

BRIDGE DOWN

November 21, 2016

A year and a half ago the usual rainy season here was having a hard time getting going. It rained some in May/June when the rains usually start. Farmers planted corn, yuca in land they had worked hard to prepare. The corn sprouted--beautiful expanses with little light-green delicate jewels of promise. But the rain stopped. The little seedlings wilted, died off. It was quite frustrating. No way to water with the river far off, no source of electricity for a pump. Things were already getting scarce then, seed corn was hard to come by. I know because I drove all the way to Cumanacoa several times getting corn seed for the local campesinos. Americo was so disgusted after losing his whole field he refused to replant even though I came up with more seed. "When I really know its rainy season because it has rained continuously, I'll plant", he declared. This didn't happen until September, four months late in a season that is six months long. It did finally rain hard, some harvests were had, though the aquifers were never topped off.

There ensued a long, hard dry season. At the same time unbelievably poor management of the economy joined by plummeting oil prices caused general scarcity of goods, including staple foods like rice, corn, sugar. Public transport suffered, since drivers could not get batteries, tires or parts for their vehicles. The water in the Guri dam, which is the source of a large share of electricity generation in Venezuela, dropped to record lows. The government instituted rationing, turning off the "light", as it is referred to here, for three hours a day on a rolling schedule. This in turn complicated business--your three hours without electricity might be peak hours-- and daily transactions: imagine arriving at your bank or ATM for the day's grocery money just as the electricity is shut off. Not that your grocery money was going to go very far. If you could find it, a kilo of rice, harina pan or spaghetti cost a day's wages. Flour was scarce as well, so long lines formed at bakeries for what they could make--bread was affordable, since it had to be sold at regulated prices. People turned to local produce like yuca and casabe, which therefore also went high in price, though not as bad as packaged products.

One crop that does well in dry weather is mango. A bumper crop came on just as desperation levels were rising out of hand. Usually in a good mango harvest you'll see ground carpeted with rotting mangos which not even the animals and bugs can keep up with. This year people would start arriving early in the morning with buckets, sacks, baskets or plastic bags to scour under the mango trees. Kids, workers, families, vandals, thieves all spread out of the city to the surrounding valleys each day. Baskets of mangos appeared for sale at low prices on streets all over Cumaná. People called them "quita-ruidos", noise removers, because they would stop the rumbling in your tummy.

The other saving grace was the fresh herring, "arenque" they are called here, which somehow were plentiful and sold cheap--from 100 to 300 bolivars a kilo. Other fish started at 1000 Bs. or much more. Chicken and beef were much more expensive and hard to find to boot. All that the price controls was accomplishing was to make products much scarcer. Even the government distribution programs of subsidized food got less frequent and with much less food.

Of course mango season ends. In fact it ended significantly earlier because the city harvesters got more desperate and more competitive, climbing the trees to take even green unripe fruit. So we were all happy to see the rains begin, me especially because fires were running rampant due to the extended dry season. The rain was sporadic at first but not really much behind it's

traditional schedule of beginning May-June-July. This brought a burst of clearing and planting much more land than had been usual in recent years. The campesinos saw that the only food they can ultimately count on was what they grew themselves. And the prices of and demand for yuca, corn, casabe, cashews or anything else they might grow were way up.

Even though it was raining, the three hour electricity blackouts continued. It took weeks, even months of rain to wet the ground enough for the water to start to fill the reservoir. All cheered with relief when the various conservation measures were ended. Schools and government offices had been reduced to a three day work week. It made you wonder about what they did since it did not seem to make much difference.

Normally August is the peak of the rainy season. It was raining hard and regularly just like old times. But I was deciding that something had happened to the stream courses. We were having water shortages from the dam on the Barranca stream running low even with the full rains. The stream from which we take our water for the upper farm at DP was dry in August! It would run while it was raining, then dry up when the rain stopped. This was a stream that normally ran all year at least a trickle. This was the first time I had seen it go bone dry.

