

Mexico City, July, 1988

by

Matthew A. Nelson

May, 1996

Mexico City was the furthest place from my mind when I went to work that Friday morning in July, 1988. My wife, Karoline, and daughters Michelle, and Cheri, had left the previous Tuesday to go to Wyoming for a couple of weeks. They had flown out of Houston Intercontinental Airport, which is about an hour away from our house. Since they had an afternoon flight, I told Karoline to leave our Bronco II at the airport and I would pick it up that night. Tuesday evolved into Friday. One of the guys I worked with was leaving for another job, so I went to his going-away party. Finally, about 9:30 PM, I made it to the airport to retrieve the Bronco.

The people who gave me a ride drove away as I unlocked the door. Friday night, no weekend plans except for mowing the lawn and changing the oil in my truck, and all those airplanes going someplace! All of a sudden my priorities changed. I was at the Continental Airlines terminal. "I wonder where I can go," I thought. It didn't matter - I just wanted to go.

Dallas, San Antonio, Austin, and Tulsa invited me to visit their cities from the television monitors. "I've been to those places. I want to go someplace different." Mexico City - 10:15 - Why not? The lady selling tickets told me that the round trip ticket was \$258.00; they had available seats, and asked me if I had proof of U. S. citizenship. After digging through the little hiding places in my billfold, I found my tattered 1964 Draft registration card. American Express cards were designed for people like me, who would rather have an impromptu trip to Mexico City than mow the lawn. Two hours later I encountered VW taxi drivers asking, "Which hotel, Se_or?"

I didn't know. The office in the airport for hotel reservations was closed. I saw a bus for the Holiday Inn, and asked the driver how much it cost to stay there. "Eighteen dollars". That should have been a clue. I don't think there is a Holiday Inn anywhere one can stay for eighteen dollars. At midnight it looked like my best choice. The room didn't meet the standards I expect from Holiday Inn. Upon checking out the next morning, I must admit eighty-one dollars caught me by surprise. Live and learn!

Prior to leaving Houston, I tried calling Karoline in Casper, but she was out. I told her brother where I was going. Then, the next morning I managed to call our neighbors, Nancy and Rod, to ask them to feed our dogs. Nancy still laughs about the Mexican telephone operator asking her if she would accept a collect phone call from Butch Nelson. Karoline called her later in the morning, and thought I had found my way to a Mexican jail. That's one time I'm glad she was wrong! Wrong, but close.

Had I known on Friday morning when I left for work that I would be in Mexico City that night, I probably would have at least taken a toothbrush, and perhaps a change of clothes. On Saturday morning I took a shower, but had to wear the same smelly shirt as I had worn the day before. From the hotel gift store I bought a toothbrush, but didn't want to pay exorbitant prices for souvenir shirts. While recovering from the shock of the hotel room charge, and deciding what to do for the day, a Mexican cab driver came to me and offered to show me around the city. I didn't want to find my way on buses, as I would normally, but the idea of seeing the pyramids sounded like something I might enjoy.

I thought \$50.00 was too much, but he accepted my offer of \$40.00, and we were both satisfied. I didn't feel like haggling, and he probably would have taken \$30.00 (or less). I told him I needed to buy a shirt before I could act like a tourist. He took me to an open market, where I bought a couple of T-shirts, two souvenir spoons, and bracelets for my

daughters. I changed my shirt in his car, while he smiled in amusement. An orange plastic bag from the market doubled for my suitcase.

The first place he drove me to was the well-known church with twin bell towers. I forgot the name of it. I thought about buying a cheap camera, but then decided not to, so all images of this trip are strictly from memory. As we drove through the city, the smell of corn tortillas was overpowering. Many of the houses were constructed of cinderblocks. Mexico City has about as many people as New York City. However, there seems to be a vast difference of the poverty levels of the two cities. Tokyo is roughly the same size, but I never saw poverty there like in Mexico City. It gave me a much better understanding why there are so many people trying to sneak across the border between Mexico and the United States. They are just trying to make a living for their families. As a side note, I personally have never been too concerned about a Mexican immigrant taking over my job. Most of the Mexicans I have seen work at jobs that I don't have any desire to do, for much less than it would take me to do the same thing.

