

Fr. Dick Perl, now 66 and a Jesuit for 48 years, is believed to have pioneered the revival of Jesuit pilgrimage, a practice that 16th-century Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola found transformative and required of his followers. Perl recalls his pilgrimage in the summer of 1969 in a reconstituted journal of his experience. (He lost his original journal years after his pilgrimage, somewhere in Central America.)

In His Own Words: Fr. Dick Perl's Pilgrimage June 13-Aug. 22, 1969

When I finished the novitiate in August of 1968, I went into the Juniorate without taking vows. For that following year I had both Fr. Jim Burke, SJ (Spiritual Director for the Juniorate) and Fr. Vince O'Flaherty, SJ (Novice Director) as my spiritual directors. Toward the end of that school year, I was still undecided about taking vows, and around April or May, Vince came up with the idea of sending me on an Ignatian "Pilgrimage" to help me make up my mind.

The idea is that I would make my way to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, and come back to St. Louis on my own, during a period of 10 weeks. Ignatius's idea was that a man would do this with absolutely no financial resources, in order to teach him to rely on God. Vince modified that and I was to take \$150 with me, plus a letter from him stating who I was, and that if I needed help from someone, that person would be reimbursed by the Society. I never had to use the letter.

He also wrote a letter to my parents explaining what I would do that summer. Now that caused some problems with my dear mother! She fired off a letter to Vince saying that she did not give her son to the Jesuits to be traveling around the country like a beggar. (I think I have a copy of that letter somewhere.) We eventually got her calmed down and I went ahead with the plan, leaving on Friday the 13th (!) of June 1969. Vince drove me to the intersection of what is now



Interstates 44 and 270. We both got out of the car, and he gave me a hug and said, "I'll see you back here 10 weeks from today." Then he drove off.

And I was not to come home before the 10 weeks were up, because a pilgrimage is not just the time spent at the holy place in prayer; the journey itself, to and from, is also a part of this special time with God. There I stood, with a relatively small backpack with some clothes in it (no sleeping bag) and \$150 in my pocket. For 70 days, that comes down to \$2.14 a day.

Off I Go

And I began to hitchhike (what else?). Since I was 21 years old (vs. the 66 I am as I write this in 2014), I was able to get rides usually within half an hour or so. I stuck out my thumb, and thus began the pilgrimage that was going to ultimately change my life by giving a direction to it that I had never anticipated.



I got a ride into Illinois and went south to the Ohio River, just up from the confluence with the Mississippi. There I talked to a guy on one of the riverboats asking about getting some work. He did not have any job to give me, but he did offer to give me lunch on a boat, so I went with him on one of the large tugboats. We went up the Ohio a couple miles to where we had lunch on another boat with some other crew. Not too bad for my first meal!

After that I hitched to Paducah, Ky., where I spent my first night on the covered porch of a hardware store, sleeping on their welcome mat. (I took them literally.) With no sleeping bag, I always looked for a protected area (roof) plus something soft under my body. I then used the backpack as my pillow. The next morning, I was awakened when they came to open the store and they found me blocking the entrance. I got up, thanked them, and was on my way. When you sleep in your clothes, it does not take long to get moving in the morning. That first day, I covered around 200 miles.

The second day was to be about the same distance as I wound up in Memphis where I was to spend the longest time (nine days) in one place during the whole 10 weeks. While hitching through the city, I got a ride with a 17-year-old guy named Tony Haley.

I told him I was looking for work and he said I could help him deliver papers in the morning and stay with his family. Sounded good to me! He took me home and I met his mother, an extremely committed evangelical woman, who said it was fine if I stayed with them. So for the next week I got up at 4 a.m. with Tony and helped him deliver papers on his morning route. That went for few hours after which we'd return home and go back to sleep for a while. I went out with Tony when he went somewhere, which seemed to frequently be a barbershop where he liked to hang out and look at Playboys. (Yes, I confess that I did browse a few of them myself!) This was in sharp contrast to his parents, Juanita and Jerry, who went to church regularly.

I did tell Juanita and the rest of the family about studying to be a priest, which was something that I did not do with anyone else along the way. I think it had to do with their religious convictions. Juanita did her best to convert me, and I did go to church with them the two or three times they went. My counter argument to her was "There is no salvation outside the church," meaning the Catholic Church, of course. In the end, we had a mutual respect for each other's faith.

Newspaper Work

Workwise, the big time was Saturday when I worked all night from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. on the Sunday edition. That was quite interesting, actually. When you see the paper go from blank sheets to having print and pictures on it, to being folded together into the various sections, and finally each one neatly stacked, it was rather cool to be a part of that. (I think I earned around \$60 that night, by far the biggest income of the whole trip.) Then Tony and I delivered the paper and crashed into bed. That Sunday night, the family and I went to church, and the following day I was on the road again. (A year later, when I was on my way to Belize for the first time to visit, I stopped in Memphis and spent a night with the Haleys. That was the last time I saw them.)

That day, I had two interesting encounters in the state of Mississippi. I got to the capital and was walking through downtown Jackson when a cop leaning against a wall saw me with my backpack, which I guess set me off as an outsider. As I walked by him he said, "Hey, boy, come over here." With his big paunch, he looked like Rod Steiger in the movie "In the Heat of the Night." I went over to him and he says, "Let me see some identification." I gave him my Missouri driver's license. He looks at it, then with one hand begins to repeatedly hit his other palm with it. Then he asks, "What are you doing around these parts?" I said to him what I told everyone, "I'm a college student hitchhiking around the country for the summer." He says, "Well, if I see you around here tomorrow and you ain't got a job, I'm going to throw you in jail for vagrancy." "Yes, sir," I said as he gave me the license back. You can bet that I did not spend that night in Jackson!

Roy Flowers

I headed south and continued asking people who gave me rides if they knew where I could get a job for a few days or a week to earn some money. One guy said he'd let me out at the next town and I should find Roy Flowers. He could give me a job. I walked into the town and I saw the Roy Flowers Market, the Roy Flowers Hardware Store, the Roy Flowers Gas Station. It was pretty obvious that Roy Flowers owned that town. I asked someone where he lived and he directed me to the edge of town and a pillared mansion, shaded by huge trees. There I found him and his wife, sipping their late-afternoon drinks, both dressed quite elegantly. I introduced myself and asked him if he had any work. He reached into his wallet, pulled out \$5 and gave it to me, saying, "Here you are, son. I thanked him and headed back out to the road.

I then hitched into New Orleans where I had never been before, and was let out by my last ride at the corner of Bourbon and Canal. It was around 9 p.m. and he directed me to go down Bourbon Street to see the French Quarter, which I knew absolutely nothing about. I walked around the streets for a couple hours, and then figured I had better find a place to sleep. Asking around, I found a place that would take in street kids, but I was older than a "kid." The guy in charge was very nice, and said he needed to reserve the beds, but that if I could not find a place to stay, I could come back. I did find a skid-row place for \$6 or \$7, and I took it.

