

Chapter 7: The
Rebirth of Bustamante



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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Chapter 7: The Rebirth of Bustamante

Bustamante, Nuevo Leon is a sleepy little town in the north of Mexico. It is located on the railroad line connecting Laredo, Texas, to Monterrey, Saltillo, San Luis Potosi and other leading Mexican cities. While in years past being situated on a main railway provided an impetus for business and growth, the decline of the railroads in Mexico has paralleled the decline in the United States, with much of the transportation dependent on trucking, buses and airlines and a proportionate decline in rail passenger and freight service.

Historically, the major industries in Bustamante have been agriculture and mining. A large number of native and hybrid pecan trees led to the extensive sale of pecans, along with pecan products such as pecan candy (nogada), and related delicacies such as semita, an unleavened oread with cane sugar and pecans, and empanadas, turnovers filled with pecans or some other sweetened vegetables and fruits, such as sweet potatoes, pumpkin or applesauce along with the pecans.

It is amazing to find in a town of 2,000 people, 312 state-licensed panaderias (bakeries). The inhabitants of Bustamante used to supplement their income by selling tacos and pastry to passengers on the several trains that stopped there each day, but the decline in rail service has all but eliminated the practice. In recent years, contrary to economic theory, the main source of income for most residents of the town has been the selling of pan de dulce (pastries) to each other.

There is still some amount of tourism in Bustamante. The town lies at the foot of the sierra, and a short drive, or a long walk, away is a beautiful canyon which attracts its share of sightseers. The sierra, called the Sierra Morena, is the same one popularized in the Mexican folk song, "Cielito Lindo." The second verse states, "De la Sierra Morena, cielito lindo vienen bajando, un par de oitos negros, cielito lindo, de contrabando." The Sierra Morena or song is the sierra which casts its shadow on Bustamante, providing long, cool evenings during the hot summer months.

One part of the sierra is called "la montana del leon" since its highest part is in the shape of a reclining lion. Climbing to the top of the lion's head is a must for tourists, along with cooling off in the famous ojo de agua, a natural spring in the Bustamante canyon.

Regardless of the beauty of the place and its popularity as a picnic area, the population has declined. Urban mobility has taken its toll in Bustamante. The younger generation migrates to the urban centers in search of education and jobs, two urban essentials not very plentiful in

their home town. Although you meet many people from Bustamante in nearby urban centers such as Monterrey or Nuevo Laredo, you seldom meet people who actually reside in Bustamante, or at least until recent years.

I say “until recent years,” because a catalytic event has occurred in Bustamante that has changed its economy and its urban character. A little town which for decades was headed for oblivion has been revitalized by an unusual economic revolution.

Bob Sánchez, a prominent attorney in McAllen, Texas, whose family comes from Bustamante, Nuevo Leon, was informed that he had inherited his grandmother’s old house in Bustamante. The house is located in the center of town, just a block from the Catholic church and the city plaza.

As luck would have it, Bob Sánchez was tired of urban life in the fast-growing Rio Grande Valley and looking for a vacation home away from the metropolitan area. Upon learning of his inheritance and revisiting the old family site, it occurred to him to remodel the old house and use it as a vacation home.

In short order, Bob hired a contractor to oversee the remodeling of the house and a couple to stay in it as caretakers during the remodeling process. This immediately made Bob Sanchez the largest employer in Bustamante. The employment rolls were quickly augmented as the contractor hired plumbers, electricians, carpenters, brick layers, stone masons, tilers, roofers, cement workers, painters and various other artisans for the remodeling task. According to the remodeling director of accounting, payroll for the job is now running in excess of 138,000,000 Mexican pesos monthly, plus a similar amount for the necessary fees and bribes (mordidas).

Once the remodeling got started, it led to an amazing amount of spinoff businesses and industries. A new Bustamante Lumber Yard sent workers into the sierra to hew and process lumber for the many braces and forms essential to the remodeling. One of the contractor’s cousins returned to Bustamante to form the new City Cement Center, which has thrived on the business from the remodeling effort. The pool of water formed by the “ojo de agua” is now three times larger as tons of sand and gravel have been hauled out for the concrete needed in the house expansion effort. Bustamante Iron Works provides the steel reinforcing rods necessary to give strength to the concrete used in building new additions to the old house.

