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A COUNTRY LIKE HOME

Un-Mexican Activities: It's the Boss's Wife

EL PROFESOR SZEKELY'S wife was an energetic business woman in three languages. She was an American citizen, and her first language was naturally American, but she had spent some years of her childhood in Tahiti, where she picked up fluent, happy-go-lucky French. Her Spanish was forceful, and equally carefree about grammar. Directions for much of the business she transacted originated with El Profesor, and were passed on to her in the mixture of French and English they used together. She elaborated and added to these instructions in American and Spanish for the benefit of the stream of gringos and Mexicans who came to her office throughout the day and evening asking what they should do next. La Rosa being what it was, these instructions seemed to run the whole gamut of human activity from agriculture and bookbinding to X-rays, Yoga and Zoroastrianism.

Mrs. Szekely also dealt with the buying, which was a considerable operation each week, by the time purchases made on the U.S. side had been brought across the border. Buying excited her and she got a great kick out of auction sales. If a San Diego restaurant had a fire she'd be there as soon as the fire engines were out of the way, picking up scorched refrigerators and singed soda fountains real cheap. Once, after she'd bought most of the contents of a fire-damaged timber yard, she found she'd signed an agreement to have all the blackened junk out within 36 hours. Everyone in La Rosa who could cross the border was loaded into trucks, and they all worked nonstop disentangling the stuff, which was any old way like a rook's nest. They hauled the first few truckloads feverishly back to the border crossing point, which was about fifty miles away over a winding mountain road. But that was too far. So the weakest member was left to guard the border dump and start filling in forms for the U.S. and Mexican Customs. The others hauled the blackened timber to the backyard of a house Mrs. Szekely's father owned in a San Diego suburb. It wasn't a very big backyard, and a good deal overflowed into the street.

They had it all out within the time limit, and then started to load again for the trip to the border. To comply with U.S. Customs regulations it had to be unloaded at the border for inspection and weighing. Indeed, Mrs. Szekely counted herself fortunate that the Mexicans did not insist on further unloading in their Customs zone. The blackened toilers, who'd been at it more than a week by this time, working fantastically long hours, were capable only of uttering a faint keening at this possibility, but as each load went through they watched the ancient and inscrutable Mexican Customs official like men unsure of their lives. . . As it happened, nearly one-third of the timber was usable. The rest of it was chopped up for firewood, and blackened everyone who touched it.

In the early days of La Rosa, before El Profesor had his Mexican citizenship, which in turn made him eligible for a U.S. border crossing card, it was Mrs. Szekely who made all the buying forays into San Diego, by herself, but loaded with minute instructions from El Profesor, who liked to think he could foresee every contingency and allow for every detail. Naturally, she was pretty well known at the border. The immigration people on both sides passed the time of day with her in the friendliest fashion; the Customs officials were the ones who kept their eyes peeled. Why shouldn't she pass the immigration barrier easily? She was an American citizen and the wife of one who became a Mexican citizen; she had privileges north and south. Of course, there were those of us who were thoroughly foreign and had to watch our step. El Profesor was always ready to give advice and map out a path through the hazards and hedges of the immigration laws. We were grateful and envied the secure position he and his wife had attained.

One day, during a period when La Rosa was having trouble with a Mexican Immigration Chief who disliked gringos, the Postmaster on the U.S. side of the border, a cranky, uncertain man who hated Mexicans, drove up to El Profesor's house, and when one of us answered the door, scratched his head and remarked tentatively, "Er, it's the boss's wife. . . ." It seemed that Mrs. Szekely had been nobbled by the Immigration Chief, and was being held at the border. El Profesor left for Tecate in a cloud of dust, instructing us to shut the gates and turn all Mexican visitors away. That was about midday. Mrs. Szekely didn't get home till seven o'clock. The Immigration Chief wanted to put her in gaol, but he was a Federal official and the gaol was controlled by local and State functionaries such as the Mayor and the Tecate Commandante of Police, who hated Federal officials on principle, and this one in particular.



"The boss's wife . . . had been nobbled at the border"

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N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 27, 1956.