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Fieldwork Among the Maya
Reflections on the Harvard Chiapas Project

Evon Z. Vogt

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Designed by Linda Mae Tratechaud

*To all who shared
the Chiapas experience with me
the stimulating students and colleagues,
the loyal friends and family, and, above all,
the gracious and patient Tzotzil-Mayas.*

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Preface

Since the days that Malinowski spent some four years doing field research in the Trobriand Islands during World War I, there have probably been dozens of anthropologists whose total years devoted to fieldwork have exceeded that early record in the Southwest Pacific. I estimate that I have undertaken more than eight years of field research in the past fifty years. Yet in this age when books about fieldwork in anthropology are becoming fashionable and are being published at an astonishing rate, I have written little about field research per se. Indeed, the longest pieces I have published are "The Harvard Chiapas Project: 1957-1975" (Vogt 1979) and "Chapter I: Field Research in Zinacantan," which I added to the second edition of *The Zinacantecos of Mexico: A Modern Maya Way of Life* (Vogt 1990).

I decided some years ago it was high time I wrote about field research and I began work on such a book, focusing it on the Harvard Chiapas Project, which was initiated in 1957 and has been in operation for some thirty-five years. The result is this personal chronicle of the project, which begins with my southwestern childhood and an account of how and why I became an anthropologist, describes the major features of the Harvard Chiapas Project, comments on changes in style and method of doing anthropology, and ends with my retirement dinner at the Harvard Club of Boston.

The field operations of the Harvard Chiapas Project were carried out in the Tzotzil-speaking Indian municipios of the Highlands of Chiapas located between the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the Guatemalan border (See map p. 70). Tzotzil is one of the twenty-nine Mayan languages currently spoken by an estimated five million Indianthe descendants of the

ancient Mayawho live in Chiapas and the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, the Highlands of Guatemala, and Belize.

The Chiapas Highlands rise to more than nine thousand feet, with fertile upland valleys at seven thousand feet, and are composed of rugged limestone and volcanic mountains. Like all of Mexico, Chiapas has marked wet and dry seasons. While the winters are dry, the heavy summer rains nourish the crops of maize, beans, and squash that feed the relatively dense populations of these contemporary Maya farmers. On the summit of the Highlands, the climate is cool and the scenery is beautiful, with the mountains cloaked in magnificent pine and oak forestsan ideal cultural and natural setting for a long-range anthropological field project.

The earlier chapters of this book intentionally provide more details about the field experience in Chiapas since the design and mode of operations of the project were slowly, and sometimes painfully, hammered out during these early years. Once the architecture of the project was shaped, it was possible to convey the essence of our operations in the later years in a more compressed style.

Although the volume is intended mainly for the anthropological profession, I have attempted to keep the style nontechnical enough so that others interested in anthropology and the cultures of the Southwest and southern Mexico can also enjoy the book.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted not only to the many students and colleagues in the United States and Mexico who worked with me on the Harvard Chiapas Project, but also to our Tzotzil-speaking friends and colleagues who accepted us so gracefully in their home communities in the Chiapas Highlands over the years. Although I have not always followed their advice, the manuscript has benefited enormously from detailed comments and criticisms by Victoria R. Bricker, Frank Cancian, George A. Collier, John B. Haviland, Robert M. Laughlin, Joan Mark, and Nan Vogt. I also deeply appreciate the skilled editorial work of Dana Asbury and Anne R. Gibbons at the University of New Mexico Press. Finally, my apologies to those field researchers who do not appear in the photographs in the book; it was impossible to include everyone.

1

Southwestern Prelude: 1918-1953

When my grandchildren talk about the Southwest (which they all cherish), they often ask me why I ever left our family ranch located under those azure blue skies among the pinyons and junipers in the mesa and canyon country of northwestern New Mexico. I probably never would have left except for a special concatenation of circumstances that made me into an anthropologist rather than a rancher.

I am one of the few anthropologists who was actually born in New Mexico, a state that has become famous for anthropological research. I made my appearance at St. Mary's Hospital in Gallup on 20 August 1918 and grew up on the Vogt Ranch located forty-five miles southeast of Gallup and ten miles west of El Morro National Monument at the foot of the Zuni Mountains. I was the eldest of four children with three younger sisters.

One can hardly imagine a more felicitous setting for the making of an anthropologist. Our closest neighbors were Navahos, who lived in scattered hogans and grazed their sheep less than a mile to the south and east of our ranch house, and Mormons, located in a verdant, irrigated valley with the small town of Ramah (population 250) a mile to the west. Twenty-five miles further west near the Arizona border was the pueblo of Zuni, which had been studied by a distinguished roster of anthropologists: Frank Cushing, Matilda Coxe Stevenson, A. L. Kroeber, Frederick Webb Hodge, to mention only a few whose books I remember vividly in the Vogt Ranch library. Other more distant, but also culturally distinct, neighbors included Spanish-American ranchers, clustered in the villages of Tinaja and San Rafael at the base of the Zuni Mountains and in Atarque in the mesa country to the south; and the most recent arrivals "the Texans," who came to

grow pinto beans, settling near E1 Morro and also founding the community of Fence Lake. It was like a rural microcosm of the United Nations lying within forty miles of the Vogt Ranch.