A new business, the Bustamante International Imports, has been able to acquire raw materials, appliances and furniture destined for use in the Sánchez residence. The architectural firm of Guillermo Cárdenas and Associates in Monterrey set up a branch office in Bustamante for the design and construction of the Sánchez Fountain, a beautiful water fountain located in the

backyard of the refurbished house, and which has become the leading tourist attraction in the town.

The local hotel, El Gran Hotel Ancira, while not as large as the Ancira Hotel in Monterrey, has a larger clientele, as people from both sides of the border travel to Bustamante to see the remodeling in progress.

The menu of the Ancira hotel restaurant is unique, featuring many local recipes, including sopa de nuez (pecan soup), arroz con nueces (rice and pecans), pecan tacos and the ever-popular frijoles borrachos Bustamante, made up of refried beans with a liberal sprinkling of pecan bits and pieces. Unlike most Mexican frijoles borrachos (drunk beans), the Bustamante variety are not cooked in beer or some other intoxicating beverage. They are called borrachos because of the inebriated state of the two Bustamante brothers who concocted the recipe.

As the sun dips behind the Sierra Morena, local couples stroll around the fountain in Bob's backyard and are joined by visitors from Scandinavia, Europe and the Orient. The local mariachi group plays and sings Mexican love songs as the candy and raspa vendors ply their trade from the rear wall of the Bob Sánchez residence to the property line just beyond the Bob Sánchez Vineyards and Winery.

The evening ends early since the young musicians and vendors must arise before dawn to work at the many new enterprises in the old town. Some of the young men must drive long hours for the Bustamante Freight Company, which transports the raw materials coming in from the ship docks in Houston for use in the Sánchez house.

In the north end of town, the city fathers have just inaugurated the Bustamante Vocational and Technical College, a school especially created for the retraining of former panaderos and to ensure an abundant supply of skilled labor among the new generations of Bustamante youth who will continue the rebuilding of Bob Sánchez's house in future years.

The educational impact of the remodeling goes beyond post-secondary education. The following is a word problem from the new fifth grade mathematics textbook, Matemáticas Prácticas used in the Bustamante public schools:

"If a master bricklayer lays six bricks every hour, and his wife removes five of the bricks each hour, how many years will it take to lay the 4,638 bricks in the west wall of Bob Sánchez's house?"

The City of Bustamante will soon schedule the inauguration of its new City Hall, the Bustamante Public Library and its first fire station, all built from surplus materials from the Sánchez house.

Two new shifts have been added to the Bustamante Police Department to supervise the orderly transfer of labor and materials to the various city construction sites.

The newly chartered Bustamante Banco de Comercio is doing a brisk business in the conversion of McAllen dollars into Mexican pesos. At the request of Bob Sánchez, the Mexican government eliminated three zeroes in its currency in order to facilitate money exchange transactions between the two countries.

The Bustamante Chamber of Commerce is now actively involved in the development of a five-year plan for the remodeling of the Bob Sánchez house. Plans have already been finished for knocking out portions of the new exterior walls in order to install vents for the stove, clothes dryer, hot water heaters and other appliances, which, not being very common in Bustamante, were not envisioned and included in the original reconstruction. The connecting of the outgoing sewer lines to the incoming water main was not a construction error, but an unsuccessful attempt by the Bustamante Water Conservation District to recycle water. Since the inauguration of the water fountain in the Sánchez backyard, towns situated over the Bustamante Aquifer, such as Villaldama, Lampasos, Camaron, Sabinas-Hidalgo and several others, have been without water. It is regrettable that all the new floors had to be torn out to rectify the improper water linkage, particularly since the recycling of waste water was unnecessary. A new water conduit being built by Bob Sánchez from Amistad Dam in Del Rio to Bustamante will easily meet the water needs of the new fountain and provide relief in nearby communities.

The economic growth of Bustamante has not gone unnoticed. Later this year, a ceremony will be held in Washington, D.C., where the U.S. Department of Commerce will recognize Bob Sánchez for his international accomplishments. His house remodeling project in Bustamante has led to an unexpected acceleration in the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Trade goals between Mexico and the United States, which were projected to be met in 1999, were met early in 1994 through the Bob Sánchez remodeling effort in Bustamante, Nuevo Leon.

“It is this type of individual initiative which is moving Mexico out of the Third World and into the family of developed nations,” said President Salinas of Mexico in acknowledging Bob Sánchez’s contribution to the economic development of the Republic of Mexico.