



San Juan Parangaricutiro. Photo sold at Angahuan souvenir stands.

## The Birth of a Volcano

Elsie Montiel\*

In a little valley in the state of Michoacán, surrounded by the petrified remains of extinct volcanoes that time has covered with vegetation, Don Dionisio Pulido Mateo was preparing his land for planting, not knowing that that day the world around him would change forever. It was just after four in the afternoon on February 20, 1943 when, 100 meters from where he had the plow, a column of smoke came out of the earth and rose high into the air. He tried to get close enough

to see what was happening, but an enormous roar stopped him cold. The column of smoke began to thicken and go higher and higher and the earth trembled. Amidst the confusion, Dionisio did not realize that he was watching something that few human beings have had the privilege of seeing so close up, or been lucky enough to live through to be able to tell about it: the birth of a volcano.

The process began more or less like this:

On the Quitzocho plain, a great crack opened up in the earth and a dense column of black smoke

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came out of it. This must have happened at about six in the afternoon. Two hours later, the volcano was already 10 meters high and the crater had already begun to form. By midnight, the newborn had grown to a height of 50 meters and was 200 meters wide. The column continued blowing upward and lava appeared. In the next few days, anyone who saw what was happening was surprised. The volcano grew uncontrollably and a few days later, it was more than 150 meters high, with several lava flows and a plume of black smoke.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the apparent surprise, the earth had actually been giving out warning signs for weeks beforehand: in the mornings and at dusk, a strange mist was seen in the area; on occasions, the ground under your feet seemed to vibrate and make strange sounds; earth tremors were frequent; barnyard fowl and animals were restless. Local inhabitants didn't know why, but some even predicted the end of the world.

By the end of the first year, the Paricutín (named after the first town that it gobbled up) reached 275 meters in height and was still emitting materials. Later it stopped for a while and, over a nine-year period of intermittent activity, grew to its current height of 430 meters, the equivalent of a 150-story building. During its first year, seven little towns disappeared under the layers of ash, sand and lava from the explosions; wells dried up and plants and trees disappeared for several kilometers around it. More than 8,000 people had to leave their homes to get away from Paricutín.

#### THE DESTRUCTION OF AN ENTIRE WORLD

In the Purhépecha language, “paricutín” means “to cross” or “on the other side.” Before the eruption, the town of Paricutín was separated from the town of San Juan Parangaricutiro by a ravine. The for-

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Unless otherwise specified, photos by Elsie Montiel



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mer was named as it was because to get to it, you had to cross the ravine. That was the first hamlet to fall victim to the volcano.

The volcano went through several phases in its activity: at first it shot out volcanic ash, bombs and vapors in big explosions. Then came the lava. By April 1943, there was nothing left of the community of Paricutín, located about 500 meters from the cone. All traces of its existence had been buried beneath sand, ash and lava. Its inhabitants were indigenous peasants; almost nobody spoke Spanish; and in their fear, they only managed to understand the gravity of the situation and the need to abandon their lands and the world as they had known it until then, and to start over from nothing.

San Juan Parangaricutiro did not disappear immediately. Its inhabitants lived with the volcano

for more than a year. The uneven terrain, the form and direction of the eruptions and the winds fed local inhabitants' hope for a time that the danger would pass. Although some did leave, the majority withstood the constant tremors, the explosions, the atmosphere thickened by gases and the ash and sand that the volcano rained down on them.

The lava's advance toward the town was very slow. First, the volcano spread lava elsewhere, but then it opened up another mouth, a smaller volcano known as Zapicho, which hurled most of its lava in the direction of the town. Many thought that it would be stopped by a hill, but it just went around it and began to enter the town through the cemetery. Not even the supernatural power of the ancestors laid to rest there could stop it. Then it slid slowly through the streets of the town, burn-



ing the houses and covering them with rocks. Finally, the decision was made to abandon the town, in early May 1944.

Days later, a new lava flow penetrated all the way to the church. But the church would withstand the volcano's destructive force: part of it, the altar, the towers and a section of the entryway arch would resist its onslaught, poking out of the petrified lava. Today, visitors find it difficult to explain why, after completely covering the nave, the lava stopped before reaching the altar, respecting the structure from the floor to the roof.

The population was not afraid, though perhaps uneasy. Although there was no loss of human life, some live witness accounts give us an idea of what it meant for a peasant to lose the main or only source of food and subsistence:

I was barely a child of 11. I thought it was fun to go look at the volcano in the afternoons. It was like a castle because the land was on fire. But for my parents, and even more for my grandparents, it was a disaster because they lost the land they worked... their personal effects...

