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IN SEARCH OF CORYPHANTHA

INTRODUCTION

MARGARET CALDWELL

For those of you who haven't had the privilege of knowing Lewis Bremmer, let me introduce you to a botanical scholar of ascerbic wit who has researched and read everything available on the genus Coryphantha.

This information with subsequent field data and specimens collected with proper permits, was to have culminated in a Coryphantha monograph.

Such work is time consuming. For instance, Lew has found that some of the manuscripts and translations failed to related to present day plants. In point, Dr. Moran described a species he collected near Irapueta, about 150 miles east of Guadalajara. The plant did not turn out to be what he thought it was but Lew found it again and corrected the identification.

Lew has discovered and identified twelve previously unrecognized species of Coryphantha. It is impressive and somewhat formidable to find that he has done his descriptive work in Latin. The "Cactus and Succulent Journal" and the "Mexican Cactus and Succulent Journal" have published his manuscripts, the American Journal following the Latin description with an equally diagnostic description in English. The holotypes of these discoveries have been deposited with the University of Arizona and with the National Herbarium of the Institute of Biology of the University of Mexico.

Lew is a charter member of the Central Arizona Cactus and Succulent Society, organized in April 1973. He was the first treasurer to set up the books according to Hoyle. Barcia, his wife, was the first secretary whose minutes were so inclusive that an absence from a meeting was only physical. Those who would read the minutes would not miss a thing that transpired.

Beginning in 1965, twice a year, the Bremmers made an arduous two week journey into Central Mexico as far south as Oaxaca, almost to the southern boundary of the State.

The accessibility of Coryphantha and the many species that thrived in loose rocky soil stirred Lew's scientific curiosity and a project was in the making.....the monograph.

It is no small thing to trek over miles of hilly dirt roads and detours that sometimes disappear in washouts and notso dry riverbeds strewn with loose boulders and flood debris. One stopped at every habitation to ask directions.

Coryphantha are relatively small, globular, sometimes cylindrical plants that so strikingly resemble their cousins, the Mammillaria, the amateur may not be able to tell them apart. They bear tubercles that look like little nipples with aeroles at their tips and conspicuous grooves that run along the upper surface from the tip of the aerole to the axis. The tubercles are arranged in characteristic spirals.

Coryphanthas are beautiful little plants which bear large showy purple,

red or yellow flowers that appear much too big for the little plant to carry. The flowers are always near the top of the plant. The name "Coryphantha" is derived from Greek words for "top" and "flower."

Sixty or so species are distributed solely in the deserts. Some are native to Southwestern United States but they are much more abundant in Mexico.

They are hard to find, small and inconspicuous, and generally deeply seated in rocky, difficult, sometimes dangerous terrain. It takes the skill and determination of an intrepid plant hunter to ferret them out.

Lew has been a twenty year member of the Mexican Cactus and Succulent Society and has known Hernando of the Botanical Garden of Mexico City who has been very helpful and co-operative with Lew's botanical searches on Mexican soil.

Lew has also worked co-operatively with Alfred Lau. Lau, besides being a plucky plant hunter over much of the South American continent as well as Mexico, has been a missionary in Peru and a sort of Father Flanigan to a mission school for boys in Mexico. He has sent a few boys to college, one graduating as a medical doctor this year. Other boys not so educable are taken along on Lau's botanical searches for their bright little eyes to spot plants older ones might miss.

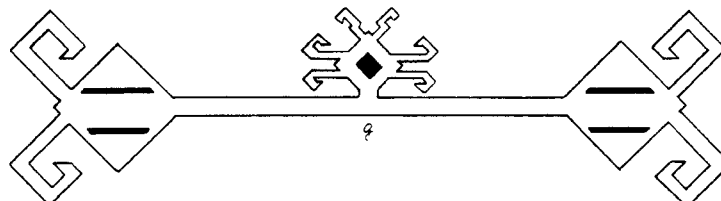
Not quite a saint, Lau has gotten himself in trouble with the Mexican government for shipping peyote to Europe and had something like four years to wander around South America before his wife could manage to get him back into Mexico.

