

On board a paddle-steamer

1883-1889

“A. Gringo”

A Gringo”, an English traveler about whom very little is known, arrived in Mexico in 1883. “A Gringo” is believed to be the pen name of Charles Manwell St Hill, born in Trinidad in 1849, who died in Mexico between 1891 and 1901. In the preface, he states that “my object is simply to give a plain account of several years experience in the country, to show its recent progress and to enable the reader to judge the future.” He also writes that “prolonged periods of travel over the greater part of its territory, by rail, stagecoach and steamer, on horseback and in canoes have afforded me exceptional facilities for studying the country and all classes of the people.”

One reviewer described this as an “interesting little book descriptive of life and travel in Mexico from 1883 until a recent date”. He continued “We congratulate the author on the felicitous manner in which he has performed his task” in presenting the “Mexico of today” to us. “His work is a pleasantly written handbook, its only defect is the want of a map, and this is really unpardonable.”

“A. Gringo” was an observant and enthusiastic visitor. He even saw fit to remark on the ready availability of lottery tickets “at every corner” with prizes from one to 100,000 dollars”. His acceptance of lottery tickets is in sharp contrast to the stance that Terry later felt obliged to adopt in the first edition of his famous handbook, when he wrote that, “mention of lotteries has been omitted intentionally because of the circulation of the Handbook in the United States—where anything in the nature of an advertisement of these games of chance is forbidden”. (Terry, 1909, p iv)

“A. Gringo”’s visit to Chapala definitely took place prior to 1889, though he did not write about it until later.

Taking a carriage, which ran weekly between Guadalajara and Chapala, a town on the border of the lake of that name, I set forth one morning, and, after climbing a hill, from which a grand view of the city and surrounding countryside was obtained, I reached Chapala.

An Englishman has a street named after him

Despite the fact that there is a short street in Chapala named “Callejón de Mister Crow”, relatively little is known about the life of Mr. Septimus Crowe (the correct spelling of his surname). Crowe (1842–1903) was born in Kåffjord, northern Norway, and became British vice consul in Oslo on his father’s retirement from that position in 1875. By then he had married Georgina Bidder, who came from a wealthy English family; the couple had one son.

It is likely that Crowe first came to Mexico in the 1880s. It is not certain when he first visited Chapala, reportedly seeking alleviation of his rheumatic ailments, but by the last decade of the 19th century, he definitely had property at the lake and was actively promoting Chapala among his circle of friends. He built his home where the Montecarlo hotel is today, and also built Casa Albión (aka Villa Josefina and Casa Schnaider) and Villa Bela. His Montecarlo property was later bought by Aurelio González Hermosillo, who asked Italian architect Ángel Corsi to build him a villa there. This villa later became the Hotel Montecarlo.

According to Jeremiah Curtin’s memoirs, on November 29, 1895, he met Septimus Crowe, “one very peculiar Englishman” on the train from Irapuato to Guadalajara. “He was dressed in a Spanish Costume: a large Mexican hat trimmed with gold braid; a short, white coat; tight trousers; and a long, red sash; and white gloves. His name was Septimus Crow (The Seventh Crow). He was the youngest of fifteen Crows and the seventh male one, he informed us.”

In 1898, very soon after their marriage, young novelist Charles Fleming Embree and his bride Virginia Broadwell arrived in Chapala. They lived in the village for eight months, before moving to Oaxaca, where Embree wrote *Dream of a Throne*. Embree includes an unusually specific reference in the book, which must surely allude to the Hon. Septimus Crowe: “Now, at the century’s end, navigation by modern means is just beginning to appear on Chapalac. There is one old steamer full of vermin and rickety, exceedingly small. She fell over once in the water and drowned many passengers. There is a new steamer talked of. The Hon. S——— C———, Her British Majesty’s ex-consul general to Sweden, has a little yacht that skims these waters. Otherwise the shipping is the same that has conducted the primitive lake commerce for hundreds of years.” If not accidental, the geographic misidentification of Sweden for Norway may have been deliberate obfuscation on Embree’s part.

Septimus Crowe died in Mexico City in July 1903, as he was preparing to leave on a trip to the U.K. His son became a prominent doctor, author of several works about chronic rheumatic conditions.

