“There is no Plan B” —
Steam railroading in Guatemala, in the new millennium...

Story and photos by Sammy King, locomotives by Baldwin

I’ve boomed around a bit since I started fooling with steam engines 38 years ago, and it seems to me that what really makes a railroader a railroader is the telling of tall tales. The tale I’m about to tell is one of my best ones, and I swear to you that none of it was made up. Some of the juicier parts did get left out, though.

To begin with, the railroad in Guatemala was the biggest and baddest of the American style narrow gauges. Three foot gauge lines of the International Railways of Central America connected the Caribbean Sea with the Pacific Ocean, crisscrossing the mountains and jungles, and reaching out to the borders of El Salvador and México. Built to serve the United Fruit Company, the heyday of the IRCA saw everything from 50 car loaded banana trains with four engines, to a streamlined Edwards railcar. A four car articulated Zephyr style trainset was designed, but never built. The steam roster included the two famous Sumpter Valley articulateds, while the growing fleet of diesels featured a dozen exotic three truck units by GE. In general, this was a first class property. For the historian or enthusiast, this system had everything that the North American narrow gauges did plus volcanoes, seaports, and banana plantations.
After nationalization in 1969, the property slowly declined until abandonment in 1996. I became involved with FEGUA, the government railroad, when I visited in 1988 as a passenger on Trains Unlimited Tours first Guatemalan charters. As it turned out, I returned three more times and had the chance to get to know the last generation of old steam heads. There were by this time damned few left in the states. My last adventure down there was the return of the two tenders from the Sumpter Valley articulateds for use behind the restored engines SVR #19 & #20. After that, I kept in touch with some of my railroader friends, but thought that I would never return to Guatemala.

"You got two minutes" was the first thing Henry Posner III ever said to me. He is a pretty tall tale all by himself, but I mention him here because he is the chairman of Railroad Development Corporation, holder of a 50 year concession to rebuild and operate the 512 mile rail network in Guatemala. He is also president of Ferrovias Guatemala, the company created by RDC to accomplish this. Rehabilitation of the track began in 1997, freight service resumed in 1999, and the operation has made steady progress since then. I had initially contacted Mr. Posner to ask a favor of him, but before my two minutes were up, we had established a common interest in the future of Guatemalan steam.

All the same, I was taken quite completely by surprise when the phone rang the day after Christmas last year, and it was Henry Posner III inviting me to join FVG in celebrating the first anniversary of railroading's return to Guatemala. The main attraction was to be a private passenger train featuring engines #204 and #205 doubleheaded, something which had never been done since I started.
going to Guatemala. The event was enjoyed by all participants, but both engines failed before we made it back to Guatemala City. With tactlessness typical of my BN background, I asked what sort of back up plan there was to cover such unforeseen difficulties, and was informed that here in Guatemala, "There is no PLAN B."

But I digress. My story begins the next month, February 2001, with my arrival in Guatemala City to help out on a special excursion chartered by our old friend, Chris Scow with Trains Unlimited Tours. This was to be a 400 mile roundtrip from Guatemala City to the Caribbean seaport of Puerto Barrios, and return. Half that distance we were to be double-headed, and we were not planning to have any road failures or injuries, or any PLAN B, either.

Only two men with IRCA era steam experience still work for FVG, and one of them, engineer Jorge Diaz, was in the hospital with a broken leg. The other, Raymundo Umaña, started as a hostler in 1957, spent his whole life railroading, and now lives alone in an outfit car. Well-known to tour participants in recent years as a fireman, Edgar "Chuco" Marroquin is the son of an IRCA car foreman, and has worked on steam several times a year since FEGUA days. He grew up with all the old timers and still lives next to the track in the rail workers district of Gerona. Even though Chuco does a great job as steam crew foreman, all of us defer to Don Federico Reynales, retired FCN steam shop superintendent from Bogotá, Colombia. Though only a few years older than Chuco and I, he supervised dozens of steam locomotives at a time in regular service, and had come up through the ranks doing all the jobs in all the shop crafts. We also had two helpers, Lester Garcia and Jaime Mendez, and the two best FVG engineers, Mario Morales and Roberto Tale, on our road crew. These four guys were new to steam, but were seasoned railroaders, well acquainted with hard work.

