

Arrival in Càlig

The first time I went to Càlig was right after St. Johns Day, June 24, 1978. I had just attended a wedding outside Barcelona with my long time friend Susana from Madrid. We headed south to see the four-story whitewashed stone house I had bought sight unseen the year before. As we headed west off the national highway, past tall cypresses and olive and carob trees, I told Susana I felt like a bride about to meet her groom for the first time the day of the wedding. My hands were quivering on the steering wheel as Susana chattered on about good and bad marriages. I hoped this would be a good one.

As we got closer to the village, I asked myself how did I manage to do something that reckless? I liked visiting pueblos in Spain, but I hadn't given much thought to living in one. Yet when a good friend offered to find me a house in Càlig, a village of around 2,000 five miles from the Mediterranean, I jumped at the chance and sent him a cashier's check.

It was growing dark as we entered Càlig. We went up a narrow tree lined road and parked in a plaza near a bakery and then looked for the post office where Juan José, the official mailman and unofficial realtor lived upstairs. About midnight, after the Spain-Argentina soccer match, we walked through the darkened streets to the bottom part of the village. Juan José turned the latch with the large iron key and the dark brown door groaned as if we had disturbed its long, well deserved rest. By the light of flickering matches, we could make out damp earth, old stones, and animal droppings. Decades, maybe centuries, of odors wafted up. We kept climbing the narrow, red tiled stairs passing through small rooms painted blue or green until we reached the terrace and Juan José cautioned us to walk carefully along the edge and sit on the ledge.

We sat there awhile looking at the stars and the tile roofs of the houses along the street. I was elated, sitting on the terrace of my house in Spain.



The Watchtower

After Càlig received its official charter in 1234, the watchtower was built on the highest part of a hill where a few Arab families had dwelled before the area was conquered by the military order of the Hospitalarios. The church down the hill from the tower was completed in the 17th century. The narrow streets around the tower form the nucleus of the medieval village. Later, when Càlig expanded in the 18th century, the town became divided into two parts: the upper where the original families lived and had acquired more land over the centuries and the lower part which was first developed in the 18th century.

Some people who lived at the top of the hill in Càlig did not understand why I would live in the lower part. The people at the top felt they were more educated and cultured. Generally the people who lived in the upper part had more political influence until Franco died and the country became a parliamentary democracy. In the lower part were those families who, at one time, had been day laborers or owned smaller plots of land.

The people from the lower part voted for the Republic in 1931, helped build the Republican Center, during a time when they also hoped for improvements in their living and working conditions. In Càlig a socialist mayor was elected in 1979, reflecting the once strong republican ideals of the majority. Living in the lower part of the village I had come to know a lot of the people on the left who seemed to me more united in their political beliefs and their social life. They had also been very welcoming to family, my friends and me. When one person asked me why I didn't live up in the upper part, since I was so simpática, I didn't reply it was where the house I had bought was. Instead I said, I didn't mind because I was fond of my neighbors. All of us, including the eighty-year-olds, have to walk to the upper part to do most shopping, conduct business at the city hall, or attend mass.



La Ermita de los Desamparados

Two streets diverge where a religious procession celebrating Corpus Christi will pass by. Village women have adorned this small sanctuary with flowers in honor of Valencia's patron saint, la Virgen de los Desamparados (which can be translated as Our Lady of the Innocent and Helpless). In Càlig, women have played an important role in preserving traditions, yet in recent years many have chosen a more contemporary life style.

Until almost the end of the Franco regime (1975), women walked over an hour to work in the fields all day, fetched water from village wells which they carried in clay jars on their head and at the waist, swept and mopped unpaved streets, and washed clothes by hand in a spring. They made bread and took it to the town ovens, forns, to be baked. When they went to Tortosa, 45 kilometers from Càlig in southern Cataluña to pick olives, they traveled several hours by mule drawn cart and stayed for three months leaving their children behind with grandparents. Older children who accompanied their parents dropped out of school.

Until the later 70's, women's lives were restricted to working in the home, caring for family members, shopping, and helping in the fields as needed, usually at harvest time. Few women were able to attend a university and have careers.

Some women have told me how much they wanted to continue their schooling, but education was not a necessity, in their day, for most farm families. I sympathize with these women who read whenever they have a spare moment. They want their children to take advantage of educational opportunities they didn't have but many of today's youth prefer working to studying. Perhaps Our Lady of the Innocent and Helpless will watch over these women and young people in their separate quests.



Moving In

The house needed some repairs before it was livable. The terrace was about to fall in; the bottom floor was nothing more than earth and small stones; and there was no water, no bathroom, no kitchen, and no electricity. The affable builder assigned to me in the summer of 1978 agreed to begin work immediately.

