

Jack Barber's Mexican Vacation

Ninety years ago, on April 21, 1914, President Wilson ordered the Navy and Marines to seize the Mexican port of Vera Cruz. John Christian Barber, a young Englishman, was present in Veracruz during the attack. This is his first hand account.

The dictator Porfirio Díaz governed Mexico from 1876 almost continuously until he was overthrown in 1911. His successor, the reformer Francisco Madero, was overthrown in a coup and murdered by one of his generals, Victoriano Huerta, in 1913. Madero's murder led to a renewal of the civil war that had overthrown Diaz.

Pancho Villa figured in the 1910-1911 revolution that had overthrown Díaz. With the murder of Madero he allied himself with the Constitutionalist opposition to Huerta, led by state governor Venustiano Carranza. The Constitutionalist armies forced Huerta's resignation in July 1914.

In the U.S., President Wilson was hostile to the Huerta regime and favored the Constitutionlists. Tampico was a city on the coast of Mexico to the north of Veracruz and under federal control. On April 9, a small U.S. Navy shore party accidentally entered a restricted area in Tampico. They were arrested by Federal troops but released almost immediately. The Wilson administration, which was not sympathetic to Huerta, made an issue of the arrest.

Shortly after, Wilson learned that a shipment of arms, destined for Huerta, was to be unloaded at Veracruz. He ordered the navy and marines to seize the port and prevent the transshipment. This was done on April 21 and 22.

Jack Barber was traveling in Mexico in the Spring of 1914. He spent March visiting his uncle, William Gleadell, and Gleadell's family in Mérida, Yucatán. At the end of March, he and the Gleadells left the heat of Mérida and traveled through Veracruz to the family's home at Jalapa – the capital of the state of Veracruz. Barber was caught in Veracruz on his way to the U.S. when the city was attacked and occupied on April 21-22.

The selections from Barber's diary in this post cover the period April and May 1914. Barber arrives in the port of Veracruz, is caught in the city fighting, sails to Galveston on a refugee ship, and ultimately arrives in Philadelphia during preparations for a service for two Philadelphia sailors killed in Veracruz.

In August 1914, a great war began in Europe. Jack Barber joined the Liverpool Scottish, and was killed in action at Hooge, Flanders in 1915.

My Grandmother, Beatriz Muse, was Gleadell's stepdaughter. She was a teenager at this time, knew Barber (she figures in some diary entries not included here), and I think she was in Jalapa during the seizure of Veracruz. As an adult she had access to Barber's diary. She made a hand copy. These notes have been typed up from that copy. I haven't always been able to decipher my grandmother's handwriting. Where I cannot, I have

indicated with “[?]”. Square brackets without a question mark are not mine, but appear in the hand copy. This version prepared 4-20-04. The diary is made available through the courtesy of Sarah Romano of Yarmouth, Mass.

Jack Barber arrives in Vera Cruz and travels on to Jalapa

Friday April 3 [Vera Cruz]

We sighted land about 11 a.m. and after lunch and the usual farce of ‘passing’ the doctor landed at Vera Cruz at 2 p.m. Almost as hot as Merida and the forty odd packages occupied the Customs officials for some time. Mr. John Lind¹ was sitting on the landing stage. – H.M.S. Essex was in the harbour and the first person we saw on board as our ship (the “Morro Castle”) passed her was Admiral Craddock² who had transferred his flag from the “Suffolk.” An invitation to tea followed. Owens the secretary, who was also up at Jalapa came off in the launch to fetch us. We had a comfortable tea---and felt a little less sticky and cross after it. Met the Captain of the Essex (a brother of Lady Cowdray) – who seemed a very good sort.

The train cum special coach left at 6:40 and arrived at Jalapa at 11:30.³ Everyone looking and feeling very sleepy.

Monday April 6

I met Mr. Brooks in my wanderings in the morning and discussed the ‘situation’ in his house for half an hour. The latter seems more complex than ever.

Has Torreon fallen? Quien Sabe?⁴

Monday April 13

Weather bad -----Trouble is reported again from Tampico and Torreon fallen. – The Zapatistas getting nearer the City – I suppose Wilson is chuckling up his sleeve “I told you so” attitude.

¹ John Lind, a former Governor of Minnesota, was in Mexico as a special agent - operating outside of normal State Department channels - for U.S. President Wilson. He returned to the U.S. on April 6 and was an important advisor to the President during the coming month.

² I think this is the Admiral Craddock who died in November 1914 in the naval battle of Coronel.

³ The Gleadells had a home in Jalapa - to the northwest of the city of Veracruz.

⁴ Torreón was an important city in northern Mexico. Pancho Villa attacked a Federal, or Huerista, army there. The Federals abandoned the city on April 2 and Villa entered it on April 3.