Lo and behold by the end of August the streams began running well again. And there began to be some harvest. Corn and cachapas and bollos started to be sold on street corners downtown. Auyama, which is similar to winter squash and pumpkin, replaced mangos as the everywhere available cheap food. Unfortunately along with the harvest came the stealing. Worse, it came before the harvest, because thieves would take the crops before they were ready. Jesus Flores and his sons had several acres of bitter yuca ten minutes up from my place in Barranca. Every day they would come by and report that somebody had run off with several sacks of their yuca. A field of yuca represents almost a year of hard work, constancy and hope for making casabe from it. When your only farm implement is a machete for clearing the woods, planting and weeding under a tropical sun, the effort is big. Finally Jesus and sons had to pull up the yuca even though it wasn't mature, and make what casabe they could, rather than lose it all. The pervasive stealing in Venezuela has become rampant with the desperation and scarcity. If your own president does it—it's called "expropriation"--why not a citizen follow the example. The government takes whole companies, large farms, businesses. Unlike thieves, they promise to pay for them, but when they don't, it amounts to stealing.

Still, we were glad to have a real rainy season. The Brito river started to have real floods--"crecidas"--as they are called here, as was usual. These huge rushes of water sandblast the rocks, giving the river its characteristic crystal clean quality.

The larger Manzanares river which the Brito runs into also began to flood regularly. It runs near the front of my house in Barranca. Vicente and I would go to watch the show from the hanging bridge that is the conduit for all the activity between city and our valley. As the amount of water increases, the speed it runs at goes up at the same time. It is hard to wrap your mind around the huge volume of water that is passing under you as you stand transfixed on that bridge.

On September 4 the Manzanares ran one of its full floods. It poured and the water level which was normally 6 meters below the bridge floor came to within a meter or a meter and a half of that floor. Having lived his life in the city, Vicente was fascinated by the show and power, as the roaring brown water carried all kinds of plastic containers, logs, brush and trees past at high speed. I suggested that standing on the bridge was not the best idea. The river was above and

out of its course. Where we park the car by the bridge to unload was under enough water to probably cover the car if it had been there.

I told Vicente about the time twelve years ago when the Manzanares flooded huge, reaching all the way to the floor of the bridge at its lowest point in the middle. A big log hit the bridge, tilting it considerably and pulling one of the steel cables out of its runners. The floodwater came up to the trail in front of the house. It flooded wide on the other side, taking three houses with it. Thirteen miles further down the road we were unable to drive across for four days, since it had flooded the road into Cumaná. Today's flood was not up to that epochal level, but was sweeping wide enough to be quite unnerving.

The morning of that day I had been with Americo and Asdrubal a kilometer upriver with two other fellows. Asdrubal had been after me for two months to cut down the burned shell of a huge tree with my chainsaw on the riverbank. It was to form the large dugout trough for yuca in his casabe factory. It took us about five hours to knock it down and hollow it out, but it was still too heavy for the five of us to carry. It was quite a way to Asdrubal's house, he was bushed--I could see he didn't want to take it on. "If the river goes up and takes it this afternoon, you'll lose the trough and all our efforts", Americo warned. We discussed the possibilities; it hadn't rained much in the last few days. "If it floods--it is rainy season after all--the river will take it. And its gonna take that one too," Americo declared, pointing to a large Caro tree leaning out upriver. "We'll ask the river to place it in front of Mango's house to make boards from." Caro is excellent lumber. Asdrubal was noncommittal but said he'd look for more people. We headed home.

Americo went to work on him and later they were heading back to the log with a sizable group, a bottle of rum and machetes and rope to make a carrying frame. That evening watching the massive flood, I mused how right Americo had been, grateful that our work and that rare log had not been lost. As we headed back to the house (it was still raining), Vicente and I heard a huge clang followed by an explosive cracking. We ran back to the bridge. The river HAD brought the Caro tree, with a branch sticking up that had rammed into the bridge in the rushing flood, derailing one of the stabilizer cables. It also ripped the two inch thick water line lashed to the underside of the bridge to take water to the houses on the other side. Fortunately the branch snapped, allowing the river to haul the tree on towards the ocean, alas lost lumber.

