

History

The Miracle of Doña Magdalena Falfán

The Final Years of Col. Peter Ellis Bean

(Mixing Car Troubles and History in Banderilla, Veracruz)

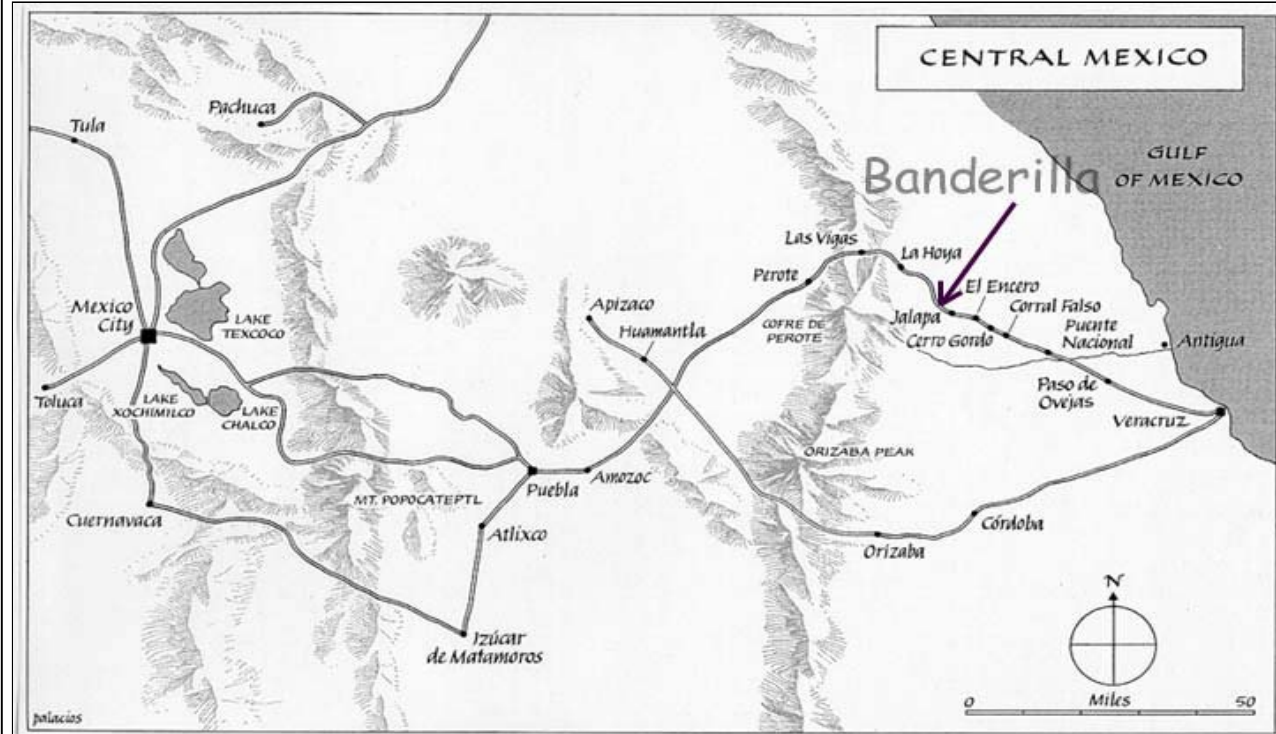
Photographs and Text by John Todd, Jr.

The Story

During my search for Santa Anna's Hacienda "Manga de Clavo", I discovered the excellent research of early Texas history by the Sons of DeWitt Colony. What captured my imagination was their story of Col. Ellis Bean and Doña Magdalena Falfan of Banderilla, Veracruz.

I felt a need to check out the story for myself. It's a fascinating story of a Tennessee Mexican adventurer during the early days of Mexican Independence. The full historical details of the story of their separation as well as how they found other, and a picture of Col. Bean, can be found here:

<http://www.tamu.edu/ccbn/dewitt/beanellis.htm>.



How to Get There

A True Story

It's the true story of beautiful Doña Magdalena Falfan Godo from Banderilla, Veracruz who, in 1815, married Col. Peter Ellis Bean, her adventurer American hero, who went back to the US to take care of some business, promising to return.

Doña Magdalena must have become a local institution, patiently waiting for 25 years, asking travellers for word of her husband along the Camino Real as they watered their horses at the waystop in front of her hacienda in Banderilla.