Leferno the butler has been drilling all morning with about 1200 other “volunteers.” Next week they are to wear uniforms – Perhaps the week after they will go North? Old men of seventy and boys of fourteen.

Uncle Willie went by the 11:30 p.m. train – I don’t suppose I’ll see him again till they reach New York.

April 15th

Startling news from the City.

A quarrel with the Americans at Tampico. Seventeen warships proceeding from Hampton Roads. The Ward Line boat suspended her sailing from Vera Cruz and passage money returned! Most of the passengers leaving on advice from the States. Villa – this time – is in Torreon and can’t get out. It looks like trouble.

Thursday April 16th

-----Advice from the City to ‘pack up and be ready.’

Friday April 17

-----Villa and Co are said to have got into Torreon which was mined by the Federals and blown up!

The ‘Esperanza’ is ordered to Texas. I have wired to see if they are taking passengers.

The next Ward Line sailing for New York has been canceled. It sounds almost like a blockade.

Saturday April 18

News from the City rather less reassuring. The various Colonies there are making rigorous preparations. The British [?] base has its two quick firing guns and 150 riflemen under [?] care so they are ready.

Today the newspapers suddenly announce Villa’s reappearance after their assertions that he was dead!

Sunday April 19th

I think I have had my last ride here – on Diabolo – to have a last peep at my ‘Valley of Jordan’ or is it ‘The Cities of the Plain.’ Anyhow, it was very beautiful although both Diabolo and I got rather a turn when a shot was fired out of the wood we were passing. There was a cross by the roadside to mark the murder, probably, of some poor wretch and the horse certainly did not intend to wait and see so galloped off. ----

Jack returns to Vera Cruz

Monday, April 20th (Written on board SS. “Esperanza” to Galveston)

No word from Vera Cruz so I left Jalapa by the midday day train – Aunt Kitty provided an excellent lunch which I did justice to on the train. I was very sorry to leave them, especially at this unsettled time.

Mr. Guerara, the forwarding agent, met me. I called in at the Wolvin Line’s Agency. The boat again postponed till Wednesday.

I booked a room – (which since I have [?] very much!) – an outside room – at the Diligencias Hotel. I went in to a gambling house for a short time after dinner. Most of the officers of the “Essex” seemed to be losing their money. As I saw nobody changing their chips for money. I was not tempted.

Tuesday, April 21st

(A memorable day. Never shall I forget it – These long hours seem like a horrible nightmare yet – but undoubtedly an experience -)

Today I went to arrange about my ticket to the States but they would not take Mexican money and the banks will not change it. While in the office I was informed that Admiral Fletcher⁵ had just telegraphed “Am landing marines to take the port at once.” All boats were going to anchor outside the harbour. The time was 11:30 am.

I went to Guerara’s office to see if he could tell me of a decent money exchange – but people were shutting up their houses and shops already. (No resistance from the Mexicans was expected). We parted rather hurriedly. I walked towards the Terminal Station a block behind the American Consulate to see what was happening. The crowd began to run for the tramcars amid shouts of “Viva Mexico” and I saw a company of American marines coming at a double parallel with us. I was glad when the tram and its unruly cargo reached the hotel where I jumped off. I found an American at the door

⁵ Admiral Fletcher was the U.S. Admiral

which in few minutes was closed by the manager – We went up to my room, an outside one at the side.

Mexican soldiers were huddled together at the corners – some lying across the road. To our dismay about 30 came into the hotel and took up their positions on the roof – and the front room balconies.

Firing started. We could see no Americans but only bricks and mortar flying. The post and telegraph office and Terminal Hotel and station, so we heard, were captured at once. The firing was too hot to stay in my room which was on the top storey – I went on the roof for half a minute – There were a few Mexican reinforcements coming over the sandhills – Soon afterwards the first soldier was shot on the roof (about 12:30 pm). He was carried down to a room and I heard he was dead and was not at all anxious to verify this. But in a few minutes a Canadian lady (a Mrs. Archer, whose untiring efforts I shall never forget) heard of the trouble and appeared with bandages and disinfectants.

The poor fellow wasn't dead, but shot through the lungs, bleeding profusely. He died in agony in 20 minutes. Meantime two others were shot, one through the jaw, the same bullet piercing the other man's ear.

The former proved the saddest case we had – (Mrs. Archer, her niece, Mr. Hart (an American) and myself stood by and did what nursing and comforting we could). The blood affected his brain and I had to hold him down continually. He lived for nearly 12 hours. The brandy and alcohol of any sort soon gave out. Sheets were torn up for bandages.

