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About the Institute

The Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, a research division of Carnegie Mellon University, specializes in the history of botany and all aspects of plant science and serves the international scientific community through research and documentation. To this end, the Institute acquires and maintains authoritative collections of books, plant images, manuscripts, portraits and data files, and provides publications and other modes of information service. The Institute meets the reference needs of botanists, biologists, historians, conservationists, librarians, bibliographers and the public at large, especially those concerned with any aspect of the North American flora.

Hunt Institute was dedicated in 1961 as the Rachel McMasters Miller Hunt Botanical Library, an international center for bibliographical research and service in the interests of botany and horticulture, as well as a center for the study of all aspects of the history of the plant sciences. By 1971 the Library's activities had so diversified that the name was changed to Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation. Growth in collections and research projects led to the establishment of four programmatic departments: Archives, Art, Bibliography and the Library.

OBERG, Mrs. R.

From Fagg

September 18, 1952

Mrs. Ruth Oberg,
Las Casas #10,
Oaxaca, Oax, Mexico

Dear Mrs. Oberg:

You may be interested to know that the plant with the large coarse leaf growing near the foot of your steps is Wigandia caracasana, a member of the Hydrophyllaceae. Since this plant is common throughout much of Mexico and I saw it nearly everywhere I went, I was glad to learn its name from Professor Martinez at the Instituto Biologico at Chapultepec. I also discovered that the straggling plant with blue-green leaves and tubular yellow flowers which I showed you is Nicotiana glauca. I saw it all around and especially on the road up to Monte Alban, and thought you might like to know its name.

Upon our return to Mexico City I secured three copies of Flandrau's Viva Mexico, one to keep, one to lend and one to give away. We are certainly indebted to you for having introduced us to this delightful work, and I might add that I have ordered three or four other books on the basis of my brief examination of them in your marvelous library.

Now that we are home, the salient fact which emerges from our trip is a determination to return to Mexico as soon as possible; so it may be that some of these days I shall be knocking at your gate again.

May I tell you once more how much I appreciated your kindness to my wife and to say for both of us that it was a great pleasure to get to know you and to share in your enthusiasm for Oaxaca and its plant and animal inhabitants.

Sincerely yours,

October 16, 1952

Mrs. Ruth Oberg,
Las Casas #10,
Oaxaca, Oax., Mexico

Dear Mrs. Oberg:

While we were in Oaxaca I took a trip out to Tule to see the famous "Big Tree," in which, as a botanist, I was naturally keenly interested. We had but a short time there and since the day was cloudy, I did not succeed in getting any worthwhile pictures for use in my classes.

I wonder if you would be good enough to see whether you could secure for me a 35 mm. Kodachrome transparency of this tree. As I recall, there was a camera supply and gift store (I believe it was called La Primavera) almost directly across the street from the Monte Alban, where I saw a color picture of this tree. They have in this store a large number of Kodachrome pictures in a revolving frame and I am relatively certain that there was a picture of the "Big Tree" among them. The cost of these pictures, as I remember, is a little more than three pesos, and if I knew how to send the equivalent of that money to the store directly, I would do so. If, however, you could manage to secure the picture for me, I shall see that you will be reimbursed by one of our friends who is going to Mexico this winter and will doubtless be visiting Oaxaca.

I hate to bother you with such a matter but would certainly greatly appreciate it if you could help me out.

With best wishes and warm regards, I am

Sincerely yours,

Apartado 162
Oaxaca, Oax. Mexico
October 19, 1952

Dear Doctor and Mrs. Fogg:

Both your letters received and I've enjoyed hearing from you. Glad to know that Mexico calls you back and will look forward to hearing your knock or ring at the door.

Enclosed you will find the transparency of El Tule. It is not a very good one but it is all they have. However, the tree is hard to photograph, due to its size and the high wall around the church yard. About the only way is to climb on a truck outside the wall.

The price is so little I wouldn't mention it but I know you will not rest until you have done something about it. So if you wish, send me about 35 cents in U.S. postage stamps and we will call it square. Then you won't have to bother anyone else with it.

When you were talking to Prof. Martinez, did you get a copy of his studies of the Ahuehuete (*Taxodium mucronatum*, Ten.)? I am sure he would send you a separate, if you asked him for it, and if he still has it. While it is in Spanish, you would have no trouble reading it and the photographs are well worth having.

