

Putting together a Country Dance Tour to El Salvador

12 February 1996 (Monday)

Perhaps its time for one of the Country Dancer travel tales. There are so many to choose from. One of the most dramatic is the story of the visas for El Salvador, and it illustrates a process which is, I think, characteristic of one which was in play for most engagements we completed successfully, and that was all of them!

Ken DeWire contacted me while he and Patsy were stationed in El Salvador. Patsy, his wife, was Education Officer for the US AID program in the country, which was at the time in a civil war between the terribly rich and powerful big landowners and the incredibly impoverished peasants. Ken was eager to spur a small country dance group he and Patsy had started (they always used country dance and amateur theater to weld friendships while on assignment). He wondered if I could come down to help. I responded that it might be fun to bring the Berea College Country Dancers down for a Short Term. Would he be interested and could he arrange an invitation which would cover expenses? Ken said he would have to explore that and would get back to me, and I would get back to him after discussing the opportunity with Joe Tarter who was directing the Dancers at the time.

Joe was agreeable to the idea but only if it could be done without cost. Joe had been Acting Director of Recreation Extension the previous year during Risse's illness and death. This fall of 1991, we split the job and salary half and half, drawing up a paper dividing responsibilities: I was teaching the classes, managing the office, and organizing the Spring Festival, Joe was directing the Country Dancers and Christmas School. Joe also wanted to know what my part in an El Salvador trip would be since he was officially Acting Director of the troupe. I agreed to be the business manager while Joe would be the Dancer's Director. He approved, so I was about to call Ken (it was September, as I recall, and we would leave in January—not much time to organize it all) when I realized that we better first have the Dean's approval before pursuing the matter further. So, I called Dean Perkins and secured his approval. I told him it wouldn't cost the College a dime and would be quite an experience for the Berea dancers to be hosted by the

American foreign mission personnel in San Salvador. He trusted me that we would be in good hands and gave his initial approval.

Joe was furious and came down to my home to get things out in the open. He felt that I was usurping him at many points. I thought that we had been assisting each other as friends. But Joe was threatened by me, I'm sure because I had been his teacher and leader for years. It must have been hard for him to hold the reins if I so much as looked here or there. We had been best of friends: I had been best man at Joe and Patty's wedding, and Joe had been my right hand man for many, many events. But by my calling the Dean, Joe must have felt that it meant, in the Dean's eye at least, I was in control again. I was very sorry that Joe felt we could not work together, but quickly agreed to be much more careful and to let him take the lead in regards to El Salvador even to the extent of having him negotiate directly with my friend Ken.

Ken was having his problems, too, and we were not able to pull it all together so quickly for January 1992. Such setbacks are a normal part of the process of putting a tour together. Instead, I went to El Salvador alone to call dances at a couple of Ken's parties and to explore the possibility of a Country Dancer tour for the following January. Actually, I wasn't alone, Risse's sister joined me in Boston where I had gone to visit my brother for a rare holiday since Joe was taking care of Christmas School. Ken's wife, Patsy, had been previously married to Risse's and Ramona's brother Rexford. This is also a typical part of the process I employed: making use of personal contacts to develop a tour.

While I was in El Salvador, the peace accords were signed in Mexico City and El Salvador was at peace for the first time in 12 years. Ken and Patsy were able to take us into sections of the country which had been off limits to Americans for some time. The Salvadorans were wonderful everywhere. We were able to organize a tour for the following year; everyone felt that the Salvadorans were ready to dance and put the war behind them. There was such a spirited wisdom everywhere—a realization that peace would not work if people held grudges or looked back, the focus must be on the future and cooperation. They knew the hell of war and wanted no more of it and realized that that meant that they must work together to build a new El Salvador. They needed to dance! The United Nations was playing a key role in brokering the peace and would monitor it. The United

States suddenly changed its policy, from supplying arms to those in control, to rebuilding schools and bridges for the peasants in the areas which had recently been off limits. Oh, what learning could take place among the Berea dancers by spending a month in El Salvador!

Patsy retired in June, but we had appointed another person in the US community in San Salvador to coordinate the tour. I had no response from that person during the summer. When students arrived for the fall term in Berea, it was time to get serious. I had to make some educated guesses about the tour, definitely a characteristic part of tour planning: is the tour viable? what will it cost? can I attract enough good dancers to put on a creditable show? So many vital questions which no one could answer but which I had to second guess.

I was pleased with the response from the students; they signed up for Adventure to El Salvador as their Short Term class and were willing to come up with their part of the funds (a guess on my part, remember). The administration approved my plans and even gave us some funds, if I recall correctly. I was beginning to get flight and travel plans in place and students were getting passports. But I had no word from El Salvador! Typical! Always something missing.

