

# INCIDENTS OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND YUCATÁN

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*Essays in Honor of Edwin M. Shook*

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Edited by  
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## **Another View of the Gran Petén: Distilled Conversations with Ed Shook**

Anabel Ford

On a memorable encounter with Ed Shook, I wanted to talk about the inspiration for the Parque Nacional Tikal, the 576 km<sup>2</sup> area of reserve centered on the magnificent center of Tikal in the heart of the Petén of Guatemala. At that time, his book had not yet emerged and so I had only a general idea of the story. It was, naturally, charming. What surprised me, though, was his instantaneous shift to my work, for he was well aware of my efforts at the unknown center of El Pilar, part of the Gran Petén. He insisted: How do you make a park today and for that matter across a difficult international border? And for me that sums up my experiences with Ed. He did want to let you know of his thoughts, his opinions, and his knowledge; yet at the same time he would be anxious to get involved with your work too. His personal experience spanned the twentieth century and all the formidable Mayanists were his friends. Remarkably, our relationship spanned a quarter of a century, no small amount of time for what he may have seen as a newcomer on the scene.

Character that he was, Ed would always bring something unexpected to our conversations. When I was sorting Petén pottery materials from my Tikal Yaxhá survey in the 1970s, he was there to review my judgments. Later, I would present my experience as an archaeologist in the Petén jungles, he could hardly wait to add his two cents. Then, in the 1980s, while I was looking for information on volcanic ash pottery, he directed me to his Carnegie Annual Reports collection in his sunlit library to show me that Anna O. Shepard had struck that chord multiple times from the 1930s. In this distinct way, Ed has brought a new sense to all of my quests and influenced my research as a Maya archaeologist as no other could.

As a catalog of experience, we have lost a lot with Ed's departure. I must count myself fortunate to have had my moments with him. One of the last times I was with Ed Shook, I brought a colleague, Mary Pohl, with me from the Congreso Internacional de Mayistas in Antigua, where he still lived. I had my questions ready, but we ended up talking about Mary's work. He was engrossed in his curiosity on the Preclassic that he knew she was working on. When his death was announced, I received a sincere note from Mary, she appreciated our audience with the master.

For me, Ed Shook's experience in the Petén was the closest I could get to understanding the early days of Maya forest fieldwork. Why, Ed himself had located many of the sites we know today and even named a good number of them, as well. He had been from one end of the Petén to the other, he had cut his teeth with the Carnegie projects, and he had made that region his home. The look of the dry season *aguadas* or of the lush *escobal* in the rain, the excitement of an exposed stucco wall and the magnificence of a tall caoba tree, the challenge of bleeding Chicle and the dappled cathedral light in a *corozal*. These would have been familiar sights and would have evoked sounds: the growling of the howler monkeys maintaining their space, the eerie patterned drone of the *Uos* (local frogs) on the annual night, the shrieking of the colorful parrots, the chuckling of the oscillating turkey. These still can be appreciated and it is surprising to me how adaptable all these forest partners are to the human landscape. Howlers are part of urban Palenque, I have heard *Uos* in San Ignacio Cayo Belize, feral parrots fly overhead in Santa Barbara California, and the oscillating turkey is a vibrant part of the Tikal experience today.

Yet, seeing Ed's old pictures, I know things have changed, though I hope not irrevocably. There are still places today like those pictured more than 50 years ago, but they are fewer and farther between. I do not know when Ed was last in the Maya lowlands, but to see it as we enter a new century would bring tears, as it does to me. So little of the area is forested, and now with the paved road and reports of less than a day by car, the dramatic changes will accelerate. When Ed Shook made Guatemala his focus, he invested his passion in its future. The monument of Tikal owes much to his concern for the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Maya and to the jungle context that enveloped it.

Of all the discussions I had, and the rewards and insights that were revealed, the most significant came unannounced and unplanned. How did he manage to work in the Petén in those days? How were logistics arranged? How were the collections transported? How did the crews get in?

These may seem as simple questions, but the answer tells a lot more than one might think. The success of archaeology in the Petén rested in the network of the Chiclero Industry! Trail maintenance, water sources, mules, communications, and supply routes were all tied into the chicle stations. One of the major stations, one with perhaps more than 500 mules, with a vast web of sub-stations and related camps, and with managers linked to supply routes in Escárcega Campeche, Cayo Belize, and Flores Petén was Bambunal, renamed by the archaeologist as Uaxactún.

Situated in the middle of the Gran Petén, Uaxactún would serve to provide a base point from which most of the Maya archaeological survey, documentation, and excavations would emanate. This turns into the good news and the bad. The good news is that archaeologist could make ready use of existing systems and the grace of these commercial systems to accommodate the research of the interlopers. The flip side is that the established network was just that -established, and thus served to structure the research of the archaeologists across the Gran Petén.

We have certainly gained more than we loose from the historical arrangements between chicle and archaeology. Certainly, the benefits are innumerable and they reach over time to match both the work of Ed Shook and my own in region. The use of the forest as a garden, the adaptation of mules to the forest fodder (literally 'ramón,' meaning fodder in Spanish), and the life that makes a Petenero are all part of the original Maya archaeological relationship. But since the work of the chicle industry depended so much on effective transport, it will not be surprising that the routes they used were those of least resistance. Consequently, the trails proffered the surveys as well as limited them. El Pilar, where I have been working these past years, was never recorded, simply due to its rugged location and the logistics of the chiclero supply and transport routes. This Ed and I discovered together, and this is something for which I will be eternally grateful. Goods moving from Belize City would gather in Cayo and from there, likely with the help of Don Emilio Awe, would be packed by mule into the Chicle stations of the interior Petén. To manage the trip of little more than 60 straight-line kilometers, the mule train would move from Duck Run, past Chorro and into Yaloch. From the lagoon of Yaloch, the trail would cross over to Holmul, thence on to Paso de Carmen and on into Uaxactún. The route out of Cayo on to Yaloch avoided the major escarpments where you would find El Pilar and consequently lay dormant for that time. There are more things yet to discover in the Petén, and Ed Shook would be the first to say so.

