

## TRAIL OF FEATHERS

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# TRAIL OF FEATHERS

*Searching for Philip True*

A REPORTER'S MURDER IN MEXICO  
AND HIS EDITOR'S SEARCH FOR JUSTICE

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*Book design and composition by Mark McGarry, Texas Type & Book Works  
Set in Fairfield*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rivard, Robert, 1952–

Trail of feathers : searching for Philip True / by Robert Rivard.

p. cm.

“A reporter’s murder in Mexico and his editor’s search for justice.”

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13 978-1-58648-222-0

ISBN-10 1-58648-222-X

1. True, Philip, d. 1998—Death and burial. 2. Murder victims—Mexico. 3. Foreign correspondents—Crimes against—Mexico—Case studies. 4. Murder—Mexico—Sierra Madre Occidental—Case studies. 5. Murder—Investigation—Mexico—Case studies. 6. Huichol Indians. I. Title.

HV6535.M42854 2005

364.1523'09723—dc22

2005045822

FIRST EDITION

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Agent True

As anthropologists began comparing notes on the world's few remaining primitive cultures, they discovered something unexpected. From the most isolated tribal society in Africa to the most distant islands in the Pacific, people shared essentially the same definition of what is news. They shared the same kind of gossip. They even looked for the same qualities in the messengers they picked to gather and deliver their news. They wanted people who could run swiftly over the next hill, accurately gather information, and engagingly retell it.

—Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*

## MEXICO CITY, MARCH 1998

Philip True had spent a lifetime preparing for this journey. Now he sat at his keyboard, writing in the early morning light and imagining the perfect trek. He would go alone, a reporter in search of a story, a walker in search of a solitary backcountry experience.

Before taking his first step into the wilderness, however, he had to sell this ambitious undertaking to editors in San Antonio—not an easy task. The story that True had in mind wasn't exactly news or even a typical feature story related to some current event. True was asking his editors to underwrite a personal quest.

After living and working for three years in Mexico City as the correspondent for the *San Antonio Express-News*, True believed he had come across the ultimate reporting foray, a solo exploration of one of

the hemisphere's last surviving native cultures. The Huichols were an ancient people who had dwelled in isolation for a long time, some say for more than a thousand years. True, however, was in a hurry. In a matter of months, the rainy season would render the backcountry impassable. If he didn't go now, he'd have to wait until winter.

As True polished his story proposal, he omitted any mention of his imagined hike through the wilds. He focused instead on his planned encounter with the reclusive Huichols. To reach their remote villages, he would have to walk the footpaths that course through swallowing canyons, over soaring mesas chiseled by wind and the eons, and up and down the steep slopes of the Sierra Madre. The Huichol world is caught in another time, largely devoid of roads, electricity, running water, and telephones. Often the only sounds are the sounds of nature.

I have come across what I think would make a good story; if not for the news side, certainly for one of the Sunday sections.

The Huichol Indians live in Mexico's last true wilderness, the Sierra Madre Occidental of northern Jalisco, Nayarit and Durango. It is John Huston country: a 100-mile wide swath of big-boned mountains and rolling mesas cut by vertical river canyons.

In an area of tens of thousands of square miles, there are only a handful of dirt roads. To get anywhere, you most often have to walk or ride horses.

The good stories, True believed, were always found "out there" somewhere, in places that required perseverance to reach. Stories about man versus nature, man versus man: peasants caught in the global economy, drought gripping helpless farmers, the poor sold short by politicians, a ragtag army of Mayans taking up arms against the Mexican government in Chiapas.

True liked to work far from the press pack. He rebelled when given conventional story assignments, especially ones that required a coat and tie or attendance at a press conference with self-important government officials playing to the cameras amid the jangle of cell phones.

True the reporter, like True the backpacker, was a solo artist. He worked better alone. Even *Express-News* photographers, who admired his ground-level view of Mexico, his Spanish fluency, and his disciplined work ethic, found True difficult to work with at times. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate the importance of visual journalism; True himself was an amateur photographer. No, True simply plunged ahead single-mindedly, not taking into account the photographer's need to work at a more measured pace, to put subjects at ease, to work in just the right light.

Most of his workdays in Mexico City began with a call to his editor in the San Antonio newsroom, checking in, talking news developments and story ideas, assessing the competition, and trolling for the latest gossip. Despite that lifeline, True faltered when it came to navigating the newsroom where he had never physically worked. As a bureau reporter, he knew few of his newsroom colleagues. Playing politics, lobbying senior editors—these were skills that eluded him.

On one visit to headquarters, True showed up in worn jeans and leather huaraches on his bare feet, hardly the uniform of a professional journalist visiting the home office for his annual review. Until he was instructed otherwise, True made little effort to drop by the offices of top editors while on home leave. He took it personally when editors resisted his story ideas, as if they were slighting his good work or questioning the judgment of their correspondent on the ground.

