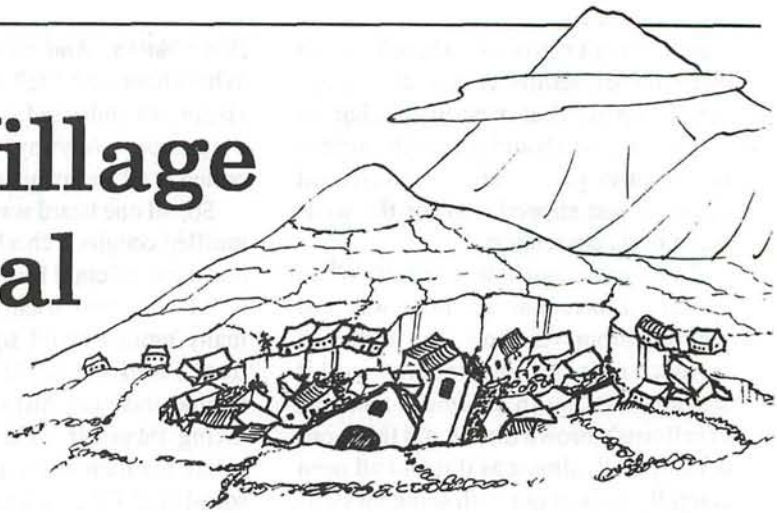
The Sinking Village of San Cristobal

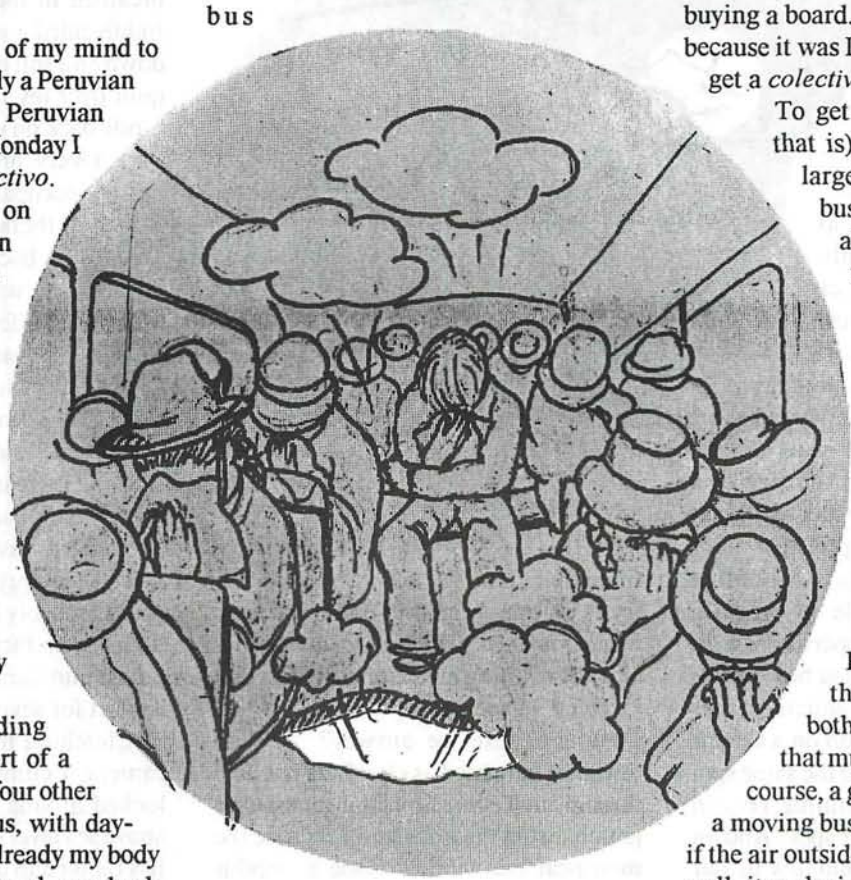


by Don Montague

I slumped forward against a muffled form in front of me. God, had I actually fallen asleep? Where was I? The bus must have hit a pothole, or maybe I just fell forward. I looked around through the haze.

I had to have been out of my mind to take a bus at all. Especially a Peruvian bus. No, especially *this* Peruvian bus. Had I waited until Monday I could have gotten a *colectivo*. But oh no. I had to go on Labor Day, the only day in the whole year when colectivo drivers don't drive. Why? What has Labor Day ever done for *colectivo* drivers? Of course, you can get a *colectivo* in Peru on Christmas, Easter, any saint's day on the calendar in this Catholic country but not on Labor Day. On Labor Day colectivo drivers stay home.

