

Adiós, Gran Sabio: W. Michael Mathes, a Personal Remembrance

Brian Dervin Dillon

Mike Mathes was a Renaissance man, an intellectual cowboy hopelessly adrift in the wrong country and the wrong century. He was a brilliant bicultural, bilingual historian, a champion of California, Baja and Alta, and a *gran sabio* (great sage) of the Mexican borderlands. An incredibly productive writer in Spanish and English, Mike was also an inspiring teacher and spirited lecturer. He leaves behind many hundreds of friends, fellow scholars, students, and admirers who feel cheated by his passing.

William Michael Mathes was born April 15, 1936, in Los Angeles, to a Southwestern family with deep roots in Texas. “William” had already been claimed, so Mathes came to be known from a very early age as Michael, Mike to his friends. Mike grew up in the City of the Angels and at a comparatively young age developed a fascination with Mexico. He learned Spanish and with his family began exploring that other country just a few hours away. An “early bloomer,” by the time he was 13, Mike, then going by *Miguel* in Mexico, was the proud owner of a war-surplus jeep. The absence of a driver’s license being no obstacle, he drove himself down into Baja California every chance he got. The land below the international border became Mike’s playground, and he came of age both physically and intellectually in the peninsula he loved so much.

Mike entered Loyola Marymount University in 1954, graduating as a history major in 1958. His specialization was, of course, Mexico, and his area of interest within it was Baja California. Undergraduate Mathes

would take off for Mexico and be gone for weeks on end. On returning he would be flat broke, yet happy and content from exploring yet another mission site or out-of-the way archive that had somehow escaped the anticlerical flames of the Mexican Revolution, usually with a new pile of books or documents to add to his growing collection.

Meanwhile, he supported his Mexican explorations by working in Pachmayr’s Gun Store, one of the premier postwar Los Angeles gun emporiums. He was a part-time gun salesman in high school and college, then a full-timer during graduate school. An avid, lifelong shooter, Mike began collecting guns while still only a young teenager (Figure 1). At one point in 1958, recent college graduate Mike found himself stony broke in Mexico City with no gas money for the trip home. So, he went to the *Zócalo* and stood next to the itinerant plumbers and electricians offering their services to passersby. He sold his .30-30 carbine around the corner from the Presidential Palace. The *carabina treinta-treinta*, normally a fixture in his jeep, stayed south that time while Mike, then with enough *pesos para Pémez*, began the long trip back up the Pacific coast. Many of his students and academic associates were surprised to learn that the distinguished Dr. Mathes also had legions of friends with nothing whatsoever to do with history or education; these were his shooting buddies, all of whom will testify that he was a straight shooter all his days.

In 1960 Mathes moved on to the University of Southern California and enrolled in a master’s program. This



Figure 1. Eight-year-old Mike Mathes shooting a “suicide special” double-action revolver in his side yard, Los Angeles, California, ca. 1944. Photo courtesy Stephen Brandt.

was the alternative to the California State requirement that those with only a BA must also get a credential in order to teach at state-supported schools. Possessors of a master’s degree were exempt from wasting an entire year taking education courses. That same year Mike expanded his intellectual horizons by going to Spain for the first time. There he worked in the civil and ecclesiastical archives most relevant to his ongoing research in Baja California and Spanish colonial Alta California. He received his Master’s in History from USC in 1962 and took a job as a librarian at the University of New Mexico shortly afterwards.

At Albuquerque Mike was finally being paid to do what he liked best, archival research and archival organization and expansion. When not in harness at the library, he continued to take off to do fieldwork in Mexico. His new goal being to teach on the university level, Mike became a Ph.D. student at the University of New Mexico. Simultaneously, he served as its best-informed librarian on Spanish colonial sources. Back in Spain again, Mike was approached by one of the Jesuit deans of the University of San Francisco. He was offered a teaching job provided his dissertation could be completed before the fall 1966 semester. Mathes did just that and moved from UNM to the Bay

Area as a minty-fresh Ph.D. to begin teaching history at USF.

I first met Mike in 1966 when I was 13 and he was 30. He was the newest member of the faculty at the University of San Francisco, where my father, Richard H. Dillon, was both the head of the Sutro Library and a history lecturer. Mathes was a dozen years younger than my dad, and both taught classes on Mexico and the Spanish Borderlands. That first day of our acquaintance, Mike had come over from San Francisco to a party at our home in Mill Valley. I used some of my halting, junior high school Spanish on him and made a friend for life. Little did I know that I, too, would eventually spend most of my professional career in Latin America.