What he lacked in political skills, however, True made up with a passion for chasing after good stories, no matter how hard the pursuit. His distrust of people in power and his working-class roots made True an especially sensitive reporter in a time and place when many in the media world came from more privileged circumstances than the people they covered.

The Huichols have evolved a cultural expression at least as colorful as the Chiapan Maya. Their white cotton suits are extensively embroidered in red, blue and yellow; they wear beaded necklaces and wristbands; their shamans don hats decked with mirrors,

eagle and parrot feathers. Peyote is an integral part of their worship of nativist gods. Their life has been studied by anthropologists for decades.

Unlike the highland Maya, the Huichols have retained a certain joy in their life. A day near a Huichol community is marked by the nearly constant sound of children laughing and playing. This kind of joy gives them a certain integrity in their being that allows them to welcome in strangers, something the Maya are usually loath to do.

Few reporters would have conceived a similar story pitch. True, however, had been an outdoorsman since his teenage years in Southern California, and he prided himself on his fitness and adventurous spirit.

“He never knew a fat day in his life,” said Joe Vasquez, True’s best friend at San Fernando High School outside Los Angeles. The two cruising buddies and gymnastic team members learned early on to watch each other’s backs in a school ruled by feuding white, black, and brown gangs.

True had taken many memorable trips over the years, some alone, some with Vasquez or Peter Harris, his off-campus roommate at the University of California–Irvine, some with girlfriends. Several times he had met trouble along the way: thieves on Alaska’s Chilkoot trail, a pack of threatening drunks on a Nova Scotia peninsula, maniac truckers in Mexico. But when it came time to plan his next wilderness excursion, True seemed oblivious to the possibility of new dangers.

Pitching his journey into Huichol lands, True painted an irresistible landscape of a forgotten civilization preserved like an ancient insect in amber. All but invisible to the outside world, the Huichols lived in a forgotten place, a largely blank space on the map, yet endangered on all sides by encroaching modernity. In that seductive landscape, True did not see himself as a stranger or a trespasser. He didn’t see himself as part of the story. He was just a good reporter serving as a bridge between his readers and a lost world.

The Huichol lifestyle has been affected by contacts with Mexican mestizo culture, but remains remarkably intact. Outside a handful of small towns, wheels do not exist. A small hand grinder for cornmeal is the usual concession to modernity (although a battery-driven boom box is occasionally seen). Distant communications are still conducted with a column of smoke.

That lifestyle now stands on the cusp of dramatic change. This month, the Mexican government strung electric lines to the town of Tuxpan de Bolaños. After a series of confrontations between Huichols and mestizo Mexicans living on disputed communal lands last year, other resources (and the government agents that accompany them) are now making their way into the back country. There is a building boom in the 300-person community.

A look at Huichol country as it confronts this influx of modernity would be a fascinating, wonderfully visual piece. The countryside, the people and their ceremonies are breathtaking and accessible. The Huichols are at once adaptive and open to change, while representing one of Mexico's vanishing indigenous cultures.

True described a world unknown to his editors or readers. He seemed gripped by the possibility of walking out of the late twentieth-century commotion of Mexico City and, all alone, entering a place lost in time.

The proposed trek combined two of the three great passions in his life: testing himself in the wilderness and unearthing great newspaper stories. Martha (pronounced Már-ta, in the Spanish style) was Philip's other great passion. She slept peacefully in the bedroom next to Philip's home office as he put the finishing touches on his story proposal.

Sometimes at work in his Mexico City home, True paused to savor this place and point in his life. Less than a decade earlier, he had been driving an aging red van and hanging wallpaper in Long Island, chasing clients for cash advances. He had lived with a cast of ever changing

roommates in shared apartments, taking up with some new girlfriend even as he skirted the unpleasant aftermath of a breakup with another.

Now, at age 50, after almost ten years in the newspaper business, True was greeting each new day alongside a smart, beautiful woman who had been his wife for six years. He was the Mexico City correspondent for an ambitious regional newspaper, a daily read from San Antonio, “the Alamo City,” all the way south to the border, serving one of the greatest concentrations of Mexican Americans in the United States. People there cared about his stories.

Philip and Martha, along with his cranky parrot, Fidel, lived in a small, comfortable home in one of Mexico City’s most desirable neighborhoods, the rent and most of their other living expenses paid by the newspaper. Fewer than twenty-five other U.S. newspaper journalists enjoyed the same lifestyle. Fortune came late in life for True, but when it did come, it was sweet and it was satisfying.

