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Text and Photos

THERE, IN THE CLEAR WATERS

The history of the communal outdoor laundry in southern Mexico City's La Candelaria Neighborhood is not easy to tell. The existing archives show little record of it. However, we do know that before it existed, the San Lorenzo Chapel stood on the same spot; but a judge ordered the saint be removed to a church already built for it a few streets away.

Legend and Tradition

In the beginning, the washboards were on the ground, on a dirt floor. That's how Señora Tiempo (Mrs. Time) —strange as it sounds, that's really her name— remembers it. She's 65 today, and she has been washing there for 55 years.

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Swinging her brown hands as she talks, she says that her mother had washed in the same place, but she did it on her knees on the ground.

There was a channel where the water flowed, and everything was surrounded by grass and a few cows. At that time, the white clothing was left soaking in lye and then beaten against the floor, rinsed, and hung on *mecate* clotheslines [a Nahuatl word for a cord made of agave cactus fibers] strung from two large wooden poles. By the time night fell, we were surrounded by walls of clothing stretching everywhere. The washerwomen brought with them a stew of some kind; we children passed the day joking and running through the green fields.

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That's how things were until the city put an end to that landscape, dried up the rivers, and raised a string of badly distributed houses among labyrinthine streets paved in stone, characteristic of the town of La Candelaria.

Señora Tiempo assures me that some women drank *pulque*, and, even though today they no longer share their food or drink that traditional beverage made out of maguey, they often cooperate to give soap and pay the entrance fee for those who don't have enough to pay for it themselves, so that no one is kept from scrubbing her clothes.

But the non-official chronicles, the ones the women talk about while washing, attribute an even older history to the place where the chapel had once stood.



They say that before the altar to Saint Lawrence was there, there had been a cemetery, which may be why some of them swear they can hear the lamentation of the souls in pain around the big pool. Some say that it's a child and swear that someone has pulled on one of their braids or on their skirt. I heard a women tell a more fanciful story, saying that once she stayed on, washing until nighttime, and when all the street sounds had gone quiet, she heard the typical

noise of horse hooves. Puzzled, she went to look and saw a couple of men picking up bodies and piling them on a cart. "I pinched my forearm to see if I was dreaming, but it all kept happening," says Ángela without taking her eyes off the garment she was washing.

It costs five pesos per washstand. It doesn't matter how many hours you spend there or how much clothing you wash; those five pesos give you access for the whole day. Most of the people who wash there have no running water in their homes or only have it intermittently. Others don't have a washing machine, and some of them just go because they enjoy it.



The Survival of a Place to Meet and Learn

The inhabitants of the town of "La Cande," as they affectionately call this area devoured by surrounding neighborhoods, have defended the continued existence of these facilities for years. Term after term, they convince the local Coyocacán borough heads —now called mayors— not to close them.

Natives from La Candelaria, but also other people from towns as far away as Topilejo, on the edges of Mexico's capital, or closer areas

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like Santa Úrsula, have been coming here for more than 70 years to wash clothing, not only their own, but also other people's. "Washerwomen who do other people's laundry are at their posts at the washstands starting at 6 a.m. so they have enough time to get it all done," Señora Inés tells me. She only comes on Saturdays and Sundays with the clothing accumulated during the week.

She has a washing machine, but she assures me that the clothing just doesn't get clean in the machine, and so she comes to the public laundry. She goes to the market very early to buy liquid soap sold to her in a "Jarritos" soft drink bottle,¹ and she hurries to get the best washstands. Those are the ones close to the main pool of water. "That way you don't break your back carrying the buckets of water to the washstands at the back," says Inés as she rinses dozens of socks in a basin with fabric softener.

Julia has been coming to wash here for 30 years. First she came when she was single; and, when she got married, she brought her husband; and now she brings her three grown sons so they can learn to wash their own clothes. Across from her, another woman shares her opinion that washing machines don't get the clothing clean, and recommends putting the garments with the most difficult stains in boiling water, and then, after a few minutes of the soap bubbling, they're ready to scrub.

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“Some Problems Can Only Be Solved Like That: Scrubbing and Scrubbing”

In addition to the clothing, troubles are also scrubbed here. The women insist that washing helps them clear their minds, and that it's just not the same doing it at home as coming to the laundry where, when you hear the splash of the water and smell the lemony scent of the bar of soap, your ideas come clear and you forget your troubles. At least, that's what Julia says. She gets up Monday to Friday at 4 a.m. to go to work, but on the weekends, she comes to “relax” by washing.

“Even if I get tired of scrubbing, some problems can only be solved that way: scrubbing and scrubbing,” one woman adds to the conversation. When I ask her name, she asks me to call her “incognito.” She's there with her husband, who washes the blankets and heavy clothing. He speaks little, but seems friendly when filmed. He says he doesn't like all the gossiping at the laundry and concentrates on washing, rinsing, wringing out, and hanging the clothing, and then waiting in the shade while it all dries and he reads *La Prensa* (The Press), a city tabloid focusing on crime reports.

Stories of heartbreak are by no means absent. Another woman who doesn't want to give her name tells the story of a young woman who gave them the details of her wedding preparations as she washed. But one afternoon she stopped coming; they didn't see her that day or the next. Many months later, she came back with a cane: diabetes had taken her sight, and her fiancé, scared at seeing his future wife blinded, disappeared. Even without her eyes, this young woman continued washing there until the disease took her. At the end of her story, the woman gathers her dried clothes, folding them meticulously.

And to do honor to the Mexican phrase “public laundry catfight,” amidst scarcely hidden laughter, they admit that, yes, there are tussles, but not very frequently. Women might go after each other because one might pick up a wash basin that wasn’t hers or because another one stole a piece of soap. Naturally, there are those who have their favorite washstand, who feel that their seniority gives them the right to its exclusive use, and so they fight with the “usurpers.” However, they do say that democracy and cordiality is the prevailing tone.

Parrish Announcements under the Sun

This Saturday, everything is calm and relaxed. There are few washerwomen, so few that Julia can use two washstands, one for colors and the

other for whites. Under the aluminum roof, the air is cool; outside, the sun heats up the sidewalks. It’s only April and there are already murmurs about how the expenses for the August 10 Saint Lawrence patron saint fiesta will be shared.

Some say that the parish priest will say mass at the laundry in honor of the saint who was worshiped here in the distant past, but others contradict that, saying that the mass will be held in the church. We’ll have to wait until August and revisit the communal public laundry in the town of La Candelaria to see which of the two is right. After all, that’s just how public laundry gossip is. **MM**

Notes

¹ “Jarritos” is the trademark of a very popular Mexican soda. [Editor’s Note.]

