

9-17-42

En route thru Arizona

Dear Aunt Eva,

I am on my way to San Jose de Costa Rica. We travel by train to San Antonio, Texas, thence by bomber to Managua, Nicaragua (where a revolution is in progress, I understand). How we make the last leg of the trip is still unknown to me.

I shall be gone at least a year. Meanwhile, I left Fedi with

1. A will
2. A general power of attorney
3. Two blank specific powers of attorney.

The last item is thus explained: in the event that the general power of attorney is not recognized, a specific power of attorney is immediately available by filling in the blanks with whatever statements are required.

As to decisions regarding the estate: we trust your judgment without reservation. Whatever

^{course}
1 you recommend to Iedi will be followed.

The enclosure will supply the missing Grass correspondence for your files, & hope (if you can read it). A part of it was typed some time ago; the remainder, in longhand, was written while bumping over the A.P. roadbeds.

Good-bye now! You'll hear from

me.

Love
Jim

Guatemala City, Guatemala C.E.
September 19, 1942

Dear Aunt Eva

THE INDIANS. This city is our first port of call in Central America. When we crawled out of the plane after our 6½ hour hop from Brownsville, Texas, everything seemed like an ordinary American spot until we looked around and caught a glimpse of the Indian women carrying their burdens on their heads. Everyone has seen the National Geographic photos of this sort of thing but until you have seen them playing on their own home grounds you haven't seen anything. The balance act looks effortless; they move their heads around rapidly in any direction without disturbing the equilibrium. All ages of women, from about 12 (yes, they are women at 12) years up, carry their bundles, baskets, and whatnot on the top deck wherever they go. Since I didn't see a single woman without something on her head I began to wonder if they slept that way too. The women are colorfully dressed, running mostly to reds in a confusion of patterns. Every other one is carrying a baby in a shawl sling on her back; lactation is performed whenever and wherever necessary. The never-washed feet of the shoeless Guatemalan Indian look like the pedal extremities of an elephant--flat, scaly, alubby, toenails broken, misshapen. The Indians are quite short in stature, making my 5'-9" seem like 6'-4". It is an incongruous sight to see a group of 3 or 4 short Indian men rolling down the street like sailors, carrying long machetes (Central American pocketknives), wearing castoff 1928 Philippino-American sport clothes (unbelievably patched and sewed with practically nothing but the shape of the original left), broadbrimmed Panama hats (a luxury I am sure they do not appreciate), and no shoes or shirts.

THE MARKET PLACE. The garden truck produce from miles around is brought to the market place via oxcart and indianhead--an amazing tropical collection. Each merchant sits among his wares and haggles with the sharpshooting buyers. Access is by narrow lanes. Life goes on unrestrained among this mass--a naked little boy stands in the center of a lane...he is relieving his hydrostatic pressure; an amber cascade strikes the hard ground and splashes on the vegetables on either side; a fleeting urinary rainbow flashes for an instant through the rising vapors.

THE STREETS. They are quite clean. Drainage seems to be good. A magnificent traffic cop stands on every corner directing the flow with a port de bras befitting the splendor of his uniform (a smartly-tailored and dry-cleaned-and-pressed rig made of overall cloth); he stands on what seems at first glance to be a retired elephant houdah but on closer inspection is revealed to be a platform equipped with a six circus parasol and inscribed with numerous philosophic traffic safety admonition. If he faces you, then you may procede; if his side is turned toward you, then you may not--Reversis! Every vehicle--pushcart, bicycle, oxcart, auto, motorcycle--has a license and a dime-store noise-making warning device; the noise-maker is sounded (by law) 2 times at the approach to every corner. The cacaphonic effect is that of a marathon New Years Eve celebration. The tympanic membrane of the Guatemalan auditory organ must be a curious physiological phenomenon.

Jim

Please note correct address as of 10/17/42

2 JACKSON
M COV IN 42
W-2 HENRI COLOD

Managua D/N. Nicaragua
September 24, 1942

Dear Aunt Eva

This is the fifth day of waiting to get out of Managua; we are promised that tomorrow a plane will surely take us to Costa Rica. This does not overly animate us as we have been told the same thing every day now since we arrived.

