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Maria Sanchez

By JOHN C. NEFF

MIDWAY on the rolling state road that runs from Romeroville, New Mexico, to Santa Rosa, there lies a small village by the name of Esperito. To a stranger, Esperito has nothing about its appearance that would cause one to remember it. It consists, chiefly, of two turns in the road, a typical church of local stone, a grey post office with a false front, and an inn that is not an inn but a strange combination of dwelling and chicken coop. Indeed, hundreds of travelers pass through Esperito each summer on their way to the famous Carlsbad Caverns or the stamping grounds of Billy the Kid in Lincoln County. And the only indication of their passing they leave behind is a great cloud of thick dust which, when they have crossed the Pecos, just south of the village, settles on fence posts and adobe houses and tamarisks that line the road. And if by the end of the summer there has been no rain, Esperito, thanks to the rush of the traveler, assumes a cloak of sand and dirt that in time becomes part of the village itself.

But travelers are, on the whole, that way. They rush to see something famous, such as the Caverns. They take a quick look at it, feel mightily pleased with themselves for having "come all this way," and then they return home to tell their friends about it. Ah! The secret of what they tell their friends is, if you would know it, quite easily explained.

While at the famous attraction, Carlsbad Caverns or Lincoln County, toward which they have bent their all, they purchase a guide booklet. The larger and more expensive, the better. They buy it, first, because they can later display it as concrete proof of their visit. (Why they should require proof is a matter for speculation.) But the second and more important cause for the purchase is that they can thereby learn exactly what to tell and what not to tell their friends

back home. From the Carlsbad booklet, for example, they discover that the Caverns were found by an old cowman named White who, on seeing a black cloud rise from a distant hill one evening, raced across the countryside expecting to find an old volcano coming to life. "Imagine," the excited traveler tells his friends, "imagine that cowboy's surprise when he found not a volcano but a deep cavern. And the black cloud he saw consisted of millions of bats! Yes, sir, millions of bats!"

All of which goes to explain why average travelers never bother about a little place like Esperito. For Esperito is indicated on few maps; and worse than that, it has no booklet!

But there is something for one to see, or rather there is some one that one should talk to, in Esperito. She's worth the effort, even, of coming down the state road in the rainy season. Now sometimes when drivers think their cars need gas, they stop at an unpretentious adobe house in front of which stands a single gas pump, like a sentinel. This is at the first of Esperito's two turns in the road. Here, the price of gas is generally higher than in the towns. But then, as one might say, beggars can't be choosers. So you pull up alongside the pump and blow your horn.

Nothing happens. Esperito continues its dream in the mid-day sun. You blow again, and still no response. Finally you get out and indignantly bang on the tattered screen door. You hear muttering within, scraping of feet. And presently a large, white-faced woman appears.

"Is there some one who'll sell me some gas?" you ask, flatly.

The woman looks at you with a large smile. She pushes open the door, steps into the road, and goes about the business of filling your tank like an expert. Well! This has happened before, still you are a little astonished. She seems such an old woman! But then there are the Carlsbad Caverns waiting to receive you, so you pay her and drive on, contented with the assurance that you won't be running

out of gas, thank God, on that long stretch of empty road ahead that is indicated on your map.

After the dust from your car has settled on the fence posts and tamarisks and indeed on all of Esperito, the woman who sold you the gas goes back into her house. As she passes through the door she notices there is a new gash in the screen. "God Almighty!" she cries, patting the wounded door. And then she closes it and Esperito returns to lifelessness.

That was Mrs. Sanchez, the star, the light, the life of Esperito. A friend of everyone, sheepmen and cattlemen alike, she is the one, the only person in both turns of the state road who has the respect of all. The cattlemen swear they would die before eating mutton, let alone associating with sheepmen. The sheepmen stand firm by their traditional hatred of everything and everyone connected with cows and steers. But each of these groups, strangely enough, has a deep affection for old Mrs. Sanchez. She is the go-between, the mediator, for the two factions.

Which is, as any New Mexican will tell you, precisely what makes Mrs. Sanchez interesting and important; and which, incidentally, warrants all map-makers to indicate the village of Esperito with a respectful quantity of ink.

When Maria Sanchez (for that, everyone says, is her real name) was born, no one seems to know. Perhaps she has caught a little of that gentle vanity from travelers that is so prevalent among women in the more knowing centers of the world. Or again, perhaps she really doesn't know how old she is herself. In any case, her age is a deep secret. Years ago, there was much conjecture among the natives as to whether she was born in 1862 or 1872. Those who said 1872, indicated that Maria would surely be unable to run the filling station if she were born any earlier. The ones who believed in the year 1862 claimed that the air of Esperito would enable a person to do anything at an even riper age. Cautiously, Maria was approached on the subject; but nothing ever came of it. She refused to talk.