After a very wet September and half of October, we are now having beautiful weather. If there are no more heavy rains between now and the 28th, I hope to start on a two week horseback trip in the mountains north and east of Oaxaca. To Yalalag, Villa Alta, and back by Natividad and Ixtlan de Juarez, in case you have a map at hand.

With many kind wishes for all the family,

Sincerely

Ruth Oberg

October 22, 1952

Mrs. Ruth Oberg,
Apartado 162,
Oaxaca, Oax.,
Mexico

Dear Mrs. Oberg:

I am deeply grateful to you for having secured the picture of the Tule tree, for although, as you say, it leaves something to be desired, it is far better than any picture which I was able to secure. Following your suggestion, I am enclosing a few U. S. postage stamps which I hope will cover the actual cost, although they cannot pay you for the trouble which you have so kindly taken.

I have just received from Dr. Martinex the specimens which I left with him a few days before leaving Mexico and in writing to thank him for sending them I shall ask whether he has a copy of his paper on the Ahuehuete. Although my verbal facility in Spanish is almost nil, I find no difficulty in reading it. Incidentally, I secured a copy of the paper on Latin American Foods from the United Fruit Company and am indebted to you for having brought it to my attention.

You may be interested to know that I saw Amos Coleman in New York a few days ago. He and Carmen came on from Cuernavaca for the annual meeting of the University of Pennsylvania Alumni Clubs. He brought with him on behalf of our Mexican alumni a very attractive invitation to the Associated Clubs to hold their 1953 meeting in Mexico. I do hope that the Executive Committee will see fit to accept this invitation, for I know that our alumni down there could arrange an extremely interesting and attractive program.

It is good to hear of your continued activity and I hope that the weather will permit you to embark upon your horseback trip as planned. I shall follow your progress on the map with great interest and hope some day to learn of the results of this expedition.

With warmest regards from all of us, I am

Sincerely yours,

Apartado 162
Oaxaca, Oax. Mexico
January 4, 1954

Dear Doctor Fogg:

Happy New Year, but WHERE ARE THE FOGGS? So long since I have heard from you.

Aside from wanting to hear from you, I'm in need of help. If you will advise me, I'll be so grateful!

The orchid catalog is now nearing the final stages of preparation. But those final stages will take money, for study either at Harvard or in other big libraries and for two or three collecting trips that are important but too expensive for me to swing alone. I know that there are foundations that give grants for such work but I am not sure which ones would be most likely to help. It would be different if I were a professional botanist with a degree and reputation.

I think the Guggenheim is out, for that is given to established writers, artists, etc. has an age limit and more applications than they can handle. I have heard of an American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia that has given similar grants, perhaps you would know about them. There are probably others you know about.

For over a year I have been regional editor of the Orchid Journal and a few other articles have been published.

In a few days my studies of the Mexican Laelias will be typed ready for the Journal to publish. But I don't know when it will come out. Would you be interested in seeing a copy, to get an idea of how I am handling the material? I

would be glad to send it to you.

During May-June of last summer I studied in the very excellent library at the United Fruit Company's school near Tegucigalpa. Drove down with Doctor and Mrs. Williams, he is the botanist there. That is a drive you must take some day. Through Guatamala and El Salvador it is like a great tropical park much of the way.

The Chapas are now proud grandparents and so happy! I was in Cuernavaca the first part of December, but Mildred was in Brownsville and Mary Margaret still in the city, so I didn't go over.

Do let me hear from you and I hope you will say that you will soon be in Mexico again-- for the Easter vacation perhaps?

With all good wishes,

Sincerely

Ruth Oberg

February 16, 1955

Mrs. Ruth Oberg
Apartado 162
Oaxaca, Oax.,
Mexico

Dear Ruth:

I called upon you at your home across from the meat market on Saturday, January 29th, only to find that you were somewhere off in the wilds of Chiapas. Since I had myself just returned from Chiapas, it was impossible for me to turn around and go looking for you.

I was indeed sorry to miss you and hope that on my next visit to Mexico, which will probably be next May, I may have the pleasure of catching up with you.