Federico and some of the others had been working on the engines for three months by this time. They had changed out most of the boiler tubes in their bellies, numerous bushings, soft trailing truck springs, and countless little gadgets and gizmos which steam engines need so they can run. Federico knows instantly what Chucho and I could eventually figure out, so I tried to keep quiet and do what I could to help out. They had things under control.

As your imagination follows me through Guatemala, I should mention that my Spanish isn't too good, as I didn't like school much when I was little. (I did like orchestra and girls, and studiously studied those two subjects.) I learned Spanish from the railroaders in México first, then in Guatemala, and
usually carry a pocket dictionary. Over the years, I've gotten to the point that I know some of the differences in the regional dialects, and the technical words of steam railroading. If Spanish is a person's primary language, they can usually talk to me with no problem, as Spanish is my second language. It gets harder if Spanish is also the other person's second language, as is so often the case in Guatemala, which has 22 different Indian dialects as well as a Carib language in the east near Belize. None of the other guys on the steam crew speak any English. It gets even harder for me to follow when they all start talking real fast at the same time, as is also often the case in Guatemala. It's not that difficult to tell when they're having a laugh on me, however.

Our first day started out pretty smoothly on the head end. The day was mostly overcast, but luckily every photo run was sunny to harshly lit all day long, and I believe that all of our visitors had a good time and got lots of good pictures. Everybody on the crew was rested, and in a good mood when the passengers got off at El Rancho about sunset. We were to deadhead to Zacapa that night, top off the tender with oil, and leave the #204 there along with a fireman and mechanic. Then the rest of us would deadhead the train to Puerto Barrios the next day with the #205. During our layover there, a smaller crew was to return to Zacapa by bus (much faster than the train) and inspect #199 in the roundhouse. The tour group was to join up with us again later in the week, and ride with us from Puerto Barrios back to Guatemala City, picking up our second engine at Zacapa for two more days of doubleheading.

Thirty-three miles might not seem far to you, but on that night it stretched out longer and longer. It was getting chilly as we chugged gingerly along the flood weakened tracks on the bank of the Rio Motagua, and our headlight began to pick up the fluttering of countless Zancudos. These are the notorious dragonfly-sized mosquitoes which live in the tropics, and they like blood. Because of numerous slow orders, we couldn't outrun them. Making disgusting thick black smoke with the engines helped, but we were nearly asphyxiated. Our eyes ran and we coughed and shivered and swatted constantly, but the Zancudos fed on us all the way to Zacapa.

In the old days Zacapa was the division point, helper station, and junction for the famous line to the Salvadoran frontier at Anguiatú, now closed. These days the terminal is rather weather beaten and tired looking but there are still five steam engines there, a six stall open air roundhouse, large depot including division offices and telegraph dispatching, freight house, work train and section crews, and a good size yard with scale house, water tank, run through shop, etc. Many retired railroaders live here, and even the women of ill repute are proud to be from Zacapa, with it's connection to the glory days long gone. Zacapa is also the place where they make Venado Especial, the beloved sugar cane firewater.

Glory rode with us into Zacapa again at almost midnight, and we were greeted by a standing ovation of wildly cheering townspeople, who crowded the station platform, the walkways of two FVG diesels, and the decks of every flatcar in the yard. After waiting for us all evening, the crowd, with two steam whistles and two diesel air horns, created a commotion worthy of its own place in history. Even so, we still had to pump crude oil before we cleaned up, or ate, or slept. I managed to look up a couple
of old friends, and was invited into the section house for a quick snack, all the while watching the fire on #204, and checking her water every few minutes. By then, we were getting tired after 18 or more hours on duty. I stretched out on a mattress on the floor in Michatoya, the FVG six axle heavyweight business car, thinking that I would be safe from the Zancudos in there. Unfortunately, this turned out not to be the case.

