

REVISITING THE TOPIA ROAD: WALKING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF WEST AND PARSONS*

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ABSTRACT. In 1940, Berkeley graduate-student geographers Robert West and James Parsons traveled to Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental to retrace the Topia Road, colonial Mexico's main trans-Sierran trail linking isolated mountain mining hamlets with the Pacific Coast and the world beyond, a journey chronicled in a 1941 *Geographical Review* article. Almost sixty years later, we document an attempt to retrace West and Parsons's route. Based on field observations, interviews with local informants, replication of Parsons's photographs, and his field notes, we evaluate landscape alteration in what West and Parsons referred to as some of the most isolated settlements in Mexico. We assess changes in the still-remote communities along the route in terms of three influences: mining, migration, and drug trafficking. *Keywords:* landscape change, Mexico, James J. Parsons, photography, Sierra Madre Occidental, Robert C. West.

Topia, Durango, Jan. 1, 1941

Dear Betty:

Arrived here New Year's Eve after four days on a mule. A great trip through virgin country. I managed to contract a mild case of flu one day in the saddle and yesterday we rode for 8 hours in a steady, soaking, cold rain such as only the Mexican Sierras could produce.—But for all that I wouldn't trade the past week for any other of my life. For my mule, however, I have nothing but respect.

From here it's more days by trail to Culiacan. This is an old mining town of about 1000 people—lots of oranges, sugar cane, cherimoyas & guavas—and tortillas and frijoles, which we're practically living on.

Haven't seen a paper since Dec. 24! —Is U.S. at War yet?—How much did Nebraska win [the Rose Bowl] by?

Jim

Sixty years ago, Robert C. West (1913–2001) and James J. Parsons (1915–1997), two young, exuberant Carl Sauer graduate students at the University of California, Berkeley, set out to rediscover historic mining sites in Mexico's western Sierra Madre. They undertook the trip, chronicled in their 1941 *Geographical Review* article "The Topia Road: A Trans-Sierran Trail of Colonial Mexico," in December 1940–January 1941 to provide a firsthand look at mining areas that had been, in their heyday, some of the most productive sites in North America. West had traveled extensively in northern Mexico in the mid-1930s, conducting fieldwork for his master's degree; for

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