Sincerely yours,

John M. Fogg, Jr.
Director

to Fagg from Oberg

Apartado 162
Oaxaca, Oax. Mexico
March 17, 1955

Dear Jack:

Thank you for your letter of a month ago. I didn't get back until the tenth and I've been working like mad to get the plants cared for. Now I'm discouraged. Seems like the more I plant the more there are!

I am so sorry to have missed you all around on your last visit. I helped Mildred Chapa entertain your Penn. people and they told me you had gone to Central America, they thought. Of course this is the time of the year when I am away much of the time. But if I only knew when my friends were coming I could plan to be here.

Can't you come down next in April instead of May? I must leave for California not later than May 6th. I am eager to hear about your present work...are you interested in rare plants and what kinds? Want to know about wonderful collecting spots? I can tell you! Where did you go in Chiapas? To have found me would have involved a plane flight from Tuxtla and three days on mule back!

Plan to work a month at Huntington while in California, then back here sometime in July to catch the summer blooms. Now I must get out to those plants!

All good wishes to you and your family,

Sincerely

Ruth

Oberg

Apartado 162
Oaxaca, Oax.
February 7, 1956

Dear Jack:

It was so nice to see you and your wife again, even if I did have to receive you in nightgown and robe and with no "face" on!

For the data on the tree bark, the tea of which is supposed to be good for ulcers (cancer?) see Martinez, pp. 377-378. Amphypterygium adstringens Schiede. What a name!

The young geologist is back and says that his doctor reported the pain he had came from his liver and might have been caused by the tea he took for diabetes. So he advised not taking any more. Of course there is always the danger of taking too much of unknown herbs. But the old Mexican man didn't suffer. My guess is that the doctor down there will go on experimenting with it.

Now here is one for the book: a friend from Mitla, Walter Miller, came in the other day and showed me two seeds, asking me if I knew what they were. I told him yes, Thevetia thevetioides. Then he explained that he had had a request from England for a kilo of them, at some fantastic price--10 lbs. or something like that. It seems that an Englishman who was here carried back two of them in his pocket and when he got home discovered that his hemorrhoids had disappeared. Now all his friends want seeds to carry!

W.M. said his 10 year old son heard him telling this story and asked his father to let him have the seeds. In an hour or so he handed them back saying solemnly that his hemorrhoids were all cured. In an hour or so he came back again asking: "Dad, what are hemorrhoids?"!!!!

Since you were here I made a week's collecting trip to Pluma Hidalgo and met the young doctor who seems very keen. I think his name is Ortiz, but I am bad on names and can't at the moment find where I wrote it down. But I can always get it for you.

Let me know when you are coming down again.

All the best

Ruth

OBERG, Ruth



San Felipe del Agua
January 7, 1957

Dear Jack, et. al:

Sorry to have missed you, but delighted that you are coming back this way and that I will have a visit after so long a time.

I'm living in an apartment at the Hotel Rancho San Felipe, if you are driving come out past the Oaxaca Courts and just keep coming. You will see the hotel door and sign just after you enter the village.

If you are not driving, then any taxi will bring you out. I haven't a car, or I'd come down and get you.

So I shall be looking forward with pleasure to seeing you next Wednesday or Thursday.

With saludas,

Sincerely

Ruth

P.O. address the same: Apartado 162

Apartado 162
Oaxaca, Oax.
February 21, 1957

Dear Jack:

Something I forgot when writing you before: there is an American who has gone to live on the Gulf slope of the Isthmus, Paul Bates. Address: Apartado Postal 40, Matias Romero, Oaxaca. He wants to know if it would be possible to cultivate the shrub used for Rauwolfia down there. He is interested in growing the unusual thing that might have commercial value. I believe he is getting his "papers" and also has a Mexican partner, so that part of it is all right.

I told him that sarsaparilla (sp?) grows wild down there, but I couldn't help him with the local names. Can you?

I'm having a plague of rats, eating my pseudobulbs and even tender plants. I am keeping Wafarin out, but when you consider that they come from all around, it will be a long time before we get rid of them all, I'm afraid.

Saludas to you and your sweet wife.

Sincerely

Ruth

March 4, 1957

Mrs. Ruth Oberg
Apartado 162
Oaxaca, Oax.
Mexico

Dear Ruth:

Thanks so much for your two letters which I enjoyed greatly - especially the story about the pseudo-therapeutic properties of Thevetia! Also, I was glad to have your comments on the anti-diabetic which you had told us about.

