

Sample Pages from
The Mexican Operation ©2006
by Lee A. Silva

CHAPTER 4

As more than one local sage had been known to sarcastically remark, if the United States was to be given an enema, Blythe, California would be the spot where the tube would be inserted.

As the same sages were also known to remark just as sarcastically, there was no reason on God's earth why any human being would voluntarily *want* to live in Blythe unless he was hiding or had gone there to the dry climate for his health.

The town of Blythe, for it could not be called a city by any stretch of the imagination, lay, geographically, as far east as one could go and still be in California, for it stretched in an east-west direction smack-dab on the west shore of the ever-flowing, muddy, Colorado River, which, in turn, is the boundary line between California and Arizona.

The fact that it was next to the Colorado, as the same sages had also often remarked, was the only good thing about Blythe, and that same fact was really the major reason that Blythe existed at all. If one were to draw a line on a map in a straight line from Los Angeles to Phoenix, he would find that the Colorado River flowed to the south at a point almost half way in between the two cities, one-hundred-and-seventy miles from Phoenix and two-hundred-and-twenty miles from Los Angeles. He would also find that the town of Blythe lay almost exactly on this line, and thus, the reason why it had struggled into existence out of the dry desert river-bottom land, for it was a wet, half-way stopping point for dry, thirsty travelers and truck drivers on their way between Los Angeles and Phoenix.

In the winter, the air was crisp and invigorating, and the desert took on a greenness that surprised most travelers. Canadian honker geese and mallards and pintails and other migratory ducks used the river as their own highway to the south, and the river itself was abundant with catfish, bass, and bluegill. Wild horses and deer bred and thrived on the bottomlands of both sides of the river, and during the summer months the river's backwaters teemed with mourning doves and their larger cousins the white-wing doves, quail, and even pheasants. And, if one had a taste

for them, huge leopard frogs that provided some of the tastiest frog legs west of Louisiana could be caught along the river's muddy banks.

But the summer, which usually lasted from April to October, was hell itself, a preview of purgatory. Blythe quite often had the dubious distinction of being the hottest location in the U.S., and it was not uncommon for the local thermometers to reach one-hundred-and-twenty degrees in the shade. The heat, at least, was dry and not humid, but the dryness made the always-present dust in the air even more unbearable. The dust was everywhere, constantly in the air. It clung to clothes like a coating of white flour, and it covered shoes and boots with the fineness of talcum, to the point that a stranger couldn't tell if a person he met had on black or brown shoes. The dust clung to windowsills and furniture, and even to moving objects like trucks, cars, and, especially, greasy tractors.

The oppressing heat sapped strength from the human body to the point where it was an effort to walk across a field in the middle of the afternoon. On especially hot summer afternoons, a man could take a deep breath and actually feel the heat hurt his lungs as he inhaled. The only way to escape the heat was to sit in the river, or, if you were lucky enough to have a swamp cooler in your house, to sit in front of the cooler—, which was a metal “box” installed in a window, usually about three feet square, which contained an always-clattering fan that was enclosed by sides packed with straw-like alpaca, through which water dripped down and provided a semblance of damp cool air that the noisy fan blades could gust into the room.

But if you had to work, you had to go outdoors, and, even a two-block walk left the average person drenched with sweat. And the only way to work and avoid sunstroke was to gulp two to ten salt tablets a day, which only made you sweat more but at least kept you alive, if living in Blythe could be considered as being alive.

Far worse than the heat were the crawling bugs and flying insects. They were everywhere, hundreds and thousands of them, as if they were amassing an army of their own in a resentful counterattack against the shuffling humans who were slowly invading their native environment.

Originally, Blythe had been nothing more than a wide spot beside the two-lane dirt road that left the river heading west, wandered across ten miles of centuries-old bottom land that was covered by mesquite bushes, and then climbed the mesa into the rocky, sandy, oblivion that was nothing but the Mojave desert for a hundred miles before it reached another town on the way to L.A. In fact, except for the town of Parker forty miles north on the Arizona side of the river, and a few “settlements” scattered

here and there, there was not another town within a hundred miles in *any* direction from Blythe.

During the great Depression, however, a lot of “Okies” who hadn’t made it all the way west from Oklahoma to the orange groves of L.A. had taken one handful of the rich, gray, river-bottom loam and said, “Damn, if we can dig canals and get water to it, it will grow anything.” Anything, that is, that could survive the blistering summer heat. And some of them had tried, and eventually Blythe had also become a farming community which began to expand slowly north and south up and down alongside the river as Blythe itself slowly expanded east and west along the dirt road that became a paved highway that served the weary truckers and travelers who braved the monotonous drive across the desert.

The only problem with being a farming community, however, was that the farmers found that the only crops that would grow in the heat were melons, cotton, and alfalfa. Cotton and alfalfa were pretty dependable and secure crops to grow, but there was good fast money in melons, especially watermelons and cantaloupes. The only trouble was, that late crops and the leavings from fresh-picked fields were left in the fields to rot, and the leavings, in turn, provided an overly fertile breeding ground for insects, especially flies and crickets. In the late summer months, the stifling heat was magnified by the stench of the rotting fields, and the flies became so numerous that it was not uncommon for one to fly into a person’s mouth as he was talking. Crickets bred by the millions, and they were so thick when they came out at night that they popped like small firecrackers as they were crushed on the streets by the tires of passing cars. The crickets fell from doorsills down a person’s neck as he walked through a doorway, and they crawled into every minute opening they could find, including the straws on the counter of the local drugstore, where wary kids quickly learned to always blow through the straw first to dislodge the hidden crickets unless they wanted a cricket-flavored milkshake or soda. And when the crickets died by the millions as they did every year, their drying bodies added their own stench to the total nausea of the outdoor air.

The town itself consisted mostly of ramshackle frame houses constructed of every material imaginable. The downtown buildings were mostly wood, stucco, and adobe, and, except for the old hotel, the Elk’s Club, and the movie theater, they were all one-story buildings because it was too much trouble to build a solid foundation for a high building on the bottomless sand of what once had been river bottom.

There was no industry in Blythe—, just motels, gas stations, cafes, houses, and farms, and tractor dealers. If you lived in Blythe, you either