Everybody wanted desperately to not abandon their homes and lands. One lady who had a sturdy wooden house and a few animals dug in and didn't want to leave. When her neighbors came to tell her she had to leave she shouted at them furiously "I'll die here! What am I going to do somewhere else, without anyplace to live or anything to eat?" They had to take her out by force...the lava had already invaded her corral and had begun to burn the house itself. As she was leaving, she turned around to look and said, drying her tears, "It's God's will."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, what for some was a misfortune, for others was reason for amazement and interest because they wanted to study or just admire the phenomenon. Despite the confusion, the fear and the damage caused, the Parícutín provided a spectacle worth watching for many months.

#### AN EXERCISE IN GEOMETRIC PERFECTION

The town nearest the volcano area is Angahuan. The townspeople still have strong Purhépecha roots;





Mauricio Degollado

the adults speak little Spanish and many local inhabitants earn their living renting out horses or as guides for visitors who want to go look at the church or hike up to the crater. One of those guides, Don Enrique Bravo Gómez, explains that, almost from the beginning, many came from outside attracted by the spectacle. “They came at night to watch the eruption, from about nine to midnight... because during the day you couldn’t see anything and it was very hot. So that’s when we started to work as guides. For example, my grandfather started acting as a guide then; people continued to come until the eruption ended.”<sup>3</sup>

As innumerable chronicles tell us, the Parícutín made for one of the most imposing, majestic spectacles of the history of volcanology in Mexico.

From the day it was born, the volcano, like an enormous fireworks show, hurled burning rocks to high altitudes. They fell down in torrents to crash against the sides or into the nearby lava flows, and as they broke up, they produced a light and color show... The lava that came out...of the base of the cone flowed from 17 to 56 meters a day...and at night, it slid like a serpent, golden and red, huge, running away from the volcano. Through the enormous crater, burning rocks, from cherry red all the way to white

from the heat, were launched into space. The steam clouds rose above the volcano and gleamed fantastically, and the gases made enormous rumbling sounds inside the crater. The lava on the surface of the flows cooled, taking on a coal black color and creating fantastic figures, but as the eruption continued, the edge cracked and fell off, making a sound like breaking porcelain...Sometimes, the rocks exuded green, yellow and red salts...at one point the volcano created a stampede with the emission of bombs, sand, solid and gaseous materials, forming imposing, beautiful plumes. Some of the bombs were enormous and made enormous holes when they fell to earth.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most faithful spectators was Dr. Atl, a member of the generation of Mexican muralists that Diego Rivera, David A. Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco also belonged to, and an eminent volcanologist. Dr. Atl built a cabin-lookout near the volcano and his innumerable nights of observation resulted in many paintings, as well as a legacy of scientific observations and aesthetic reflections. Among the latter, the one referring to the cone of the volcano is worth reproducing here: “During this whole month of May [1943] the central column has been modeling the cone

surprisingly slowly until it has reached geometric perfection. The cone is very regular on all sides. In some crags on its north or south side there is a small landslide or variation, but the column immediately moves to correct the defect. On all sides, the Paricutín looks like a clay vessel made by an able potter and the grooves marking this little mountain in formation seem machine-made.”<sup>5</sup>

From the tourist center of Angahuan, with its cabins and other services, the visitor reaches the old church by horseback in a half an hour ride. It takes longer to reach the volcano: two or three hours. The trip to the crater is made on the western slope, where the lava flows were scarcer; going up is the challenge since the pathway is made of sand and ash. Volcanic activity has not ceased altogether. From above, you can still see small columns of steam that remind us that under the earth are burning lava beds. The Paricutín went through more than 12 phases by the time it ceased major activity in 1952. Today it only breathes and sleeps. But, for the com-

munities of Caltzontzin, San Juan Nuevo, Angahuan and Zacán, among others, its birth is still a key moment in their history. Many black-and-white photographs hanging on the local huts offering water and snacks to the visitors who come down from the church show that what they say here is true: the Paricutín was born under the gaze of strong, resilient men who only abandoned her slopes when the fruit of her belly threatened to devour them. **MM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Television documentary by Jorge Prior, *Chronicle of Paricutín*, broadcast on Mexico City’s Channel 11, April 12, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Personal interview with the Angahuan guide, April 23, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Esperanza Yarza de la Torre, “Los volcanes del sistema volcánico transversal,” *Investigaciones Geográficas*, bulletin 50, UNAM, April 2003, p. 228.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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