It is a story unlike that of Doña Conchita Aguelles from the early days of California who waited in vain for years for her Russian explorer "*novio*", Count Rezanov to return.

And, in 1844, how Col. Peter Bean did return to her loving arms to spend the best years of his life in a peaceful Mexican village in the cool mountains just outside Xalapa surrounded by the loving people you find in many small Mexican villages. He finally died peacefully in 1846 at the Hacienda La Banderilla in the arms of his loving wife, Doña Magdalena Falfan de los Godos.

It is a story of love, patience, and strength of a Mexican woman for the man she loved. Often I have wondered where she got the strength to wait, ignoring the advice of loving family members or friends in town to get on with her life and find someone else.



Church of the Virgen de Guadalupe

The Power of Prayer

Doña Magdalena must have prayed many *novenas* here in the parish church to the Virgen de Guadalupe or to San Judas Tadeo, the patron saint of impossible causes, nurturing the hope that her love would return.

When her prayers were finally answered she must have spent the rest of her life giving thanks in this church for the miracle granted to her.

As was the custom in Mexico, the parish cemetery surrounded the church, but as towns developed, they were moved to the outskirts of town.

The Trip to Banderilla

Banderilla is only an hour and a half or so from Veracruz about 5 kms outside of the city of Xalapa on the way to Mexico City. It is a narrow town, 2 to 3 km. long on a steady grade. A climb in a narrow gap along the old Camino Real with low hills on both sides.

Banderilla was officially founded in 1534 as a Spanish royal grant called "*La Venta de Sedeño*", and by 1580 had become an obligatory rest stop on the Camino Real to Mexico City. Sedeño refers to the Sedeño river at the end of town towards Xalapa. You might remember Plymouth Rock was settled in 1620. Because of its location Banderilla over the years is a town with a lot of history.

After reading [this story about Peter Bean from the Sons of Dewitt Colony in Texas](#), I knew I had to go take a look at the place where Col. Peter Bean had spent his final years and enter the same parish church where Doña Magdalena must have spent many hours in prayer for the safe return of her American husband. Perhaps I would find the remains of Peter Bean or Doña Magdalena, or some remaining members of the Falfan family who might have more stories to tell about their American ancestor.

Car Trouble

Many of my "typical" trips in Mexico start out OK, but sometimes later turn into high adventure.

That morning arriving in Xalapa, the traffic along the 6 lane highway was heavy. Lots of slow trucks and buses climbing the grade. Just after Xalapa, the fog settled in.

"Banderilla has to be around here somewhere", I thought to myself. I'd passed through here many times.

Up ahead through the fog was a stop light. Maybe a cut off to Banderilla. As I slowed for the light, I felt a slight "thump" in the car, and noticed the power steering was gone! The car would steer, but it was really hard.

The light turned red and I stopped and waited, wondering what to do.

"None of the panic lights on the dashboard had come on, so I guess I am OK for another couple of minutes," I thought, as I anxiously waited for the light to turn green. I began looking for a wide spot along the busy highway where I could pull over. There was none. The highway had a curb.

The light turned green and I sluggishly pulled away wondering how far I could get. Up ahead was a sort of wide spot in the driveway in front of a cement plant. And that's where I headed.

When I came to a stop all the panic lights turned on. "Engine overheat", and "Oil Pressure" were the bad ones. I turned off the key and got out. When I opened the hood, at first it didn't look too bad. The radiator was bubbling and grumbling but there was no vapor being released. Then I noticed the timing belt had slipped off.

That explains it. The timing belt is like the fan belts in older cars. There's only one, and it controls the alternator, air conditioner, water pump, and power steering. You need the timing belt to make everything work.

Whenever I go to Mexico, I make sure I have a spare.

But I was still in a near panic since I only had about \$25 on me. Getting stuck far from home on a lark trying to do a favor for someone, and then disaster strikes. Just like another trip to Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca where we had to spend the weekend in the little town of Juxtlahuaca. Not again!

Having a nice American car in Mexico always carries a certain amount of fear because car parts can be very difficult to find. Sometimes they have to be ordered by bus from Brownsville, or adapt a similar local product which may work for awhile, or have the part made in a local machine shop. I knew the ordeal ahead of me. I had been through the exercise before.

Inside I kind of cringed thinking I may even have to spent the night in Banderilla or Xalapa, or leave the car here to take a bus back to Veracruz. What I felt was a mixture of loneliness, fear, and anger at myself, I guess, as I trudged down the foggy highway full of trucks looking for a mechanic. Maybe this only happens to me, I thought to myself. The story of Col. Bean and Doña Magdalena was now less important.