Even though I hadn't gotten any rest, I was glad when Chucho tied the whistle cord down at 5am. It's another hundred and three miles to Puerto Barrios, and we all wanted to travel as much of that distance as possible during sunlight because the Zancudos get bigger and more ravenous the farther east you go, as the mountains get smaller and the jungle gets thicker, and the mud gets muddier. Other than the fact that we were all chewed up, with very little sleep, no chance to wash up or shave, and our backs all sprung out of line, our second day on the road started smoothly. It was, as they say, downhill all the way.

Well before noon we had already made nearly 20 miles, when we stopped to pick up a gentleman named Victor Robles, who had come out to meet us with his video camera from his home town of Gualán. He rode with us into the station, which featured a large PA system with a DJ playing CDs of traditional Guatemalan marimba music for us. Again, the townspeople stood all around the train cheering, and applauded our arrival. In spite of a light rain, all the local schoolgirls lined the loading dock dressed in their school uniforms, and our brakemen were clearly overwhelmed by the enthusiastic mob of giggling youth which then over-ran the cars!

After taking water from the rare double spouted tank, being interviewed by Sr. Robles, and having a cold refresco, we again started east with our train now loaded with the next generation of Gualán. Their parents formed a motorcade on the road paralleling the track out of town, and they enthusiastically honked and waved and flashed their lights at us. We whistled as much as possible considering we only had one engine. We stopped at a crossing several miles out of town to let our passengers off, and the party was over for the day.

While we enjoyed this warm and friendly reception, it had delayed us somewhat leaving Gualán. That's when we began to have small troubles, and make frequent stops, and hear funny noises all the time. It was as if #205 had waited until everyone was happy before showing her age, or rather the effects of sitting outside in the weather for decades and being maintained out of the dumpster when times were hard. Times are frequently hard in Guatemala. It was 5pm when we stopped at the operator's office in Bananera with smoke rising from the main crankpin on the fireman's side. All the grease had evaporated, and all the new grease that Lester put in just bubbled and boiled over on the platform. Then Federico said it's time to go. In my infinite wisdom, I was sure she was going to throw a rod, and Federico picked up on it even though I said nothing. We kept going, and kept stopping, and kept doping the rod. And the crankpin kept smoking.
We had taken up our seats on the tender as the sun got low in the evening sky. The Zancudos wouldn't be out for another little while, and all of us were enjoying the last comfort we could until the oil was topped off and the train put away that night. I had only fired the engines standing still, or backing downhill on the first “Guatemala Choo Choo” in January. But now Chucho was ready for a break, so I got a turn. It didn't last long. The headlight showed the Zancudos just fine, but I could only tell when I was making smoke by the laughter and cursing, and by everyone on the crew holding their noses and pointing at me. Anyway, the pin had cooled off and quieted down by the time we tied up in Barrios, proving once again that my generation has a lot to learn about steam engines. Federico told me it was toasted, but that wasn't enough to stop us. After all, we were 197 miles from home with no PLAN B.

I got special treatment because I'm a gringo, so I went to the hotel immediately when we at long last got to the end of the line. My Guatemalan buddies got to stick it out for another hour or two because it was necessary to switch out our train and place the tank car of oil next to the tender in position for a hose to reach the bottom. This operation must be done before shutting down the locomotive because a reciprocating steam pump is used for the transfer. At least one lucky crewman gets to wrestle the slimy hose around, and watch the tender slowly fill, while another guy fires the engine. All of us slept like corpses that night.

The next day four of us had an early breakfast in the open air market, and caught an express bus to Zacapa. Our mission was to look over the #199 as a possible candidate for restoration to service. When I first saw her in 1988 she looked great, had all the vital parts and pretty ornaments on her, and stood proudly in her stall with two gauges of water, ready to light off when needed.