The E1 Morro-Ramah-Zuni area was part of the Anasazi archaeological region that covers much of the Colorado Plateau country of New Mexico and Arizona. Not only was the immediate vicinity covered by Anasazi ruins, but their descendants in the contemporary pueblos of Zuni, Hopi, Acoma, Laguna, and the pueblos along the Rio Grande were all part of my early consciousness. This experience was especially meaningful since there is an Anasazi cliff dwelling in a sandstone canyon on our ranch, as well as dozens of Pueblo II sites. In fact, in 1915 when my father settled on the section of land that is now the Vogt Ranch, he used rocks from the nearest Anasazi ruin (one hundred yards away) to build the ranch house. My earliest formal anthropological research experience consisted of excavations in another nearby Pueblo II ruin at the age of eight. The excavating proved to be hard work on hot summer days, and my efforts were dilatory. But I did uncover some Anasazi pots and arrowheads that are still on display in the living room of the ranch house.

A key figure in this early experience was my father, who arrived in New Mexico in 1905 in time to make us "a territorial family," that is, a pioneer family that came before New Mexico achieved statehood in 1912. My father was born into a modest Swiss and German-American family in Upper Sandusky, Ohio, in 1880, the immigrant Vogt ancestor having come to America from Basel, Switzerland, in 1750. The Zartman side of the family (my father's mother's family) landed in Philadelphia in 1728. On my mother's side, the family histories are less complete, but most lines appear to have come to Illinois from Germany in the migrations of the 1840s.

My father's father was first a farmer and later owned a succession of small stores selling dry goods, groceries, and hardware in Ohio and Indiana. In 1892 the family moved to Dayton, where my grandfather worked until his retirement as a traveling salesman for the Souder Extract Company. In Dayton my father grew up speaking fluent English and German; he delivered morning newspapers to the Wright brothers while they were building their first airplane, learned to play tennis well, and purchased his first tailcoat in 1900—all facts that he never let us forget.

My father was the youngest of four siblings (two older brothers and an older

sister), a family position that probably accounted for his ebullience



Evon Z. Vogt, Sr., during his early ranching days
in New Mexico.

and optimism. He was also an obviously ambitious young man, imbued with the American success story, who managed to enroll at the University of Chicago as a member of the class of 1905, the first in his family line and the only one of his siblings to attend college. At Chicago his grades were not impressive, but he became something of a big man on campus: he was a member of Delta Upsilon Fraternity, a college marshal, and secretary of the Reynolds Club. He valued and kept in close touch with his fraternity brothers for the rest of his life; they included such prominent men as C. Arthur Bruce, president of the Bruce Lumber Company in Memphis, L. R. Smith, president of the A. O. Smith Corporation in Milwaukee, and William R. Wrather, former director of the United States Geological Survey in Washington.

In his senior year at the university my father contracted tuberculosis and was sent by his physician to the Southwest to recover. After some months of rest in the Albuquerque sun, the tuberculosis was arrested, and he enjoyed the Southwest so much he decided to remain in New Mexico. He

engaged in various trading store and ranching enterprises between 1906 and 1913, when he sold his ranch north of San Mateo (near Grants) and spent a year in Europe, half in London and half in Paris. He had learned Spanish during his ranching experience in these early years; in Paris he improved his undergraduate French. I am still impressed that he was fluent in four European languages, especially since in my generation my three sisters and I learned only English and Spanish. (Growing up between World War I and World War II in New Mexico was certainly not a time to encourage the speaking of German, and unlike my father we did not study enough French to make us fluent.)

Returning from Europe, my father married Shirley Bergman of Chicago. My mother, born in 1894, the younger of two daughters, came from a well-placed German-American family in Freeport, Illinois, where her grand-father was the principal dealer in farm machinery and mayor of the town. After her father was killed in a train accident, the family moved to Chicago where my grandmother worked at Marshall Field and Company to support her two young daughters. Here my widowed grandmother met and married Charles W. Vogt, an elder brother of my father. When my father was at the University of Chicago he became acquainted with my mother when she was a child of seven; then returned to court and marry her when she was twenty-one, fourteen years younger than my father. (I have often wondered if some of my anthropological interests in kinship may have derived from having an uncle who was also my step-grandfather, a grandmother who was also an aunt by marriage, and two auntsmother's sisterswho are also my first cousins.)