After we visited the church, we drove to the pyramids, about one hour's drive. Again, I forgot the name of these pyramids. These weren't even discovered until about 1912, by some farmer working his fields. While the driver stayed in the parking lot, I climbed to the top of a couple of the pyramids. Have to wonder about the toil extracted by the Mayan people to build these, and how many years it took. But then again, after a lifetime of building a pyramid, one could say, "Look over there - see what I did during my lifetime. I wonder how long it will last." One thousand years from now, will people be able to wonder about what I did with my life?

About 4 PM, the driver dropped me back near the city open square. I don't remember much of our conversations, but I did enjoy his company, and learned more about the Mexican heritage. He recommended a restaurant that had blue tiles on the walls. Quite honestly, I like what passes for Mexican food in Texas better than real Mexican food in Mexico. After the dinner, I walked around the city, had my cowboy boots shined, and relaxed in a park. As I sat on a park bench wondering what to do next, two women walked by. One walked, the other limped because of a very deformed clubfoot. The lady with the bad foot laughed heartedly as she told the other woman some story. I can't imagine the pain she has endured over the years, but seeing her laugh as if she didn't have a care in the world left a lasting impression on me.

My wife tells people that she doesn't like travelling with me because I am like a fly on a hot skillet. Buzz over here, buzz over there, don't stay in one place too long. I had seen enough of Mexico City. The only other thing I wanted to do was to go to a bullfight, but there wasn't one until the following evening. So I decided I would just go back home. A young man in his twenties driving an orange VW taxi took me to the airport. He had a Crucifix dangling from the rear-view mirror, and sang along with the songs on his stereo cassette. We talked and laughed, and he thought this Gringo was strange to leave home without even a toothbrush.

The airline could put me on the plane, but I would have to hurry. No problem. I ran to the area where I had to pay a \$10.00 departure tax. It took a while to go through the line. As I arrived at the gate, the plane rolled away. An employee of the airline told me to come with him. He drove me in a van out onto the taxiway to the front of the plane, and radioed to the pilot about me missing the flight. "Too bad!" the pilot radioed back. So we drove to the terminal, where I decided it was in my best interest to retrieve the Departure card (and \$10.00). I didn't want any grief from the Mexican authorities. It hadn't been ten minutes since I had passed through the departure area, but it took the man several minutes to locate the card with my name on it. I must admit, though, he was friendly, and mildly amused.

The office that made hotel reservations was still open, so I was able to find another place to stay for \$25.00 in the downtown area. From an outdoor cafe I watched jillions of Volkswagens and bicycles. One pretty young girl, about 16, saucily rode standing behind her

boyfriend on a bicycle built for one. She rested her hands on his shoulders, smiled at me as they rode by, her white teeth a contrast to her long black hair flowing in the breeze.

About 8:30 the next morning I went back to the airport, hoping to leave on an earlier flight than 7:30 PM. I had \$38.00 in U. S. currency, and 8900 pesos. All the flights to Houston were full, but the airlines told me I could standby for the other flights. A cup of coffee and a sandwich cost me 8100 pesos, leaving me with 800 pesos, which was the equivalent of 45 cents. It looked like the airport might be my home all day. Finally, around noon, American Airlines had a flight to Dallas that would accept my Continental Airlines ticket. "If I can go to Dallas, then from there I can easily fly back to Houston," I thought. After going through the departure lounge one more time, I had \$28.00 and 800 pesos. At the time it cost \$4.00 a day to park at the airport, so I figured I would have \$4.00 when I arrived in Houston, enough to go to McDonalds for supper.

One would think that the Customs and Immigration people would be used to people travelling on the spur-of-the-moment. Maybe to Las Vegas, but not to Mexico City. I guess most people have more than an orange plastic bag when they clear Customs. My T-shirt with the Matador that I wore was as close as I made it to the bullfight. Even though I had not spent \$400, the amount one of goods one can legally bring back to the country without declaring, I still declared everything on my Customs card: Two T-shirts, two bracelets, two souvenir spoons, and one toothbrush. I had bought a tube of toothpaste, but didn't like the flavor, so left it in my second hotel room. I wanted to be honest with these guys. I expected a few questions; I did not expect the Inquisition.

The first agent politely said, "We would like to talk to you. Will you please step over here?" "Yes, Sir", I said. Then my first mistake. "Can I use the bathroom, first?" I really needed to go. "In a few minutes." "OK." It never dawned on me then that people use bathrooms to rid themselves of drugs.