This is hard to believe in the year 2002, at the beginning of the

twenty-first century, there is still more to discover. Yet it is true. The world is changing and there is a call for the recognition of our resources. This year I have witnessed the Maya forest at risk. From three exceptional experiences, I know that Ed Shook's visionary call for reserve the Tikal as a national park was of critical importance. Paso Caballo was an early Chiclero camp and important transshipment center along the Río San Pedro for movements in the Petén from the early part of the twentieth century. This area would have been intimately familiar to Ed Shook and would have certainly been a beautifully forested locale. Today, the shocking drive from Flores to the river bears little in common with anything of the Gran Petén. There are few trees, let alone any forest, burning fields dominate the horizons, parched pastures with dead limbs assault the immediate view, and the growing populations of the zone struggle to make ends meet. A satellite view of the same area etches the incredible truth of population growth in the region transforming tracks of jungle into neat farmed squares on the west and south leaving only the northeastern Petén in forest. Such a pattern is devastating the environment and has little in common with the ancient land use patters that sustained populations for more than four millennia.

Paso Del Carmen, once a major station on a sluggish Río Holmul along the Cayo supply route still promises secure water, but the area is only a shadow of its former self. There is a major lumber road that reaches from the Remate area and the former military post there is now thankfully a CONAP fire lookout base. While traveling there from Yaxhá via Nakum, forest fires were smoldering under the dense thick leaves, firefighters with hard hats materialized with their supports, helicopters were dashing overhead, and outside the old camp, water was scarce.

Traveling from El Pilar to Guatemala by road, this with Rudy Larios, we shared our memories of the same drive over the past 30 years. The landscape of densely covered hills are now denuded, bromeliad draped cliffs are now scorched, troublesome swamps now bridged and paved. The labor to enter the Petén is no more. Stopping at the Machaqilá, one would hardly appreciate how treacherous this crossing could be as the river rose and forced the use of the small suspension bridge, now another skeleton relic unnoticed by the traffic speeding by on the main highway. How would Ed look at these changes wrought in my lifetime let alone his? I would think his pride for his contribution to the cultural heritage of Guatemala and the protection of Tikal for the world would stand strong.

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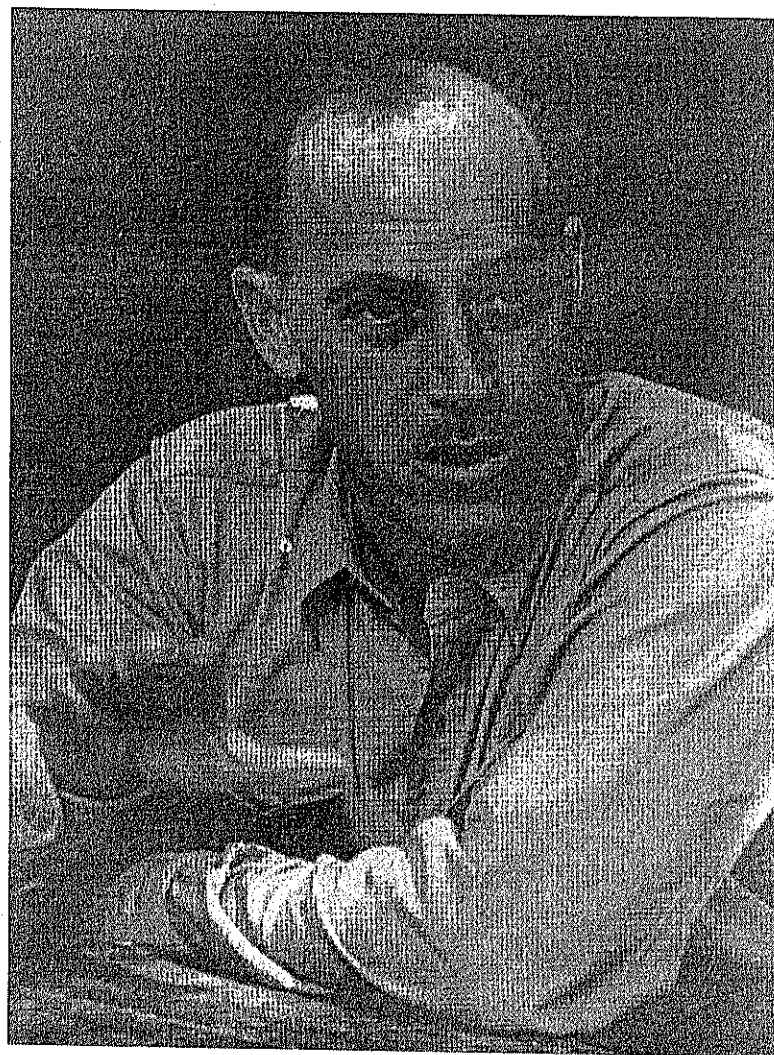
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