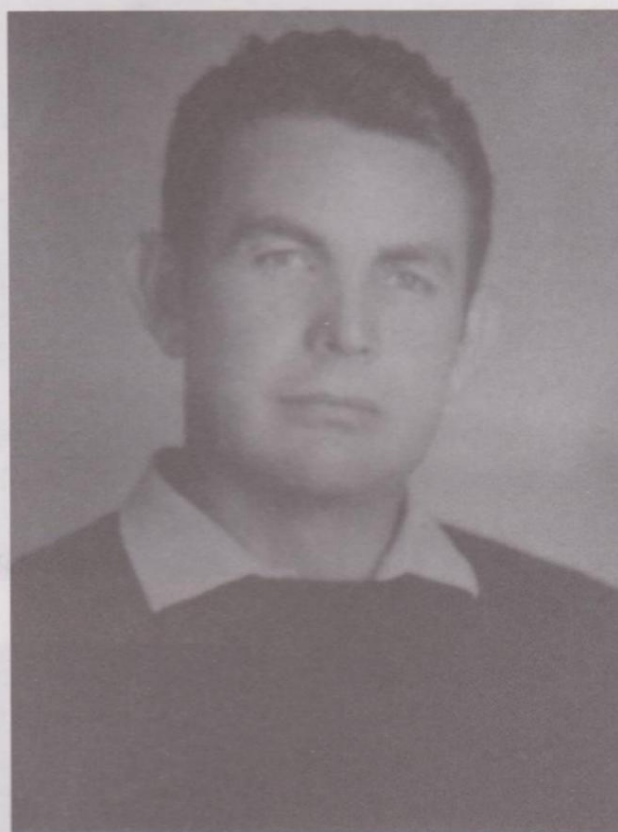


Interview with one of the Mulet team members.

He says he met a teacher from the Rafael Aqueche Institute, who was known as "La Chepía," and who made pilgrimages to Esquipulas on foot from the capital. She was admired by the other teachers who were her coworkers. Proof of how difficult these pilgrimages on foot were was the case of a teacher who taught him at the Serapio Cruz school named Antonio Pardo. *He was short, chubby, and red-faced. He made the round trip on foot along the shorter Jalapa route, the one used by the pilgrimages on foot. Upon returning, he died after about two weeks from the physical exertion of the walk, as he was very fat and untrained.*

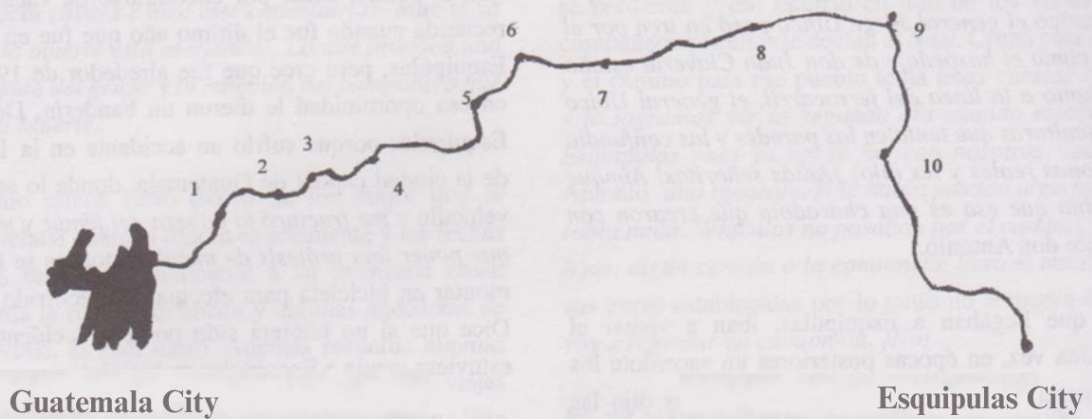
Don Antonio made more than 30 bicycle trips to Esquipulas *without getting off to spit, as we called it, after falling.*

The most frequent trips were those made during Holy Week, taking advantage of that holiday, and they also made them in December, but on that occasion, only teachers could make it because they were on vacation. He doesn't remember the last year he cycled to Esquipulas, but he thinks it was around 1962 because he was awarded a pennant then. He stopped going to Esquipulas because he had an accident on 12th Avenue in Guatemala City, where he was hit by a vehicle *and fractured the head of his femur, requiring a metal prosthesis.* It was then difficult for him to ride such a long bike. He says that if it hadn't been for that accident, he would still be cycling to Esquipulas.



Don Antonio when he was 35 years old, photograph taken on September 29, 1961.

Route map



Route Map: Arturo Matas Oria

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| 1. El Fiscal | 6. El Rancho |
| 2. Agua Caliente | 7. El Jícaro |
| 3. San Antonio La Paz | 8. La Reforma |
| 4. Sanarate | 9. Zacapa |
| 5. El Progreso | 10. Chiquimula |

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