Learning Life in New Orleans

The next day, I explored a bit of New Orleans. I hitched down toward Loyola University, and got a ride with a guy who seemed very nice. I told him I had never been to New Orleans, and he offered to show me around a few hours later. That sounded pretty good to me, so when he stopped at his house, I made note of where it was, and returned there at the agreed-upon time. He welcomed me in, but it was pretty obvious after a few minutes that what he really wanted to show me was his bedroom. I reminded him that he had offered to show me the city, but then he said he was too busy. At 21, I was beginning to learn the ways of the world.

In between that time I had found Loyola. I looked for the Jesuit community and it was there that I met my first Jesuit: Pat Koch. The catalogue from that year says he was the superior at the high school, but he was at the university community that day. He answered the door and was most friendly. He asked if I wanted a room, but I did not want to stay with them because I thought that would be too easy. So I asked him about staying on campus, and was able to get a room in a dorm for a very small charge.

I ran into a Jesuit scholastic, Bill Ameche (Cal Prov), whom I had met the previous year. I wound up going with him to

Preservation Hall in the French Quarter and was there when they marvelously sang "When the Saints Go Marchin' In." We were sitting on the floor in the very first row. Super. After that, he introduced me to beignets (French donuts) at a local place.

One night I was walking on the Tulane campus, which is adjacent to Loyola, and in the darkness I saw this dog running straight toward me. I didn't think anything of it until it jumped up into my arms. Well, it was not a dog, but a monkey! Heaven knows why he did it. (Perhaps I reminded him of a long lost cousin?) His owner quickly came and apologized, and I gladly handed the monkey back to him.

I spent a total of three, maybe four nights in New Orleans. Time to move on.

Out on the Gulf

As I hitched southwest from N.O., I continued to ask people where I could get short-term work. Someone suggested the coast where I might get something on a boat. So I went to Grand Isle and found a guy who was about to make a trip to bring workers out to an oil boat. He needed a deck hand, although he said he could not pay me. Sounded adventurous, so I said yes. We headed into the Gulf of Mexico early evening, carrying maybe a dozen men.

At first, it was adventurous, as we got into 5-foot sea waves. I didn't have to do anything – yet. The oil rig was about 50 miles off the coast, and was going to take us a couple hours to get to. At one point, I went to stand on the deck where I could enjoy the view. I noticed it was slippery, so I looked down. I was standing in some guy's vomit! I thought, "This guy is not too macho if he can't take these waves!" Well, it wasn't too long before I found out that I was not too macho either, and began to get seasick, finally throwing up over the side of the boat. After that, I could only endure the rest of the trip. I had some hope as the lights of the oil rig appeared in the distance. As we got up to it, the captain called out for his deckhand. I went to him and he told me to go to the front of the boat and tie it up to the side of the rig.

It was dark, I still had some nausea, and those 5-foot waves had not diminished at all. I was supposed to tie us up to this rail on the boat next to some stairs for the workers to climb up. When I got up to the front, I was afraid I would fall off, so I went back and put on a life preserver. I got us tied up, and all of the workers climbed up the stairs onto the big oil boat. Then the captain came and we both did the same.

It was a little tricky because you had to time your transfer when the small boat was at the peak of the wave. I got onto the deck of the large boat and quickly laid out flat on my back. It felt so good to have something below me that was not moving up and down. I must have been there 20 minutes, and finally felt good

enough to stand up. Someone directed me to the galley. The cook was very friendly and helped me to eat something that would counteract the nausea.

I was hoping we were going to spend the night, but that was not the plan. The captain found me after a while and said we were going to go back. So, I went down the stairs, waited until our small boat was past the peak of the wave and got on. Once he had the motor started, I untied us and went inside. I wanted to lie down on one of the two beds for the rest of the night, but he wouldn't let me. He said he needed someone to talk to. Well, he could talk to me all he wanted, but all I could do was grunt in reply. At one point he said, "The compass isn't working. I'm going to have to steer us by the stars to get us back."

That did not work, and after a while he said we were lost. Now what? He approached another oil rig. I went and tied us up again, and he climbed up to get directions. He returned with a few guys who wanted a ride back to the mainland. Now he knew where to go, plus he had someone to talk with. So he said I could go lie down. We eventually got back to shore after midnight. Our passengers departed and the captain lay down in the other bed and we slept the rest of the night.

A Chance to Drive the Boat

When I got up the next morning, he said he was going to take the Intracoastal Waterway to the Mississippi River if I wanted to go along. I thought that this would not be quite as "adventurous" as the night before, so I said yes. So off we went for a couple hours going through this sometimes-narrow canal, passing through dams, until finally we came to the Mississippi River. Then we headed south. At one point he asked me if I wanted to drive the boat. Well, what do you think I said? So there I was at the wheel of the boat for maybe half an hour. That was really cool! We went to the farthest point on the highway along the river, which is Venice. We said good-bye and I hitched back up along the highway that goes along the river.

[Note: Hurricane Camille hit this whole area of southern Louisiana that same summer, one week before I returned to Florissant. With sustained winds of 190 mph, it killed over 250 people.]

Shrimping

Eventually I got to Morgan City and began to look for work. I found a young guy who said he needed help shrimping and he took me on. I spent at least one or two full days with him, going out with him into the bayous in his relatively small boat with an outboard motor. He would troll a net behind the boat; the net had two large pieces of wood that helped to spread the mesh out. He would drive the boat for a while and then we'd pull in the net.

We dumped all the shrimp into the bottom of the boat, and then put the net out again. My job then was to gather up all the shrimp and put them in a cooler. Not only did we pull up shrimp, but also crabs. Since we did not want these, I had to pick each one up and throw it overboard. However, there was a problem. Sometimes as I would try to grab the crab from behind, it would pinch me. Let me tell you, that hurt! After a good number of pinches and loud (and angry) "Ows" from my mouth, the captain gave me a hammer and told me to hit each crab with that and *then* throw it overboard.

The hammer went through the crab's shell and the crab would get impaled, and then I flipped it back into the water. I did not like having to kill the crab to get rid of him, so I still tried to grab them by the hand, but when one pinched me, he got hammered. Sorry, Charlie.

We got so many pounds of shrimp each day that he would then go sell. But this was not much more than a break-even operation, so after a couple days he gave \$20 or so, and I was on my way once again.

Free Donuts

I think it was around this time that I had a simple but positive experience. Always looking to conserve my meager resources, I went one day into a bakery and, after telling the woman behind the counter my story about hitching around the country, asked her if she had any day-old donuts that she could either give me or sell me for half price. She said they didn't have any, but then she counted out a dozen *fresh* glazed donuts, put them in a bag and gave them to me saying "Here you go."

Wow! What a gift for a pilgrim! I told that story to Vince in one of my bi-weekly phone calls, and he shared that with the novices. He told me afterward that one of the novices made an offertory petition at Mass the next day, "In thanksgiving to the woman who gave Dick the dozen donuts, let us pray to the Lord." I tear up now thinking about it. People were very good to me, generous throughout the pilgrimage. God was watching over me, taking care of me. I echo the novice's petition, for her, and for all those who helped me in different ways.