At the same time, these "typical" travel experiences add to and complicate the intensity of the quest. Yet, at least in Mexico, the Lord is somehow good and sends you His angels to help you out of the problem. It's the only explanation I have. Other experienced travellers in Mexico will tell you the same thing.

In Front of a Large Cement Plant

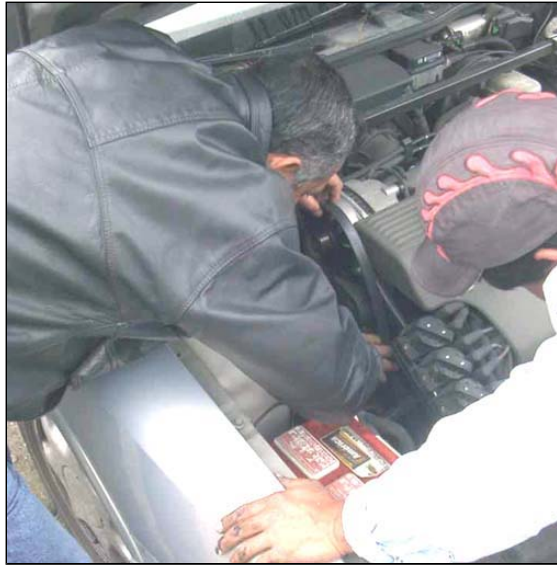
Coming out of the fog of my initial panic, I lowered the hood and looked around.

I realized I had stopped in front of a rather large cement plant. I went over to the office, and asked the lady if she knew of a good mechanic in the neighborhood.

She went out back and called, "Enrique!"

"Who's Enrique?", I asked

"Why, he's our company mechanic", she replied. "We have a fleet of cement trucks to maintain."



Diagnostics

A Locked Tensioner Bearing

Enrique was a positive guy. We looked at the belt that had fallen off, and checked all the pulleys, my panic began to melt a bit. What had caused the problem?

Then we found the culprit. It was a locked up tensioner bearing. A round set of ball bearings, about an inch in diameter didn't look like much.

Not high technology, but in Mexico sometimes a little part like this can cost a fortune.

So, in my mind I figured we are looking at 3 possibilities. \$4, \$60, or not available anywhere and order from Brownsville. And the panic came back.

Oh groan, why does this have to happen to me? (I go through this every time my car breaks down in Mexico).

A Silent Prayer

Then Enrique pointed a half km. down the highway through the fog, and suggested I go to the International Truck Dealership over there. They have a gasoline engine mechanic, and hope against hopes, might even have a tension bearing.

I looked up at the foggy skies and said a silent prayer.

Well, any port in a storm. Let's go for it!

I offered Enrique a couple of bucks, but he wouldn't accept the money, and backed away kind of laughing.

"No, Señor, that's OK. I didn't really do anything." Sometimes, I just love Mexican mechanics!

Shaking his hand, I thanked my savior profusely, and headed down the fog enshrouded highway pessimistically wondering what would happen at the truck dealership.

Although when I left Veracruz the weather was cloudy and mild, with the first breezes of a norte starting to blow, I was glad I'd packed a jacket and a sweater. Sometimes the weather around Xalapa during a norte gets foggy and cold with a heavy dew called the "*chipi-chipi*", especially above Xalapa around Banderilla. I have become acclimated to the "*tierra caliente*", and 50 degrees in the damp mountains feels uncomfortably cold.

A Walk Down the Busy Highway

The International Truck Dealership was about 2 blocks away down the highway and offered a beacon of hope. I entered the new show room and talked to the sales manager.

"No, we don't have any gasoline mechanics. All diesel here." He thought for a moment.

"There's a good mechanic in town, IMPCO is the name. It's a little far, but that's your best bet."

"How do I get there?"

"It's down this side street about 4 blocks to the main street that goes through town. Take a left and go down about 8 blocks. It's kind of far," he sympathized, "but Ing. Orozco is the best in town. Look for a sign off to the left that says, IMPCO."

"What the heck", I thought, not relishing the long walk ahead of me.

I thanked the manager and walked down the side street past a "momma-poppa" store. I really needed a Coke. With coke in hand I continued my walk down the street.

In spite of the fog, coming from the coast, it felt refreshing to be walking in the cold air in the small Mexican town.