Until now I have not had the desire to record my impressions of Managua. It seems like a bad dream; things like this cannot really happen; people who are able to speak and interchange ideas cannot possibly live the depraved and impoverished life of the Nicaraguenses. The picture must be drawn in a series of sketches.

THE PEOPLE. The principal theme of all animate Nicaragua is sex. As one soldier expressed it, "I never saw such a place! Everything here is knocked up--women, cows, oxen, horses, and dogs!" This motive predetermines the course of the woman's life; she is a reproductive machine, with or without benefit of clergy, for the greater part of her life (few attain old age, fortunately). As a necessary adjunct to this pattern, the life of men is similarly predetermined. The congenitally syphilitic beg; those who have control of their central nervous system, start their lives as bootblacks, ceaselessly soliciting the norteamericanos. From their big brothers, the taxi drivers and porters, they early learn the panderer's trade. That seems to complete the life cycle of the ciudadano (city dweller). All I have seen of the agricolas (country boys) is from a distance--swinging their machetes in the fields, driving their oxen to town with a load of milk or wood.

No wonder they are a short-lived people; they just get tired of it! I believe that, despite the poverty and sanitation, they would live longer if there were any reason.

THE HOUSES. I would rather not try to describe them.

THE STREETS are narrow. The ones that are paved are cracked and buckled. The ones that are not paved are filled with great mud holes (drainage is a fortuitous circumstance rather than a civic foresight). The daily rains maintain the mud concentration at a constant; the excarts, floundering through the muck, distribute it over the remainder of the streets. Excrement of horses, oxen, dogs, and human beings is everywhere. The heavy, noxious, composite odor--undisturbed by air current and intensified by the tropic sun--rises into an atmosphere already humid. This fecal miasma the Nicaraguenses draw into their lungs and pump through their blood streams with every breath of "air".

THE COCHES are the most prevalent form of urban passenger traffic. They are like the old coaches we used in 1912 and before--forward and back seats with a top similar to that of the old touring car. They are painted and striped with the more intense tints and shades of the red spectral region. The diminutive horses are the pitiful part of this incongruous equipage. They are ribby and meatless; the heritage of nutritional deficiency makes them small, like people born in famine years. The cocheros (drivers) trot them incessantly, with the exception of taking on and letting off fares, throughout their six-hour (theoretic) shift. During the latter part of their shift they are so tired that they run down the street leaning against each other. If a person remains in one spot during the afternoon rains, he will see them fall on the slippery streets at the rate of six an hour. Sometimes only one of a team falls; sometimes both. In either case they get to their feet without human assistance and continue trotting. The sight of these tired, shrunken, animals, whipped through the tropic heat at a constant run is never to be forgotten.

January 15, 1943

Dear Aunt Eva and Uncle Henry,

Tedi sent your note on to me. You know there are two outstanding faults my little family and I possess:

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That row of zeros represents a lull of a couple days. On Sunday afternoon I sat down to write this letter. I got as far as the colon when one of the fellows stuck his head in the door and asked me if I would go out to the airport and help them unload a plane that just sat down.

...(to continue with the faults (most annoying ones) we possess: (1) We never get around to giving anyone a present. (2) We are so ashamed of Fault No. (1) that we are inarticulate when it comes to expressing our appreciation for the thoughtfulness of others in continuing to gift us. I have always been a self-centered, selfish, conceited ass anyway. Every Christmas I receive things, stroke my chin and damn myself for not going out to do any shopping, then solemnly swear that next year will be different--next year I will search all year to find some particular thing that just suits that friend's individuality...something that will show him I really like him and value his friendship and want to keep it. Then what do I do? First thing I know I am doing the same thing all over again and it is another Christmas. (But that is all over! Next year will be different. I will search all year...etc., etc.)

That is quite a family circle you have now with three granddaughters. As a grandparent, you are one up on your brother, Aunt Eva. (So far). I can understand the devoted father angle. I rather fancy myself as one too.

