Sister City

A look at life in Arlington's sister city in El Salvador, Teosinte/ page 3A.

SISTER CITY NEWS

Sister-city visitors reach Teosinte and Tremedal

By SUSAN HERSHEY
Harte-Hanks news staff

The Arlington/Belmont/Watertown sister-city delegation finally arrived in Tremedal, Watertown's sister city, on Saturday morning, Oct. 26, after circumventing a military checkpoint at the Colima Bridge. At 3 a.m. on Friday, soldiers stationed at the bridge refused to let the delegation through, even after it enlisted the help of a United Nations official.

The delegation, including Jayne West, Susan Nye, Dean Stevens, Meryl Becker, Rick Rabin, David Lilianthal, leader Gate West and this reporter, arrived in San Salvador on Wednesday, Oct. 23. After being turned away from the checkpoint, we retreated to San Salvador to plan our next move. On Saturday, we left the city in the middle of the night in the back of a four-wheel drive truck. This time the checkpoint was avoided.

The village of Tremedal is nestled in the mountains of Chalatenango province, north of San Salvador, the capital city. The rebel Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN) controls the province, and fighting between the government-sponsored military and the guerrillas has continued sporadically for the past few months.

To get to Tremedal from San Salvador by going directly over the Colima bridge takes a couple of hours; to get there by way of a riverbed and a rocky dirt road takes five hours. The group took the latter route.

Although the journey was bumpy and at times uncomfortable, the excitement of actually finding a way to get to the sister-city communities overcame any sense of fear or distress we might have experienced. Only once, when large bolders had to be moved out of the way to allow the truck to continue down an extremely steep and wet incline, did this reporter feel any trepidation. We forded streams, passed through muddy sugar cane fields and wooded areas, and at last through the town of Tjutala, where menacing soldiers lined the side of the road. At one point, we witnessed the military holding a group of men up against a wall. Speculation was that the army was forcefully conscripting troops.

The delegation arrived in Tremedal in the [illegible] home in Tremedal. But not for the first night.

After a welcome lunch of refried beans, plantain, salad and coffee, we piled into the back of another truck and set off once again down a knobby dirt road to Teosinte. The plan was to spend the night in Arlington's sister city and return to Tremedal for the fiesta on Sunday and Monday. Two river crossings and many bumps later we arrived in Teosinte.

A band of guitar players greeted us at a bend in the road. In the plaza, kids and adults gathered to say "ola" to the Americanos. In the school building on the plaza, six hammocks were strung up for us to sleep in.

We met with the "directiva," or leaders of the village, in the church at 6:30 p.m. In the darkness, a lantern was pumped up to provide light, but when it failed, candles were brought out and set upon the table.

Seven men and five women make up the directiva. The people of Teosinte were driven out of their village during the height of the civil war. They fled north to Hondouras, where they lived in refugee camps. Three years ago, after the Salvadoran election, the refugees were allowed to return to their villages. Since then they have worked against all odds to rebuild their village, which they told us had been destroyed by the army. A school was built, which is attended by approximately 40 children, and plans are being made for a new school building. A day-care center is under construction.

Obtaining materials for building is a major problem for the repopulated communities. Another serious problem is identification documents. Only recently, the Teosinte directiva members told us, has their ability to obtain identification cards improved.

Their cattle project and the planting of corn, beans, pineapples and pig feed are endeavors they are most proud of, but because the road to Tremedal is in such poor shape, their progress is slowed considerably. The road has never been repaired, they told us, and the village has only one vehicle. The women are working on embroidery projects and making hammocks, and fishing nets to be sold for profit.

Many of the children of the community are malnourished and suffering from the flu, coughs and diarreal illnesses. Most of the houses in Teosinte are made out of dirt, and when the storms come it is difficult to keep the children clean. A special women's directiva has been formed to look into problems involving children.

After the meeting and another meal of refried beans, plantain and potatoes, we returned, exhausted yet exuberant, to fall asleep in our hammocks to the sound of pounding rain on the tin roof of the school building.

(Susan Hershey is editor of the Watertown Sun, and accompanied the Belmont/Arlington/Watertown sister-city delegation on its trip to El Salvador. Next week: The wakeup call at 4 a.m., the fiesta, and the climb to El Higueral, Belmont's sister city.)