View of La Ojuela lead mine, Mapimí, Durango, Mexico ca. 1909
(Photograph courtesy of William R. Stark Archive, Hugh C. Watson Collection)

I

In its heyday, La Ojuela produced more lead than any other mine in the world. Today, the old suspension bridge spans 271.5 meters and separates past from present. Making your way between the ruins of the barracks of the miners, the church, and other traces of buildings that made
up this once elaborate industrial complex, you sometimes hear echoes from the past: sounds of men and horses, bugles and bracelets, buckshot, and handcuffs. Other times, the strum of a guitar, an accordion, or the voice of a woman singing sad, sultry songs rises up from the detritus. You can almost detect the clink of glasses raised in celebration, and the murmur of men as they play cards and smoke hand-rolled cigarettes. It’s important to listen to these voices. Their stories rise to the surface from the depths of the mine and shed light on things lost and forgotten.

I have listened to many old tales of the goings-on at the mine, stories that make your hair stand on end. And like all stories that emanate from the depths of the earth, there is a grim truth to take away: the spectral forms of men who worked and died in the mine sometimes reach the present, where they are summoned by the wind, the rain, and the perfume of flowering cactus.

While my great-grandfather’s diaries serve as my temporal compass, ancestral memories stir the movements of the living. They pass languid hours breathing in the shadows. They recall for me fleeting moments of those who came before me. They speak of an interstitial existence in between cracks and seams that hold together the fabric of reality. The voices of my great-grandparents, Mary Paradise and Hugh Watson, reach out to me, sometimes as a murmur, other times as a whisper. They penetrate the dimension of the living to touch me when I least expect them.

Hugh’s finely written scrawl describes his time with Mary in a region that is dry, windswept, and desolate — a páramo, where nothing meets the eye but cactus, creosote, and rocky crags. If you have never seen a páramo, you need only imagine a barren wasteland that stretches out in every direction as far as the eye can see. Desolate and godforsaken, it is a region inhabited by ghosts. Its vast expanse is a labyrinth that defies the imagination. Lost and forgotten souls wander its empty plateaus and barren foothills. They hear their cries in the wind. They whisper in the darkness. The freezing winds penetrate the living and dead alike, and the summer heat melts the will and erases memories.

Mary Margaret Paradise ca. 1909
(Photograph courtesy of William R. Stark Archive, Hugh C. Watson Collection)

II

When I imagine my great-grandmother Mary in the mining camp at La Ojuela, she is standing over a wood-fired potbelly stove smelling onions and garlic that are cooking in butter. The stew she is preparing for Sunday dinner marks a special occasion: the anniversary of her marriage to Hugh.

She moves to the table, picks up a handful of fresh thyme, separates a few stems from the others, removes the delicate, aromatic leaves, and begins to chop them, ever mindful not to bruise the leaves. When she’s done, she sets the herbs aside and grabs four potatoes. She rinses them thoroughly in the basin. Peeling them one by one, she pulls the paring knife upward toward her thumb carefully separating the skin
from the flesh. She then discards the skins in a small bowl away from the stove. Afterward, she cubes the potatoes and adds them directly to the sweating garlic and onions.

She then peels six carrots and slices them one by one into the pot. She stirs the contents and leans over to wave the smells from the pot up to her nose. She shudders as she remembers that just a year earlier she was living in Denver, Colorado with her brothers and sisters. At that moment, a gust of wind blows the kitchen window open, knocking over the potted plant she received on her wedding day. In the breeze she hears a faint voice whisper:

_Sin más, ni más_

She moves to the window, and with agile movements quickly closes it, hooking the latch with deft hands. She returns the plant to its spot on the ledge and then moves to the table. Once there, she removes the beef shoulder from its paper wrappings and begins to cut it into small pieces.

IV

In the morning, Hugh meets his fellow claims inspector “Shorty” Ujack and a mozo. They have three saddle mules and one pack mule. On the pack mule they take Hugh’s bed, some grub, and two blankets for Shorty.

They clatter out of town at 7:15 a.m. and ride directly down a street past the Alameda to a store called Alaska. At Alaska they turn sharp to the right and cut across a big rocky square and take the western branch of the road to La Ciénaga. Here they ride along between two stone fences for about an hour, and then out onto a good mountain
wagon road, all the time on an upgrade with an occasional hill. At about 11 a.m. they go down into a valley where there is a ranch called La Murcia.

All afternoon they travel over a fine mesa covered with wild hay and very good grazing ground but do not see many cattle. They pass some small Indian huts, the most curious Hugh has ever seen. They look like roofs without walls set on the ground. There are about ten of them, and they call the place Refugio. They ride on by down a fertile but uncultivated valley and there they come to four houses, a granary, and some water in a stream. Here they make camp. The place is called San Jabel.

They go down to the creek, build a big fire, cook a meal, and sleep on the ground. It is cold that night. Feliciano and Shorty keep the fire going all night. Shorty only has two blankets and Feliciano none.

The next morning they get started promptly at 4 a.m. It is still dark and their restlessness is entirely due to the cold. Their early rising does them no particular good except to keep them from freezing. Shorty is in an ornery state. Dust covers his hat and his pants. His ire seems to be the only thing holding him up. Hugh asks if he's okay, if he wants something to eat before they get under way. But Shorty merely grumbles under his breath and stops short of Hugh to lean against a tree. Although Shorty acts like he has nothing more to say, his silence tells another story.

“Shorty” and Hugh on the trail
(Photograph courtesy of William R. Stark Archive, Hugh C. Watson Collection)

Hugh walks over to the pack mule and reaches into a pannier to remove a small newspaper-wrapped pack of hardboiled eggs. He selects one, cracks it, and begins to peel away the fragments of shell and solidified albumen. The sulfuric aroma rises up to his nostrils. Shorty looks away. Hugh takes two swift bites and the egg is gone. He brushes his hands off on his pants and kicks dirt over the shells on the ground.