I was just happy to see the bridge mostly intact and the flood receding. That bridge is our lifeline, which we cross several times a day bringing supplies, taking stuff to sell, fixing the power lines, the road, or carrying water. Tourists come across it to swim the clear Brito waters. The teachers cross early each morning to the elementary and high schools, returning across the bridge in the afternoon to their homes in town. Many mule and motorcycle loads cross with casabe or cashews or fish. Some loads are to supply the valley bodegas--little grocery stores. That steel bridge with its concrete ramps has been there for the thirty seven years I have lived in this valley, and it would greatly complicate our lives if it weren't. I remember old Pedro María recounting getting casabe loads across before there was a bridge. "You started with the load on your shoulder, and then as you walked along the rocky bottom leaning in to the current, you lifted the load with your arms straight up because the water was over your head in the middle. If the casabe gets wet, it dissolves and you lose the load. I remember struggling across, feeling I could not possibly hold my breath any longer, gasping desperately as my head broke above water towards the other side." Those guys had to be in superb physical shape. A cuenta of casabe weighs over sixty pounds.

The next morning I congratulated Americo on getting the Asdrubal canoe over in time. As we fixed the water line and managed to pry the cable back into its slots at the side of the bridge, Americo described his dream from the night before in which the river took away the bridge. "It tried," I said, "but luckily it didn't manage to do it."

"No, you don't understand," he said, "It is going to go up again."

It rained every day but for the following three days the river did not surge more than a meter or two. On the fourth day the rain started early and went long. Late in the afternoon 'el río Manzanares ' was again a roaring torrent. In the crecida before, the river had carried logs, mats of twigs and leaves as well as plastic junk. After a while the debris dwindled, as the massive rush of water cleared the river's course. This time the amount of debris tearing past was much greater. "Must be flooding from a different tributary" I said to Vicente. Huge logs among masses of litter swept by, interspersed with household items and junk. Even two or three refrigerators went past, so we knew houses were being flooded further upriver. It was still raining, so Vicente went back to the house. He had not been there when Americo told of his dream.

I stayed, dreading. I noted that the logs and flotsam concentrated in the middle of the river, leaving the edges relatively clear. That was also where the bridge hung lowest. The water was just a meter below the bottom of the bridge, still rising. The velocity was now such that any log that hit would cause a massive, terrible impact. And there it came--a monstrous ceiba tree, trunk over a meter and a half in diameter, with three huge broken-off branches or roots rising up and forward towards the bridge--boring down inexorably. There was a deafening clang and crash as the behemoth slammed into the bridge, bending the middle down into the rushing brown waters. With its 8 inch I-beams and inch-thick cables the bridge held for moments as more logs and water piled up against it. Then with ear splitting snapping and ripping, it broke away from the other side of the river, was swung out at high speed and crumpled against our side of the river.

The water continued to rise for a while, flood cresting after another half an hour. As the rain tapered off people began to appear to see what had happened to their bridge. In spite of the rain and being huddled in their houses people had heard the crash far and wide. I saw headlights and flashlights across the way, but the flood on the far side kept people forty meters from where the bridge had been.

That night I marveled to Vicente how with so much rain and disaster the electricity was still working. Fifteen minutes later it went off and did not come back on. At dawn I discovered that we also did not have water. The breaking bridge had pulled the pipes apart at their lowest point, so all the water from the dam had run out during the night. Americo showed up at dawn, as usual. Rather than crowing "I told you so", he gave a simple grim declaration that "When I have a dream like that, it happens, like it or not". He and I gathered a crew and we worked down the side of the twisted, tilted bridge freeing the tubing. The end was buried in mud and debris in the river, but the men dove in and finally freed it. We had to cut the tubing where the bridge had bent it, then pull the forty meters of black polyethylene pipe out. At the end we wired it tightly bent so water could no longer drain out. After a few hours the now copiously flowing stream replenished dam and piping so we had clean running water again. Not so the folks on the other side of the river, the road side. With no bridge it would be a while before they figured out a way to string that pipe across the river. The forty meter length cut from the bridge we hauled to the house, knowing it would sprout legs and walk away in the night if left out.