I hitched into Texas and one night found myself along the beach of the Gulf of Mexico, perhaps around Galveston, although I am not sure. Around 9 p.m. or so I decided that I would spend the night there, sleeping on the sand. So with my backpack as my pillow, I lay down. I was there for a little bit, when I heard a couple people talking, their voices getting stronger as they got closer to me.

It was two guys, and they stopped next to me and looked down at me. I got scared that they were going to rob me, or worse, and I held on to the strap of the backpack, ready to jump up and run if it became necessary. I pretended to be asleep until

they asked me what I was doing there. I told them I was just looking for a free place to spend the night, and the beach seemed like a good spot.

Turns out they were actually teen-age friends, and one of them said I could spend the night in their beach house with his family. I was happy to have something that would be more comfortable than the sand, so I went with them to their place. When we got there, they introduced me to the mother of one of them, but she did not seem quite as inviting as her son and his friend. She asked me where I was from, and wanting to appear like a local, I told her I was from “South Houston.”

They prepared a bed for me, and later when I was alone, she came in and asked, “Where are you from, and I don’t mean South Houston?” I think she recognized by my accent that I was not a local, and she wanted to find out who I was so she could put to rest her concern about having a stranger in their home. I fessed up and said I was from St. Louis, to which she responded, “A Yankee.” I told her the usual, about being a college student hitchhiking around the country for the summer without much money. She seemed to accept that. I slept well that night; they gave me some breakfast that next morning. I thanked the boys and the mother for taking me in, and once more was on the road.

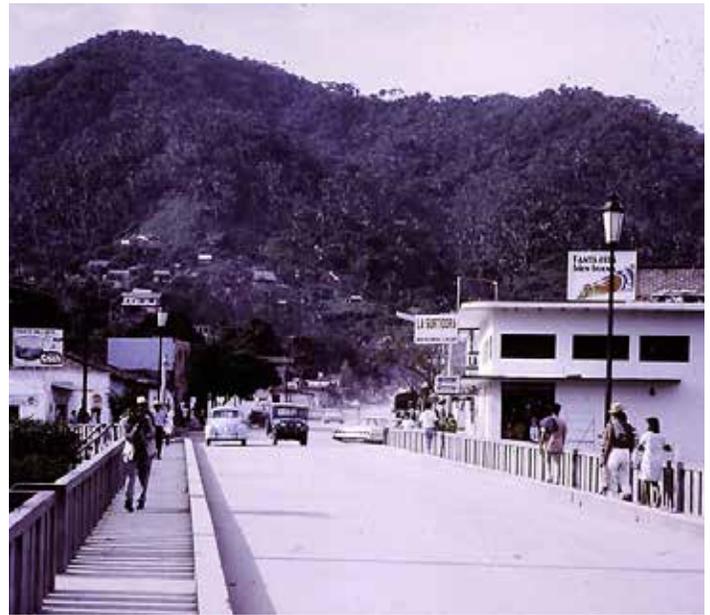
Finally in Mexico

I then headed to the border and crossed into Mexico at Reynosa. My first time ever out of the United States! (I don’t remember if I had a passport or not, but I don’t think so; a driver’s license was enough as I remember.) In Mexico, I sometimes took buses, which I never did even once in the U.S. So then I bused or hitched to Monterrey. As I look at the name of the city that I just typed, I realize for the first time that it means “King Mountain.”

I was always looking to save money, so that very first night I spent on the side of a mountain overlooking the city. The view was impressive! I had no sleeping bag, no mat, so I just found a spot on a trail that was flat, and laid out. I think my body was a bit tougher then at 21 than it is at 66, because I cannot imagine doing that now. I was still so new at this that I brought no water with me. Some time during the night I woke up a bit thirsty, but got back to sleep. But by the following morning I was dying of thirst like I had never experienced before, nor since.

Spanish is Handy

One of the totally new experiences of entering Mexico was speaking Spanish, all day, every day. And I found that with my two years of high school Spanish I was able to get by. I have always said that Spanish was the most practical course that I had at St. Louis U. High. I never used my trigonometry, nor my chemistry or physics, but I sure used my Spanish! I also learned some new phrases, such as the phrase for hitchhiking: *viajar con*



el gordo. Literally it means “to travel with the fat one,” the fat one being your fattest finger: the thumb. I love it!

Throughout Mexico, I would hitchhike and when I had trouble getting a ride, I would take buses since they were quite cheap. [Note: I never took a bus in the US.] I thought it might be interesting to see the Gulf of Mexico from Mexico, so I went through Tampico on the coast. Then I headed west, arriving in Tamaúín. I was sitting in the central park of the town journaling around 9 p.m., my backpack beside me, figuring to find a hotel a bit later.

In a place where everyone knows everyone else, I guess I stood out a bit. A couple of youth approached and engaged me in conversation. Being the “curiosity” that I was, within a few minutes there were over 10 youths and children standing around me, laughing at my version of their language, all of us enjoying the interchange. That continued for a while, and then two policemen came and wanted to know who I was and what I was doing there.

I certainly knew enough Spanish to answer their questions, but that wasn’t satisfactory for them, so they took me to some man’s home who knew English. The poor guy was sleeping, but they woke him up. He comes out in his night clothes and asks me who I am and what I’m doing there. I give him my usual answer about being a college student hitchhiking around the U.S. and Mexico. He repeats it to the two policemen who seem to accept it, except for the part that I do not yet have a place to stay that night. So we get into their car and they take me to the local jail to spend the night!