So, instead of speeding along in the posh comfort of a car, a *colectivo* with only four other passengers, I was on a bus, with daybreak two hours away. Already my body ached from leaning forward, my back especially. Who wouldn't be in pain? Try balancing on a board across the aisle in a cramped and rickety Peruvian microbus. Peruvians still do this -- put boards across the aisle and sell the "seats." Not the bigger bus companies, of course, -- Tepsa or Ormeño. When you leave the driving to them you get a real, cushioned seat on a not-all-that-old Mercedes bus, a seat you can even recline. Not so with many of the smaller bus companies. Watch out for the Andean entrepreneur, sole owner of his own decrepit microbus with tassels around the window and a metallic radio blasting incessantly. No reclining seats and tinted windows here. And if you're one of the last to get on, you'll find yourself perched on a board in the aisle. I didn't know this when I paid for a seat on a bus to Huaraz. It's not something that springs to mind when you buy a bus ticket, -- that you're buying a board. But here I was on a bus because it was Labor Day and I couldn't get a *colectivo*.



To get to my seat, (*my board*, that is), I'd had to step over a large hole in the floor of the bus. I didn't think much about it at the time except to observe that not every bus has a large hole in the floor. And I mean a *large* hole -- a hole about the same size and in the same general location where you'd expect to find an escape hatch under a tank.

The roads leading out of Lima are paved. Riding over a paved road, the hole, which nobody bothered to cover, didn't make that much difference at first. Of course, a gaping hole in the floor of a moving bus sucks in a lot of air, and if the air outside just happens to be cold, well, it sucks in a lot of cold air.

It got cold as soon as the bus got underway. Cold, yes, but nothing compared to the numbing, frigid temperatures from the gale that whooshed in once the bus headed up into the mountains. If there was a heater "on board" (like I

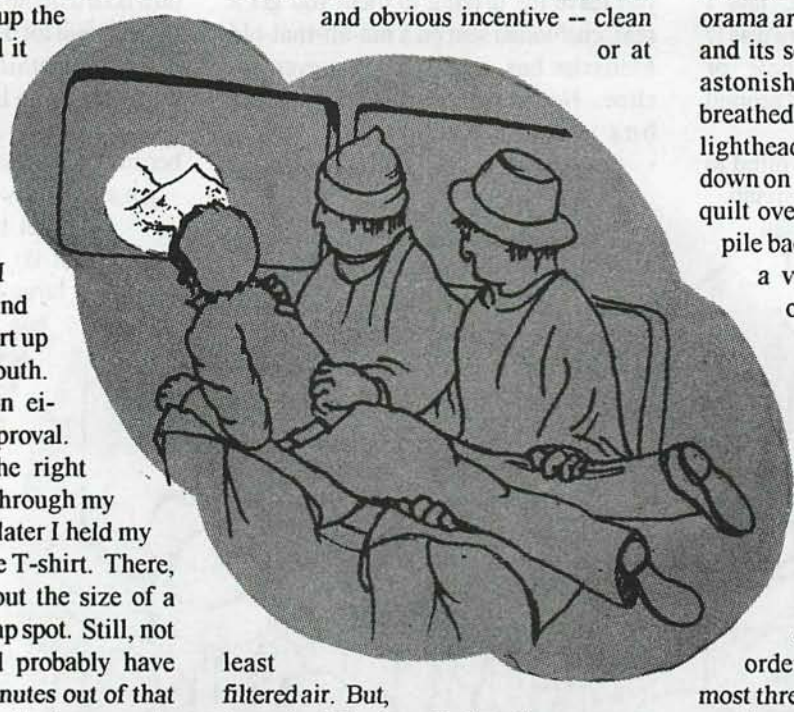
was), it wasn't noticeable where I sat. No doubt the owner/driver baked in toasty comfort up front but an outfit that charges real money for a board across the aisle is not about to go . . . ah, . . . overboard (sorry, it just slipped out) for the well-being of its passengers.

I must have somehow dozed off. When I awoke a torrential, icy blast was still pouring through the hole. But as the bus barrelled over the now unpaved road it was also sucking in enormous amounts of yellowish-brown dirt. It did this wonderfully well, almost as if it had all been carefully worked out with some mysterious purpose in mind. The yawning hole in the floor had, in effect, converted the bus into a giant vacuum cleaner that gulped dirt as it swept up the road below and trapped it inside.