Thirteen years had gone by, and I was sadly unprepared for what we found when we went back for another look. At a glance we could tell she'd been stripped and mutilated, probably while the line was shut down. We looked in the smokebox, and saw two tubes with stoppers in them, with trails of rust and corrosion all over the lower part of the front flue sheet. Somebody had removed the dome casing and nuts so they could enter the interior of the boiler recently, so we decided to pursue our inspection. After all, we were being paid and had come all this way to do it. Jaime and I helped Federico open the steam dome, and then he crawled inside the boiler with his camera. Jaime and Raymundo started shaking the rods, I started measuring the wheels, and Chucho was tracing the air brake system. By a miracle, nobody opened the firebox door.

When I first heard the buzzing, I ignored it. Then I noticed a bee, but again I ignored it. In the very next instant, the buzzing became deafening and all four of us on the ground were covered head to toe with bloodthirsty killer bees. We dropped our tools, started yelling and screaming and running, swatting them off of each other's backs with our leather work gloves. They were inside our clothes, our ears, up our noses, and stinging our eyes. We were spitting them out of our mouths while they stung us over and over. They chased us the HELL out of the roundhouse, across the turntable and the station tracks, down the platform and into the depot, where we hid in the stairwell and slammed the door behind us. Then we only had to kill all the ones that got inside with us.

One good thing about killer bees is that their stingers are big enough to pull out without using tweezers. About the time we got to that stage, we remembered poor Federico, all alone and abandoned inside the boiler with an extremely large angry colony of deadly killer bees. Frantically, we tried to figure out how to rescue him, but none of us knew what to do. We were afraid he was already dead, but when we got up the courage to open the door and look outside, we were just in time to see him shoot up out of #199's steam dome. It sure looked like he jumped up out of that engine straight up into the air and landed on the concrete ramp running flatfooted at full speed. I'll admit that would be impossible, but I guarantee you that he got out of there PDQ.
As soon as he made it to the stairwell, we squished all the bees covering him using our work gloves, and pulled all the stingers out that he couldn't reach. Federico got it as bad as the other four of us put together, so we let him have the shower first. Several years previously Chuco had been attacked by killer bees while firing a fantrip. That time he ran for the tender, dived in the water tank, and slammed the lid shut. They got him anyway. His injuries had been severe enough to require hospitalization, so he got the shower second. Raymundo is older than Jaime and I put together, so he got the third turn.

Besides that, you don't just leave tools laying around in Guatemala because they will disappear. So somebody had to go back to the roundhouse to retrieve them, actually two somebody's. Jaime told me not to worry, that we could fix up some burning waste from a freight car journal box, and carry it over there with us, and the smoke would scare off those nasty killer bees. No problem.

This worked just long enough for us to go back over there and pick up our tools before the buzzing started again. Yes, we got it again. After a few beers, it was funny, and after a shower and another cold beer I was getting over it, except that my knee was swollen up where I had clobbered it on the valve gear of #199 while trying to save myself the first time I was attacked.

One of the retired railroaders in Zacapa is a friend of mine from my first visit to Puerto Barrios, Don Miguel García. He was master mechanic there at the time, and was the last person promoted to this rank on steam power by the IRCA. This evening I had been invited to dinner at his new house in the railroaders barrio near the depot, and it was time to call my hosts. As I walked into the telegraph office to borrow the phone, the agent flagged me down. It seems that a fellow from the Zacapa fire department was there, and he wanted to know if I could tell him where the killer bee's hive was. At the time we didn't know for sure that it was inside #199's firebox, but I suggested the possibility. Then, laughing, I grabbed the sleeve of his shirt and asked if he was going over there dressed like that. He assured me that he was experienced in such matters, and that the bees settle down when it gets cool at night (and the Zancudos come out), and that they would be back later to slaughter the entire swarm.