Later that day we heard that that elephantine ceiba had taken out two other bridges. The next bridge upriver from us was damaged but still in place. It crosses the river about a mile upriver at San Agustin. This now became the path to go to the road and town. A week earlier Americo had complained about the trail that goes up that way. Where it crosses the stream that runs behind our house and into the Manzanares it gets quite muddy and slippery. We hauled slabs of wood and put in a makeshift bridge and boardwalk. In the first flood five days ago the river backed up in the stream bed and carried that wood forty meters up next to our neighbor's house. The neighbor and I carried the wood back and laid down some stones. I had Americo place a wooden forklift pallet for people to cross the muddiest section. The trail was overgrown in parts and certainly a long way around. But the primary objection I was hearing was having to traverse Tigre, as the settlement before the bridge is called. It is known as the local nest of malandros--thieves, delinquents, and people were afraid of being mugged.

There was much drama in the first days after the flood. Various visits by firemen, military, medical and government officials, including engineers. The fellow in charge of Mercal, the subsidized food distribution program, showed up with a major from the army saying that we had to do a food delivery for this emergency and it should be done at my house (community center) as usual. The major had a definite eye for the ladies and a census was ordered of the very pregnant women in the valley. Said pregnant ladies turned out--sensibly--not to be very interested in being hustled away from their families amidst much publicity to stay in makeshift accommodations at the local medical dispensary by the road. They did avail themselves of the attention to get checkups and supplies.

I made the trek up to the San Agustin bridge and back down to the other side of our broken bridge, where I was one of the interviews by a TV crew. Days later when I finally made it to town, several people told me they had seen me on TV. This included Kontia's mother, who commented "todo un artista para hablar por televisión".

The lack of electricity was getting urgent, we were on the verge of losing whatever was in our freezers. Then I heard that the electricity had returned to the houses on the other side. That meant that it was just our line, and nobody of influence would be bothering the electric company. Figuring the fuses of the high voltage power lines were thrown out, I took the long light bamboo pole with a special wood hook we had rigged for this purpose and marched up to the San Agustin bridge and down to Barranca. You are supposed to use a special insulated fiberglass pole, but those are always missing.

Barranca was a full melee. Some Brito hothead activists had blocked the main road to pressure the government to do something about the bridge and electricity. Cars were backed up half a mile each way. I hate these roadblocks where it's the drivers who have nothing to do with the problem who suffer. I've been caught in a number of them for hours. But people here generally agree that it is the only way to get the attention of the authorities. Meanwhile a cistern truck had come to get water to the Barranca houses and gotten stuck sinking in to the wet dirt road. Yobani told me that he had tried to replug the fuses to our line and each time they exploded back out due to some short. He was furious at the road blockers and generally in high stress. I expect its hard being the dedicated representative of a now quite unpopular government.

On my way back I discovered that a transformer in Barranca had been blown by lightning the night the river took the bridge. That was obviously the short in the system. I sought out Teodoro, a local self-made lineman, who was coming to the same conclusions. I gave him the fuse pole

and told him to pull the fuses at the blown transformer, which served only a few houses, and put our main line fuses back in, which served the whole Brito valley. Apparently he got much resistance and threats from Yobani and practically had to force his way, but did do the fuses after an hour and a half. The electricity came back on, there were none of the problems that Yobani augured, and the electric company which he had insisted was on the way never showed up.

The next day David Leon showed up with a long steel cable to string between the bridge supports with the idea of putting a pulley and basket system in for crossing the river.

So far the way across was that mile up to the San Agustin bridge. There you could get the bus to town. For me it was double distance as I had to go back down the other side to Barranca to get the car. I moved the car to Manuel's, which was a quarter mile up towards San Agustin. Manuel, my mechanic, is a true jack of all trades, who can fix just about anything if given time, tools and materials. He loves something well done, the Volkswagen Beetle being one of his prime examples. People come to him from far and wide to keep their old VWs running. If a part is unavailable--commonly the case in Venezuela--he makes it himself on antique metal lathe he has jury-rigged in his shop. Manuel was once a boating enthusiast, had a boat carcass in his junkyard, but replied in the negative when Yobani asked if he had a boat we could use to cross the river. We discussed using a truck tire inner tube to carry stuff across the river, as there was still talk of doing food distribution from my house. Manuel suggested a rig with two steel drums to make a little barge to cross with.