Work here is quite interesting to me. I am the head of a little group of three known as the Computing Sub-Section of the Road Planning & Design Section. Traverse closures, curve data... in short--all alignment problems come our way. In addition, we take on a lot of little special problems: tables for lengths of culverts at different elevations on our different typical fill sections, earthwork quantity tables for our typical cut and fill sections, quickie shotgun guesstimates at any time for total yards of cut and fill for any part of the job...or maybe total yards of paving or miles of clearing...you know--odds and ends. In addition all field men remain in our little group for a few days as a sort of brief orientation course in our methods of recording and computing. We are not being fancy this time. I think we are really going to build this road in a hurry.

Well, so long! And thanks folks for remembering my little family!

Jim

March 7, 1943

Dear Aunt Eva,

I have been in San Jose for five and a half months now. I am fairly well adjusted to everything--in fact I would be quite happy with my family around. I might leave for Volcan', Panama', however. I was asked if I would accept the job of office engineer there--of course, I said "Yes!" I want that experience very much. It all depends on whether or not I am released from my present job--alignment. Experience, however, will be the most I can hope for as living conditions there are famous for being unattractive--tropical heat (remember, San Jose is at an elevation of 3870), sketchy sanitation, amoebic dysentery, etc., etc.

There are many interesting things to tell about Costa Rica. I am going to save ~~them~~ time by gathering them all together in a coherent form before talking about them. That will be a little later.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS:

We rented our place. Tedi had to live closer to the studio with present transportation difficulties.

The children are both in school. There is a housekeeper at home.

Smoky is the children's pony. Damsel is our own pup (born on the premises). Butch is our cat.

I am returning the clipping as I know you must prize it. Thanks for sending it to me. I am always happy to learn any of your doings.

The grove deal turned quite seur for you. I hope my thoughtless expostulations did not influence you to lose a chance for a sale. Paddling along way behind the way I always do, I should never have made a comment at all. Use your own judgment in the future. Whatever you decide is alright with me.

Thanks again for the Christmas cheer. When I say "Thanks!", I really mean that--it is not just a way to close a letter.

You will be hearing again from me soon--a few yarns and a few pictures of Costa Rica.

Love,



2 November 1943

Dear Aunt Eva and Uncle Henry

By this time I suppose you have heard of the closing down of the Pan American Highway. All of us regret that we were unable to finish the job but I guess that is the way it is to be. The Engineering Division is now engaged in the preparation of the "As-Built" drawings for the portions of the highway constructed.

When the order came to stop construction I was sent out into the field to instruct the resident engineers as to how to prepare the information to be submitted on the existing line, grade, drainage structures, width and surfacing of road, and so on (I am winding up my brief career in the Pan American Highway as Office Engineer in the main office of the San Jose Area, which includes the Republics of Costa Rica and Panama; I have held this job since the first of July).

It was quite a trip: by train to Barranca, Macacona, Cocal, Puntarenas; by plane to Nicoya, Santa Cruz, Sardinal, Liberia, Las Canas; by jeep to Bebedero; by launch down the Rio Tenorio to the Tempisque, thence down the Golfo de Nicoya to Chomes, thence to Cocal again; finally, by plane returning to San Jose. I saw many strange things: wide glassy rivers with Conga monkeys barking from the tall trees along the banks, lagartos (alligators) suddenly sinking from sight in midstream with a swirl of bubbles, and brilliantly plumed and strangely shaped tropical birds flying all around; the placid golfo with dolphins undulating about the launch, ominous shark fins cleaving the waters, and the pelicans power diving into the drink in their perpetual search for food.

On returning to San Jose, after the procedures were established for ~~the~~ posting the field notes on the Plan and Profile sheets, we had to pitch in to another job: writing the final report. That task too is complete and the report has been approved by the Area Engineer. So, now there remains only a few odds and ends of miscellaneous engineering work plus the final task of demobilization.

I expect to leave Costa Rica about 30 November.

Love,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'JMT', is written in a cursive style. It is located in the lower right quadrant of the page, below the word 'Love,'.