And much to Lew's disapproval Lau also over-harvests plants with economical value. However he has made significant contributions to the knowledge of Mexican and South American cacti. He contributes frequently to the Cactus and Succulent Journal.

Presently the Coryphantha monograph Lew has worked on so many years is on hold. A few more trips into Central Mexico are needed to complete and confirm the data on hand, but currently the climate for the safety of Americanos in Central Mexico is distinctly hazardous and the Bremmers are apprehensive.

Hopefully the hostility will soon be resolved and the monograph will be written and take its place in botanical literature.

We see too little of Lew and Barcia these days, but we know the distance is an understandable reason for staying home on hot Sunday afternoons. They do surprise us once in a while which is very rewarding for all their friends.



IN SEARCH OF CORYPHANTHA

EXCERPTS FROM AN ACCOUNT OF A PLANT HUNTING TRIP by BARCIA BREMMER

After the usual frantic flurry to get everything in the camper Friday night, we left Sun City on April 1st, heading eastward.

Sunday morning we took Route 385 south out of Marathon for the "hill" where we finally collected Echinocereus davisii. It had already flowered and was fruiting, which was fortunate since the first plant was discovered by noticing the fruit. Lew also collected a C. minima.

Spent the night in Del Rio, and entered Mexico at Ciudad Acuna, taking Route #2 over to #57 at Morelos/Allende on Monday morning. First stop on Route 57 was at Km 153, the first ridge south of Allende where there is a series of "S" curves, and on the south side of the road saw a six-headed clump of coryphantha. The ground was extremely rocky and Lew managed to collect one head from this clump---possibly robustispina.

Eighty-five kilometers out of Monclova we collected three plants, Coryphantha Borwigii, a robust form of Epithelantha, and a stem with one small pup of an Echinocereus that also was very robust and had deep pink flowers. Most of the Echinocereus was in large clumps of one or two feet in diameter, but we finally were able to find this one small head (not that the stem is small, but at least we didn't have to take it off a large cluster.) Lew told me to make note that the "pup" should be pointed to the northeast---guess I was, as usual confused in my sense of direction, because I would have thought the "pup" should have been pointed to the southeast. At this location we saw lots of Ancistrocactus Scheeri, Cory. Nicklesae, robust epithalanta, peyote, and several varieties of opuntia.

Stopped again at Km 32. Finally managed to get across the several ravines to the lower reaches of the mountain. Saw bicolor, echinocereus, hamatacactis and one pottsii. The mountain was steep. It was not climbed. We collected nothing.

Next was Km. 24-1/2, the locality for Gymnocactus Roseanus. Last time we stopped there we climbed a ridge, then traversed across the mountain looking for Roseanus. With Lew's unerring memory, this time we just started up the mountain. He was to my left, and of course found them. I scrambled over to where he was, and he said hi'd bet there were more within ten yards. So I went up more than ten yards, and more then ten yards to his left. Then on starting down the mountain, about a yard below where he had found the several heads, sure enough, I found one!

At Matehuala, went in on Route 68 toward Dr. Arroyo. This was at about KM 17-1/2 (eleven miles in on the road) on a hill just across the road from some houses. This is the last hill on the north side before crossing the state border. Here, from a third to half way up the hill, we collected Turbinocarpus Macrochele. They were flowering, fortunately, the four we collected all had lovely white, slightly creamy, flowers. These were found just below a rock fall line, which might have been an old rock fence.

At the "Quarry" north of San Luis Potosi we made our third search for the elusive Mammillaria aureilanata, and this time concentrated on the hills--or mountains--to the north of where we had searched before. Still no luck.

Then we drove on to Km 30, north of SLP, and along the rock outcroppings we were successful in collecting Pelecyphora---I think it is aselliformis.

These are fun to find because of their small size, the color of dirt, and their "wormy" appearance.

North of Queretero we went in toward the Microondas Road at about KM 114. This is a very good unpaved all-weather road back to where the cobblestone begins. But beware! There are three unmarked "vados" (dips) that one comes up on completely unseen. On the first one we almost did an Evel Knevel (or however he spells his name) except we were in a camper instead of a motorcycle. Most vados are marked, but these are not. And there are three. Just to be sure I counted again as we drove out. Wandered about a bit. Lots of beautiful hystrix, and collected what turned out to be two coryphanthas growing in a rock crevice. Because of growing in the crevice, the roots were a little mangled in getting them out, but with Lew's green thumb, they'll survive. Saw some other coryphanthas, one quite an old great-great-granddaddy.