Some years ago I bought honey in two steel drums from a llanos (prairie) beekeeper, but after too many complaints about it not being as good as Brito honey I quit selling it once the drums were empty. The next day I had a crew of volunteers wrapping rebar around the drums to attach boards we had previously made from river logs. There was some delay when they discovered honey residue in one of the drums and invented a long scoop to get it out for coffee and juice. "No sugar in the stores", they pointed out.

Two days previously some of the military had appeared across the river calling and discussing. One of the soldiers almost drowned trying to get a rope across the river. I yelled across to come back in the morning when the river would be down some, but they kept milling around. Later they told us their commanding officer had ordered them not to come back unless that rope was strung across the river. They finally found their solution in Mauro, a local malandro who is like an otter in the river. I suspect he has had practice stealing water pumps by the river at night, though he denied it when I asked him after mine was stolen. He appeared out of the muddy water at night on our side, rope in hand. He is an appealing youngster and I helped him string the ropes, after which I lent him a flashlight to get back home via the San Agustin bridge.

We now used that rope and a high quality climbing rope the soldiers had left to moor at both ends across the water and haul the barge. As the youngest of the brothers at hand, José David was elected for the maiden voyage. He was summarily dumped when the little barge was flipped by the current in the middle. There ensued a series of hilarious episodes in which we tried tying the rig differently or rigged sliders along the rope and each time José David splashed unceremoniously into the brown waters.

During these efforts I noted that you could in fact wade across the river in some mornings. The water came up to your chest. In dry season there are places you can cross with the water

little more than knee deep. At Manuel's place he has steps down to the river and the crossing is passable at times. Exploring with Americo, we found a way to easily cut a trail through the woods along the river, ending up across the river from Manuel's place. Jose cut poles for us to use testing the river bottom (water way too muddy to see anything); we started to wade out. Soft sticky mud near the edge changed to sandy, rocky most of the way. We stumbled over rocks, water up to our chests, feeling for the shallowest route, but got across without going in over our heads. The river was usually a little bit lower--it was empowering to find that it was navigable without a bridge or conveyance. I developed a procedure of putting pants into my daypack, shirt raised high in my teeth, pulled pack up on my head to ford the river. There was never anyone around, and I would get dressed at the other shore and head up to the car. Not only did crossing at Manuel's save the long loop up to Tigre and back, it avoided the thieves and such pests.

One day I was as usual running late returning from town. It was already raining and the river was starting to inch up. Any delay would have the water too dangerous. I took wallet, papers, anything that should not get wet, and stuffed it into my pack. Leaving my clothes on--which were already wet--I charged across. Slipping and sliding down the muddy trails, it wasn't until I got halfway home that I realized my cellphone was still on my belt under my t-shirt. It was a "Vergatario" (slang that you could perhaps translate as 'helluva fellow'), Chavez pet project of Venezuelan produced low price cellphone. After being underwater the entire river crossing, not to mention the rain, it still worked! I opened it up some and dried it off. It took a couple of days for the screen to dry fully, but it is working normally.

Since there was still no way to get stuff across at Barranca, the food distribution was done at the San Agustin school, right across the road from that bridge. There was tension about the bridge, which had also been damaged in the flood. It was missing a couple of floor pieces and had broken bonds in the support structure. Locals were worried that the increased traffic would break their bridge. I found some Brito people chest deep wading the river where the rope was strung at the Casa Barranca riverfront. When I asked why they didn't just use the Tigre bridge, they said Tigre people were grumbling threats about too many people using their bridge.

The government figured they had quieted people with the cheap food--nothing more was done. Pretty soon Briteros blocked the road again. The next day a commission from the governor's office went upriver. They went unnoticed by a group waiting at the ex-bridge. These spent the day getting madder and madder because the governor promised to send someone then didn't. In the afternoon when the government group came down, the waiters were so heated up they simply could not cool down even in the face of the bald fact that the governor had in fact sent someone.