Until I returned to Spain the following June, I had no communication with him or Juan José. When I phoned Juan Jose from Madrid, he told me, much to my surprise, I could move right in. On further questioning, he added: “Well, there was water and a bathroom.”

Two friends accompanied me to help with the slow process of cleaning out 15 years of accumulated dust plus the construction rubble. There were also trips to the beach, stopping at the drogueria for painting supplies, much discussion on how to get a butane gas permit, and scurrying around to get furniture. Remedios, an older friend, donated a table from her molino (olive oil mill), a neighbor sold me a rocker and washstand after much bargaining, but he never backed down on price, and in Madrid, my friend who found the house for me, encouraged me to buy a very Castilian looking library table, which he said would be easy to transport to Càlig. That did not turn out to be true and it ended up on the floor in a corner, the legs separated from the top. Other furniture was rescued on its way to the dry riverbed (the Càlig antique shop).

By the end of that summer, one room and the terrace were painted and I was considering installing electricity, which my neighbors assured me wasn't necessary as I would only be there two months. When I returned in 1980, I didn't recognize my house painted white inside and out. An Andalusian painter had left his regional signature on the Eastern

Spanish house as he had many houses in the village. Electricity was installed two weeks later by a 16 year old who has a prosperous business in the village now. The builder protested: “Why didn't you put the electricity in before it was painted? Now the wires are outside of the walls.”



Another day he brought over two wooden chairs with cane seats which grace the entry way to this day. How many people have sat on them over the years!

Wooden Shutters and Other Changes

In 1981, my parents came to see the house their crazy daughter had bought. During those weeks, my parents, who were much handier than I, made the house much more habitable. On the terrace and on the third floor we put up the hanging bead curtains that had been rescued from a demolished house; my father insisted that the kitchen window have chain curtains. They also suggested I think of putting glass in the windows. It was very dark with just wooden shutters during a three-day deluge of rain.

That first visit they were welcomed warmly; everyone on the street would come up and kiss both cheeks. People I knew better would immediately invite us in for moscatel and pastissets. Several families had us over for meals. During these longer visits my parents managed to get the gist of the conversation and even joined in. They had been going to Spain since 1958 and had both studied Spanish. One Sunday we spent with my friend Ana's family. Her father was the gaseosero who delivered wine, beer, soft drinks, and gaseoso to his customer's doors. We partook of a traditional Sunday dinner—appetizers followed by paella and later dessert. A different wine accompanied each course ending with cava, Spanish champagne. We lingered over the food for two hours and then spent another two hours talking over coffee and cognac.

When we left a few days later, our rental car was filled with apricots and watermelon, coconut drops, pastissets and palmeras. All the neighbors and even Remedios from the upper part of the village came to say goodbye.

“Hasta el año que viene,” they all said kissing us on both cheeks. I could see the tears in their eyes, and felt them in mine.

Two years later when I returned, I purchased a 1970 (or earlier) Citroën and drove to Barcelona to meet my parents. The salesman assured me I could drive anywhere in Spain in this utilitarian car as long as I didn't exceed 50 miles an hour. This time my father's knees which had bothered him for years were much worse, the summer was extremely hot and humid, and there were fewer invitations. We were no longer a novelty.

My father was also discouraged with the house although the glass was put in the windows. Unfortunately the wooden shutters had disappeared, probably were thrown into the dry riverbed to float to the sea after a heavy rainstorm.

The railing that took three years to get up came crashing down one day when my father leaned on it heavily. Then he noticed a wall about to cave in. The builder pointed out the bad beam that would have to be replaced. Would my house collapse after just five years with its new owner? (continued next page)

Wooden Shutters and Other Changes (cont'd)

On their final visit they were honored for traveling at their age. No one in Spain traveled in his or her late 70s. On their last night in Càlig, we celebrated my mother's 78th birthday at a restaurant overlooking the sea. She commented to me:

“Each time we come to Spain it has been different. We've changed. Spain has changed. But in all these years we have been coming, we have always been treated so well, eaten well, and had pleasant times with friends. Who knows, maybe we'll make it back one more time.”

And she talked about returning until she died nine years later.



We Are Very Modern

Many people in the village, men and women, pride themselves on being modern. The term modern could have many meanings from wearing the latest style to spending lots of money. Once when I asked Remedios why someone would dress up in Bermuda shorts to work in the fields, she explained: “We are very modern.” Years later I learned that women changed clothes when they got to the fields.

Remedios was always very conscious about being in style so that in 1996 when I wore my new long black sundress, which I thought was the latest style, she told someone I was so old fashioned, dressing like women had before wearing long black dresses and scarves over their heads. I was out of sync with village style although some people did appreciate that I preserved the house and old furniture. They just didn't want to live that way. Now I have become more modern with air conditioning on the top floor, a microwave, and a fashionable façade.

