



Steve Salerno

## In Guatemala, Under Foot

By Steve Olson

When I saw Mateo not long ago, standing beside a smooth post on his veranda, he said, "I had no idea this would happen when I started."

Twelve years ago, Mateo's life was different. The black beans and corn he produced on his acre and a half in the Guatemalan highlands did not last his family, all young, until the next harvest. So each November he left his home for two months, migrating to work on a plantation on the humid southern coast.

One year when he returned, Mateo — I am not using any real personal and town names — decided to attend agriculture classes offered by a United States church group. Though he viewed change with suspicion, he decided that new farming methods did not conflict with his people's ways.

Each Thursday, he walked to San Lucas for class. In a faded green sweater, blue pants patched at the knees, and tire-tread sandals, he was dressed like the dozen other Indians in his class.

When the corn sprouted that year, he sprinkled fertilizer around 10 plants. Those plants grew tall, their leaves almost as dark green as the pines across the stream. Unlike the familiar spotty cobs three feet away, their large ears were filled with kernels.

Not so cautious as some fellow Indians, Mateo planted the seeds closer together the next season, fertilizing each plant. From his field, which had never yielded more than 900 pounds of corn, he harvested 3,375 pounds. By the fourth year, it produced 6,750 pounds. The church group hired him to teach agriculture. Three afternoons a week, he walked two to five miles over the mountains to give classes, returning in the dark. After the earthquake in 1976, he learned how to build earthquake-safe houses and taught this, along with fertilizer use and composting.

For several years, things went well for Mateo. He bought two more acres of land. Then early one October morning, he saw one of his students at the San Lucas market. "Alejandro

*desapareció!*" his student told him — Alejandro had disappeared.

Alejandro was president of the local co-op where Mateo and his students bought fertilizer. Mateo knew that anyone suggesting social reform was labeled a Communist by the Government. But now the paramilitary and police-vigilante "death squads" were kidnapping, torturing, and "disappearing" Indians like Alejandro who had not been involved in politics.

Every day, newspapers reported the discovery of five to 10 bodies. Mateo had seen articles accompanied by photos of firemen dragging corpses up out of ditches, the heads sometimes covered with cloths to hide where the faces had been hacked with machetes or blasted with guns so that they could not be identified.

The success of the co-op where Alejandro worked displeased plantation owners who depended on cheap labor. As Indians like Mateo became self-sufficient, they no longer worked for low wages on plantations. Politicians and military officers also feared people like Alejandro who showed leadership potential. They considered revolutionary anyone who helped poor people.

One night not long after Alejandro's disappearance, an acquaintance of Mateo's was shot to death in San Lucas. The family could only suppose that Chepe's assassins had mistaken his identity. He was a carpenter who had never been interested in politics.

The death squads sent "hit lists" naming people they intended to kill to

the newspapers. Last May — because of the agriculture classes he taught — Mateo's name appeared on a list, along with university students, professors, lawyers, priests, and one old man who organized labor 30 years ago when the Government encouraged it.

Less than a month later, Carlos, a fellow teacher with the church group, *desapareció*. At 2 A.M., a jeep pulled over beside Carlos's house, shining its headlights through the dust onto the whitewashed adobe. Three plainclothes *Ladinos* (non-Indians) waited in the idling jeep while two others walked to the rough-hewn door and knocked. When Carlos's wife answered, one of them grabbed her, hitting her cheek with his Galil automatic rifle. The two pushed into the dark house and shoved Carlos out to the jeep. He has not returned.

At his students' urging, Mateo quit teaching in July. He started taking different paths home each time he returned from San Lucas, and sometimes he slept at friends' houses or in the cornfields.

Twelve more of Mateo's friends have *desaparecido* since Carlos did. Newspaper counts now reach 20 a day.

Mateo looked much older when I saw him in February. As he stood beside the veranda post, I noticed that his hair was graying. It was then, as he looked from his corn to the drifting clouds, that he said, "I had no idea. . . ."

The other day, he took his family to the southern coast for the first time in nine years. He did not tell anyone what plantation they were headed to, saying only that they would not return.

Steve Olson — he requested a pseudonym to protect individuals in this article — is a journalist.

"The