Following the wedding of my mother and father in Chicago, their honeymoon consisted of a two-week pack trip on the Upper Pecos River in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains east of Santa Fe. My mother had never been on a horse before her honeymoon, but she survived the experience and became an expert rider, continuing her riding on the ranch well into her eighties.

Unlike my father, my mother had only a high school education, and while she was a warm and effective person, she had limited intellectual interests and spoke only English. I was always astonished that my mother managed to live in the Vogt Ranch house for seventy-one years and never learned to speak more than a few simple phrases in Spanish, and only a few words of Navaho spoken by our closest neighbors.



The wedding of Evon Z. Vogt, Sr., and Shirley Bergman in Chicago, 1915.

My father stimulated my interests in other cultures as he reached out and engaged the neighbors around us in various and significant ways. Some of my earliest memories are of Navaho, Zuni, and Spanish-American neighbors coming to the ranch where they would invariably be greeted courteously by my father and invited into the house and fed, all in keeping with the manners and expectations of hospitality in early ranching life in the Southwest. I was always deeply impressed by his ability to engage these visitors easily in conversation and to make them feel at home. Since my mother had to feed all these visitors, and to put them up overnight if there had been a winter blizzard or summer cloudburst and the roads were impassable, she was obviously less enthusiastic about such visits. Not only couldn't she speak with these guests, but she also thought they were unwashed and left unpleasant smells in the ranch house.

I can also recall being taken on memorable trips by my father to Zuni pueblo to see the summer kachina dances and the famous Shalako ceremony in late November or early December when the twelve-foot tall



Mr. and Mrs. Evon Z. Vogt, Sr., outside the Vogt ranch house constructed of rocks from a nearby Anasazi ruin in 1915.



Evon Z. Vogt, Jr., dressed in his Indian costume
at age three.

masked Shalako gods came to visit in new or renovated Zuni houses and danced from midnight to sunrise; to Canyon de Chelly on my eighth birthday when we rode horseback up the canyon with a Navaho guide and encountered even less acculturated Navahos living in the canyon, and then on to a performance of the famous Hopi Snake Dance at Walpi, where the snake priests danced with live rattlesnakes in their mouths. Some years later, when I was sixteen, my father also took me along on an unforgettable pack trip with a Navaho guide from the southern base of Navaho Mountain (on the Arizona-Utah border) through almost impassable canyons to the foot of the beautiful Rainbow Bridge.

I was fascinated by these different languages and cultures, and would return to pore over books in the ranch library that described these cultures, especially the travel books of Charles F. Lummis, and the more technical Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) annual reports, which included Matilda Coxe Stevenson's *Zuni Indians*; Frank Cushing's *Zuni Fetishes* and *Outline of Zuni Creation Myths*; *The Coronado Expedition of 1540*



Anasazi cliff dwelling located in José Pino Canyon on the Vogt Ranch.

1542 by George Parker Winship; and *The Cliff Ruins of Canyon de Chelly* by Cosmos Mendeleff.

During these early years my father was appointed the first official custodian of E1 Morro National Monument, that impressive sandstone mesa containing the Spanish inscriptions of the conquerors and early governors of New Mexico, beginning with Gov. Juan de Oñate in 1605. There were also two prehistoric Zuni pueblos on top the mesa that yielded arrow points, fragments of pottery, and small beads (which could always be found on red anthills in the ruins when the ants picked them up with other small stones to build their homes). Because he was the custodian he was able to receive gratis the BAE reports and other government documents; he also became acquainted with and was visited at our ranch by a stream of famous writers such as Charles F. Lummis and Erna Ferguson.



Evon Z. Vogt, Jr., learning to ride at age five.



Evon Z. Vogt, Jr., learning the sheep ranching business at age seven.



Four Zuni Shalako performers at the edge of the Pueblo.
(Photograph by Evon Z. Vogt, Sr., 1920)

At the height of our ranching operations my father controlled some two hundred thousand acres and ran more than twelve thousand head of sheep, as well as some cattle. These operations also significantly involved us with other cultures. Our employees were Spanish-Americans and Navahos, with an occasional Zuni being hired as a shepherd. I was deeply involved in the operations, for, being the only son, I was thoroughly trained between the ages of seven and thirteen to assume command of the ranch. At our home ranch I learned to ride, rope, brand calves, butcher steers, build and maintain fences, chop wood, and milk and feed two cows morning and evening. I recall the greatest thrashing I ever received from my father was one morning when I paused to read the comic strip in the newspaper before proceeding to the corral to milk the cows.

My father also insisted that I join him on the range for the lambing season as soon as school was out in May. Here in sheep camp I worked on a daily basis with Navahos and Hispanics, speaking mainly Spanish with both groups, since the second language for Navahos in those days was Spanish rather than English. From the age of seven onward I was required to herd a small group of ewes and their lambs on the range all day. This was a sunrise to almost sunset regime, and I remember it as a very lonely, and