"Do you have any baggage?" "No, Sir, this is all I have." "Would you explain?" "Well, my wife and two daughters left last Tuesday to go to Wyoming, and left the car at the Houston airport. When I arrived there on Friday night, there wasn't anything for me to do, so on the spur of the moment, I decided to go to Mexico City."

"But you're in Dallas!" I wanted to slap my forehead, and say, "Dallas! How could that be? I thought I was in Houston." But I didn't. I really did know that I was in Dallas. "Yes, Sir. My plane on Continental didn't leave until 7:30 tonight, so I thought if I made it to Dallas, I could go to Houston with no problem."

"Let me get this straight. Your wife left to go to Wyoming on Friday night, so you decided to go to Mexico City?" "No, Sir. She left on Tuesday and left the car at the Houston airport. I decided to go to Mexico City because it was a Friday night, I didn't have anything else to do, and it sounded like a good idea. It didn't have to be Mexico City. It could have just as easily been Vancouver or London. I didn't have my passport with me, so that left London out. But if there had been a flight to Vancouver, I could have gone there. It didn't matter where I went. I just wanted to go somewhere."

He looked at me with raised eyebrows. "How were you planning on going back to Houston?" "Just buy a ticket on American Express." "Where do you work?" "I work as an engineer for Lockheed in Houston at the Johnson Space Center." I could almost read the expression in his eyes, "Right, this guy's a rocket scientist!" Five different times, and five different ways I was asked for whom I worked.

"So you just left to go to Mexico City without any luggage or anything?" "Yes, Sir. I figured I could buy what I needed there. That is why I bought some T-shirts and a toothbrush."

Then the second agent asked me to empty my pockets. He was the most rude of all three who eventually questioned me. He asked to see my return airline ticket receipt, which I showed him, and looked at the receipt of the stuff I had bought at the market place. During the entire time, I was pleasant, and answered almost every question with "Yes, Sir" or "No, Sir". These guys would go home after their shift was over. They could make my life miserable. They kept walking behind closed doors, about twenty feet away. My hands were sweaty. I was telling these guys the truth, but they kept questioning me. I had done nothing wrong, but I guess I fit the profile of a drug runner. I have never used nor had any involvement with illegal drugs in my life, but they didn't know that.

In my wallet was a newspaper clipping of the time I took the Texas Sesquicentennial Flag to the South Pole, which also said I worked for Lockheed. I was wearing a South Pole baseball cap. The second agent looked at everything in my wallet. Then he came across my private pilot's license. The first guy asked me what type of planes did I fly. Second mistake. Instead of saying, "Cessna 172's", I read the words directly off my license: 'single-engine land only'. I didn't know what to say, because I thought if I said "Cessnas", they would have thought I was flying drugs. They thought that anyway. Their eyes lit up, I could almost see the red lights flashing on and off. They took my pilot's license, my driver's license, and some other identification, and disappeared behind those closed doors. I know they ran my name through every computer system they have.

While the second man was going through my billfold, he saw the \$28.00 and asked, "Is this all the money you have?" I said the boring, "Yes Sir!" He said, "How were you going to pay for getting your car out of the parking lot?" "I figured it would only cost me \$24.00." Then he asked, "Are you carrying any more money, or do you have more than \$10,000 with you?" I said, "No, Sir. I wish I had that kind of money, but this is all I have." It was at this time he repeated the question about where I worked.

Then a third guy who is wearing officer insignia stood a few feet behind me. "He is wearing boots. Check his boots." Well, although I showered each day (but had not shaved), I had been wearing the same pair of socks and underwear since Friday morning, and this was Sunday afternoon. If they wanted to check my boots, it was OK with me. But apparently, my reaction wasn't bad enough, so they didn't make me take my boots off. Later on, when telling this story, Speight Grimes, one of the guys I worked with, said, "Matt took off his boots, and the dog went slinking off into the corner!" Possible conversation in the back room: "I think he is telling the truth, but it's your turn to search guys like him." "Oh no, He probably has the same pair of underwear on since Friday - you can search him."