On my next round to the Tigre bridge I found some men fixing it. They had procured a long wire to set up an arc welder and were banging metal into place. They were local, and I never found out if anyone paid them for the effort. They were still at it late afternoon when I returned from town. The bridge now was quite functional and the concern due to high traffic faded. There was talk of prohibiting motorcycles crossing, but they had about as much chance of stopping the water from going down the river as stopping the motorcycles.

A couple of doctors, a nurse and assistants did an operative at my house (community center), checkups, passing out pills. Some of the pregnant ladies came. Irma, who used to work at the mayor's office, lives on the other side of the river, came to oversee and get drinking water, which they were still didn't have since the bridge went. She reported that the engineer from the mayor's office requested that the community come to agreement about what they wanted. He

said they needed the cable car setup not just for people in the valley to cross the river with in the interim, but also to move tools, materials and workers for reconstructing a bridge. As head of the Infrastructure Committee (don't ask) of the Communal Council it fell to me to try to round up a consensus.

I headed to our upper farm, stopping at the houses along the way to drum up support. I made a point to talk to various road blockers. A few days later a small group of us went to the Mayor's offices to meet the engineer. Luis Tovar was an appealing young man, say twenty eight to thirty years, earnest and friendly. Prominent front teeth gave him a Bucky Beaver look, apt for a hardworking engineer on a river project. He said they were working on a design for a new bridge which would be twenty meters longer than the old bridge (which had been 50 meters long) so the base would be on very solid land away from the edge. That way they could make it higher so that the flood waters wouldn't reach it. I could see he had a spiel ready when he launched into a "three stages" explanation: short term was the hand powered cable car; median term was dismantling the old bridge and putting it back in place provisionally for strictly pedestrian use--no mules, no motorcycles; long term was building the new bridge. Pulling the old bridge back was a recurring fantasy. People expected the government to send a big tow truck that would haul the bridge back. We are talking two forty meter I-beams, the whole floor of steel plate and all the other heavy metal parts, many now twisted or broken beyond repair. Heavy machinery wouldn't even fit down the narrow access road, much less be able to negotiate the two right angle turns. Luis Tovar gave us his phone number and said they would be coming to work on the cable car in the next few days. Which of course they didn't.

On these trips to town I called my kayaking friend Chris to ask if he had an inflatable boat. He pointed out that it would get wrecked in short order and sent me a link on Mercado Libre, the Venezuelan eBay, for an aluminum dingy. The little aluminum boat we had as kids on the Pond and in Nassau would have been perfect. It was stable in the water for up to four people, yet light enough to carry and put away at night. Manuel said we should visit a friend of his, Ramoncito, who worked on boats. Manuel also observed that we had not made the drum raft right. The wooden platform had to be suspended midway of the width of the drums rather than on top as we had done it. We put it together that way and I was hauled across the river with a small load. It worked passably well.

Ramoncito turned out to be a hefty energetic older fellow, perhaps Italian background, who was very happy to see Manuel. Two guys who knew tools and machinery, loved to work with them were eager to talk shop. Ramon's workshop was a sprawling warehouse beside the perimeter highway that runs around Cumaná, with big boat hulls, an old dump truck being repaired, a little pond or former swimming pool. Mostly he and Manuel recounted their recent robberies, both serious. Ramon's night watchman had apparently colluded with the robbers who had driven in a large truck and spent the night loading high quality tools, equipment for making fiberglass boats, a huge loss overall. The factory that had been contracting Ramon simply left Venezuela to cut their losses. Ramón was soldiering on with odd jobs, replacing tools bit by bit. What he was eager to show us was some bananas he had planted where cows had been kept. They were in fact astounding in size and vigor.

Alas the little red fiberglass boat he had once offered Manuel was no longer around. He took us to the algae-filled pool, where we fished out a fiberglass shell about nine feet long, three feet wide and a foot and a half deep. Though square at both ends, it was somewhat boat shaped, flat bottom slightly rounded, a little wider at the top than the bottom. Ramón said it was a tank from a fiberglass boat. "Take it until you get a bridge", he said. It looked like it might work, and

two people could carry it. I was worried about stability so on the way home Manuel described how to make an outrigger for it.