They start riding northeast. A chill still hangs in the air. Dew clings to the brush. Several birds gather on a nearby tree to greet the sun as it pulls up over the hills before them. Shorty stares off at a distant point on the horizon that Hugh doesn't recognize.

For a while they ride along in silence. Then Hugh begins to sing the Sestina of the Tramp Royal:
Speakin' general I've tried 'em all
The happy roads that take you o'er the world.
Speakin' general I've found 'em good
For such as cannot use one bed too long.
But must get hence, the same as I have done,
An' go on observin' matters till they die.

They stop for lunch after a few hours on the trail and after eating they climb their first big hill. They reach the cumbre and ride along the top for several hours. Then, alongside the hill on the other side of the divide but going down, they pass the Hole of Juan Miguel, which is a big cave. Later they would wish they had stayed there.

The last of the evening light has faded. A starry night accompanied by a bitter cold descends upon them as they ride. The chill Hugh feels compares only with the vast, opaque expanse of crisp blue sky he observed earlier in the day. He is feeling contrary. His mule hasn't accustomed itself to him. He is sore on one side and wants nothing more than to settle down to a fire, some grub, and some sleep.

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Workers gathered to watch as Pancho Villa and his men enter La Ojuela. January 1909.
(Photograph courtesy of William R. Stark Archive, Hugh C. Watson Collection)

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V

They don't reach Huahuapa until late the next day. It is a town of about 500 people. At the same time they get in, a party of six Americans coming from the other way arrives. They are rumored to be engineers contemplating the buying of El Cobre. Hugh meets them and remarks that they look to him more like hot-air merchants than engineers.

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VI

Mary reaches for salt and pepper. She seasons the pieces of beef on the chopping block and rolls them in flour before adding them to the garlic, onion, potatoes, and carrots. She picks up the chopped thyme with the edge of her knife and adds it to the pot. She gently brushes the remaining leaves from her left index finger, and with a long wooden spoon, she slowly stirs the ingredients until the beef is browned. She adds chicken broth and watches as the contents of the pot bubble and hiss.
The windows of the kitchen begin to steam over and the room grows dark. Mary looks up and out the foggy panes. She sees the figures of men running and hears shouting. She sees the outline of more men gathered at the bridge as others wearing wide-brimmed hats on horses parade across the bridge.

VII

What happened next depends on which of two stories you choose to believe. Both versions of the story have it that Pancho Villa and his troops rode into La Ojuela in broad daylight via the old suspension bridge. Administrators of the camp had heard rumors of revolution. News of insurrection in not-too-distant pueblos traveled like wildfire. They all knew Pancho Villa, or one of his generals, would eventually arrive to ask for tribute. In fact, they busied themselves with preparations weeks before he appeared, and were as ready as could be expected when the sound of horses crossing the bridge echoed over the ravine. One hundred men bearing rifles and machetes, wearing wide-brimmed sombreros and bands of bullets across their chests entered La Ojuela following Pancho Villa.

Family history has it that Villa’s men held Mary for ransom. However, in one version of the story, my great-grandmother challenges Villa and a number of his entourage to a drinking contest. Shot for shot, the story goes, she out-drinks each and every one of them until only she is left standing. In the other version of the story, distant relatives swear that the drinking contest never happened. Had it happened at all, they claim, Villa and his men would surely have shot Mary dead, or worse.

Those who support the latter line of thinking believe the kidnapping was a perfunctory act: Villa and his men wanted to show the foreign administrators of the mine that they meant business; that on top of the tribute they were asking, they would also require $14,000 in gold for the return of my great-grandmother.

Revolutionaries in Mapimi, Durango, Mexico, January 1909
(Photograph courtesy of William R. Stark Archive, Hugh C. Watson Collection)

Others say that Mary sympathized with the revolutionaries’ cause; that the kidnapping was her idea all along. They say she felt sorry for the fearsome Pancho Villa and his band of followers. The drinking match was unfair, she’s reported to have said. Villa and his men were hungry and tired. They easily succumbed to the intoxicating effects of the tequila.
What has been documented is that when Hugh and Shorty returned from Huahuapa, the revolutionaries had already collected the ransom and released Mary. Fearing the possibility of future abductions, Hugh bought Mary a pearl-handled revolver and no one ever spoke of the kidnapping again. The pearl-handled revolver joined Mary's collection of souvenirs of Old Mexico and La Ojuela, to gather dust on a shelf in a library in Denver many years later.

Other times, at home, when I'm breathing the freezing January air of New England, I recall the cold nights and creosote of the Sierra Madre. I read Hugh's detailed accounts of journeys over the barren steppes of Durango. It's Hugh's boisterous guffaw that I hear cutting through the air. I can almost see him walking around, camera in hand, surrounded by children, taking photographs, and handing out candies.

In those desolate, temporally remote lands, the past intersects the present and specters emerge from the depths to walk with the living. When the cactus blooms, you can sometimes hear voices in the wind. You can hear a lot of things, if you're willing to listen.

I have traced my great-grandparents' footsteps through Mexico and South America. Whenever I am on the trail or walking through ruins I know they visited, I get the feeling that Mary and Hugh are there with me, guiding me 'round the next bend and over the next hill through to the next arroyo. Sometimes I think that I hear Mary's contagious laughter when I ford a stream or cross a river. I can see her smiling in her wedding dress and I can almost smell her thyme-laced beef stew.

"Some fragments of this piece previously were included in other stories posted on the blog Reflections from the Colonial Divide."