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It Started with Alethea

I can't remember when I haven't been fascinated with anything I could learn about or from another country or even another part of this country. The exotic nature of anything different pulls me toward it: if the architecture is different, I want to investigate it; if the ingredients of the dish are strange, I want to hear about and taste them; if the landscape is mountainous or flat or wooded or desert or wet, I want to see it; if the complexion is darker or lighter, I want to get to know the person who has it.

One of my first encounters with the exotic came in the third grade when Alethea Jelley appeared in our class soon after school started. Even if she had been present the first day, she would have stood out because she was different from anyone I'd ever seen. She was two or three inches taller than anyone else in Miss Secrest's class, almost as tall as Miss Secrest herself. She was introduced simply by her name, Alethea Jelley, itself an exotic sound. Miss Secrest was a no-nonsense teacher who told us simply that Alethea had just moved into the neighborhood - and nothing else. But I could see her shy, bony tallness, clad in a dark print cotton dress that hung from her shoulders and was, even to my untrained, usually uncritical eyes, far out of date. So was her very long, black braid which reached her waist. All the girls I knew had short Dutch bobs or short curls. I was fascinated with her large black eyes and her smooth complexion, a different brown from any I'd seen before. She was clearly embarrassed by the brief attention she received from Miss Secrest and the class.

At recess, I overcame my own shyness long enough to approach her, the new girl, standing all alone. I didn't know how to ask very probing questions, the sort which would have satisfied my curiosity about this exotic creature, but I did learn that she was born in Madras, India. Later from other sources, I heard that her father was a missionary to India and that her mother, no longer living, had been one of his early converts to Christianity. Later, when we were studying India, Miss Secrest discovered that Alethea spoke, in addition to her flawless English, an Indian dialect, which one I wish I knew. She asked Alethea to stand before the class and speak to us in her Indian language, but Alethea was so shy that she had to turn her back to the class in order to say a few halting words. I was captivated with the harsh yet musically rhythmic sound I heard. I wanted to hear more, but Alethea's shyness coupled with mine resulted in my learning little more about her before she disappeared from class after Christmas.

I was an avid student in Mrs. Bone's geography classes, which were my only further link, albeit a powerful one, to anything exotic until I reached high school, where I welcomed the opportunity to take all the Spanish classes offered. I went with my teacher, Mabel Turman, to city-wide Pan American meetings, where I could see and hear some of the city's Mexican heritage citizens. I loved their liltingly accented English and took special delight in hearing Senora Angelita Martinez-Gomez, the wife of the Mexican consul to Dallas, when she often sang for the meetings. She had a lovely coloratura soprano voice and was generous in sharing her talent, always singing *Granada* as an encore for her

enthusiastic audiences. Sometimes she brought with her some dancers who would perform the “jarabe tapatia” with its colorful costumes.

When I attended S.M.U., I continued my Spanish, majoring in the language and literature and adding Latin, French, and Portuguese when the opportunities arose. In Spanish literature classes I frequently could talk to Mexican-American students who had grown up in the United States and wanted to learn something of their heritage.

After I graduated, I spent six weeks in Saltillo, Mexico, in a trip sponsored by Texas Woman's University. All of our instructors were Mexicans living in Saltillo - a poet, a novelist, a lawyer, and a businessman. On Saturday nights we always attended dances and got acquainted with local residents, both male and female. I especially delighted in the friendship of Rosa Blanca, a Saltillo girl who soon made me sit on my hands when I talked to her, because no gente Spanish lady *ever* uses her hands in speaking. Without my hands, I was virtually tongue-tied at first but learned to talk moderately well.



ENVOY IN PAJAMAS—"It isn't dignified, but I'll do anything to build good will," Mexican Consul Luis Perez-Abreu said Friday as he left his sickbed to interview a group of Dallas girls who will attend summer school in Saltillo, Mexico. Left to right, standing: Joan Hexter, Betty Linz Kahn, Nellie Jane Loomis, the Consul, Catherine Murphree and Mary Frances Hlokan. Seated: Fay Lipper and Mary Lucile Bergen. Perez-Abreu has been confined to his home for the last few weeks after an operation to relieve an ear ailment.

I also met a local bull fighter whom I dated a couple of times, seeing a side of Saltillo life quite different from our well-structured official school outings. I was well aware that a proper Mexican young lady of my age would not have been allowed to have an unchaperoned date with a young Mejicano. He took me to a Saltillo of unpaved streets and less than handsome houses. We had dinner in a little posada that served delicious peasant fare instead of the good Spanish cuisine I'd been eating at our hotel. I even got to see him fight the bulls, an activity about which I had a good bit of ambivalence. I understood enough Spanish to learn, from the men sitting about us, that my Juanito wasn't a very skilled torero.



Some of the highlights of that stay in Saltillo included side trips eastward to Monterrey, with its city atmosphere and lovely mountain vistas, and westward to the state of Nueva Leon, with its rugged desert atmosphere and sparse habitation. I was fascinated with the occasional adobe houses we passed, as well as the bare-footed, serape-clad ranchero hands. The highlight of our school experience, so far as I was concerned, was the entertainment we staged for the people of Saltillo who had been so hospitable to us. I learned the jarabe tapatio and felt very *Ámejicana* twirling the lacy, full skirts of my china poblana costume.



In later years I have satisfied my love of the exotic by living in a number of different regions in the United States. The salmon, blue crabs, and smelts of Oregon, the Brunswick stew, hush puppies, and grits of North Carolina, not to mention the contrasting barbecue of North Carolina, Virginia, and Texas, were just a little of the "exotica" I

experienced in our various residences. I've visited all of the states, except Hawaii, and seen several parts of Canada.

But the most fulfilling association with the exotic has been in my teaching English as a Second Language to a United Nations assortment of Europeans, Middle Easterners, Asians, Africans, and South Americans. There I have made friends with many individuals, their ways of living, their foods, and other aspects of their cultures - both in class and out. I ate Vietnamese cooking in the tiny kitchen of one of my college students, took a Chinese plastic surgeon to his first live classical concert, and helped a Chilean social worker polish her English as she wrote her master's thesis. Even the everyday association of the middle school youngsters I see now provides an excitement and satisfaction. I can't look at a small, brown girl and tell you whether she's from Vietnam or Korea or a rugged tanned boy and tell you whether he's from Puerto Rico or Guatemala; I can't tell an Egyptian from a Syrian, or a Kenyan from a native of Chad, but I can help them learn about the strange ways the English language works and find out a bit about their hopes and daily life. And it all started way back there with Alethea Jelley.