I was amazed that the National Guard did not stop us at the checkpoint. They stop most vehicles with loads, especially unusual ones. They ask for papers, invoice or permit in lieu of which the driver can present them with papers of the higher denominations of the local currency. Perhaps my jeep just looks too impoverished. I don't paint it; it is missing the front fenders, very much a rattletrap; but it runs good. They almost never stop it at the *alcabala* checkpoints.

On arrival Manuel drilled a hole at each corner and threaded a short loop of rope at each end for attaching a tow line. The next morning we put the "boat" in where the rope was stretched across the river up from the fallen bridge. It worked surprisingly well, passably stable, could carry two passengers. It required two men, one at each side of the river, to haul the passengers across. Would-be river crossers began to avail themselves of it, amid festivity, nervous squeals in crossing, and many wisecracks.

I could not stay for the fun, since I had to go to a meeting at the school. I was not going to miss it, given that I—like many parents—was hopping mad. Since the bridge went, the teachers had not made an appearance. They had gotten together and released a statement that until the bridge was fixed, they would not be giving classes. Very conveniently they would continue to collect their pay while not having to make the daily trek up to the river. Some years ago we had tried to solve the problem of teachers losing their resolve to give classes at a remote rural school by finding, helping to prepare and hire teachers from the community itself. There were still several of them on the school roster, though they now lived in town or at the road. They too seemed to be willing to risk their students losing the academic year. This meeting was with some representatives from the central school administration offices in town to try to find a resolution. Accusations shot around with some acrimony between parents and teachers. The main spokesman for the administration presented himself as a mediator, but I could see that he came with an agenda already in mind. Chencho had gone to the central offices with a proposal. He is head of our Communal Council, a long time high school history teacher and has worked in the administrative center. He is also the one who got me riled at the teachers about this. His proposal was that the teachers keep working, but scale back to three days a week. The administrator wanted to get in good with the teachers by getting them a lighter work load, but at the same time be seen by the community and parents as working in their favor, or the students favor. He suggested the teachers make those three days an hour longer to compensate a little for the two days lost per week. Yanitza, a mother who had been at the river watching the boat be figured out, pointed out that the teachers now had a way to get across the river without the bridge, Apparently Americo and the crew working the "ferry" had started charging a small fee, something that Steven and I were planning to suggest. "But," Yanitza said, "The maestros are exempt from that fee". Only Franklin had the gumption to stand up and say he would come the five days if there was a way to get across, but the rest were set on the three day work week, as was the administrator. They pointed out that when the river was in flood they could not cross—true but infrequent. Those days they would have to go up and around via the Tigre bridge, which they claimed dangerous for fear of robbery. Two of the teachers who saw the trek to the school as a definite hardship were encouraged to request a change to a school closer to the road. The administrator agreed to speed acceptance of Marcela as a contracted teacher. She is the person in charge of our Foundation's education program, lives near the school, was already teaching at the school as a substitute, and is by vocation a teacher and a good one at that. The teachers chose Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday as their three days (talk about a long weekend!). Since then I've noticed that the morning and midday of those days are quite raucous

at the crossing, with much screaming and laughter amidst Americo's constant patter and insults as he hauls the teachers across. We fashioned two low wooden seats for the fiberglass shell which get covered with cardboard discarded from the food distribution program so the teachers keep their clothes clean.