Church of the Virgen de Guadalupe

The Smell of Menudo

The smell of hot *menudo* wafting from a pot on the sidewalk in front of a store was inviting.

I got to the end of the street and saw the church about a half block away.

For a moment I forgot about my problem with the car and walked over to the church which I later discovered is about midway through long town.

A man in front of the church told me it was the first and only church in town, and had to be the exact location where Doña Magdalena spent her time praying for the safe return of her husband.

They also told me the church office is open from 4 to 8 PM. I thought I might find some burial records. There was no churchyard, or typical old style cemetery.

They told me the cemetery was a couple of blocks away, and sounded like it might be "recent", like after 1880.

Almost across the street is a little park with a gazebo.

The day I was there, it looked like market day with a big "*tianguis*" covering every square inch of the park and extending out into the wide street.



City Offices

A Visit to City Hall

A block or so up the street was the city hall, and about the only office that wasn't busy was the small mayors office, so I stopped in, and I guess I talked to the mayor.

The people in the office were fascinated by the story of Doña Magdalena and Bean. They said there are still some Falfan's in the area, but they don't sound like wealthy people today.

They offered to introduce me to some of them but I didn't have time. I really needed to get the car fixed and get back to Veracruz before dark.

Besides, these meetings always turn into a long enjoyable lunch sharing history and anecdotes and unfortunately today I didn't have the time.

One of the ladies in the mayors office suggested I go to the Casa de la Cultura, just up the street.

I was told the *Directora* was the local authority on local history.

Next, I trudged another 3 long blocks up the street to the Casa de la Cultura and it wasn't open yet.

Maybe there will be time to come back later. I really needed to get back to reality and find a mechanic. I still have a long day ahead of me trying to fix the car so I can get home again.

Hopping a Bus

Buses following the main street were plentiful so I took a bus back down the hill. After a couple of blocks the bus driver pointed out the IMPCO sign and I dismounted to take a look at my oasis.

It looked like a repair shop where things would be under control. It even had a shady tree out back.

In the Hands of a Graduate Engineer

Many times in Mexico you find the unexpected. The owner, Ing. Orozco is from Xalapa and is a graduate engineer.

He had spent several years at the Laguna Verde nuclear



IMPCO

power plant in maintenance and quality control before coming back to peaceful town of Banderilla.

I explained the problem to Señor Orozco and explained the car was still out on the highway.

"No pasa nada!," he told me, as he packed some some odd tools in a knapsack to take with us.

He inspired a confidence that everything would be all right.

Back to the Highway

By this time the *"chipi chipi"* had abated and even though he didn't have a car, Ing. Orozco, his assistant and I took a local bus back up the hill and walked the 5 blocks back to the highway to take a look at the car.

Ing. Orozco confirmed Enrique's earlier diagnosis and suggested we first look for the tension bearing at the truck dealership just up the highway.

We were in luck! They had the exact tension bearing at the truck dealership, and the cost was only \$40 pesos!

I was relieved! Back down the highway to the car, Señor Orozco's assistant replaced the bearing and the reinstalled the belt. And now I'll be on my way again.

Groan! Out of luck again. Somehow the belt had stretched in the heat and was loose. On top of that something inside the engine screamed to high heaven each time I stepped down on the gas. With all confidence, Ing. Orozco suggested we try to make it back to his shop, about 7 blocks away.

As it turned out, to make the "easy drive" back to the shop we would have to drive 1 mile down the highway, make a U-turn in the fog in front of the trucks coming at us, and backtrack about 10 blocks back to his shop. Sometimes it's better not to know all this ahead of time.

A Terrifying Ride Back to the Shop

The ride back was terrifying!

With all the screeching from the slipping belt I could imagine the power steering, AC compressor, and

alternator bearings being ground to a fine powder before we got to the shop. Or being struck by one of the trucks flying down the highway.

Since it was all downhill perhaps the brakes might fail! But I kept my thoughts to myself.

"*No pasa nada*", repeated Ing. Orozco. I think he could sense my concern.



A Big Black Dog

How Did I Get into This One?

"What am I doing here?", I wondered to myself.

I was no longer thinking about the Final Days of Col. Peter Bean and the faith of Doña Magdalena. I needed some prayers of my own and thought this might be my own final day.

Driving Through the Fog

Onward through the fog back to the the oasis of the repair shop. I was dying from panic on the inside and just knew we weren't going to make it.

