

Paricutin

By Marie Hammontree

The liveliest and youngest of the world's volcanoes, Paricutin is now a mecca for visitors from every continent. For years the farm of Dionisio Pulido, two miles outside of the village of Paricutin, had been a favorite picnic spot for neighboring Mexicans because the ground was so warm and dry and hospitable. On February 20, 1943, while plowing in his cornfield, Senor Pulido heard a noise from under the soil. Louder it came and then with an earth shaking roar began pouring rocks and cinders into the air. The next day there was a cone-shaped pile twenty-five feet high. Within a week it was five hundred feet and in ten weeks over one thousand. Soon the little town of Paricutin was smothered beneath the encroaching lava, and scientists from everywhere converged on Mexico to watch developments.

Paricutin is located almost directly west of Mexico City but is a good day's ride away from it by bus. The road is full of twists and curves and lies continuously in the mountains, taking its travelers through Toluca, Morelia, past Lake Patzcuaro and by nightfall reaching Uruapan. Uruapan is generally the embarking place for Paricutin, and the trip is most effectively made at night.

A light rain had begun to fall upon our arrival in Uruapan; and my companions and I decided to postpone our visit to the next evening since we were afraid the rain might obscure our view. We found rooms at the very Mexican and picturesque Hotel Progreso and then went for a walk. A few enterprising market sellers were still up, hoping to get a head start by selling their wares intended for the morrow which was market day in Uruapan. Others with less initiative had already gone to bed on the sidewalk and lay huddled together somewhat like lumpy sacks of potatoes. Before I realized, I almost stepped on one little pile. It was a damp, chilly, penetrating night; and as I later lay snug in my bed at the hotel, I could not help but wonder about these fellow humans asleep out there on the ground with only a blanket to protect them from the night.

The next day dawned warm and bright, and we spent it in visiting the market and lacquer shops of Uruapan. Three o'clock in the afternoon we were told was the customary time to start for Paricutin; so clad in warm slacks and jackets and armed with a supply of food, we set forth in an automobile hired to take us (to the point) as far as it was possible for a car to go. Paricutin is approximately twenty-

four miles from Uruapan, and the last few miles of our drive were over practically non-existent roads. On the way we could get intermittent glimpses of Paricutin spouting its smoke, by daylight looking similar to pictures of the atom bomb explosions. Also evident were the complete lack of vegetation and the blackened earth.

Finally we arrived at Parangaricutiro and were told that from this point on we could either walk or rent a horse or donkey to carry us. Not being an expert horse-woman nor particularly fond of walking, I selected a donkey as the safest mode of transportation. With each donkey one also acquired a small Mexican boy, a combination guide for the passenger and guard for the safe return of the animal. He walked bare-footed beside his charge and toted our food supply.

The sky which had become clouded and threatening now became more ominous and gave evidence as we mounted our burros that it was soon intending to open up and put out that great conflagration which was bellowing and belching and rumbling in the distance. The village of Parangaricutiro is now a mass of hardened black lava with only a church spire protruding to give evidence that it ever existed. As our procession began to pick its way through the solidified lava rock, the promised downpour arrived; and our small guides silently helped each of us on with a sarape which was included with our donkey — an oblong piece of heavy, coarse material, semi-rain resistant, with a hole in the middle, leaving the wearer's head to brave the elements as best it could.

On the barren lava there was no place to turn for shelter; and having travelled thousands of miles for this experience, we were not to be dissuaded by a good soaking. The storm grew in intensity, and thunder vied with Paricutin for attention. Suddenly the lightning struck very near us. Our little crowd stopped for just a moment, hovering together and scarcely knowing which way to turn. I could feel my animal quivering beneath me though I had to admit that perhaps it was I shaking the donkey.