The Hotel Arzapalo

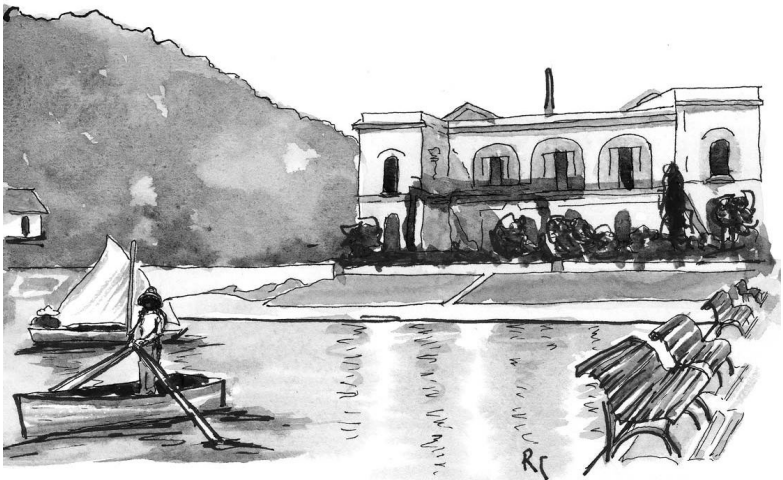
Prior to 1898, visitors to the small fishing village of Chapala stayed either with friends or in the one small guesthouse belonging to Doña Trini. After 1890 or so, many well-to-do Guadalajara families and some foreigners, such as Septimus Crowe, built villas on the lakeshore. The village's fame as a place to vacation grew steadily, boosted by a brief visit from President Díaz in 1896. Díaz returned in January 1904 to visit his in-laws, which only served to further boost Chapala's appeal.

In the mid-1890s, Ignacio Arzapalo Palacios, who had recognized the curative properties of Chapala's waters, and fallen in love with the natural beauty and favorable climate, began to build the village's first major hotel.

The Hotel Arzapalo opened in March 1898 with 36 rooms, and acquired its own diligences, to ensure daily service between Chapala and the Atequiza railway station. Rates at the hotel, including meals, were between \$2.50 and \$4.00 a day, depending on the room, more than twice the daily rate across the street at the Posada Doña Trini.

Arzapalo's businesses did so well that in 1908 he opened a second hotel, designed by Guillermo de Alba. This was first called the Hotel Palmera, later the Niza, and then the Nido hotel, before being occupied by municipal offices. Arzapalo died in 1909, leaving all his Chapala property to his seven-year-old granddaughter.

Several years earlier, Doña Trini's guesthouse had been upgraded by Victor Huber to become the Hotel Huber (later the Gran Hotel Chapala). Located immediately opposite the church, it was demolished in about 1950 when Avenida Madero, the wide boulevard leading directly to the pier, was created.



purchasers had been found.

A rude pier of rough stones extends into the water, and here one can embark in a rowing or sailing boat or a naphtha launch and take trips up and down the lake. There are one or two old-fashioned steamers on it, but they do not make regular runs and have to be chartered for special trips. There are also a number of small fishing schooners. The little village, with its big white church and mountainous background, bears a wonderful resemblance to some of the lake villages in northern Italy, and makes a most beautiful picture. This little bit of lake might be taken for a scene on Como; but the waters of Chapala are slightly yellowish instead of blue. The lake, too, is very shallow, and for this reason the government has prohibited its waters being used for irrigation.

In the lake there are some small white fish (pescados blancos) which are caught with nets, but there is nothing to tempt the angler. The Mexican government is now stocking the waters with trout, bass, perch and other game fish, which may eventually make the lake more attractive to lovers

A great architect leaves his mark

Guillermo de Alba (1874-1935) was the architect of many of the finest buildings in Chapala. Originally from Guadalajara, de Alba graduated as an engineer-surveyor before undertaking a trip to Chicago. Soon after his return, he began to build houses in Chapala. In 1906 he completed his family residence, Mi Pullman, and was then commissioned by Ignacio Arzapalo (owner of the eponymous hotel) to design a second major hotel, the Hotel Palmera. By this time, de Alba had become the favored architect of many wealthy families from Guadalajara and designed several more noteworthy homes, including Villa Niza (1919).

However, de Alba's architectural masterpiece in the Chapala area is not a villa but the beautifully proportioned Chapala railway station (1920), now a museum and cultural center.

Guillermo de Alba married Maclovia de Cañedo y González de Hermosillo, who was 15 years his senior, in Chapala in 1900. They were blessed with one child, Guillermina, born in 1902. In 1933, when it was her turn to get married, Guillermina insisted on having the civil ceremony on board a steamboat out on the lake.

De Alba was also a distinguished photographer, to whom we are indebted for many of the finest pictures of Chapala during the early years of the 20th century, a time when the resort was, in many ways, enjoying its finest hour.

The *diligencia* generally draws up in front of one of the several hotels at **Chapala Village**.