I peered around. All the swaddled forms I could make out within my few feet of visibility held some garment or other to their faces. I unbuttoned my shirt and pulled a swatch of T-shirt up over my nose and mouth. Mummy-like figures on either side nodded their approval. Clearly I was doing the right thing. I smiled at them through my T-shirt. Some minutes later I held my breath and examined the T-shirt. There, a few inches away, about the size of a quarter, was a dirty, damp spot. Still, not all *that* dirty. I could probably have gotten another three minutes out of that spot but it takes a while to properly evaluate the filtration properties of a T-shirt on a moving dirt-filled bus, and to calculate the number of square inches required for air purification on a 6-hour trip. No matter, I could use the same spot later if I had to. In the meantime, I began to breathe through another spot. And on we traveled into the mountains in our own exclusive Hoover.

Strangely nobody squawked. Not a single person stood up and yelled, "Hey, driver, there's a #*%!&¥ hole in the %*@^#!@ floor that's sucking in a lot of &%$?+^¥*! dirt, you $#^&%$* !$%^%#+$. And so's your mother." What about me? Me? Look, I was just a visitor, an ambassador of good will, not a agitator. Anyway, I couldn't have pulled it off in Spanish.

So, all one heard was gushing air and muffled coughs. I checked again. I now had a row of eight brown damp spots on my T-shirt and tried to estimate how many more I could squeeze in on the front. Maybe I could turn my T-shirt around under my shirt and jacket without taking them off. I'd never tried this before but then again it wasn't exactly a social skill I'd ever had a pressing need to acquire. In the present circumstances, to wit, an ice cold, crowded, dirt-filled, Peruvian bus there was an immediate and obvious incentive -- clean or at least filtered air. But, try as I might, I couldn't pull my arm up inside my sleeve without a lot more room and after flailing my seatmate for several minutes, I gave up.



Where were we anyway? "What town," I mumbled as clearly as possible through my T-shirt. Something must have gotten lost in the translation because the man near the window made a circular motion on the glass, wiping away the dust. Then, to my surprise, the two of them hauled me across their laps for a peek. Outside, it was crystal clear. One could see for miles -- some of the cleanest air in the world, a mere pane of glass away. I could be breathing that air but I wasn't. I was inside a bus breathing dirt, stretched across the laps of two peasants and looking at the world through a little circle in a filthy window.

The bus stopped at last. No we didn't pile out. There were boards in the aisles with people sitting on them and it took a while to de-bus gracefully. Outside the women wandered off and squatted down in a circle. I joined the men relieving themselves. The view was spectacular, even to someone who'd just been sitting on a board for three hours. A vast circle of white peaks towered over an immense, tawny plain. No house, tree, animal -- nothing obstructed a sweeping 360 degree panorama around our dinky little, garish bus and its scraggly, dusty passengers. The astonishing clarity was dazzling. I breathed in the cold, clear air and felt lightheaded and queazy. I wanted to lie down on a soft bed and pull a thick, warm quilt over my head. But, no, we had to pile back on the bus. This was done in a very orderly fashion with each occupant of a board, boarding the bus at the proper time. Once back on my board and underway again, everything four feet away soon dissolved again into a yellow, brownish haze. No matter. I'd taken off my T-shirt outside and figured what with ready access to sleeves, sides and back, I could now make neat orderly rows of brown spots on almost three square feet of virgin T-shirt. I could probably hold out for well over two hours. In fact, when the bus finally pulled into Huaraz I still had space on the T-shirt for several more rows of spots.