Leaving Jurica we drove north on Route 57. Stopped to try still another mountain for the Mammillaria aurielanata. Nada!

Then we took the road east at San Luis de las Paz toward Xichu. Much to our surprise the road was paved! I well remember our trek on the Xichu road when we collected macrodiscus. Thirty-five miles in and thirty-five miles out, and it took us practically all day! Lew wanted a small head or cluster of Coryphantha erecta to put outside in our yard, so 6.2 miles from the bridge out of San Luis de las Paz where the new paving starts, twelve miles from the highway, we collected a two-headed clump of C. erecta. Right beside it was a Crassihamatus which we also collected. The erecta in this area is lovely, and there is a lot of it. However you have to go in this far to come to the extensive growth of erecta.

Went on to San Luis Potosi, and took Route 49 toward Zacatecas. Stopped at Km 31-1/2 and collected a Thelocactus. Spent the night off the road at Km 48. Collected a Coryphantha and a Thelocactus. The next morning started off toward Zacatecas, looking for a Pemex station. The second tank was getting dry and Lew always keeps a third as "reserve emergency". About KM 96 found a station practically in the middle of no-where. Also needed oil. The usual method in Mexico is to punch two small holes in the oil can allowing a goodly amount to dribble over the engine. Therefore Lew carries an oil funnel. He gave it to the station man who was almost ecstatic with pleasure over his treasure!

Going into Zacatecas we were entertained for about ten miles with a "walking race." I can't remember what it is called but it's one of the Olympic events, the walking bit, heel and toe, the odd hip movement etc.....The first one we saw had plainly given up and was just plodding along in an ordinary walk. Up the road was a group "heeling and toeing: along. Then isolated groups or individuals were stretched out for the next several miles. I kept thinking "There is the leader." But around another curve or down another stretch there would be another one. They were dripping with sweat. I wondered how they could walk so far at that altitude.

Then again for the first time I saw the middle of another city-- Zacatecas. We were looking for a "farmacia" or "botica" -- a drug store. But everything was closed, which seemed very strange. Leaving Zacatecas I learned why. Evidently there was to be a car race on the curvy mountainous road. Perhaps the "Grand Prix" of Zacatecas! The crowds were lined up all along the juiciest curves. Whole busloads of people had been brought out.

The racing cars were all just at the edge of the city. The police were out and people, people, people! Saw one car all decorated with "Durango" but not one with STP. One car did zig around us and the other traffic. Don't know whether it was a racer, the pace car, or just a car trying to get clear of the traffic. Anyway, we got out of the way and headed through Fresnillo to Route 45 toward Durango.

We took Route 45 out of Durango for Parral, heading toward the Rio Nazas. Went through Rodeo, and the Nazas was supposed to be about 15 miles further north. I don't know the kilometer number where we stopped. It was getting rather late, and there was this nice flat space off to the south from the bridge over the Nazas River so we decided to stop for the night and go on toward the mine road the next morning. Things had seemed so quiet. We had gone over this road before, but I had forgotten how winding and quiet it was. We drove over 90 miles and had met or passed the total of 13 vehicles, including one local bus. I didn't count in the 13 a motorcycle and a tractor and about three bicycles. Anyway it was a very quiet road. We stopped. I took a short walk of about ten minutes and then came back to the camper for a drink and to cook dinner. Lew wandered around. Found a variety of *Coryphantha* and was intrigued by a golden spined one he had seen, but decided to clean plants rather than collect it. We had dinner, washed up the dishes, and started to get ready for bed. In fact, both of us were ready to crawl in when we heard something outside. Looking out, I thought we were surrounded by a posse. The camper itself was dark. Lew turned on the outside light and talked with the crew outside, telling me to stay down. During the "palaver" I managed to get on my sirt and my slacks----later discovered I had them on backwards. Peeked out a bit and could see two horses and two burros with people on them. Lew said later that one burro had two people on it. After talking with them he gave them two pesos, said we'd see them "manana" and they left. So we relaxed and started getting ready for bed again. This time we were in our sleeping bags---Lew said if I heard something to let him know---so I heard something and reached over and touched him. There were three characters outside on foot. I didn't know how many there were until Lew told me. Anyway, he turned on the outside light and there was more talk. Evidently the first group had gone back to where they had come from, and these had now arrived. They were on foot, but the older one had a bottle of something and they apparently felt they could get money for another one. Lew got his trousers on, I got on my shirt, and the slacks, again backwards, and we decided to get out of the place. Things on the cabinets were thrown on the beds, and Lew started to let the top down, only to discover the dinette table was in the "up" position. I managed to get it down, and he got the top down. Lew told me to "stay put", started the camper, and we got out of there. Lew drove north and so far I could see we had crossed the Rio Nazas bridge several times. I knew he was looking for the mine road. Finally he stopped. He hadn't found the mine road, so we locked up the back of the camper, I got in front with him, and we started north. We finally found the mine road, only to discover there were several miners waiting there looking for a ride into the mine.

