

## LIGHTEST MEXICO

by John Abney

Chapala, Mexico--One morning back in the 16th century the Spaniards came -- marching over the hill and found some Indians sitting around the lake shore fishing.

The Spanish captain looked up the head Indian and said, "Howdy, amigo, this is quite a pond you got here. Whadda you call it?"

"Chapala," the chief replied. "It's 50 miles long by 17 wide, Mexico's biggest lake and all that stuff."

"For Heaven's sake," exclaimed the captain. "You got a pot of gold the tourists will be mad for. How's the fishing?"

"Oh we got white fish, carp, bass and things like that," said the chief. "Cut yourself a cane pole and set with us for a spell."

The Spaniards did just that. For about 300 years, to be exact.

Nothing important happened except the Indians got furious when the Spaniards began washing their socks in the lake. The Indians moved upstream and kept on fishing.

And the king's men stayed to build a few colonial places, some of which are still in use.

Lake Chapala's problems were explained to me by Mr. Luis Cuevas while we sat in his beer garden restaurant on the beach. Some years ago, Luis picked up an antique building on the wide street that goes down to the big wharf. He put in a swimming pool and some store bought plumbing and called it the Hotel Nido. On week ends, you can't get a bed in the Nido nor a seat in the beer garden.



Anyhow, said Mr. Cuevas, The big problem here is all the gorgeous water lilies with the purple flowers. They wash in from feeder streams and multiply like mice.

This has been going on for so many years that the lake now has around 100 square miles (about one-tenth of its surface) covered by lilies. They are bad for the white fish.

Chapala's white fish are said to be the finest in Mexico. But they have a curious habit of laying their eggs in foam-like wads on the surface of the water.

The wind blows the lilies around and they bust up the eggs. Next year, less white fish.

Mr. Cuevas pulled a new one out of his sombrero. Mexican caviar, which is carp eggs fried and rolled in a tortilla. First caviar taco I ever ate and I must agree it does taste better in a corn flapjack than on crackers.

Then one of the waiters paused to explain how Chapala became a lake. Ages and ages ago, a couple of volcanoes caught fire and spewed lava across the Lerma River and made a big dam.

The water started backing up and since there was nothing but mountains on both sides, it kept rising until it came to a hole in the hills.

The result was an enormous lake with a spillway at the top end.

And what with all the built-in scenery and climate to make it an inland Riviera, Chapala has been doing a brisk business since the time of the natives.

The bad thing now, said the waiter, was these blasted lilies. Chapala's civic leaders are looking for some way to get rid of them before everything is flowered-over. What they are looking for is some kind of poison that is bad for lilies and good for fish. You have to be gentle with fish that whole-sale for a dollar a pound and live a mile high in the mountains.