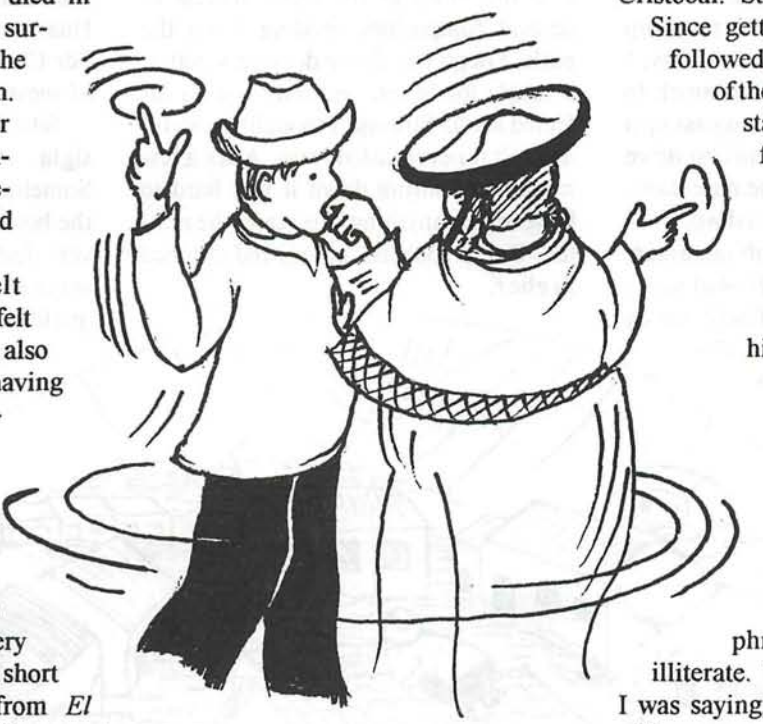
Clutching my small bag, tripod and camera, I climbed down, stretched and looked around. Huaraz is 10,140 feet above sea level in the Santa River Valley. It's flanked to the west by the Cordillera Negra, to the east by the Cordillera Blanca. Huaraz is possibly the most important mecca for climbing, trekking and backpacking in Peru and even in all of South America. The area draws travelers from all over the world.

For all that, Huaraz is a grubby, little burg with a history to rival any biblical town for pestilence, catastrophe and disaster. Landslides and earthquakes have been regularly wiping out populations for hundreds of years. More recently, an avalanche in 1941 dumped tons of rock into a lake, which spilled over its banks, roared down on Huaraz and killed 5,000 people. It flattened the town. In 1962 another avalanche struck with similar results, wiping out the nearby town of Ranrahirca. But of course the big one took place May 31, 1970. A massive earthquake, even for these parts, 7.9 on the Richter scale, devastated central Peru, killing some 80,000 people. Half of these, or about 30,000 people died in Huaraz. Only 10% of the city survived. All this accounts for the bleak appearance of the town. Given the inevitability of another major disaster soon, the city fathers can be forgiven for not rebuilding, at least not so you'd notice.

Where earlier I had felt lightheaded and queazy, I now felt downright ill. Of course, I was also a hell of a lot higher but, never having been much above sea level before, I didn't connect the altitude with my wretched condition. Still, something was definitely wrong. After an exertion of any sort, I had to sit down. So, with frequent stops I shuffled about, stopping every now and then to show someone a short newspaper article I'd clipped from *El Commercio* the week before. It was a story about San Cristobal, a small village that the article claimed was sinking. The article never got around to saying why the village was sinking. And it wasn't any too precise about where to find the village, except to say that it was near Huaraz. Not much to go on -- San Cristobal . . . somewhere near Huaraz . . . people fleeing sinking village. Like many a story in Latin America it cavalierly ignored the whos, whats, whys, whens and wheres, rules slavishly adhered to in North American newspapers.

Actually, it was a mistake to include "The Sinking Village of San Cristobal" in a *News Outlook*. I regularly sent off a *News Outlook* to ABC, NBC, CBS, Visnews, UPITN, BBC, etc. advising them of stories we could cover. But last month's *News Outlook* had been a little skimpy -- only four stories, so when I came across a vague little blurb in *Commercio* about this sinking village, I thought, "what the hell." Naturally, I never figured anybody would actually assign us to cover a sinking village. I only threw it into the *Outlook* to flesh it out a bit, so to speak.

ABC *wanted* the story of the sinking village -- not the four other, good and filmable stories on the *Outlook*, every one a better story that I could have filmed without leaving Lima. But that's how I came to be on a bus, breathing dirt, that's why I was in Huaraz (wherever that was) on Labor Day, looking for San Cristobal and getting for my pains, which were considerable at this point, a lot of puzzled looks. Nobody, it seems, had heard of San Cristobal, at least not the first fourteen residents I'd spoken to and that was bad news. No San Cristobal meant no coverage of a sinking village which meant no $75 and worse. I'd have to eat the expenses of getting to Huaraz, as a sort of chaser to all the dirt I'd already consumed getting there.