At the same time, the jumping off place for Huichol country, the 16th century mining town of Bolaños, is of interest in its own right. Colonial ruins line the town’s cobbled streets. The place was nearly abandoned between 1940 and 1970, when the price of silver brought several mines back into production.

Its mayor is the rarest of things: a decent PRI politician. He has a hat full of ambitious schemes to try to bring further prosperity to Tuxpan de Bolaños and the Huichol country, few of which will probably fly in this era of reduced developmental resources from Mexico City. He also eats peyote buttons, of which he had three on a shelf behind his desk when I spoke with him.

There is a beautiful story within all of this. Interested?

True carefully reviewed his work and then hit the send button. It was time to brew an espresso, wake up Martha, who headed a non-profit environmental agency in Mexico City, and then head out for a seven-mile jog and a new day.

Fred Bonavita, the tall, white-whiskered editor who oversaw the *Express-News* bureaus in Washington, Texas, and Mexico, opened the waiting e-mail from the correspondent he affectionately called “Agent True.” Bonavita had listened to True rehearse his pitch over the telephone; now he read the e-mail. It would fall to Bonavita to persuade senior editors to let True make the trip.

John MacCormack bestowed the nickname on True. MacCormack was the newsroom’s most respected reporter and something of a legend around the state for turning up leads that broke open the long dormant investigation into the murder of atheist Madeline Murray O’Hare. MacCormack also served as Bonavita’s unofficial deputy, and in that role fielded his own fair share of morning calls from the Mexico City correspondent. The nickname captured True’s streak of independence and his knack for being in the right place at the right time.

Bonavita and True were ten years apart in age, but they enjoyed a kind of father–son relationship, the wiser, more experienced and grounded Bonavita guiding the more emotional, sometimes hot-headed True. The two men developed a close relationship, each at the distant end of a telephone line. Bonavita, a former reporter and now a few years from retirement, was held in high regard by his troops in the field. He exerted a calming influence on far-flung reporters working alone, and he knew how to polish a story without imposing his own voice.

Reserved and circumspect, Bonavita sidestepped open conflicts with higher-ranking editors. He never raised his familiar, scratchy voice in story meetings when he didn’t get his way, and he didn’t use the office e-mail system to vent. He tended to express disagreement or doubts subtly by breaking off eye contact or clearing his throat. Bonavita had learned a trick or two from the Texas politicians he spent years covering as a statehouse reporter. He knew when to push and when to yield. As much as Bonavita liked True, he saw no advantage in butting heads if there was no chance of prevailing.

Agent True’s latest story proposal was a long shot. You don’t give reporters weeks off to go backpacking and camping by themselves in

the wilderness. What happens if real news breaks out? As editors up the line read the memo and asked questions, they slowly learned what True had left out of his pitch—he would make his journey on foot, surviving on whatever he could carry on his back through the harsh, inaccessible terrain. There were no roads or telephones and no way for editors to track him.

The whole thing was unconventional, more of a travelogue suited for *National Geographic* magazine than a newspaper story. The *Express-News* wanted its reporter to stay focused on Mexico's opening economy and the coming end of autocratic one-party rule. His proposal seemed disconnected from the biggest stories of the day in his region: Mexico's slow march toward democracy, free trade, drug trafficking, and the standoff between the government and Zapatista guerrillas in Chiapas.

The idea was met with indifference when Bonavita shared it with senior editors, among them Carolina Garcia, the recently hired managing editor who supervised the newsroom's day-to-day coverage. Garcia was poised, articulate, and well tailored, and her distinctive silvery white hair made her easy to spot in the cavernous newsroom. She had returned to her native Texas after nearly two decades in Milwaukee, and her management style at times was more formal and demanding than some at the paper were used to. "She didn't share the same interest in Mexico as other editors and didn't seem to play stories about Mexico on page one," said Bonavita.

True, naturally distrustful of management, did not like authority figures, and he did not like the new managing editor and what he saw as a corresponding decline in front-page play of Mexico and border stories. The clique of bilingual reporters in the San Antonio newsroom—many of them experienced border reporters, others with prior work experience in Mexico and Central America—shared his view.

Life looks different from the bureaus and the reporting ranks than it does from the page one meeting, when editors weigh competing stories and agendas every day. In Garcia's defense, Mexico simply wasn't generating the kind of headlines it did when the guerrilla uprising first

broke out four years earlier or when the free trade agreement was negotiated and signed in the early 1990s. Reporters and photographers didn't care about meetings; they chased good stories and competed for page one.