Of course, this was our topic of dinner conversation. Don Miguel allowed that a killer bee queen must be 4 or 5 inches long, and then he told me that only a week or so earlier a cowboy AND HIS HORSE were attacked and killed by a zillion killer bees right close to Zacapa. Having been invited to stay with the Garcías, I went back to the depot to get my suitcase, and met the fireman again. He was smiling, and the last wisps of poison gas floated lazily out of his sprayer. He said they destroyed the hive, but the bees got him plenty enough times through his protective clothing. He rolled up his sleeve and showed me just in case I wasn't convinced.

The next day, I returned by bus to Barrios, where the boys had #205 ready to go home. We had time to finish our jobs, take some pictures on the turntable for ourselves, and to visit the Safari restaurant, built on pilings driven into the shallow waters of Amatique Bay. It looked like I would get a good night's sleep before our return trip, even though I hadn't spent much for a room. As I lay in my bed watching local cable, a half grown cockroach climbed absent minded up the wall next to me. Up to this point in my life, I always reacted quickly and violently toward them, but my experiences with the
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Zancudos and killer bees had taught me a new tolerance. I figured if the poor little cockroach minded his own business and left me alone, I could do the same for him.

I wouldn’t want to give anybody the wrong idea here, so let me just say that life isn’t worth living without some adventure now and then. FVG rates highest of all my railroading experiences in that department, but it would quickly do me in to live this way all the time.

Here is as good a place as any to throw in one of the fine points of story telling, the story within a story: This one concerns a bet that Chucho and I made before we left Guatemala City. He said that neither #204 nor #205 would fail in a week’s time on the road, and I told him that we were going to come home on the bus, or else riding behind a diesel. Hazing being an accepted custom on every railroad known to either one of us, we razzed each other unmercifully, and finally a bet was made for $200 US greenbacks. Every time we had to make an unscheduled stop, or something sounded funny or rode rough, I told him about all the women and liquor I could have with $200. He showed me the gold US dollar I had given him for luck, and reminded me about the lack of any PLAN B.

Our return trip started with a minor, all too typical derailment of our train while it was being tied onto us by the yard engine. It was easily remedied, and after a small delay we loaded our visitors aboard and boogied. It was another mostly overcast day with fine sunlight breaking through at just the right times for photography. We made more photo stops than planned, but we like to ham it up when things are going well. Except for some really hard core train photographers, the tour group left us at Quiriguá just before sunset. We hadn’t had too many mechanical problems, but we made numerous stops in the counterweight deep mud and muck along the river bank, and had another small derailment, and generally very slow going. The Zancudos were going to be plentiful when it got dark.

The daylight running had been pleasant for passengers and crew alike, but again the line seemed to get longer and longer the later it got. More rattles and clanks had to be doctored more often during more and more frequent stops. At long last we came to the grade crossing outside Gualán, and we were greeted with horns honking, headlights flashing, people following the motion of our rods with flashlights, cheering, bonfires, etc. Our friends gleefully escorted us into town.

Again it was raining when we set ’em down in Gualán. All that could be seen in the circle of our lights was a mob of mostly children, mostly very enthusiastic, mostly cheering and applauding. They mostly covered the engine and all the cars in a split second. Since our train crew was occupied, and there was very little room in the cab for me anyway, I grabbed a lantern, bottled the air, and cut the engine and tank car away from the train. Next, we see-sawed through the pass, and I baled off in a ditch and somersaulted through the mud at the other end of the siding. Fortunately I landed on my feet. I was so completely surrounded with kids that Roberto couldn’t see me, and I had to stick my lantern up over my head to give signs. My hair stood on end every time we moved, as hundreds of kids moved along with us, somehow staying balanced on the slippery, greasy, wet surfaces. Every time we stopped it was
the same. This went on for at least an hour before we had filled the tank car and tender with water, but somehow nobody was injured. The crowd was pleased again. Sr. Robles presented all of our crew with copies of his wonderful video of our visit earlier in the week. None of us will ever forget the way Zacapa and Gualán greeted us, as long as we live.