As we ascended the mountain of lava, I could hear the burros struggling for breath as well as the panting of their barefooted keepers. My guide was a sturdy youngster, but there were others who sometimes had to lie down for a few minutes as the path grew steeper. Having no doubt carried many an American to a view of Paricutin, my stubborn little burro still refused to comprehend English. In the excitement my meagre supply of Spanish had deserted me and besides had never included the Spanish equivalent for "whoa." Anxious perhaps to be out of the storm and to be done with his duties, he was inclined to take the lead and jog on ahead of my friends, mercilessly leaving me to hang on for dear life. The

vocabulary of my guide, slightly better than the donkey's, included one English word which he used at the summit. It was the magnificent word of "here" which he said as he pulled the burro to a stop and indicated it was time for me to dismount.

"Here" was a very rude shelter composed of four slight props with a canvas top and no walls to obstruct the view on any side. It was perhaps twenty or twenty-five feet square in size. There was no view, however, as in every direction nothing could be seen but mist and rain. Paricutin continued to give evidence of its being by frightening roars but was nowhere in sight. So we sat down in our sodden clothes on some crude benches and looked where we were told to watch and waited for Paricutin to unveil itself. One enterprising Mexican had obtained the concession for Paricutin though his sole commodity was hot coffee. Although he almost asphyxiated us and made our eyes smart from the fumes of his fire in the middle of the hut, we were grateful for his ambition and eagerly sought to warm ourselves with the coffee and refresh ourselves with the food which the hotel keeper had wisely advised us to bring along.

But the rains continued, and we strained our eyes to penetrate the mist for the first view of the crater. More and more sightseers arrived. The only hut became crowded, so much so that some folks had to stand under the very edge of the tent half protected and half letting the rain trickle down their faces. Darkness fell, and still the fog obscured the volcano. It was like sitting in a theatre to view a play from which the curtain had been left unraised, or I thought perhaps it must be the way a recently blinded person feels, straining to look upon the thing he knows is there. With characteristic impatience some of the Americans gave up, climbed on their donkeys and horses and began the descent to civilization.

With time, however, we could see the fog slowly, steadily moving to one side, not enough to view the volcano but enough to give hope that before the night was over we might see Paricutin. Yet maddeningly dilatory it was in drifting away. By ten o'clock a miniature crater came into view with a steady stream of flame shooting into the air from its funnel. There was a continuous puffing as if a train were trying to get under way which I attributed to this small volcano and a great roar every few seconds which I knew must be emitting from Paricutin. Gradually, ever so deliberately, the fog shifted; and at last Paricutin came into view, each twenty seconds blasting fiery lava high into the black sky, and as the force of gravity brought it earthward, letting it roll majestically down its sides. No man-made fireworks exhibition, however beautiful, could equal the wonder of this one which nature puts on nightly in the Mexican

heavens. I was told we were six miles away, the closest point to which man might approach with any degree of safety; and yet our faces were covered with black soot and cinders.

I gazed in wonder, hoping forever to preserve in my memory this awesome monster which had torn loose from the bonds of hell and on February 20, 1943, had rent the cornfield of Dionisio Pulido to emerge into a frightened world. Like a fiery dragon from the pages of mythology, it snorted and fumed, resisting all efforts of modern man to restrain its course, destroying entire towns, laying waste the area for miles around and shaking the walls of distant cities.

The rain had by this time ceased, and we again mounted our burros and began the climb down the precipitous lava. Hot molten masses were spattered in our path, and I gripped my burro to keep from making a premature descent into this material erupted from the depths of Hades. Occasionally when the path grew easier for a moment and I dared to ease my hold, I turned around in the saddle and took a last glimpse of the mighty volcano which though only a few years old had grown to such proportions and was still growing. The obscure town of Paricutin is dead, buried under countless tons of lava; but in its death it has also become immortal. Scarcely a traveler would have visited it as a town, but now it will abide for all eternity. Even though the angry fumes subside and the surrounding countryside is quiet again, Paricutin will tower into the sky in solemn majesty; and although its burning lips are sealed with snow and icy winds, it will stand like its many volcanic predecessors in Mexico as a grim reminder of the burning fury which lies dormant in the depths of the earth.