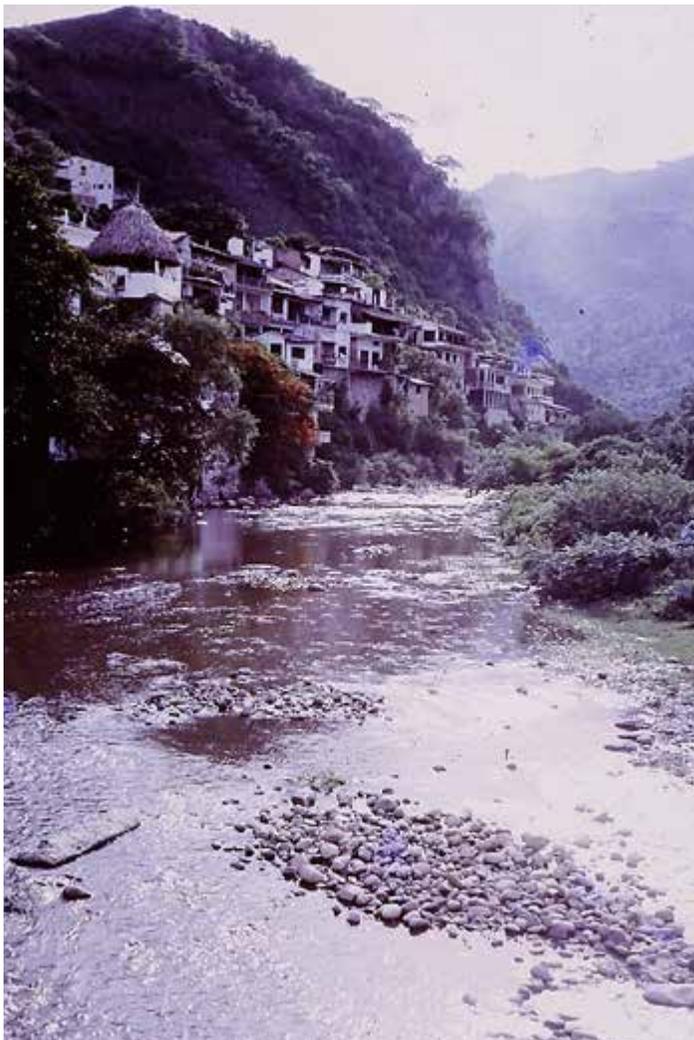
Night in Jail

They turn me over to the guy in charge there who shows me around my “free lodging” which is a very small courtyard surrounded by three individual cells with people in them. He is

actually very friendly, and it is as if he is giving me a tour. Two of the cells have a few prisoners in each, and I ask him about them. He explains that the first one contains the guys who have been found drunk. The second one holds guys who are in there for stealing.

There is only one person in the last cell, and I ask him why he is in there by himself. His answer: "He is here because he killed someone." That is when I suddenly got very worried, fearing that he would put me in the cell with him because it had the most room. So I ask where I am going to sleep and he points to a wide bench in the mini-courtyard. It is open air, but fortunately it did not rain that night. He then goes back to the front of the jail, locking me inside of the courtyard. The next morning I woke up, knocked on the locked door and they let me out.

I continued east on highway 70 to Rio Verde, then took highway 69 (89 on one map) southeast and met an American guy who lived there with his wife, and he took me in for one night or for one meal. He told me about Chappaquiddick and Teddy Kennedy's accident on July 18 I did not realize quite how important the whole story was until I got home.



Spanish Moss

I spent a most interesting night in the open air. I was in the mountains at one point hiking when the usual pilgrimage question came up: Where am I going to sleep tonight? I was on a path, not a road, and there was a great view though the pine trees. And hanging from all of the trees in this area was Spanish moss. Then I had this brainchild of an idea – use the Spanish moss to sleep on. So I easily gathered a large amount of it, laid it down to test it. It was very comfortable, so that night I slept in the open air with the stars above me, and a comfortable mattress of Spanish moss below me.

Lunar Landing

I hitched a ride into the town of Arroyo Seco with a young guy around my age. As he drove, he asked me where I was going to spend the night. I told him I didn't know yet, so he invited me to spend the night with his family, which sounded good to me. Being as he was driving a car, his family was better off than many. They also had a TV. And I can tell you the exact date I stayed there: July 20, 1969, the night that Apollo 11 landed on the moon.

Because it was such a historic occasion, the president of Mexico declared that anyone who had a TV should make it available to all those who did not, so as many people as possible could watch the lunar landing. So since my host family had a TV, they cleared everything out of the front room where it was so that anyone could come in and sit on the floor to watch the landing. I walked around a bit before the landing and a few families had put their TV in the front door, facing out to the street, so that everyone could watch that way.

After one or two nights in Arroyo Seco, I bid the family "Adios" and was off. I got back onto a major road toward Mexico City, and at one point began walking up a very steep mountain highway. I had decided to walk for a while to enjoy the scenery, with its sharp hairpin turns and steep precipices. By the time I got tired and began hitching again, I realized how difficult it was for anyone to stop and pick me up: the road was narrow, winding and steep.

An Unforgettable Ride

After many vehicles had passed me, I got one of my most memorable rides – unforgettable because of the fact that the driver of the huge tractor trailer picked me up without stopping. Huh??? This guy's truck was going up the highway very slowly because of the steep grade. He wanted to give me a ride, but could not stop because if he did, he might not have gotten it going again because of the sharp incline. But he signals to me to get in.

I begin running alongside the truck's cab, and he reaches over and opens the door. I take my knapsack off my back and swing it up and on to the passenger seat. He reaches over and pulls it toward him. Then he points to the handles on the door and door frame that I could reach up and grasp. (Mind you, I am running alongside all this time!) I reach up and grasp them and jump up on to the running board, and finally climb into the cab and close the door. I said a very heartfelt "Gracias," which was meant not only for the driver but also for God for helping me to make this rather dangerous transfer safely.

I must have spent almost 24 hours with this guy. We stopped along the road (after it evened out!) and he treated me to supper at some *comedor* (eating place). It finally got dark and he pulled off the road so we could spend the night. He got to sleep on the seat, while I got the floor. I clearly remember having to wrap my body around the huge stick shift. But beggars can't be choosers, and I was definitely a beggar! The following morning we continued driving toward Mexico City.

Some time that day, without warning, he reaches under his seat and pulls out an automatic handgun and places it on the seat between us. He must have seen my eyes turn as big as peso coins when I saw that gun. To calm me down, he simply said, "*Mala gente*" which means "bad people." I am sorry, but I needed more of an explanation than that to assuage my fear, so I said back to him, "*Mala gente?*" And he explained that he had been robbed once, and so that was why he wanted to have the gun ready, in case he needed it. I prayed quietly, "Lord, help us not to need this gun," and my prayer was answered. Finally he stopped before getting to the city and said that was as far as he was going. And I was on my own again.