The best way to force a response is to make it personal, so I finally secured pictures from the dancers (I think I had to substitute one picture for a negligent student in order to complete the mug shots) and sent them off to El Salvador with an official schedule, including many guesses such as flight dates etc. I was also in touch with Ken by phone and he, having left El Salvador when Patsy retired, was in contact with his friends in El Salvador. I finally got a response by phone in late October. The lady said that she didn't realize that we were coming in January and that it was not a good time for us to come (I learned later that she had planned her vacation for that time). I had gone too far to cancel (at least without considerable mud-on-the-face), another point one reaches in planning a tour. Ken located another person to coordinate the tour for us and Ken and Patsy agreed to accompany us on the tour (I think I offered to pay their way and put Patsy on as instructor of Salvadoran culture and history for the tour)! That made me breathe easier. Doug, our new contact, didn't dig in right away either, I guess it all seemed so remote. So, I planned to send Ken down to El Salvador as our advance man. Throughout the tour he was able to stay a few jumps ahead of us, often hardly a day in advance, but what a

tireless, enthusiastic, persistent worker he was. The tour wouldn't have made it without his gigantic efforts. Every tour needs such a support person on the scene.

On the home front, we were putting our program together, learning Spanish and about El Salvador, and getting costumes in shape. The full troupe would attend Christmas School for in depth rehearsals and getting into physical shape; foreign tours are always grueling.

Finally, I got all passports from the students, always a problem because of some birth certificates not meeting regulations. I sent them off to the Salvadoran Consulate in Washington by overnight mail with a paid return overnight envelope; we were in contact by phone to make sure that we did not mess up at this point. It was already into December and I learned that the Consulate would close in a few days for the holiday and would not reopen until January 3 (?). We were to leave Berea on the next day in our own bus, the New Nag, headed for our flight from Miami (the cheapest way to put the tour together; I was always pretty good at finding low cost ways to make the trips possible). It was a good feeling to finally have everything in order for the trip.

The passports were not returned the next day. I called the Consulate after they opened the next morning, the last day before the holiday. They had not been sent out. I reminded the girl that we would be leaving before they reopened after the Christmas-New Year holiday. She said that she would do what she could. Of course they did not arrive the next day and all other calls were not answered. This was another to-be-expected last minute hurdle. My procedure was to always forge ahead as long as there was hope but to also make contingency plans. In this case we had to have the passports, but there were a few days yet in which to get them, even if we had to leave Berea without them and pick them up in Miami. I retained my confidence that the problem could be worked out and didn't make a big deal, nor a big secret out of it. Being above board and open is also one of my characteristics, I think.

On January 3rd, I was on the phone to the Consulate early until they finally opened. The passports were still there. I explained that we were leaving the next morning but, if they would get them in the overnight mail by 2:00 pm, our postmaster would call me at 4:00 am when they would arrive and permit me to

come up to the post office to pick them up (there are advantages to small towns). The Consulate said they would do what they could. It was time for contingencies.

We had made arrangements to park our bus in Miami at Park and Fly and to have some costumes sent to them from Sears, to be held until our arrival. The person I spoke to left me a bit uneasy, so I decided to find another contact in Miami to hold the passports if we could get them to send them while we were en-route; the bus trip to Miami included three overnights and several performances to help us earn our expenses. I knew that Stacia Berry had a son in Miami and contacted her. Unfortunately, he was out of town. Stacia took it upon herself to go thru the Berea College alumni addresses and pick alumnus. It turned out that he was still in the employ of Eastern Airlines, altho the company had cut back it's operations. He said that he would be happy to receive the passports and deliver them to us at the airport. I appraised Glenna Rice, a classmate of mine and former Country Dancer and who was at the time living next door to me on Adams Street, of the situation and asked her to have the passports forwarded to Miami should they arrive after we left Berea. She also had a copy of our detailed schedule, which I always found very important to prepare and update continuously, so that she could contact us at any stopping point during the trip. Betsy Philyaw, our mail route person on Adams street, was also aware that we were looking for the passports. If the passports didn't arrive I was aware that we could, simply drive to Miami and back to Berea and study El Salvador on our own campus.

Betsy called Glenna the next day from the Post Office and told Glenna that she had seen the passports, they had arrived, but that she had better get up to the post office right away, which Glenna did. The official on duty would not turn the passports over to Glenna since they were addressed to me, even with Betsy there to urge otherwise. The passports would be returned to Washington! Glenna was not even allowed to touch the passports. She finally convinced the official to send them on to me in Miami c/o our contact there altho he said it was against regulations. I can't recall if I had left Glenna money to have them forwarded or if she worked that out. She did call me to let me know that they were on the way and I called our Miami contact to make arrangements to have them delivered (he, too, had our schedule with flight numbers, departure times etc.).

Its a good thing we didn't send the passports to Park and Fly; the Sears package had arrived but they had refused to receive it, claiming to know nothing about a John Ramsay. Al White and I dropped off the students and Karen Busk Sørensen, a Danish special student we arranged to take with us to take a Miami flight to Brazil, and then he and I went to park the bus, leaving the troupe in the hands of the men's and women's leaders who were duly appraised about the passport situation. We were cutting it close! Al and I got back just as the last Country Dancers were finishing check-in with all our costumes, gear, instruments, and baggage; it was 20 minutes before flight time. The passports had arrived. The contact drove by the departure area, saw some Berea CD jackets, called one of the dancers over to his car, handed over the passports, and drove off. I never did get to meet him!

We had a marvelous trip to El Salvador—absolutely a mind-changing adventure.

How could all of this have worked out? Were we simply lucky? If so, I have been lucky again and again. Or are all things possible to those who have faith? Or what?