There was no doctor nor outside help to be had. We luckily never had more than four or five in our little ward at a time – There was one boy shot across the forehead and terrified by the blood. Another poor old Indian shot through the shoulders (rather near his heart) who behaved just like a little child – He thought he was dead from the start but I think he will live though he's lost a frightful lot of blood. We left him for a few minutes about midnight in the care of another wounded man while we went for a cup of coffee – but when we came back the old fellow had torn all his bandages off and was bleeding pitifully- and calling on all the saints at once. The poor old man was also talking and thinking of his wife and little children who he said had nobody but him. That first day the firing stopped at dusk – though “sniping” went on all night. I stayed up with the two ladies all night as we did not dare to leave the wounded by themselves.

If only we could have had a doctor, the lives of one or two more might have been saved.

I telephoned two or three times to the Mexican Red Cross people but they would not make more than one journey until daylight. Four of their men were shot by their own troops. This a result of giving rifles to all the criminals who were let out of prison. And a great many of the soldiers were drunk. The colonel in charge of the hotel was drunk but luckily went out, leaving the soldiers without a leader. One of the Mexican “volunteers” shot at the lift boy because he would not bring him a bottle of “cognac.” Three drunkards

hurried in the door about 2 a.m. and demanded admittance – One was riding a horse and they had stolen a lot of silk dresses from somewhere. Luckily there was no drink in the house.

At dawn we were relieved when the Mexican ambulance corps arrived and took away the rest of the dead and wounded. Altogether in the hotel there were 3 killed and about 10 wounded.

About 6 a.m. – or rather earlier – heavy firing started again and big guns from the ships were fired over the town. I was trying to rest as I felt “rotten” but had to give it up.

Some of the ladies became hysterical and the children terrified – There must have been 30 or 40 foreigners in the hotel. The Americans were soon in the Plaza and at 9 or 10 am they got into our hotel. The ladies nearly kissed them all! My friend Mrs. Archer now collapsed – and I am not surprised after all her hard work. Blood was cleaned up and front rooms inspected. Mine had only one shot through it but many of them were riddled.

Soon afterwards I went into the street. Dead Mexicans everywhere – Horrible – about 300 were killed on the Mexican side and 18 of the Americans. Certainly the shooting of the bluejackets and marines must have been excellent though they should (- and expected to have taken it) – have taken the City the previous night. I lost no time in going to the Galveston boat with a family who also wanted to clear out – The American officer gave us an armed guard as there were still occasional shots.

We were all famished and dead tired and though the meals and sleeping accommodations were rotten I was very thankful. A bottle of beer seemed to bring utter content!

I had been 30 hours without sleep which I am afraid is rather much for me!

Jack leaves for Galveston on a refugee ship

Thursday, April 23rd

Went into Vera Cruz. There were again a few shots fired at dawn. The place is under martial law and thousands of American troops in the streets. I got a bath at the hotel.

Going back to the “City of Tampico” I heard of the Ward Line “Esperanza” sailing to Galveston as a refugee ship –

I trotted off to the American Consulate and got a pass. A bit of luck since I could not pay for my ticket on the Wolvin boat! Paid my bill and transferred all my luggage to the Esperanza with 20 or 30 other “refugees” – There is no communication with Jalapa. I hope they’re safe. An American tells me Uncle Willie is staying in the City. There’ll be trouble there. We all got berths for one night at least on this boat – and I think there is no fare to pay!

Friday April 24th

I had such a good sleep that I missed my breakfast.- We called in at Tampico at daylight and have taken on a few hundred more foreigners on board. Women and children are given the cabins and I expect many of them will have to sleep on deck tonight, but I think we might reach Galveston tomorrow. There are about 14 American warships at Tampico but none is large as those at Veracruz. The former port has not been attacked yet. They say the Army has crossed the Texas border.

I hear that two Americans and the Danish consul were shot from roofs of houses in Veracruz on their way from this ship to collect their belongings.

Many of the women on board don't know where their husbands are and haven't got a cent when they land.

Saturday, April 25th

We are going ahead splendidly and ought to be in Galveston this evening.

I had a good night's rest – was lucky to get a settee to sleep on and be able to undress – A cold bath and a shave made one feel almost –clean.- The food is pretty awful but it is not for much longer.

One hears plenty of stories-

Many of the men have been worth two or three hundred thousand dollars in Mexico and have been able to bring away nothing more than a two dollar bill. Opinion seems to be against Wilson though it is agreed the country wanted “cleaning up.”! The Americans from Tampico have just had a meeting on board. It seems on Tuesday night also there was a riot there and the Southern hotel was attacked by the mob. The German boat heard of it and the officers intervened just as the doors were being broken in. – An appreciatory cable is to be sent to the Kaiser. Sighted Galveston through the rain at 4:30 pm. Everybody had their luggage ready and those who were sick had got up.