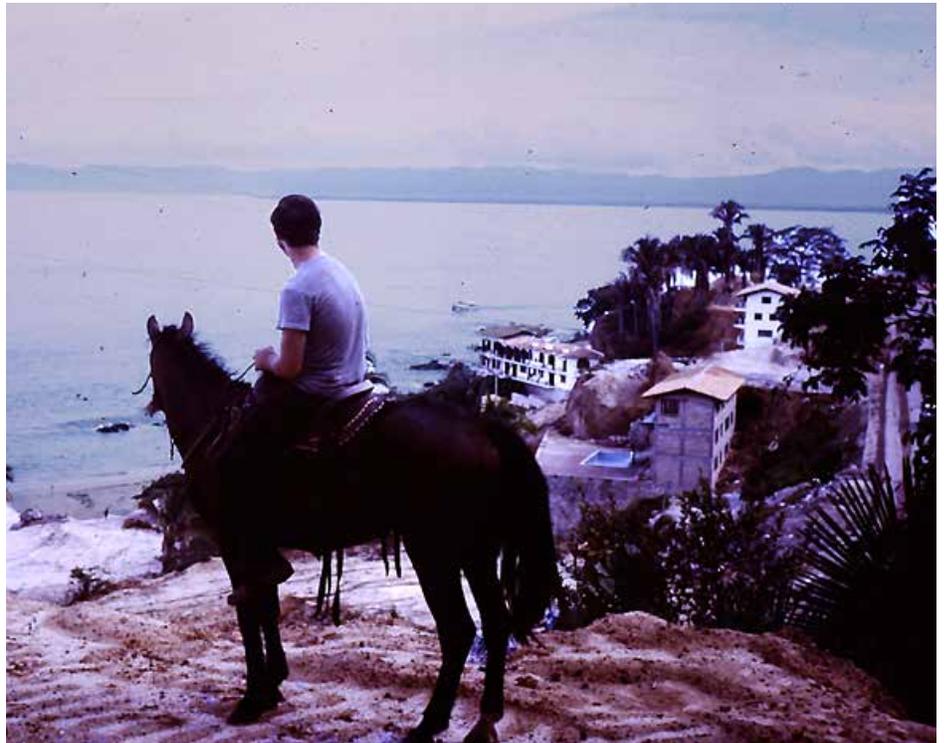
Letters from Home

I got into Mexico City which was an absolutely *humunga* urban area of 8 million people in 1969 (21 million now as I write this!). That first day I only had one goal, to find the Jesuit theologate on Rio Hondo and pick up the mail that had been sent to me there. All I had was an address, but I was able to take a few buses and finally find it. As I remember, it was this long, tall, concrete wall with a door in the middle. I rang the bell and told whoever answered who I was, and asked if there was any mail for me.

He asked me to wait, and closed the door, and a few minutes later the door opened again and out stepped Jack Donald, a

California Province Jesuit doing his theology there. (Little did I know then that we would be working in neighboring parishes 16 years later in Honduras.) He was most friendly and invited me in. He went and found my mail, and asked me if I wanted to stay there. Again, not wanting to depend on the Jesuits during my pilgrimage, I declined his invitation and said good-bye.

I found my way downtown and began to look for a place to stay. It was late afternoon, I was on a very busy street with cars, and it began to pour rain, so I settled into a doorway to wait it out. I sat down and pulled out my mail and began to read the letters which were from fellow Jesuits, the novice director and my family. I only read one or two, and suddenly broke down in tears as I thought of all the people back home who loved me and were praying for me. I was thankful it was raining so hard and that there was so much traffic, because no one could hear my sobbing. It was then that I decided to bend my self-imposed rules and return to Rio Hondo to stay with the Jesuits. The thought of staying in a cheap *pensión* in the middle of a huge, strange city, just got to me. So I found my way back to the theologate and Jack Donald got me a room.



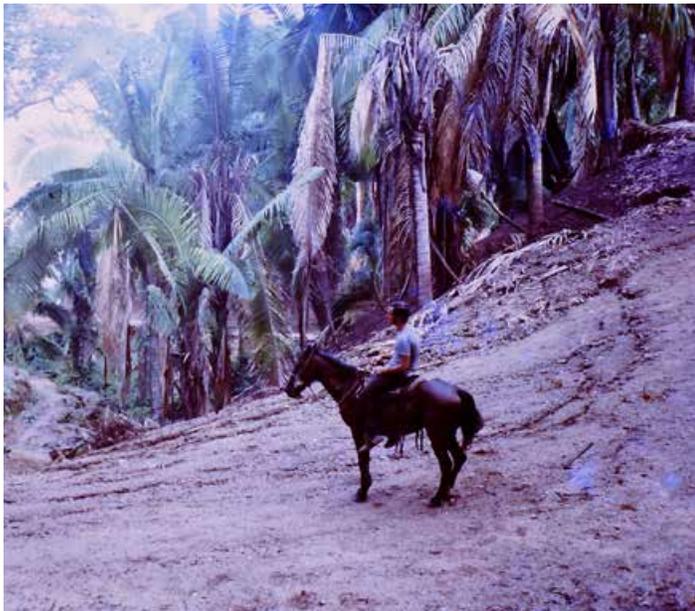
Finally, the Shrine of Guadalupe

The next day I found my way to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe to find out how long it would take me each day to get there, and to see what it was like *before* I was to begin my time of prayer. I walked through the gate into the plaza in front of the old basilica that had been there for hundreds of years. (A few years later they built the new basilica with its horizontal escalator, but my days were spent in the original one.)

My very first visible impression was of the many pilgrims walking on their knees all the way across the plaza, from the entrance gate, into the basilica, and up to the communion rail. I very clearly remember my reaction to seeing this: “It seems rather superstitious to me.” (Put that first impression on hold, because I will return to it later.)

I returned the next morning. I was now at the “goal” of my pilgrimage, and I was to spend three days in prayer here.

That day, and the days to come, I spent many hours in the basilica, praying, observing, being present. I attended what seemed like countless Masses, one after the other. Each Mass had a different celebrant, one that had come with that group of pilgrims. During each day I would choose one Mass to be more present to, and would receive communion. Pilgrims from all over Mexico would get off buses and process up to the front to view the *tilma*.



Whether there was a Mass being celebrated or not was secondary to viewing the image of Our Lady on that precious piece of cloth that had been there for 438 years since she appeared to Juan Diego in 1531. After spending some hours in this atmosphere, day after day, I became mesmerized, hypnotized by it. I would take a break to go outside, walking up the hill of Tepeyac in back of the basilica, or watching the pilgrims struggle across the plaza on their knees, or going into the nearby open-market to get something to eat.

Toward the end of my third day at the Shrine, I felt like I needed another day beyond the three prescribed by the novice director, so I returned for a fourth, last day. Something was happening to me during those hours spent each day at the basilica. What had originally seemed superstitious to me was having an impact on me that I could not have anticipated, although I am somewhat at a loss for the words to describe it.

The Tilma

What I do clearly remember is that as my final day at the Shrine was coming to an end, I knew that I had to do what I never thought I would: walk across the square on my knees. So I went to the gate at the front of the extensive plaza and began to do what I had seen hundreds upon hundreds of Mexican pilgrims do. I got down on my knees and began the walk, the 200 yards or more to the door of the Basilica, and then climbing over the beam of the door, and down the long central aisle, up the stairs to the communion rail, to be as close as I could to the *tilma*.

And there I prayed to Our Lady of Guadalupe, thanking her for these four special days. And I asked her to guide me, not only safely back to St. Stanislaus in Florissant, but also to guide me as to what to do with my life. And she did not let me down.

I would leave each morning from Rio Hondo and bus up to the basilica, and bus back in the late afternoon or early evening, to be there for their light supper that began around 9 p.m. There was a Jesuit there whom I had met at Florissant when I was a second-year novice two years before when he came to study English with 3 other companions. His name was Gabriel Gomez Padilla. I have no idea how I remember his name, other than that he was very gregarious and quite funny. [I just “Googled” his name (that word, of course, did not exist in 1969!) and found that he is still a Jesuit!]

When it came time for me to go, I asked him who I needed to see to pay for my *per diem*. He was adamant that I should not have to pay, and he would go talk to the minister of the community to explain it for me. But I was insistent that I wanted to pay so as not to depend on the Jesuits throughout the pilgrimage. I did pay the roughly \$6 *per diem* (minus a 3-day grace period) for my approximately seven nights there, probably my largest single expenditure during the whole 10 weeks, but I was so grateful to have had my Jesuit family to stay with during that time.