Long about 11:30, with desperation mounting, I showed the article to a woman selling newspapers and, lo, she claimed to have heard of San Cristobal. She even professed to know its whereabouts. A good sign? Possibly, but probably not. A recent arrival in Peru, I'd already seen far too much of Lima while following the enthusiastic but misguided directions of Peruvians who sent me any old place rather than admit they didn't know where to find some Ministerio. Actually, the only thing strange about this morning was the surprising number of people who admitted *not* knowing where to find San Cristobal. Still, what to do?

Since getting off the bus I'd been followed around by a cab driver, one of the many that lurk around bus stations. It was nearing time for serious negotiations but, feeling queazy again, I decided to sit down to mentally rehearse my pitch in Spanish.

"Diego", I said, (I knew his name because, "Como se llama?" was one of the few things I could say in Spanish with some expectation of being understood, along with, " Mucho gusto, Que tal? Cuanto cuesto?" and other similar phrases of the linguistically illiterate. "Diego," I said, or thought I was saying, "that woman over there with newspapers says she knows where there is a village called San Cristobal. I want to go to San Cristobal and come back to Huaraz. You are to talk (hablar) with that woman, yes, the woman with the newspapers and see if she knows the way to San Cristobal." (Now came the tricky part. I wasn't too good with the conditional tense). "If she, the woman with the newspapers, knows the way to San Cristobal, and if she can tell you how to get there and you can get me there and get me back, then I will pay you to drive me to San Cristobal and drive me back to Huaraz." I wanted to explain that I'd

talked to fourteen other people who'd never heard of San Cristobal and that, in all probability, this woman hadn't either but this proved far too difficult in my limited Spanish and I was clearly confusing Diego. So I made him slowly repeat what he thought I'd said, made some necessary corrections like "No, *I* wasn't from San Cristobal, I wanted to *go* to San Cristobal," and sent him over to talk to the woman.

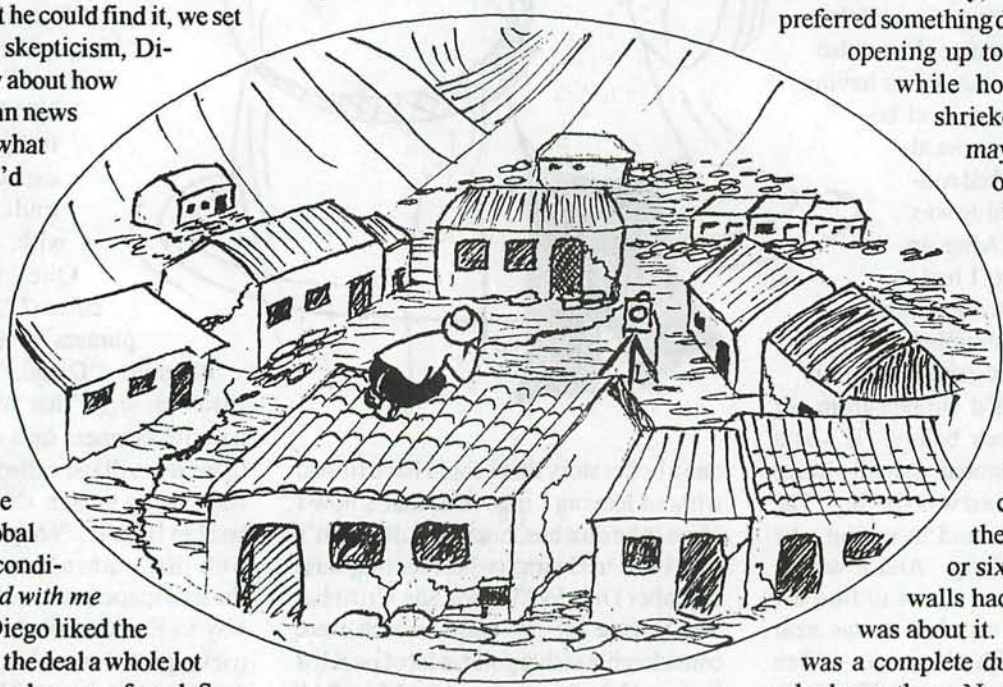
Meanwhile I loitered on one side with sinking heart and tried to imagine what they were saying. What could possibly take so long? Both gestured wildly, rocked back and forth, and rotated in little arcs as if trying to establish simple concepts like left and right, up and down. It boded ill. And anyway, I didn't trust Diego. It was too much to expect a Peruvian cab driver to pass up a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to drive some fool gringo around the mountains in search of a non-existent village.