My first step toward modernity was to replace the barn-like door. The venerable carpenter designed one with windows so I could have a little light in the entry way when the door was closed. I could also watch people passing by. The door was inaugurated on Christmas Eve, 1991, with luminarias on the street which is not a village custom. Many people still remember that night.

In 2010 the house was painted in contemporary Mediterranean colors: light salmon with blue trim, colors that matched chipped paint from old abandoned houses. Today Calig is no longer a white village as many houses have different shades of ochre, gold, pink, and dark red.



Through Beaded Curtains

In 1988 I had a summer grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to do interviews on the past ten years—the good times it turns out—but most people I talked to would eventually recall the hard times after the civil war. To find out more, I had year grant in 91 and 92 from the National Endowment for Humanities to interview people in Càlig about the post civil war period (1939-1975). At first it was a challenge to find people willing to talk to me. When I did, and it became increasingly easier, I began to learn the stories that constitute the history of the village. Doors I walked past before, wondering what stories lay hidden inside, opened for me.

One afternoon I was looking at a particular door because I wanted to replace mine when the owner opened the top half and started asking me about my project. He was a doctor—hijo del pueblo—living in Barcelona who had restored an old house in Càlig. He suggested talking to two men who could tell me the history of Càlig – two anarchists who spent the afternoons recalling the past. He introduced me to them a few days later and I began to learn about the conditions in the village before, during and after the Civil War.

While I talked extensively to these two anarchists, I eventually talked to more than 50 people of different political persuasions and gender. One person would suggest someone else which turned out to be very helpful to have an introduction before a potential interviewee would agree. By the end of the year I knew many more villagers, some of whom became good friends. Eventually I could even participate in every day conversations.

By learning about the history and customs from my teachers, the villagers, I felt more integrated into village life. I became less concerned with what people were thinking of me although I knew every time I stepped out of my house, all eyes were watching from behind beaded curtains or from balconies behind persianas, which separated the entrance from the street. I gradually accepted that in

the street one had a public persona but I am never as adept as some villagers are who can act their roles with great aplomb.



Housewives and Handicrafts

On summer afternoons many women used to sit out on the street and do handicrafts: hand sewing, embroidery, crochet and lace work. In the early 90s when a group called Amas de casa was formed, many women joined and began to do handicrafts in the Cultural Center where they had their own room to store materials. I did not become a member the year I lived there because I felt uncomfortable doing art or handicrafts in public.

However, I have taken many pictures of the handicrafts of this housewives' organization and given them copies. Five years ago when Rainbow Artists had an exhibition on women's traditional arts at the National Hispanic Cultural Center here. I entered pictures I had taken of a lace work display these creative women had had at the Cultural Center in Càlig. That summer I went to one of their meetings to read a short article I had written about photographs of their lacework being shown at the same place and at the same time as well known Mexican artists such as Rivera, Kahlo, Orozco, and Tamayo. After I finished reading the piece, which would be published in their up-coming Libro de Fiestas, I sat down next to a long-time friend whose excellent work had been featured in the display. She invited me to their annual paella outing at the Ermita de la Virgen de Socorro.

The president was taken aback at this impromptu invitation and she withdrew the invitation in spite of protests from the executive committee sitting close by: "But Martha has given us lots of photos. She's even sent us photos we asked for from the States."

"No," she repeated. "Does she come every week and take photos? No." I was crestfallen. I crept out of the room. Later I learned that the executive committee had spoken with her again because they wanted to ask me to join them, but my friend spoke up and said, "Martha wouldn't want to go now."

The following summer I returned in August to see attractive posters all over the village announcing the regional encuentro of the Lace Makers in Càlig using one of my pictures. It was a very attractive poster but there was no acknowledgement of the photographer. I discretely asked one of the members who mentioned it to the Housewives' leaders.

One day when I was walking down the street one of the members came out and handed me some posters, saying they weren't many extras, and they didn't know they were my photos because I hadn't signed my name with the date on the back. Another day the president herself motioned me to come over and then asked me to go with her to her home. (Continued next page)

Housewives and Handicrafts (Cont'd)

She carefully wrote a dedication on the poster, claiming I had won the poster contest. She asked me not to say anything to anyone else.

The following year when I did join them for paella, I had a great time; no one fixes better paella than these women.

More and more I understand my role in the village: to listen to their stories and appreciate their history and to share photos with them. What I have come to appreciate most is knowing generations of Calijos. The little boys and girls who played on my street now have children of their own. The older generation I was so fond of I miss when I pass their houses and reminisce when I see their gravestones. Last July when I left, one of my best friends who is in her 80s said: "If I am not here when you come back, you can come see me in the cemetery."

As long as she can make it up the hill, I think I'll see her again.