The Long Journey Home

Then it was time to begin my journey home via the west coast of Mexico. I headed out on the highway toward Guadalajara. Despite Gabriel Padilla’s urging me to stay with the Jesuits there, I chose not to. Somewhere past the city I met an American named Steve Sontag who was also backpacking around Mexico that summer. He said he was going to Puerto Vallarta and invited me to go with him. I checked out the map and it looked like an interesting place, so I took him up on his offer. I had never heard of the place, but Steve had. Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton had been in a film called *Night of the Iguana* which was filmed there six years before in 1963. (I never did see that movie.)

We traveled for three days together, spending that first night in Puerto Vallarta, and the next two in other villages, before eventually parting ways. Steve was a couple years older than me, from Chicago where he was in med school. He was also Jewish, and he taught me something very significant about prejudice against those of his ethnic origin. When he told me he was Jewish, I said I had never met anyone who was a Jew. As he spoke, I realized that his experience of being a “Jew-boy” (his word) was very much like that of blacks. I was very aware of intolerance against blacks, but against Jews?

It was totally off my radar. I saw no difference between a Jew and someone whose background was Italian, Irish or German. For Steve, though, this was not “neutral.” I have always been grateful to him for his making me aware of this prejudice.



Photos of That Summer

He had a camera and sent me some photos of that part of the trip, the only pictures I had of that summer. In turn, I sent him an invitation to my first vows in March of the following year. I was totally surprised to see him at the Mass, and that following everyone else, he was in line to receive communion.

There was the time, but I am not sure where, when the bus I was in broke down. We were in a very rural sector, on a dirt road, when the bus’s engine conked out as we were going over a dry creek bed. Everyone got out to wait while the driver fiddled with the motor. After a bit, he tried starting it, to no avail at which point he asked everyone to push the bus. So all 20 or so of us got in back or on the side and began to push. The bus began to move just a bit from our efforts, but it was enough for the driver to jumpstart it. And we were on our way once again.

Night in Tepic

I continued my journey up that major highway (MXC 15) to the northwest which parallels the coast. I got to a large town called Tepic where I met a French youth around my age who was traveling around Mexico that summer. When it got time to go to sleep that night, we decided we would look for a place where we could roll out his sleeping bag. We found an open

field at the edge of town and agreed that was a good place, so we laid down there. It was a good place until it started to rain. We jumped up and folded his bag quickly to look for a more protected spot, which meant going back toward town. We saw a large backyard of someone’s house which conveniently had a small work area with a roof over it that was right next to the street.

By now the rain had stopped, but we were afraid it could begin again, so we climbed over a fence and laid the sleeping bag out again. It must have been around 11 p.m. by this point. Just about the time we were falling asleep for the second time that night, we were awakened again. However, it was not rain this time, but rather a small group of three or four guys who were pointing to us and yelling something as they leaned over the fence.

A couple of them had sticks or machetes and they did not seem too friendly! My French friend got up to see what they wanted. I remained lying down as if I were still sleeping, but I had one hand on my backpack which I was using as a pillow, ready to jump up and run if they got aggressive toward my newfound companion. He came back relating that they had said we could not sleep there. So once again we folded up his sleeping bag and went looking for a third place to sleep that night.

The third place found us as we walked along a street. A car pulled up next to us and a couple of guys jumped out and said they were police and that we had to go with them. They did not have uniforms on but it was obvious that we had to do what they said. So the two of us walked with the two of them, accompanied by the car for a few blocks until we got to the local jail. There we were unceremoniously told to walk through a door into a cell and the door was slammed behind us and locked. Fortunately we were each left with our backpacks.

‘Go to Sleep!’

By now it is around midnight and there was no light in the cell. We had no idea if there was anyone else in that same cell, if it had a servicio (toilet), if there were roaches or mice or rats running around, or where might be the best place to lay out the sleeping bag for our third attempt at some shut-eye for that ill-fated night. We had some matches, and so began to light one after the other to check out our “bedroom.” They must have been watching us through a crack in the door because after a few matches one of the police shouted: “Stop lighting those matches and go to sleep!”

Although I had not taken my vow of obedience yet, it seemed prudent to do what he said. In fact, there was no one else in the cell, and so we unfolded his sleeping bag and eventually fell asleep until the next morning. When we were finally awake, with no food to eat, we quietly knocked on the cell door,

whereupon the policeman on duty opened the door and said we were free to go. My first night in a Mexican jail in Tamuin had actually been a rather positive experience, whereas the night in Tepic was very negative.

The Frenchman asked for my written name and address which I gave him. We then said *adios* and parted ways. A couple months later, I received a postcard from him in France.

Copper Canyon

When I spent my week in Memphis, I saw a National Geographic article in the August 1968 issue called “South to Mexico City.” In it was a photo of El Divisadero at Barranca del Cobre [Copper Canyon], a stop on the train between Los Mochis and Chihuahua.

It was a picture of the train stopped at the edge of this impressively deep canyon. I had filed that photo away in my memory and as I continued up the highway from Tepic I saw that I could take that train from Los Mochis since I would be passing through there in a day or two. And that is what I did.

When I got to Los Mochis, I bought a ticket for the stop called El Divisadero overlooking Barranca del Cobre (Copper Canyon). The total train trip is 390 miles, and it crosses 39 bridges and 86 tunnels, most of which are in that stretch up to Barranca del Cobre. Upon arriving some hours later, I got off and walked the one minute to the overlook. It was quite impressive and I was very happy that I had decided to spend a night there before continuing to Chihuahua. After the half-hour stop, most of the others got back on the train. It was then that I met an American named Gary Ojinaga.

We got to talking, and he invited me to come down to the mine where he worked at the bottom of the canyon. Of course I said yes and what had started out as one night spent sleeping on the rim turned into a three-day adventure taking me down to the very bottom of canyons that are longer and deeper than the Grand Canyon in Arizona. He had just come from Chihuahua and was bringing supplies down with him, and a couple of the workers had met him at the train stop with mules.

They were able to carry my backpack, but not me, so I had to walk, but it was downhill and so not too bad. It was too far to make it that day, and so we had to sleep under an absolutely huge rock outcrop where all four of us plus the three mules and all the supplies were protected. Up the next morning and down to the cave where they lived next to the mine, which was a source of *optical calcite*, absolutely flawless crystals used in optical instruments like microscopes and gun sights.

He said he knows if he has a valuable piece of calcite when he can put it in a bowl of water and it *disappears*! He invited me down into the mine where all ups and downs were done

on handmade ladders. I spent that night on the floor of their cave, but distinctly remember having a difficult time falling to sleep because of a scorpion cruising the floor next to me. When I gasped at seeing him and hit him with my shoe, they all laughed and Gary said, “You’ll get used to them.” The next day, Gary sent me back to catch the train to continue my journey to Chihuahua. This time, along with my guide, I had the luxury of my own mule for the ride up!