We ended up at Km 192. How Lew ever found this crevice in the rocks along this winding road I'll never know, but he got the camper into it and we finally turned in. I slept some, but I don't think Lew slept a bit that night. By the time we got into the crevice it was 10:30, and on a camping trip this was very late for us.

The next morning, after breakfast, we drove back south to the mine road, went in three miles and collected the Coryphantha longicornis Lew was looking for. Supposedly a mam and athelo are also found there, but the thorn forest was almost impenetrable, and I still don't know how he found the longicornis. Needless to say we did not collect the other two.

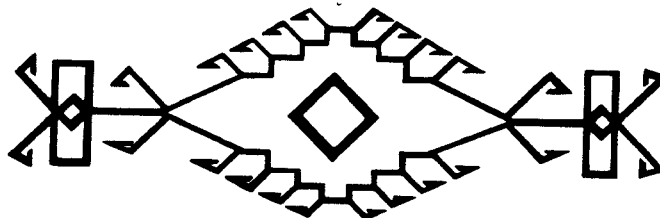
The next morning at Bermejillo we turned north on Route 49 and near noon stopped at the Microondas Tower Road at Km 85. Lew went to sleep. There was a crew working at the servicing the station so I stayed in the camper. About one thirty Lew awakened and I fixed lunch. We ate and he went back to sleep. I took a walk around but it was so hot after a while I went back to the camper and got out "THRONE OF SATURN" since I like Alan Drurey's books. I tried to read but it was hot in the camper too. Lew was sweating as he slept. I put on a pair of shorts in place of the slacks. My shirt was soon soaked with sweat so I took it off, and when Lew moved his feet so I could get in the refrigerator I got out a quart of cold water and drank that. When Lew awakened I got dinner, got the dishes washed, the camper made up for the night, and we turned in early for a good long night's sleep.

The next night we were near Chihuahua, decided the road was campable but went on to town and spent the night at the Motel Mirador.

In the morning we went on to the border, getting to customs at El Paso about ten-thirty, and finding the people (one man I should say) very nice. His first reaction was to stick the plants into the "cooker" but then decided to take a look at a few, and after about a dozen (we had 49) decided to give us a clean bill of health and we started for home.

Thought briefly of stopping at Globe, but being so near to home both of us decided we wanted our own beds for the night. Got home a little after seven o'clock. Found everything intact. Had a drink or two, cleaned up a bit and went out to dinner. We were in our own good beds shortly after ten o'clock.

Editor's note: This is an account of a trip made several years ago.



"Basically my concern is very simple. Whatever problems---we do have problems of all kinds---the economic recession, inflation, racial problems, unemployment, ghettos--- everything becomes totally academic if your home is unliveable. And the Earth is our home. If it becomes unlivable, what in hell do all the other problems mean? They become meaningless by comparison. I don't think anything is more important than the ecological problem."

JACH LEMMON in an interview in CALYPSO LOG, COUSTEAU SOCIETY
DECEMBER 1979.