Indeed, her continued silence with regard to her birth date has eventually made not only the date but also her name, legendary. People living on lonely ranches south of Esperito speak of her as "old Mrs. Sanchez," yet they rarely dream she actually exists.

However, for the Esperitans themselves, Maria Sanchez is, as I have already said, of prime importance. Sometimes when the Pecos is low and the irrigation ditches that run along the southern side of the village are drying up, the Esperitans will come, one by one, over to Maria's filling station and ask her advice. Each person is anxious to consult her privately and then announce her solution of the problem as his own. But always there is a crowd congregated about her door as soon as anyone indicates he is going to call on her. What does Maria think of the situation? Will they continue to supply the ditches with the reserve waters and hope the river will rise? Or will they wait, and take a long chance on letting the alfalfa and corn crops die? What does Maria think?

Maria Sanchez adjusts her plump body in a chair that was meant for a smarter figure. She sputters and coughs. Everyone waits, respectfully. Finally she speaks. "God Almighty, it's terrible! Terrible!" She draws a fat hand over her brow, coughs again, and then looks to see if they are heeding her properly. "God Almighty! As I was saying to some people this morning, I thought sure it would rain today. Those big clouds over Bernal Peak-way had water in them sure enough. Well, they went on, too." She stops for a moment to let her words receive proper digestion. "But God Almighty, it went and rained over near La Liendre instead! Not a drop here!"

There is quite a group gathered in the room now. Everyone is straining to get a glimpse of Maria. They know perfectly well what she looks like, but just the same they rather enjoy being assured of their impression of her.

Maria continues with her speech. She knows she must talk to them. Somehow or other she begins to talk about

the *baile* that is to be held in the school house in Anton Chico next Saturday night. Anton Chico is off the main road, but twice the size of Esperito. For a moment, Maria tells about the good old days when *bailes* were really *bailes*, and not cluttered so much with fox-trots and jazz dances. Those whose ages more nearly approximate hers respond with pride and not a little enthusiasm. They, too, take turns recalling the good old days. One woman blushing tells how she met her husband at her first *baile* in Anton Chico. Everyone laughs over this and what is almost a confession of romances begins. Maria wears a large smile.

But then suddenly a young fellow speaks up. "About the ditches, Mrs. Sanchez? What do you think we ought to do about the ditches?"

And so Maria finds herself ruthlessly brought back to the moment. She repeats her account of the cloud over Bernal Peak and the subsequent rain at La Liendre. It is getting late. She wishes one of those travelers would stop for gas! She listens, hopefully. All she hears is the bark of a mongrel dog and the pecking of the chickens in the yard of the inn that is not an inn. "Gold Almighty, it's terrible! Terrible!"

Everyone shakes his head, thereby agreeing.

But here now, Maria has to say something! She removes the shell comb from her white hair and draws it over her skull in a backward motion until it is in place again. "You say the river hasn't come up any?"

"No, it hasn't come up at all," they answer. Everyone is alive again, expectant.

Maria asks if the river has gone down. No, they answer, it is just the same. Jumping at the chance, Maria says, "Well God Almighty, we should be thankful it hasn't gone down. That's a good sign!" Everyone agrees. Why hadn't that been thought of before? This Maria Sanchez uses her head! Now what would she say?

But Maria never had to make any conclusive statement. Because just then the sound she'd been waiting for came

to her ears. A car of travelers was coming to a stop outside her door. "God Almighty! God Almighty! A customer!" She got up with a grunt, leaving the small chair to regain normalcy as best it could. On the way out the door with the wounded screen she said, "Don't do anything yet. It's going to rain. God Almighty, it's got to rain!"

She was out in the road, talking to the travelers who were bound for Carlsbad Caverns. She talked to them before filling the tank, told them about the wonders of the Caverns—though really she'd never been near them. And after she had counted out the change, she gave the driver all the latest road information. Anything, she thought, to waste time.

She made a good job of it, too, because by the time she returned indoors, all her friends were gone. It was meal time, and no true Esperitan will forego a meal for any cause.

Somehow, in some way, rain did come that evening. A heavy torrential rain. It came just as the sun was settling in the direction of Santa Fe, beyond Bernal Peak. As it fell, it was saffron, and the dust it stirred as it first struck the ground was golden. Maria Sanchez stepped out of her door to lock up the filling pump for the night. She felt the first drops touch her forehead.

"God Almighty!" she exclaimed.

Then she went indoors. And on both turns of the road that runs through Esperito, men and women and children remarked on the wisdom of old Maria Sanchez.

Sanctuary

By ALICE LEE SAWYERS

The gate
To my garden
Will always open in—
To convent the adorations and reverence
Of friends.