It was still a long way to Zacapa, and slow enough to suit all of us, I tell you. We finally made it about midnight, and were greeted by our friends, who brought hot food and returned the washing that we’d left off on our way east. #204 and her crew were ready to go, and had been waiting for us all day and all night. Since we were called in El Rancho with both engines at 9am, sleep didn’t look like an option. We took turns getting washed up and eating while the oil oozed slowly into the tenders. Since there is a pump on only #205's tender, it is necessary to have three tracks together to top off the fuel in #204’s tender so everything lines up right with both engines and a tank car. So we had to do it while we could. Then we had to get on down the road.

Once again I got special treatment, and I laid down on the floor of Michatoya and tried to sleep. Every time I started to get sort of comfortable, the train stopped. I foggily wondered what was happening, but didn’t really want to know. Then we’d start up again. This happened every few minutes, over and over until I gave up. I staggered up to the head end, and was told to sit down on #205’s left hand seatbox, and stay there. The train started up again, and I got the fire fixed in a few minutes, the stack clean, boiler full of water, and all the steam she’d hold. Then, I just enjoyed the view of #204 working up ahead. The sky was gradually turning blue, and we were leaving hilly jungle and entering desert mountains. It was hard to believe this was the twenty first century.

When we stopped at El Rancho to pick up our group, I found out that we had made so many stops during the night because #204 had broken a side rod. It happened a little at a time because an old welded repair had gradually let go, allowing the rod bushing to spin and heat up and self-destruct. The guys had taken down the rods to the #4 driver on both sides and we kept going without further incident, but she was less powerful and more slippery to drive after that.

Of course a fireman's job is to make steam, not smoke, but we were supposed to lay it on thick for the runbys. It went against my grain to do it, but it really wasn't such a big thing to ask. I was just happy to be where I was that day. The hill leaving El Rancho westbound is the ruling grade for the system right now, 3.2 miles of 3.3 % grade up to the curved trestle at Santa Rita. On my first trip to Guatemala, I had run #205 up this hill under the guidance of Jose Angel Menegazzo, the last steam engineer promoted to road foreman by the IRCA. Now I got to see it from the other side of the cab, doubleheaded with #204.
Above Santa Rita summit the grade eases off, and there are a number of spectacular horseshoe curves and tall steel trestles. It was another photographic bonanza, and we made many run bys in the perfect conditions. All of the crew felt about half past dead, but we were eating up all the attention from the visitors. We were prouder than hell of our Guatemalan steam engines, and that so many people had come from all over the world just to watch us make 'em smoke.

At Progreso, we swapped the engines so that #205 would be in front. I changed engineers, and moved to the #204 so I would still be in the second cab, and Chucho could get HIS picture taken on the first engine. It took a few minutes for me to fix the fire, clean up the stack, fill the boiler with water, and make all the steam she could hold. Then, I sat back and enjoyed watching #205 work up ahead. Railroading would be the perfect job if it was always like that.

Sunlight ran out somewhere around Agua Caliente, 27 miles from Guatemala City. The bus met us and our passengers called it a day. We thought we were going to get some rest that night, but it was to be a very long way off. The first problem was that there was only a single track at Agua Caliente, and we had to switch everything out on three tracks to pump oil. There was no way around going back to Guatemala City, but the train was to be left in the clear. Since the stub ended siding faced us head on, that meant shuffling the train around so the engines could get out. Normally either engine could handle the whole thing, so this move should have been easy. But #204 was crippled, so our first attempt failed. We ended up having to split up the cars, and do the switching twice over, just so we could get to where we should have been an hour before. Besides that, it was dark, with trees, buildings, and vegetation, overhanging cliffs, and the curving tracks all blocking our lantern signals. Of course we don't have radios. It took forever before we got the cars put away, coupled up the power and made our air, and beat it for town.