The dog was friendly. I wondered how long the '52 Mexican Chevy had been there, probably waiting for parts.



Under the Protection of the Virgin

In Safe Hands

I'll never know why, but Sr. Orozco was cool, as if this sort of thing happened all the time.

Maybe for HIM it wasn't unusual, but for me this was not an everyday occurrence.

Finally, with sweaty palms we arrived at the oasis of IMPCO!

I thought I was going to melt into my seat.

Preparing for Surgery

I always try to have a spare timing belt and on my last trip to the States I had bought one, so I left it with Sr. Orozco's assistant to replace in the comfort of his shop.

Hopefully the solution to the problem was close at hand.

Two other customers showed up and the shop got busy.



The Safety of the Shop

There was nothing more I could do. so I decided to take a stroll around town and continue my search for Peter Bean and Doña Magdalena.

It looked like it would take a couple of hours to get the car fixed, and so I decided to take a walk and explore Banderilla. A walk would also calm my frayed nerves.

The fog was lifting and after the heat of Veracruz, a walk through the friendly town in the cool weather would be pleasant.



Free Crystalline Water

Free Water

Just above city hall I saw these two men doing something around a little street side shrine.

They looked friendly so I went to take a closer look.

They were filling water jugs! Like the ones you buy at the store for \$20 pesos.

They explained that there is a spring above the town filtered by fine sand, and the city installed a free pipeline system down main street for the people to fill their water jugs to take home.

Since Spanish Colonial days, Banderilla's plentiful fresh water supply was a well known watering spot for horses and people.

In those days the crystal clear water must have flowed down the side of the street in as an aqueduct with periodic fountains where horses could drink the cold water.

Famous for Chicharrones

Another unusual sight in Banderilla are these little concrete pits on the sidewalk. There are probably 3 or 4



Circles on the Sidewalk

per block. Inside the circle was some partially burned household garbage.

On the coast in the evenings you can see people burning the light papers of from the home accumulated during the day.

I was told it has a dual purpose: to take care of garbage and the smoke is an effective mosquito repellent in the evenings.



Banamex
Old architecture adapted to new uses

I asked one of the men filling the water jugs if these concrete circles they had the same purpose.

"No," the man replied, "the pit is for a *"paila"* (a large metal caldron filled with boiling pork lard) to rest on to make delicious pork *"chicharrones"*."

"Banderilla es un *pueblo chicharronero*," he told me. Like Tejería, near Veracruz, the narrow town is packed on the weekends with people who come to buy the crackling deep fried pork skins.

He also added the town's patron saint is San José and the best time to visit Banderilla is March 19.

"You should come back and visit us then", he suggested.



Swiss Chalet



Another Swiss Chalet

Fixed and Ready to Go

By around 4 PM I walked back down the Camino Real to the IMPCO repair shop and found the car was ready. The charges were reasonable and I sincerely thanked Ing. Orozco for helping me out of a dreadful

situation.

"*No hay problema, John*," he replied. "That's what we're here for."

After all that had happened during the day, the drive back home was peaceful and uneventful as I retraced the route of the old Camino Real back to Veracruz, passing through the "Manga de Clavo" estate, once part of the vast landholdings of Santa Anna.



El Camino Real

El Camino Real Today is called "**La Calle Principal**" or Main Street

Without a Trace

Unfortunately, in Banderilla there was no longer any trace of Col. Peter Bean and his bride Doña Magdalena Falfan Godo.

I was told there are still some Falfans in town and I will have to save meeting them for another day. I had found what I was looking for in my short amount of time in Banderilla.

I had felt the satisfaction of walking the same streets the Col. and his wife must have strolled arm in arm, entered the same church where they had prayed so many years ago and, took in the refreshingly cool climate of the Mexican mountain town they must have enjoyed those many years ago.

Next Time

I discovered that Banderilla is a lovely little town, great for wandering and exploring the route of the Camino Real and imagining what Mexico must have been like before Independence.

The next time I have an impossible task, I may go to the Church of the Virgen de Guadalupe in Banderilla, and pray to the same saints that Doña Magdalena did so long ago. They seem to have worked for her. I just hope it won't take 25 years for the wish to be granted. The help I needed to fix my car came in only one day. I can imagine what might have happened if I had been out in the desert of Tamaulipas north of Tampico and lost a timing belt. Whew! I was really lucky!

First chance I get, I'm going back on a weekend with some friends and enjoy some of their famous *chicharrones*.

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