I got the train that afternoon which did not arrive until well into darkness. At one point, I was standing at the end of the car, outside, looking up into the star-filled sky. All of a sudden a meteor appeared very brightly, and then disappeared as it went over the roof of the train car. I ran over to the other side and, to my happy surprise, I could still see it! I have seen a good number of meteors in my life, but that was by far the longest and the brightest.

Headed to the U.S.

I got to Chihuahua and then headed north toward the border. That part of Mexico is basically desert, with mountains paralleling the highway. I arrived in Ciudad Juarez, and crossed into the States in El Paso. I had spent about 3½ weeks in Mexico, which was a third of the 10 weeks total of the pilgrimage. The time there had a significant impact on me. I’ll reflect more on that at the end of this narrative.

Heading north from San Antonio I entered New Mexico. One guy who gave me a ride suggested I try “hitching” a ride at an airport from a private plane. He said he had done it and so I thought I’d give it a try. I got to the Albuquerque airport and found the area where the small private planes take off.

It seemed to me I’d have a better chance to get a ride if my appearance were more “presentable,” so I “dressed up” as best I could with my *extremely* limited wardrobe.

As the individual pilots left the very small terminal, I approached each one and asked for a ride. They naturally asked me where I was going, to which I responded “Anywhere north or east.” No one was ever going that direction (at least that they would admit to). I took it to mean that they did not want to give me a ride because I was too vague, so I got more specific: “To Denver, or anywhere toward there.” I spent four hours or so there to no avail, and finally gave up. So I was back on the road.

Strange Encounter

I eventually got up to the small town of Chama, N.M., 10 miles south of the Colorado state line. Although it was early August, it was quite chilly because Chama is over 7,800 feet in elevation. It was around 9 p.m. and I still had no place to stay, and I thought it would be too cold to sleep out. But, plugging into pilgrimage mode, I said, “God will provide.” And “provide” God did in what was to be the most incredible chance encounter of the whole 10 weeks. I was hanging out in “downtown Chama” (population less than 1,000) when the police approached me in a car. The driver got out and asked for my ID, and what I was doing there. Then came the big one: “Where are you going to spend the night?” I responded, “Don’t have a place yet,” and in the begging fashion of the pilgrimage I added, “Any chance I could spend the night in the local jail?” His answer after thinking for a moment: “Yeah, let’s go.”

I was very happy. I was going to have a place to sleep for free. So I get in the back seat of the police car because there is a friend of his (not a policeman because he is in lay clothes) sitting in the front seat. Chama is too small to have its own jail, so we are heading down the highway to the next town, actually, more like flying because we are going around 90 mph. The cop’s friend in the front seat asks me where I am from, and I say St. Louis, to which he says, “My sister is a nun and she teaches there.”

I ask him what her name is and what order she belongs to. He responds and I am absolutely incredulous. I know her because I had been teaching Sunday catechism to the children of her parish in Florissant near St. Stanislaus. I excitedly tell him this, and he says to the police driving the car to turn around and head back to Chama.

“This guy isn’t going to spend the night in jail. We have a bed for him with my family.” Not only that, but it turns out that she is in Chama for her annual home visit! We go into the house and the nun glances at me and turns away, but then she immediately turns back to look at me in disbelief. She comes over and gives me a hug, and we sit down while I explain to her how I wound up in Chama. They give me a bed for the night and after breakfast the next morning, I thank them profusely. How amazing that I would meet someone I know in that little New Mexican town.

Tough Hitching Out West

And now I am once again on the road, headed north. By the next night I am north of Denver on Interstate 25 hitching in the dark on the highway itself by the ramp to Boulder, but I want to get to Wyoming. Because where I am standing is not on an entrance ramp, but on the highway itself in the dark, it is difficult for anyone to even see me. I am wondering if I will be able to get a ride. All of a sudden, a car stops and I excitedly open the back door and get into the seat.

There are three young people around my age: a guy and a gal in the front, and a gal in the back. I say with a fair amount of enthusiasm, “Thanks for the ride! How far are you guys going?” The driver indicates a map they have in their hands in the front seat and says, “We just stopped to see where our turnoff is.” They probably had not even seen me, and certainly had no intention of giving me a ride. So I sheepishly apologized and got out of the car. I was hoping they would change their mind and offer me a ride, but they didn’t and drove off in a few minutes.

But God will provide, and someone else did stop and took me up to Cheyenne, Wyo. I have no recollection at all of where I spent that night, but I think it was a Saturday, and I wanted to go to Mass the next morning. I found a church, perhaps the cathedral, and went to Sunday Mass, the last Mass before arriving home on Friday of that same week.

Hopping Freight Trains

Then I found a train yard and hopped a freight train. I was walking between two stopped trains. One of them began to move without warning, and so I got on that one before it picked up speed. I have no idea where that idea came from, really! But there I was, in an open gondola with some big piece of machinery anchored in the middle. If *you* ever have occasion to hop a freight train, I suggest you get the same kind of car to ride in. Why? Because it had a great view of the whole countryside – 360 degrees.

The view from a boxcar would not have been nearly as good. It was a wonderfully clear day. But, I was aware I needed to go toward St. Louis, which was toward the east, but this train was going west. I decided I would get off the first time it stopped, hoping it would be before we got to the Pacific! We went a few hours paralleling I-80. We got to Rawlins, which is 150 miles west of Cheyenne. When we stopped there, I climbed out of the gondola and continued my hitchhiking, this time to the north.

The only thing I knew about Wyoming was that the Missouri Province had, at that time, St. Stephen’s Mission in Riverton. So I headed in that direction, and later that same day, one of the rides I hitched took me right by the mission, which I could see

off the road a few hundred yards. That is the closest I ever came to our work with the Native Americans because I kept on going with my ride. This was my very first time ever in Wyoming, and I had the desire to also go into Montana. But that was not to be.

I got fairly close to the border, but then spent a few hours with my thumb out and no one picked me up. I think it was the only time during the whole 10 weeks that I could not get a ride to where I wanted to go. [The very first, and *only*, time I ever went to Montana was almost 40 years later when I did the wedding of a former JVI.] Disappointed, I headed east toward South Dakota.

I got to Rapid City at night and found the train yard. Coming quickly on the positive experience from Cheyenne to Rawlins, I decided to see if I could get a train going east. There must have been at least 10 tracks, each with a train. But I had no idea of which train would be going east, nor when. So, I positioned myself between two trains, with the idea of walking down to see where there was a car on each of the 4 nearest trains where I could run to if that particular train began to move east. I took off my backpack and put it inside the door on the edge of an empty boxcar; once I had all the trains scoped out, I would come back to get it. Then I began to walk toward the east, looking to find an accessible train car in the 4 trains, two on either side.

Backpack in the Boxcar

I had just begun walking less than a minute, when all of a sudden, without any warning, the train on my left, the one that had my backpack on the edge of a boxcar, began to move. However, it was not moving east, but rather west. My backpack!