By this time, thirty minutes had passed. I was now really nervous, because I hadn't done anything wrong. However, while they were firm with me, they were also polite, if not slightly incredulous (only the second agent was rude). I answered every question politely and honestly. Finally, the first man said I could go to the next station, where duty is paid. I asked, "Does this mean I am free to go?" He said, "Yes. By the way, do you smoke?" I said, "No, Sir", and he told me it was OK to leave. I am not sure what he meant by that question.

I walked out into the airport, a free man. They never took me to the back room, they never searched me, and they didn't "detain" me. Had they searched me, they would have found three-day old underwear, almost freshly stained. They would not have found any contraband then, now, or ever. I am sure my name still floats in their computers. They probably laughed about me when they went home that night. Luckily, we all went home that night.

But I wasn't home yet. Still shaking, I looked at the TV monitors, and saw that American Airlines Flight 20 left to Houston from gate 60 in fifteen minutes. The terminals in Dallas-Fort Worth airport are halfway between forever and eternity. I must have really looked confused, or somebody was still keeping an eye on me. "Sir, can I help you? You look lost." "I can't find gate 60 to Houston." She looked at the monitor, and said I needed to go to gate 20, Flight 60. "Thanks!" and I hurried off from gate 12. At gate 20, I heard, "I'm sorry, Sir, you

have to go inside the terminal at gate 12 to purchase a ticket to Houston. We can't sell you one from the gate. But you better hurry."

Run. Inside the terminal, at the American Airlines counter, I stepped over those snap-on barricades, to avoid walking the empty rows of the zigzag pattern, "Sir, Do you want a TICKET? This is a secure area you are in," asked the stern voice of a woman. "No, I don't want a ticket. I just want to go home." "Where are you trying to go to?" "Houston." In a more kind voice, she said, "Sir, you are at the international check-in. The domestic terminal is over there." I apologized, and she said that everything was OK.

Within a few minutes, the American Express bill had increased by \$45.00. Now, I had about two minutes to make it to gate 20. At the security walk-through, I placed my orange plastic bag with two dirty shirts, two spoons, two bracelets, and one toothbrush on the X-ray belt. Hurry - the plane is about ready to take off. About 100 yards away from the security checkpoint, a firm hand grabbed my shoulder. Now what? I was beginning to regret this trip. "Sir, did you leave this orange bag down at the security check-point?" Thanks again. Just as I stepped on board the plane, the flight crew closed the door.

Back in Houston, I paid the \$24.00 to liberate the Bronco II, stopped off at McDonalds, and watched the rear-view mirror all the way home. Home, and then it was time to explain all of this to Karoline when I called her in Wyoming. She has said in the past, "I wonder what it might be like to be married to a drunk. At least, he would come home at night." I am not sure she would believe me, if on the way home some night, aliens took me for a ride in their spacecraft to Alpha Centarius. I think it would be a great adventure, and dealing with them wouldn't be any worse than the Customs people in Dallas, who have no understanding of people who have to buy a toothbrush because they didn't pack one before leaving for work one morning.

Some of the guys I worked with at the time had a better understanding of me than the Customs people: Tom Jenkins would have told them, "That's sound like something Matthew would do." He would have been more surprised had I gone to the airport and not gone anywhere. B.G. Smith told me that I should have had them call him. He would have said, "I know Matt Nelson. The only reason he stopped in Mexico City is that he didn't have enough money to go to South America. Or to Europe." A few months later, I was walking back to my desk with my toothbrush in my hand. B.G. asked me where I was headed, since my bags were packed!

In 1992, after one of my trips to the South Pole, I entered Hawaii from New Zealand, flew over to Japan for four days, and then reentered Hawaii. The Customs man looked at his computer terminal for what seemed like an hour. "You were just here four days ago!" Another "Yes, Sir." Here we go again! I told him that it cost less frequent flyer miles to go to Japan from Hawaii than it did from the Mainland. He asked to go through my bags, and after going through the first, my briefcase, said, "Mr. Nelson, have a nice day". Almost like, it's only Nelson, again! I hope they establish a new profile in their computers - The Nelson Profile. "Oh, it's him again. Doesn't do drugs, just likes to travel on the spur-of-the-moment. Likes to live the National Geographic quotation he carries in his wallet: 'I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move.' Harmless. Turns a weekend trip to an adventure of a lifetime. Just enjoys exotic places, learning new cultures, and life."