

Today Me, Tomorrow You

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

I read a piece Sunday in the New York Times magazine by an Oregon driver who broke down three times this past year, but each time no one stopped to help. The break-downs occurred when he was driving other people's cars. Otherwise, he said, if he'd been in his own car, he would have "carried things like a jack and extra fuses, and know enough not to park on a steep incline with less than a gallon of fuel."

□ The people at the gas station where he'd asked for a gas can told him that they couldn't loan them out "for safety reasons" but that "I could buy a really crappy one-gallon can, with no cap, for \$15."

□ “It was enough,” said Justin Horner, a graphic designer who lives in Portland, “to make me say stuff like ‘this country is going to hell in a hand basket,’ which I actually said.”

□ In the end, some people did stop. In all three instances they were Mexican immigrants. One family lived in Mexico but was in Oregon picking cherries for a few weeks, and then peaches, before returning home. The driver got out of his van. He did not speak any English but his daughter did. The man had a jack but it was too small for Horner’s jeep. So they braced it with a part of a big log they’d cut with the Mexican’s saw. As he was taking the wheel off, Horner said he broke his tire iron. It was one of those collapsible ones and I wasn’t careful...” The wife took the tire iron from her husband and was off to buy a new one. She returned in 15 minutes.

□ Horner tried to pay them but “the guy just smiled and, with what looked like great concentration, said in English, ‘Today you, tomorrow me.’”

□ The piece reminded the Lady Friend of a story I’d told her when my late wife and I were looking for a place to live in Mexico. The year was 1958. We had been staying in Chapala on a lake with the same name. But we found Chapala, a magnet for Americans, especially retired military officers, too rich for our means. Friends told us about Sayula over the mountains, not many miles away. Tourists were rare.

□ When our venerable Dodge came to rest in the plaza in Sayula we discovered that we had a flat rear tire. I was about to reach for the spare and begin cranking but a cheerful crowd of young men waved me off. They would change the tire. But a lug nut was missing from our wheel. What to do? After examining the attachments closely, one of the boys sprinted across the street to examine the wheel of a government jeep. He returned in triumph with a lug nut that was a perfect fit for our Dodge.

□ “But,” I said. “You might get yourself in trouble. You stole that nut from the government.”

□ “The government?” replied the youth. “We are the government!”

□ My wife and I often wondered if a car with people from Mexico had wound up in our own small Northern California town with a break down, would they have been as warmly helped? We thought not. But, as I say, this was 1958.

□ □ *Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.*

