

RAY HALL'S BORDERLANDS JOURNAL

White Sand South of the Border

By Raymond Nelson Hall

I've been absent for a few days. That usually means one of two things. Either I'm painting, or I've gone somewhere I probably shouldn't have gone.

This time it was a little of both. I decided to explore an area of northern Mexico that was new to me. Alex Navarro came along, partly because he wanted to see the country and partly because my Spanish remains good enough to get me food, gasoline and occasionally into trouble. Alex greatly improves the odds of getting me back out.

We rented an off-road Jeep because I wanted to get away from the highway and into the desert.

Our destination was an area identified on the maps I had been studying as **Duan Virgen**.

I had no particular mystery in mind. I wasn't chasing Captain Voss, Sheriff Ortega, strange symbols or anything else connected with The Mesilla Files. I simply wanted to see the country.

We ended up staying in a small hotel in **Samalayuca**. Nothing fancy, which suited both of us. We left early the next morning with water, food, cameras, sketchbooks and considerably more gasoline than Alex thought we needed. He was right about that.

But I've spent enough time in deserts to know that having too much gasoline is considerably more pleasant than discovering you have too little.

WHITE SAND

The country surprised me. I've traveled through a lot of desert in my life. Arizona, New Mexico and northern Mexico all have their own character. Even places separated by only a few miles can feel completely different.

This place was different again. **White sand**. Beautiful stretches of it.

In places the sand seemed almost untouched. Wind had erased most signs that anyone had been there before us. The dunes rolled toward distant mountains beneath an enormous blue sky.

Alex stood looking across it for a while before saying, "You came all the way down here to look at sand?"

I told him I'd gone considerably farther for considerably less. He accepted that.

The farther we drove, the fewer signs of people we encountered. Eventually I stopped thinking about where we were going and simply started looking. That's usually when I find the things I eventually paint.

Light against a dune. The shadow of a ridge. A single dark plant surrounded by pale sand. Mountains that seemed much closer than they actually were. I made several sketches and took enough photographs to keep me busy for a while.

There will almost certainly be paintings from this trip.

SOMETHING FAMILIAR

Late in the afternoon, we stopped on slightly higher ground. From there I could see a broad section of the white sand below us. And I had a strange feeling. Not fear. Recognition.

I had seen a landscape very much like this before. It took me a few minutes to understand why.

White Sands, New Mexico.

Not identical. I don't want anyone at TRC turning that sentence into something I didn't say. But similar enough that I found myself thinking about the distance between them.

White sand in New Mexico.

White sand here in Chihuahua.

And somewhere between them—

Mesilla.

That was when Alex asked why I had become so quiet.

I told him I was thinking. He said that usually causes trouble. He's beginning to know me too well.

JUST A DESERT

I want to emphasize something. We didn't see lights in the sky.

We didn't find Captain Voss standing behind a dune.

No mysterious doorway opened.

As far as I know, we saw exactly what we went there to see.

A beautiful and isolated part of the desert.

But I'm going back.

There is considerably more country around Duan Virgen than we could explore in a couple of days, and I want to spend more time there.

This trip also reminded me of something I've learned from years of traveling through the Southwest and northern Mexico.

We draw borders on maps because we need them. The desert doesn't care. Mountains continue across them. Water continues beneath them. Animals cross them. Geology crosses them.

And stories cross them too.

Maybe that's why I keep coming back to this country.

Every time I think I've reached the edge of something, I discover the landscape continues.

I'll have some new artwork from the trip soon.

And there is one other thing Alex and I saw before we left.

I'm not quite ready to write about that yet.

I want to look at my photographs first.

Raymond Nelson Hall

Borderlands Gallery

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