As any good cynic might expect, there has been much comment and controversy about the fee for crossing in "el bote". At 50 bolivars it amounts to a nickel. The bus into town is 100 Bs. or 150. Persons who have set themselves up as my defenders are indignant that I should have to pay my fare. I have to take them aside and point out that no one is demanding I pay; I try to set an example. What I want is for the thing to work and be available and viable. The men who haul the boat show up here at dawn to carry the fiberglass shell down to the river on a pole frame they made. One of them has to plunge into the cold, muddy, turbulent waters to get the rope to the other side and tie it off. They work all day until it either rains or gets dark. In the collection jar they collect from 3000 to 7000 Bs. A day's pay from 7 AM to noon is 3000 Bs. for one man. This is two men working a more than double shift. The Foundation pays for the teachers' crossing, which amounts to 1200 bolivars daily. 3000 bolivars (Bs.) buys a kilo and a half of rice nowadays. So I add a day's pay of 3000 to the pot each day. Gisela deferred some funds from her branch of the Foundation to cover for a while as well. That still doesn't really make it worth the worker's while. I expect that it is because their service is needed and wanted by their community that they show up faithfully every day. On the days that the Brito fish sellers come, the boat has to be in at first light. First they haul across the canoe filled with five gallon buckets brimming with fish, then the sellers cross on the next two rounds. Instead of a fee, the ferrymen are left with a bowl of fresh fish for their lunch. They have fashioned hooks to anchor the boat as people get on and off; cut stairs into the river bank; wives bring chairs to sit by the river while the kids play on the rope in the river.

In due course we have been back to the government offices several times. Originally the project was to be a coordinated effort by both the mayor and the governor's offices. Then it was left to be started next week by the mayor's engineers. That next week they informed us that the governor was taking responsibility and would start the following week. One day I was left with open-mouthed amazement when told that the governor had reported on public radio that the the Cañifle basket system had been erected and the bases for that bridge dug, while the bases for the Brito basket were being dug. We knew they were doing no such digging on the Brito, so Joseito and I drove up to Cañifle to check. Our friend Armando there, who is originally from the Brito, told us that the only thing done there was by a numerous crew who came one day and dug two shallow holes for the basket system which he could have dug in one afternoon by himself. I've been told that the politicians lie, but this is a lie that would immediately be evident as a complete falsehood! Next around they told us that the responsibility was back to the mayor's office, but sent us to Public Works, which is more State government than Municipal. The Public Works engineer, Anchetta was furious because in a radio interview some Brito people had said he was much talk and no action. In our interview with him the day before yesterday he asked us to understand that his office was overwhelmed with the week's flooding in Cumaná. Then yesterday he called us furious again because some other Brito people and councilman had called him to point out he wasn't doing anything, just one day after he had met with us. But lo and behold when we got back from town to the boat crossing, two brand new massive posts for the basket system had been delivered to the foot of the former bridge. A crew was to come tomorrow to start digging the holes, with help from us in the community, but Anchetta called to say they were still struggling with flood damage in the city, so he had to put his crew there. He said there would be deliveries of gravel and sand arriving. One of those posts is to go in right near where it is. But the other one goes on the opposite bank. I'm wondering

how we are going to get that other half ton of metal across the river and up the riverbank on the other side.

I thought this was as far as this account was going for now, but another week has passed with no government workers showing up or materials being delivered. The day before yesterday handsome young Francisco was in town, flashing his winning smile in his characteristic good humor for Steven and me, seeking aid for getting lab tests and medicines for his little boy and his wife, Norbelis, who is even better looking than Francisco, if that's possible. She has been having bleeding problems in her second pregnancy. He asked me for 10000 Bs. for Norbelis, which she would pay back when she next gets paid as teacher for the government literacy program. He wanted half that again on his part for her expenses, which he would pay back going up to work at the high farm (4 hours further up the trail from Dos Pasos) the following day. But yesterday after Francisco had left for the mountains, Norbelis started hemorrhaging. People quickly lashed together a carrying frame and carried her the two-hour trek down to Barranca (in much less than two hours). Feeling the trip up to the Tigre bridge was way too long, they placed Norbelis in our little boat shell and hauled her across the river. A number of the men who were carrying her went right into the river with her, wading or swimming alongside the ferryboat to make sure she did not capsize. Francisco showed up early this morning on his way to town to attend to Norbelis, having had to come all the way back down the mountain without getting to work up there. Late this afternoon he came back to go home for supplies, due to return tomorrow morning. In the morning he crossed on the boat, but after a hard rain and subsequent flood in the afternoon, he had to come via Tigre. He said Norbelis was hospitalized, but is okay.

Stay tuned to hear what's next,
and how the Foundation participates to solve this problem.