Absolutely the last straw – we have to go into quarantine – Perhaps for four days more – The evening meal started at 5 pm and any who did not go down immediately only got soup and beans to eat. It is a soaking night and no berths to sleep in.

They say W.J. Bryan⁶ has been in communication with the Governor of Texas re. our quarantine but the latter won't move. Despair.

I must be looking worried. I have been constantly asked the last few days if I am married.

⁶ W.J. Bryan is the U.S. Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan.

April 26th Sunday –

Slept last night on the floor of the dining saloon. The stewards are just making as much money as they can. I paid a dollar (gold) for a bath towel yesterday. We were turned out from the saloon before 5 a.m. and no provisions had arrived before breakfast. The Americans especially have begun to “kick” for the women and children. There is a lot of discontent- undoubtedly the “refugees” are getting worse food and treatment than the crew. The second steward was knocked down in an attempt to keep a man back who was conducting a woman and her child into breakfast. Sensation! The Captain intervened. Certainly the breakfast – although only a mess of hash and beans – was a slight improvement – Speculation is rife as to the length of our stay here ----- The quarantine authorities land and give “hopes” of our release tomorrow afternoon – Papers and provisions arrive – Thanks go up.

April 27th Monday.

Another disappointment. Our release put off again till tomorrow. There are two cases of smallpox on board. There are two cases of smallpox on board the U.S. battleship “Connecticut” which has brought more refugees to the port. The oil tank steamer which got here before us was released today amid cheers from the other refugee ships (there are now five in port). The people on board had no covering from the rain and cold but few tarpaulins.-

All afternoon and evening the rain has come down in a deluge intermingled with flashes of lightning and about the loudest thunder – which lasted till 11 pm – that I’ve ever heard.

Last night I slept on the floor at the head of the staircase but though there is a fairly soft carpet which is fairly comfortable people are apt to tread on you. The men on board who are pretty “tough” remind me of a crowd of bookmakers. Arguments and poker are their chief amusements.

Tuesday April 28th

Again slept at the head of the stairs. I find if I get up at 5:30 a.m. I do not get trodden on so much! Last night it was unfit to sleep on deck so it was necessary to “bag” a sleeping position about 8:30 pm.

Woodrow Wilson and W.J. Bryan would not be flattered if they heard their critics on board. Language is flowery. There are a few nice people in the crowd – a young professor from Harvard and his wife, the son of ex-secty of State John Hay and a Scotch fellow from Glasgow. Although most people don’t care if it [?] ink! now, I sincerely hope we get ashore today. To think of a decent meal and a bath --- --- We were treated like third class emigrants when we were allowed ashore, especially the “foreigners.”

We were alongside the wharf before 9 am. and it was 12:30 before I got ashore – the doctor was missing and had to examine undesirable aliens.

I went off with a Scotchman I discovered on the boat and took rooms at the Galvez hotel – The streets almost under water after another thunderstorm.

After lunch cabled Jalapa, went to the bank and called on Mr. Heflin saving up a bath till the last.

I have a lovely room looking on to the hotel garden and sea, and – a bathroom of my own. Dash the expense this time!

Sat. May 9 --- Washington D.C. --- (at the Willard)

After a wash up and breakfast I happened to run into one of my refugee pals – (the only man on the boat who knew where the beer was kept. I used to keep his bed/space while he went in search of “nourishment”). He’s here on a committee to put the Tampico refugee’s grievances before the President -----

Sunday. May 10th

Did not waken until very late but managed to slip down in line for a dollar’s worth of breakfast. Perhaps the presence of O’Shaugnessy⁷ and John Lind in the hotel raised the prices! --- In afternoon I strolled round the White House grounds, made friends with the squirrels, also with a ‘camera fiend’ and the commissionaire. Did not see the President but members of the family.

[Philadelphia] May 12th

Had lunch with Mr. Cryden who also showed me over the State Hall with the various “Independence” relics including Liberty Bell. One room was in readiness for the remains of the two Philadelphia bluejackets killed at Veracruz to be buried tomorrow.-----

Thursday May 14 [New York]

Rather disturbing news has reached him [Mr. Vhallcross?] from Mexico – Uncle Willie and Auntie Kitty both stuck up without communication. The family at Jalapa – the federal Governor with his troops have been withdrawn. Disgraceful. I hope they have got down to Vera Cruz by now.

⁷ O’Shaugnessy may be Nelson O’Shaugnessy - the U.S. Chargé in Mexico City during the crisis - I gather he may have been the senior U.S. diplomat present at the time.