Most of my dad’s friends were historians or writers, and many like him were WWII combat veterans; in contrast, most of my mom’s colleagues were liberal artists, just like she was. Many members of both groups were present at the *Hacienda Dillon* during Mike’s first visit.

The first time at our place, Mike launched into a polite but unrelenting attack on the San Francisco hippies and their Berkeley radical allies. He praised Ronald Reagan (known as *Ronnie-Baby* in the Dillon household, because of his *Hollyweird* background) who was then running for governor of California. The conversation became polarized, and Mike found himself in a position he would come to enjoy over and over again in future years—the lone conservative hole, surrounded, if not actually hemmed in, by the liberal donut. After he left, my mom asked my dad, “what did Mike mean when he said ...?,” because she had never actually met a true, dyed-in-the-wool conservative unafraid to swim alone in the great Sargasso Sea of liberal Marin County.

Mike came to many more parties at the Dillon house because he and my father had become close friends at USF. Mike also developed a great love for the Sutro

Library, and many years later he would be instrumental in organizing and expanding its Mexican documentary holdings. In deference to my nervous Mom, Mike promised my Dad that he would behave while under our roof. He did his best to not engage in liberal-baiting without provocation and stopped wearing his western duds: Levi jeans jacket and weathered cowboy hat. These were too evocative of our new cowboy governor, so recently installed up in Sacramento, for most left-wing Marinites.

My father recalls that throughout the 1960s Mike still wore his trademark cowboy clothes to historical conventions and to rare book conferences, where he was the only one so attired. For his own lectures at USF and return trips to our place, Dr. Mathes began dressing the part of what he now was, a young professor on tenure track. Still, he could not resist wearing a 1930s-vintage Spanish fascist Falange pin on his lapel. Once more back in the Dillon living room, when a liberal artist friend, herself sporting a peace symbol button, asked, “what is that pin you are wearing, Dr. Mathes?,” Mike would get his opening and then launch into his standard discourse on how all things were right with the world with Ronald Reagan in the driver’s seat in Sacramento and Francisco Franco still at the helm over in Madrid.

Dr. Mathes knew more about Baja California archaeology than most archaeologists, more about its remnant Indians cultures than most anthropologists, and more about its history than any other historian. Mike was instrumental in persuading the Mexican government to establish an Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) office in Baja California, specifically to administer the historical archaeology associated with its missions. Until Mathes began his campaign, Baja California had been the only major portion of the Mexican Republic without INAH representation. Mike loved to talk with his scholarly counterparts wherever he found them, be they in La Paz, Mexicali, México, D.F., or at the Real Academia Española, Madrid.

He also took pleasure in hobnobbing with Indians, charros, and *licenciados* (graduates with a licentiate—bachelor’s degree), anybody that shared his own interest in the past. His gringo and latino students were in awe of his intellectual gifts and fiercely loyal to him.

Spanish-speaking scholars, especially in Mexico and Spain, revered Dr. Mike. He was awarded the Order of the Aztec Eagle in 1985, the greatest honor Mexico can bestow on any foreigner. Twenty years later in 2005, Mike was similarly honored by Spain with the Order of Isabel la Católica, the highest award offered to Spanish writers, artists, and patriots, seldom if ever given to non-*peninsulares*. That same year I was able to repay Mike for his many kindnesses by publishing his short paper (Mathes 2005) in a festschrift (Dillon and Boxt 2005) honoring our mutual friend Clem Meighan. In Mathes’ controversial study he went gunning for “Berkeley Demographic Scholars” like Sherburne F. Cook. Their population estimates were generally accepted when Clem himself was a UC Berkeley student in the late 1940s, and by the time I was there in the same capacity a generation later these had crystallized into holy writ. Yet, another generation later, Mike, the iconoclast, let the venerable sacred cows have it with both barrels.

Unfortunately, in the country of his birth, Dr. Miguel remained the odd man out. Revered as almost a saint in Baja California, Mike never really got the recognition or appreciation he truly deserved in *gringolandia*. This was probably, at least in part, because his intellectual honesty would not permit him to compromise with the academic fad of the moment. Mike stuck to his guns both in historical research and in contemporary politics, puncturing shirt after stuffed shirt with well-aimed fusillades. He sometimes imparted the impression that he would be happier off on some windswept island in a small stone hut, surrounded by his beloved documents, writing by candlelight, untroubled by human distractions. But then, even within

minutes, he would reverse polarity and become the life of the party, telling jokes in both Spanish and English, entertaining and inspiring the less adventurous with his wit and enthusiasm (Figure 2).