I was finishing my first year as editor after moving up from managing editor, so if attention to Mexico and the border declined, I would have to share the blame. Frankly, I didn't see it, at least not in any systematic way. My own newspaper career had been defined in large part by my years as a reporter working on the border, in Mexico, and in Central America during the violent 1980s. I never thought we lost interest in the region or the story. In any event, no one ever brought True's proposal to my attention. It languished in the *Express-News* computer system, one more story pitch stacked electronically in the story queues. Bonavita advised Agent True to move on.

But his man in Mexico City had no intention of moving on or of accepting what he interpreted as diminishing interest in his work at headquarters. As the rainy season ended in late November, True sat down at his computer and launched a blunt, challenging e-mail to the managing editor and several others.

He cited a recent story in the *American Journalism Review*, published by the University of Maryland's journalism school, that singled out True's Mexico coverage as equal to that of any of the major national newspapers.

The documentation is accumulating—from readers, critics and newspaper analysts—that, as compared not to the Texas competition, but to the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times, the San Antonio Express-News' Mexico coverage, “more consistently reports with depth, insight and continuity as opposed to headline news full of sensationalism.” I read that as superior coverage.

Given the praise, not to mention the awards received by the Mexican bureau. . . over the past two years, I would imagine that we would want to lead with strength, and prominently feature our Mexican coverage in the paper. There is reason. Mexico is the

United States' second largest trading partner; billions of dollars of trade pass through San Antonio annually bound for or coming in from Mexico, and many important San Antonio business people are looking for ways to cash in on that; our city is 60% Hispanic. . . San Antonio's historic ties to events in Mexico are long and intimate.

But over the past six months it seems that the paper's Mexico news hole is closer to page nineteen than page one; thoughtful and provocative project ideas go without response; Sunday stories now appear in Sunday Insight rather than the A section, because little interest is evidenced in *longer* pieces, etc.

What is wrong with this picture?

I will be in San Antonio on home visit early in the week of Christmas (Dec. 21–25). I would like to meet with as many of you as possible to see if we can answer that question. Thanks.

After learning from Bonavita that he had failed to persuade the editors to approve his trek through Huichol territory, True quietly decided to put in for vacation time and make the trip anyway. He would share his plans with only a few key newsroom allies and colleagues in Mexico City and be back by mid-December, in plenty of time to keep his appointment in San Antonio later in the month.

The memo and its challenging tone, like True's earlier story proposal, never reached my desk. It drew an immediate rebuke from Garcia to Bonavita. The managing editor did not like a bureau reporter she had met only once challenging her news judgment. Worse, he had done so in a widely distributed memo sent to enough subordinates to ensure its quick passage into the newsroom gossip network.

True, the former labor organizer, wasn't finished. He worked the phones in search of allies. He telephoned Dane Schiller, the newspaper's border correspondent in Laredo, to recruit him to his planned Christmas week showdown with senior editors. True argued that strength in numbers would force the bosses to give ground.

Schiller, a former naval intelligence hand, was more measured. He agreed with True's assessment that Mexico had fallen off the front page, but he had promising contacts at the *Dallas Morning News* he could pursue if he grew as unhappy with his editors as True was. He advised True to cancel his planned march on Mahogany Row (as the rank and file described the well-appointed offices occupied by senior editors), who were unlikely to yield under pressure.

Bonavita knew of his reporter's planned visit home, and he intended to do all he could to prevent Agent True from provoking senior editors. True was scheduled to receive his annual performance review and salary increase on the same visit. Bonavita set out to defuse the potential problem in his written evaluation, dated December 14, 1998, which awaited Garcia's review and signature. The evaluation praised True's work over the preceding year, without assigning blame for the tensions resulting from the e-mail exchanges between True and the front office. In regard to True's initiative, Bonavita wrote, "He frequently recommends stories that might be overlooked or underplayed by the home office, although he can become quite upset when these touts don't always bear fruit."

Under "human relations/attitude": "Philip's attitude in dealing with the home office in recent weeks has suffered from a combination of things: his impatience and a slow response from San Antonio to his requests for things that earlier were done almost automatically. While Philip is entitled to complain about the former, he needs to do it through channels. Going over a person's head to the next highest editor or executive is counterproductive. Scattergun memos achieve little other than causing more problems. Philip needs a better grip on his patience."

Bonavita didn't mention any editors by name or title, and at the same time, he deftly avoided language that suggested True was the problem. His criticism of True's intemperate e-mails was mild. Bonavita, in so many words, implicitly framed True's behavior as the inevitable result of senior editors not paying attention to his work.

Bonavita concluded, "With better cooperation from the home office to keep the bureau running smoothly and with new dedication to keeping his relations with San Antonio in better shape, Philip will approach the millennium in outstanding form."

It was a piece of skilled office diplomacy. He suggested a 6 percent salary increase, double the prevailing cost-of-living increase given to most reporters that year, an unmistakable show of support.