At length, on the most dubious assurances of Diego that San Cristobal was a real town and that he could find it, we set off. Sensing my skepticism, Diego babbled away about how reliable the woman news vendor was. But what did he know? He'd just met her.

Now the deal I'd made with Diego was that I'd pay double (doble) his asking price (which was probably extortionate to begin with) to drive me to San Cristobal and back on the condition that he *stayed with me the whole time.* Diego liked the deal. Later I liked the deal a whole lot more, especially when we found San Cristobal wasn't accessible by car.

In the meantime we had left the main road and were winding up dirt roads, higher up into the mountains. Higher and higher we climbed, pulling over occasionally for Diego to interrogate some peasant. And sure enough, less than two hours later, we pulled into a small village. It wasn't San Cristobal but at least everybody there had heard of it. San Cristobal? "Up there," they said, waving towards the heights. This is where my deal with Diego paid off and Diego knew it.

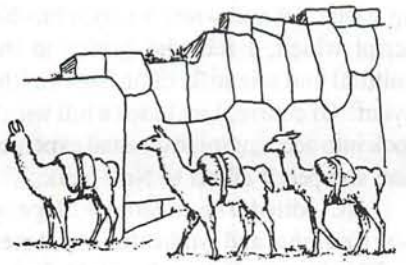
Up a rocky path we started, Diego lugging the tripod and camera. The sun shone. In all a splendid day except that I was having considerable trouble breathing. After a while I had to sit down. Further along, and gasping, I developed a headache. I plopped down again and it went away. Ten minutes later I found myself on my hands and knees retching into the grass to the mild interest of several compesinos heading down the path. Diego was doing decidedly better, a whole lot better. He didn't seem affected at all. Strange, I thought, as awful as I felt it never lasted long. After a few minutes of sitting down it was hard to believe that anything was really the matter. But as soon as I got up and climbed higher,



I felt a pounding of the temples and if I pushed myself to go on, I would shortly be on all fours again, retching like an animal. Diego, who'd been a bit sullen at the outset, brightened up as my condition grew worse. He even got quite chatty, talking about the air, and Soroche (altitude sickness) and how it didn't bother him at all because he was a man of the mountains or something like that. I barely listened. Having just pushed myself too hard I was undergoing a violent fit of dry heaves. He found this all quite cheering and during my periodic convulsions displayed the most serene detachment. Effusive displays of compassion are not the custom in the mountains -- not even the most basic show of concern, for that matter.

With frequent stops en route and wracked by repeated violent chest spasms, it took close to an hour to reach San Cristobal. It's not on any map I could find but it's a whole lot higher than Huaraz which is already too high by half. For Chrissake, there were even patches of snow around.

San Cristobal was not an inspiring sight. First of all, it wasn't sinking. Somehow I'd had pictured the village in the bottom of a vast sink hole or at the very least in a filmable depression of some sort. Ideally, of course, I'd have preferred something dramatic -- the earth opening up to swallow the town while hordes of peasants shrieked in terror, with maybe a few cutaways of flowing lava and shaking buildings. There was none of that. There wasn't even much to show that something had happened. A couple of crevasses criss-crossed the town -- the biggest maybe five or six feet deep. Several walls had fallen over. That was about it. As a news story it was a complete dud. For one thing nobody was there. No grieving or stunned victims, not a single crying and homeless child, not even a stray dog or a vulture gnawing on some carrion. Nothing. Just a dozen or so mud houses, a couple of large cracks in the ground, Diego and me.