I had to get it off the train, so I took off running. It was not in the first four boxcars. I continued running to the fifth boxcar, and it was not there either. I knew that I could get to the next, sixth boxcar, but with the train picking up speed, if it was not in that one, I knew that I would not be able to run fast enough to get to the seventh car, so I had to make an instantaneous decision: jump onto this moving boxcar next to me, which I did.

Although I was now safely on the train, I was very upset. Not only was the train going the wrong direction for me, but worse still was the fact that my backpack was on the edge of the train door of a car ahead of me. I was very afraid that when we finally stopped, that the backpack would have fallen out along the way, and with the dark of night, I would not see it. My fear was quite reasonable, but suddenly the train slowed down and stopped. And the car I was in stopped directly in front of the station, light pouring into my boxcar through the open door.

Friendly Train Guy

I immediately ran to the corner of the empty boxcar so no one would see me. All of a sudden, a guy sticks his head inside the door of the car and shines a flashlight (seemed like a spotlight to me) around the car until its light lands on me. Then he asks: "Is that your backpack in the next boxcar?" Damn! I could have made it to the next car and pulled it off. "Yes," I responded sheepishly. Then I headed over to the boxcar door where he was, got off and went to get my bag. I was not sure how much trouble I was in, but began to feel a lot better when he asked me in a very friendly manner where I was going.

I answered, "East, toward St Louis." "Nothing going in that direction tonight," he replies, followed by, "Where are you going to spend the night?" "Don't know yet. I'll probably go out to the highway and start hitching." He says, "You are better off to spend the night in a caboose, and head out in the morning."

So we go way back in the train yard to an isolated caboose and go inside. We sit down on the two beds on either side of the car. He says, "Don't worry. We are going to be coupling for a short while, and then you can go to sleep." Sure enough, without any warning a train backs into us and I was not prepared for it, and was quite thrown off balance. Then, we are towed a short distance and uncoupled. We go through this process two more times again: hit, moved, and then uncoupled.

He then shows me the bathroom and tells me which bed I can sleep in. "You won't be bothered any more tonight. I'll come and get you in the morning." He was right, no more coupling, no more encounters with anyone. I slept very well that night for the first time ever in a "caboose bed." He came the next morning and woke me up around 6 a.m., and said that there was a train headed east to Chicago sometime that afternoon, indicating that I could get a ride on it if I wanted. But that seemed like such a long time to wait, so I thanked him for helping me and headed out to the road.

Which Woodstock?

There is one humorous footnote that happened the last days of the pilgrimage. During the novitiate, I had heard about Woodstock Letters, a Jesuit publication named after the seminary in Maryland where they were published. And then there was THE Woodstock music festival that took place Aug. 15-18 of that same summer of my journey. My access to what was happening in the world was limited since I saw no TV nor read newspapers, and so I had heard nothing of this historic gathering.

Somewhere in those last few days a couple of young people picked me up, and one of them asks me, "Wasn't that music celebration at Woodstock fantastic?!!!" I pleaded ignorance and she went on to tell me about it. But when she said "Woodstock," my internal reaction was, "What have those East Coast Jesuits been doing that these youth out here in Nebraska know

about it?” It took me a while after the trip had finished to realize that there was no connection between these two Woodstocks.

This brings me to the very last day of the pilgrimage, Friday Aug. 22, 1969, 10 weeks after Friday the 13th of June. I was in Iowa, and I knew that night I would be back to St. Stanislaus in Florissant. That awareness had me quite happy, and prompted me to say the *stupidest* thing of the whole pilgrimage (and perhaps of my life).

What a Flub

I was hitching southward outside of a small town, I believe it was Ottumwa, but am not sure. An Iowa state trooper stopped and asked to see my ID. So as I had done any number of times before, I gave him my Missouri driver's license. He then asked me if I knew anything about a car that had been stolen the day before in a nearby town. I said no. And then, because of my happiness at knowing I would be back home that same night, I said something so incredibly ludicrous when he asked me once again, “Are you sure you don't know anything about that stolen car?”

My reply: “No...*but I might be lying.*” Honest to God, those were my exact words! Why would I say something like that? I was so exuberant that my journey was almost over, that I decided to play with the cop. His response to “but I might be lying” was, “Yeah, you might be. Get in the car.” And then he made a U-turn and we went back to the town where he took me to the jail. There they made me take off my belt (so I wouldn't hang myself I guess) before putting me in a cell with someone else. I could not take my backpack in with me, so I asked if I could take my New Testament, and they said yes to that. I wondered how many of the people taken off the street had New Testaments with them. I was in there for two hours, and was then freed after they had checked me out.

Home at Last

By this time it was noon and I still had over 250 miles to go. I hitched straight through to Florissant, arriving around 7 or 8 p.m. It was still light out as I walked up to the Howdershell side of the novitiate. All of my classmates from the Juniorate were still gone. I don't remember who the first novice was that I saw, but I walked up to Fr. O'Flaherty's room on the third floor where he warmly received me with an embrace. I do remember telling him and everyone else I saw that night, “I spent two hours today in a jail in Iowa.” I made a visit to the second-floor main chapel to thank the Lord for bringing me home safely and then went to sleep in my third-floor Juniorate room. My pilgrimage had come to an end.

Reflections 45 Years Later

I took vows at Fusz on March 14, 1970. I am probably the person in the province with the longest time as a novice. I had been in the Society over three and a half years before my vow day. As I professed my vows, I took a vow name: “I, Richard Guadalupe Perl, promise to....”

Is there anything I would do differently if I were to return to that Friday the 13th of June, 1969?

As I look back on the experience, I know that one of the things that was very strong for me was that I did not want the pilgrimage to be

“easy.” I wanted it to be challenging, and hence my “fear” that if I told people what I was doing, they would be more inclined to help me. And so that is why I always told people “I am a college student hitchhiking around the country for the summer, and I was wondering if you knew where I might be able to work for a few days or a week to earn some money.” I did tell the Haley family whom I stayed with in Memphis for nine days who I was, but they were the only ones.

If I had it to do over again, I would tell people that I was studying for the priesthood, and that I was on a pilgrimage. Why? Because I think it would have been a very good way to connect with people, to engage people on a significantly deeper level.

A Life-Changing Experience

That trip marked my life, opening up a world so vastly beyond the comfortable middle-class existence that I had known up to that point. I loved Mexico. I loved being with simple people. I loved seeing a life that was less complicated, and yet just as real in its own way. And that is what led me to wind up spending my whole life working with the poor (22 years in Belize, 10 in Honduras, one in the Philippines). I have always given credit to Our Lady of Guadalupe for my vocation to Central America.

One of the basic thrusts that Ignatius had for his novices when he sent them out with no money was: “God will provide.” And how God *did* provide for me. Whether it was a ride when I was hitchhiking, food when I was hungry or a place to lay my head at night, the Lord always delivered. Amen!