We couldn't have gone more than a couple of miles before the gremlins started in on us again. As soon as I fixed my fire, we had to stop and inspect and doctor who knows what. As soon as I got my fire cut down to idle, we started up again. The process was repeated who knows how many times for who knows how long. It seemed like we stopped every few hundred feet for mile after mile. All week long, our guys had watched both engines all the time, and every time we made one of these pit stops, they piled off the tender with hammers, wrenches, oil, and baling wire. Sheer stubbornness was the main reason we were still going by this time. In the states, we would have run out of time on the first day, and given up trying to keep the train running, and fallen back on Plan B. But we were in Guatemala. Somehow or another, we stayed awake until we tied up in Guatemala City. Chucho immediately sent Federico, the two engineers, and me to the hotel, but the other four stayed up all night servicing the engines and pumping oil. How they made it all that time without sleep I'll never know.

FVG is as humane as railroad management gets. They listened to us when we told them what went on behind the scenes, and the schedule for our next road trip will be considerably adjusted because of this experience. My most important duty on the road was safety supervision, meaning that I
could stop the train or cancel the trip if any of us thought anything was dangerous. Even though we all knew that we were all too tired, the guys would have killed me for stopping this trip.

We were back at work by 6am, and everybody who had been able to rest felt better. Coupled up, backing up, we again had a smooth, pleasant trip the 27 miles downgrade to Agua Caliente, and both engine crews occupied themselves by trying to drown each other out using the locomotive whistles.....The switching was a lot easier in daylight. It looked as though the clouds were coming in, so we went after the runbys early, and I managed to sneak a few shots from my seatbox. There was a strong feeling of relief that we had made it, and everybody relaxed and enjoyed the day. It got cloudy, but #204 was practically running herself, so I let some of the tour members have a few minutes on my seatbox at a time, to take in the view and shoot video of #205. As a courtesy to the exhausted crew, we were coming back earlier than planned.

Sure enough, we made it. The tour group had treated us wonderfully all week, among other things they made sure that we had food and cold water or pop on the engines. When they left us at the end of every day, they saw to it that we had plenty to last us. Now it was time for some turntable pictures, and saying goodbye to our friends. The visitors had numerous railroad gifts for everybody except me, but the railroad and crew members took care of me. Sometime after I returned home to Colorado I received several videos, and pictures of myself firing, from our guests, which I treasure. All of us are very appreciative of the friendship offered us during our adventure, and consider it a privilege to work with Trains Unlimited, Tours.

My leg was swollen badly, but I managed to hobble into the locker room and arrange it on one of the long wooden benches. Chucho and I shook hands, and said "WE MADE IT." We were extremely happy that the worst injury we suffered was from the killer bees. I told him that the only reason we hadn't broken down or wrecked or blown ourselves up was because he brought along the gold dollar I had given him for luck. He replied "Somos ganadores porque TENEMOS HUEVOS". In English, this means that we are winners because we have large testicles.

Chucho said I didn't have to pay him, and I've never been so happy to lose a bet. But, did I pay? It would ruin a good story if I told you.

Anybody who thinks tourist railroading is too tame might want to visit FVG next time Trains Unlimited Tours throws a party on wheels. This will be in January 2002. We also have shorter excursions during the remainder of the year sponsored by the "Guatemala Choo Choo". Revelation Video produced a tape featuring the Salvadoran railroad with doubleheaded IRCA 2-8-0's, as well as the trip you just took by reading this story. FVG is on the RDC website, and Revelation Video has a website with more information.

FVG is continuing to invest in reconditioning and running the steam fleet in Guatemala, which consists of a dozen locomotives of the 2-8-2 and 2-8-0 wheel arrangements, ten of which were built by Baldwin, and two by Krupp. Visitors will see that the railroaders there won't give up, although nothing is likely to be done about PLAN B anytime soon.

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**NOTE:** This article was written in 2001 during the height of FVG's operations. Since September 2007, all railroad service has been suspended pending the outcome of arbitration with the Guatemalan Government. In addition, Trains Unlimited Tours filed for bankruptcy in 2009.