Mike Mathes lived simultaneously in all three tenses, past, present and future, and he had little patience with the great bulk of plodding humanity with too little imagination to ever leave the comfort of the here and now. Mike took history seriously, plumbing the deepest depths of his reservoir of wrath when criticizing those he termed “quasi-historians” who subverted or perverted historical fact in service to modern political fiction. If you crossed him, he could and would make your life a living hell, going on the attack both verbally and in print with a bulldog tenacity, surprising to those who only knew his kinder side.

On the other hand, if you were on the Mathes wavelength, even just part-time, you had a loyal, dedicated, warm, and supportive friend for life. Mathes was very generous with his time. He was a conscientious editor and proofreader when he honored you by going over some study you hoped might interest him. But some errors in the category of pet peeves, both in speech and writing, were certain to set him off; using the term “baja” (an adjective) instead of Baja California would, for example, trigger a historico-political lecture that would guarantee that compound term would be forevermore used henceforth. Similarly, the common Anglo-Californian misuse of the word “Spanish” for the people who came from the Iberian Peninsula (“Spanish” was the language that the Spaniards spoke, Mike would invariably insist) would have him gritting his teeth just as much as the incautious use of “South America” by the geographically challenged to include not only Mexico but his beloved Baja California.

Upon his retirement from the University of San Francisco, Mike left California for the “free world,” specifically, Plainview, Texas. I then began to kid him

that since his academic life had been devoted to Baja California, it was appropriate that he should spend his retirement in “Baja Oklahoma.” No longer a fish out of water, most of his new neighbors shared Mike’s political orientation, if not his level of education nor his love for the land and people south of the border. And now, for the first time in more than 30 years, Dr. Mathes supposed that he owned fewer firearms than anyone else on the block.

After leaving USF, Mike became, if anything, more active in his Mexican research ventures. Besides writing and editing more than ever, he began to lead tours up and down the mission chain of Baja California. He communicated with his old, stone age (non-computer, non-internet) friends through a steady stream of letters and postcards. He also communicated with younger friends like me, still held captive in the PRC

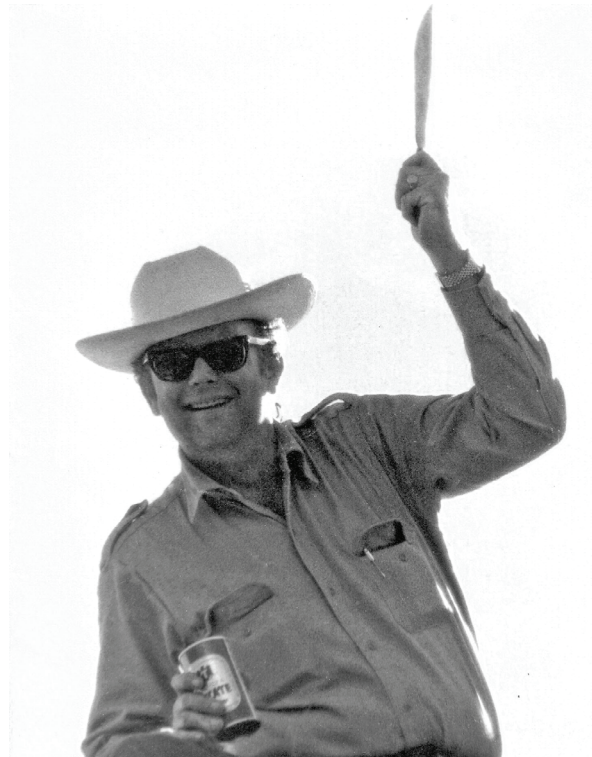


Figure 2. Dr. Miguel Mathes as we fondly remember him, with cowboy hat, machete, and liquid refreshment, ca. 1967, in his beloved Baja California. Photo courtesy Stephen Brandt.

(People's Republic of California), via the new medium of e-mail, at which he became a whiz.

Writing to friends right up to the end, Mike's final postcard to my father was, in fact, delivered after he had breathed his last on August 13, 2012. Sadly now, there will be no more postcards, no more entertaining e-mails, and no more scholarly publications apart from those few that will appear in postmortem festschrifts such as his article in this *Quarterly*. We now must learn to be content with what Mike, *El Gran Sabio*, shared with all of us for so many years. Without his presence and his voice, we are left to treasure his memory and his amazing contribution to scholarship, which will outlive us all.

Vaya con Diós, mi cuate, y que le vaya bien por siempre.

Acknowledgments

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