Hotels *Hotel Arzopala*, facing the lake; \$2.50 to \$4 American Plan, according to location of room. The upper rooms command better views than those on the ground floor. Spanish cooking and management.—*Hotel Victor Hugo*, \$2 to \$2.50 American Plan—*Hotel de la Palma*, \$2 to \$2.50 American Plan. Lower rates for a prolonged stay in all the hotels.

Boats. Launch on the lake (consult the hotel manager), \$5 an hour, inclusive charge for a party of 10 or less. To *Ocotlan*, \$3; round trip, \$5. Row-boats, 75 c. an hour. Each boat will hold three or four persons comfortably. The above rates also apply to boats at other towns on the lake. *El Viento* is the name given by the fishermen to a sudden squall that sometimes breaks over the lake. In a steam-launch one is generally protected, but one is usually in for a fright and a wetting if caught out in

The Chapala Development Company

One of the most dedicated promoters of Chapala as a resort was Paul Christian Schjetnan (1870-1945). Schjetnan, from Kristiansund in Norway, had several business enterprises in Mexico City, including the Norwegian-Mexican Company in 1901, prior to moving to Chapala in about 1908. His home in the village was the Villa Aurora.

Schjetnan later formed the *Compañía de Fomento de Chapala*, a company to promote and develop the village. He also hoped to export agricultural produce grown on the newly drained farmland at the eastern end of the lake. The export business came to nothing but by 1911 Schjetnan and his partners had completed and opened a yacht club in Chapala. Unfortunately, this coincided with the Mexican Revolution, which put paid to many investors' dreams. By 1914, the yacht club had been abandoned; in 1916, it was accidentally burnt down.

But Schjetnan was not to be deterred for long. In 1917, Schjetnan announced plans to launch two new steamboats on the lake: the *Viking* for passengers, and the *Tapatio* for freight. Even more ambitiously, he spearheaded the task of completing a railway line from Chapala to link with the Mexican National Railway at La Capilla, near Atequiza.

The Chapala railway station, designed by Guillermo de Alba, was one of the most beautiful ever constructed in Mexico. It was inaugurated in 1920, with twice daily service. It reduced the travel time between Guadalajara and Chapala from the 5 hours or more by diligence to 3 hours each way. Sadly, even the railway failed to make any profit, and in 1926, following severe floods, rail service to Chapala came to an end. Happily, the restored railway station has found a new lease of life as a cultural center.

The village of Chapala itself leaves a lot to be desired regarding its viability and resources. Built without a street plan, offering only shadeless stony roads in poor condition, it will never be able to compete with Tehuacán, Cuernavaca, Cuautla and other places renowned for the mildness of their climate. Whoever visits Chapala, seeks to enjoy aquatic sports, swimming, canoeing and fishing. The neighboring hills, studded with cacti, rattlesnake lairs and scorpions do not tempt the walker...

Chapala possesses a ferruginous spring at 37 degrees and another, sulphurous, at 33 degrees Celsius; the water is brought in from a nearby hill. The ferruginous water is used to make refreshing drinks, the quantity of solid corpuscles that it contains not altering the taste. Aside from commercial baths, there are others that are free, in open air basins, where the Indian women come to bathe their children who collaborate happily.

Taking advantage of my stay in Chapala, I decided to go hunting and climbed in a tiny canoe with a young Indian. On arriving in a cove which had a quartz rich sandy bottom, I was surrounded by hundreds of galaretas,

President Díaz and Lake Chapala

Porfirio Díaz had been President of Mexico for more than fifteen years when he visited Chapala in December 1896. When he revisited Chapala in January 1904, he stayed with Eduard Collignon, while his wife stayed with Lorenzo Elizaga, her brother-in-law. By this time, Díaz was in the twilight of his military and political career. Since he had first taken office in 1877, economic boom times had returned and the national budget had been balanced. Agricultural production had risen. Massive investments, many of them emanating from foreign countries, had been made in mining and infrastructure, particularly railways.

Politically, though, the country was in the hands of a dictator. Elections were rigged and public opinion ignored. A restricted, select group of advisors—called the científicos, but actually a group of lawyers and economists—had assumed more and more power. Nepotism was rampant. Massive land concessions had been made to foreign speculators and personal friends.

After his 1904 visit, Porfirio Diaz returned to Chapala at Easter time in 1905, 1908 and 1909, always staying with his in-laws at El Manglar. By that time, in gratitude for being given the concession of recently drained land, Manuel Cuesta Gallardo was reportedly planning to make a gift of Villa Tlalocán (designed by George Edward King) as a residence for the President and his family. However, when Díaz visited Lake Chapala in 1910, he did not stay at the town of Chapala but in several haciendas at the east end of the lake. In 1911, Díaz went into exile in Paris, never to return.