We all felt pretty terrible about having disturbed you that evening and you were truly gracious to have received us so cordially. Next time I shall see that you are given a proper warning in advance.

I am not sure that I can help your American botanist who wants to grow Rauwolfia without knowing, first, which species he has in mind, and second, what his growing conditions are. Of the 105 species of this genus several are now in use by the pharmaceutical houses. The Asiatic R. serpentina, which I saw and collected in Ceylon, India, Burma and Thailand, requires shade and a rainfall of 90-100 inches a year as well as a very deep humus soil. The African R. vomitoria is a plant of the tropical jungles where it becomes a tree, requiring some years before achieving value as a crop plant. The Mexican R. hirsuta is used to some extent as a source of reserpine and of course is a common species throughout most of southern Mexico and Central America. I have collected it from a score of localities. If your friend cares to write to me telling me more specifically what he has in mind, I'll be glad to try to enlighten him.

I did not know that the true Sarsaparilla, which is of course a species of Smilax, grew in Mexico, nor can I find it in Martinez's book on Medicinal Botany.

Hope you get rid of the rats!

With best wishes and warm regards from us both,

Sincerely yours,



HOTEL GENEVE

7^a DE LONDRES 130
MEXICO, D. F.
MEXICO

40 Egg from Oberg
RELIABLE GARAGE
ONE BLOCK FROM HOTEL

Oaxaca, March 12th

Dear Jack:

See Martinez, Plantas Medicinales p. 330 and Miranda, Vegetation Chiapas, ~~ex~~ v. 2:385 for Smilax in Mexico. Don't know if any of these are the ones used by the drug houses in the U.S. But at one time an American was in touch with them and they were eager to buy the one growing on the Istmo--but he couldn't get collectors!

Thanks for the other information--I have sent it on to Mr. Bates and suggested he write you of his growing conditions, etc.

Your visits are all too short! After you leave I always think of so many other things you might be interested in hearing about.

Saludas to you both.

Sincerely

Ruth

S. Regalis (Miranda)

S. subpubescens

S. officinalis

S. medica

April 24, 1957

Mrs. Ruth Oberg
Oaxaca, Mexico

Dear Ruth:

You are just about right concerning the Sarsaparilla but there may be some room for argument. I had always believed that Smilax Sarsaparilla was the only source of the drug and because this is a South American species I told you that Sarsaparilla did not occur wild in Mexico.

Standley, in Trees and Shrubs of Mexico, p. 104, says that "S. medica is believed to be one of the chief sources of the drug" and gives its range as, "Veracruz and San Luis Potosi; reported from Tamanlipas." This, of course, seems to rule out Chiapas.

Another thing that threw me off is that Martinez does not list a single Smilax in the Index of his Plantas Medicinales, although S. medica is described and even figured on p. 330. Miranda is equally confusing. Why can't our friends down there make a decent index?

It was good to hear from you and I hope your friend can succeed with his project.

Sincerely yours,

Oaxaca, May 9, 1957

Dear Jack:

Thank you for your letter of April 24th.

No, just because Dr. Standley didn't have a specimen of Smilax medica from Chiapas doesn't say that it could not be found there. Almost anything that grows in Vera Cruz can be found in comparable regions of Chiapas.

Of course you have the two references to Rauwolfia heterophylla in Martinez', but I wonder if you ever ran across the short article in Anales del Inst. Bio. Tomo 9: Nus. 1 & 2 (1938) in which one Roberto Llamas reports on its use as an anti-malaria remedy.

No time for more gossip just now. When are you coming down again?

With all good wishes,

Sincerely

Ruth

P.S. I have another report on the diabetes-curing herb! This time the reference is to just one plant. But they say no one will tell which one it is. However, a friend is going to try to get me a whole plant.

P.S. No. 2

Some more references as to Smilax :

Smilax aristolochiaefolia (Zarzaparilla) Reko, Mitobotanica Zapoteca .

Smilax medica, Plantas Curativas de Mexico, Dr. Luis Cabrera

Send this a silly-looking letter. If I weren't in such a hurry I'd do it over!