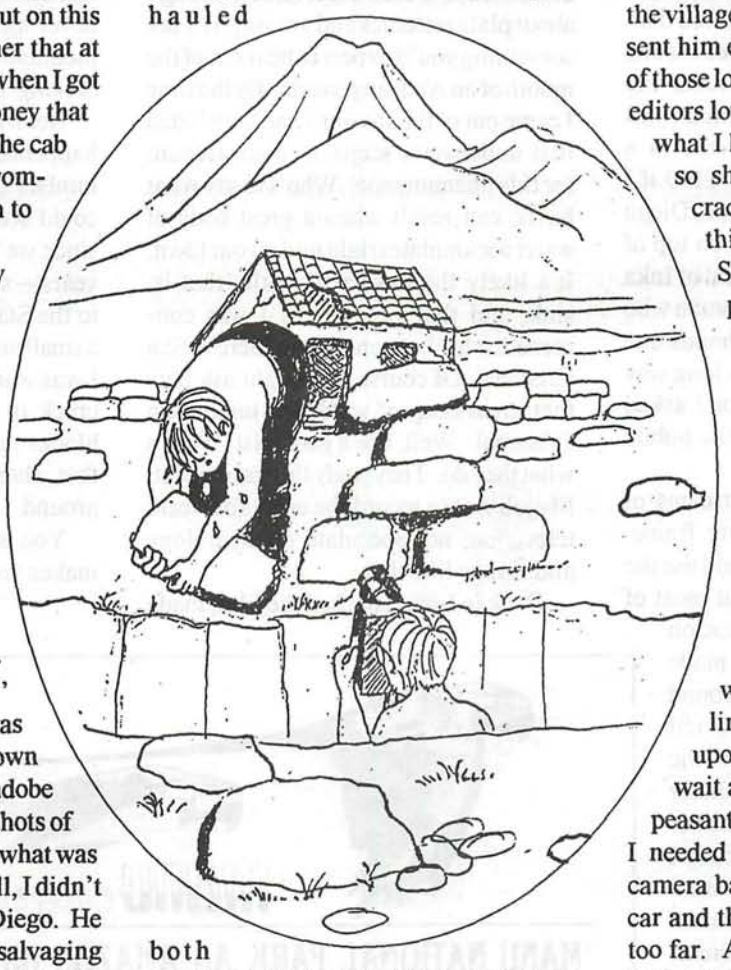


I won't dwell in more than tolerable detail about how much I needed that $75. We hadn't had a story in weeks. $75 goes a long way in Peru. It pays for things like food and rent. Before setting out on this trip I blandly assured my partner that at least we'd have $75 coming in when I got back. It was the lure of the money that had gotten me to Huaraz, into the cab with Diego, and, panting and vomiting, up a steep mountain path to this dismal, little non-story.

Well, dammit. I had paid my dues. I came here to film a story and I was going to film a story. While Diego strolled about picking his teeth, I set up the tripod, cranked up the camera and surveyed the scene like the professional cameraman I was supposed to be.

"Get down in that crack," I commanded. Diego blinked. I screwed the camera onto the tripod. "Crack," I said. "Diego! Crack! (Baja!) Get down!" I thereupon acted out what he was suppose to do, namely climb down into a crack and start moving adobe blocks around. I needed some shots of villagers in the act of salvaging what was left of their humble homes. Well, I didn't have any villagers. But I had Diego. He would have to do for a villager salvaging his humble home. Diego seemed reluctant to comply with this reasonable request and I was forced to remind him of our deal -- double the fare provided he stayed with me the whole time. True, I'd never mentioned moving bricks, but this was, I felt, sort of implied. Why else would I want him around?

I got some overhead shots of Diego stacking blocks. Then I crawled down into the crack and filmed Diego from below. Naturally I filmed the usual closeups -- Diego's sweating face, hands clutching blocks, blocks stacked up. That done, I had Diego take off his shirt and filmed a similar sequence that I hoped would be taken for a different peasant salvaging pieces of his humble home. Having exhausted the filmic potential of the crack we ascended to ground level where I sent Diego up on a roof to salvage some shingles. In one nice touch I had him pretend to yell to his peasant wife who couldn't be seen inside the house. Next I put the camera back on the tripod, h a u l e d



b o t h over to another crack. There, I framed a shot, set the F-stop and focused. I then gave Diego a crash course in cinematography. He was to push "this button here" once I had gotten down into the crack and started to work. With that I took off my glasses (the better to pass for a mountain native), crawled down into the crack and acted out what I thought was a stellar performance of an Andean peasant faced with tragedy and gathering up the pieces of his shattered, and yes, humble home.

"Now," I shouted, and Diego dutifully filmed a twenty-second take of me stacking adobe blocks and another sequence with me doing much the same with my army jacket off. That, I hoped, would serve to show two other peasants toiling to save their humble homes. Diego then shot some more hand closeups, but no face shots. And that was about it for that crack. That left the village. Wiped out by my exertions, I sent Diego up the hill to get a medium-range shot of the village and after that, still exhausted, sent him even further up the hill for one of those long, establishing shots that film editors love. Not a bad film story, given what I had to work with -- fourteen or so shabby adobe houses, assorted cracks, and a cab driver. The only thing missing was a sign saying San Cristobal but I thought, in a pinch, I could fake that back in Lima. Still, even with grossly overshooting every take, it took great ingenuity and creativity to use up 200 feet of film, about six minutes in all.

So it was that I came to film an historic vignette of genuine Andean life, my own little contribution to cinema verité.

By this time I was totally wiped out. Also, Diego was limping about, looking much put upon, even abused. I decided not to wait around in hopes that some real peasants might happen our way. Also I needed Diego to get the tripod and camera back down the hill and into the car and thought it wise not to push him too far. After stowing the camera in its box, I loaded up Diego with the equipment (I was ill, remember) and together we traipsed down the path to the village where we'd parked the car. There I treated the worthy Diego to a well-earned Inka Kola.

Diego took this opportunity to let me know he'd like an advance on the money I'd promised. I pretended not to understand or rather, I carried on as if he were saying something about the high cost of living. I agreed and smiled. I fully in-

tended to pay Diego but just in case he eventually demanded more than we originally agreed upon, I thought it best to enter our final negotiation ritual with Diego having nothing at all. I figured this way he'd be more inclined to settle on the original amount rather than a considerably greater sum he'd be sure to claim he earned for hauling blocks, acting, and filming.

Back in Huaraz Diego did demand more than we'd agreed upon. That was okay. He would have demanded more if he'd done nothing at all. I expected that. But clearly, Diego had performed far and beyond the usual duties of a mere cab driver. Hell, he was co-cameraman, part producer and fully half the cast in a movie that stood to gross over $100 if I padded the expenses. So I paid Diego what he asked, gave him a tip on top of that and stood him another round of Inka Kola. And I didn't forget the woman who sold newspapers. I gave her a handsome finders fee. Two dollars goes a long way in the Andes. Then as a favor I asked Diego if he'd drop me off at the public bath.

I sang in the shower as streams of black water coursed down my frame. True, it was not likely ABC would use the film on the Evening News, but most of the film we shot was for syndication anyway -- multiple prints were made and the story sold to clients around the world. Still, you could never tell and few practitioners of the cinematic arts could have delivered more under the circumstances. Of course, either way a script was needed. Already I was thinking of plausible explanations for the cracks that had caused the villagers to abandon their homes. Fortunately, no one viewing the film could say for certain that the village wasn't actually sinking. By definition, elevation is relative. For all anybody knew, the village might have been higher before I arrived. Film could only record its present location which I could describe as lower than when it had been, shall we say, higher. Put together, that spells "sinking." It's as plain as day.

As I lathered myself with coarse soap I speculated on the powerful forces and mechanisms that might cause a village to sink. True, this isn't something I'm qualified to discuss, but a newsclip seldom calls for scientific conclusions. All I really had to do was report what the villagers believed caused their village to sink and, as it turned out, my vote was worth half the villagers in the film. I could also, I thought, speak authoritatively for Diego. After all, I paid him. I briefly considered plate tectonics and dismissed it. I didn't feel I knew enough about plate tectonics and anyway, it's not something you'd expect to hear out of the mouth of an Andean peasant. By the time I came out of the shower I had concluded that underwater seepage could account for this phenomenon. Who's to say what havoc can result when a great body of water accumulates right under your town. It's likely the town will settle, that is, sink, and that's, as far as I was concerned, what happened right there in San Cristobal. Of course one might ask how that great body of water got under San Cristobal. Well, ask a geologist. That's what they do. They study things like that. My job was to record the event for world television, not speculate on hydrology and things like that.

Back in Lima I packed the film, made up a shot list and wrote a very plausible script which, I felt, did justice to the cultural and scientific dimensions of the event. Of course, I included a bill which took into account some unusual expenses and shipped it all off to New York.

ABC edited *The Sinking Village of San Cristobal* and syndicated, it was seen by TV viewers all over the world. I went on to film other stories, good stories like *Nasa Scientists Study Peruvian Desert for Clues to Color Changes on Mars*, and bad stories like *Alpaca Hot Pants*. But never again did I face the almost insurmountable challenges of a story like *The Sinking Village of San Cristobal*.

Returning to New York a year later, I happened to drop by ABC up near Columbus Circle. As a favor I asked if I could see some of the stories I'd filmed since we'd been shooting blind all those years -- shipping undeveloped film back to the States and Europe. I was taken to a small auditorium and soon, seated alone, I was watching, of all things, Diego in a crack in San Cristobal, moving adobe blocks around, and, a little while after that, there was I, moving adobe blocks around.

You see something like that and it makes you proud. □