

*A Not So Small Miracle* by merrill glos

Diane's uncle (her father's brother) was a priest whose first parish assignment (1944) was Curepto, a small dusty cow town about a half day's ride south of Santiago, Chile. Father Tom Wellinghoff was his name and he died and was buried there in 1949. No one from the family had visited his grave. The primary purpose of my solo journey was to ride to Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world (and back), but a legitimate secondary goal was to scout the town of Curepto on my way south, find a comfortable hotel for when Di joined me on the return leg, (a month later) and visit Uncle Tom's gravesite together.

I got an early start leaving Santiago on Sunday, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2004. By noon I arrived in Talca, (on the Pan Americana) sixty miles east of Curepto, found a nice hotel, stashed my panniers, and rode west to Curepto enjoying a beautiful warm blue sky day. Without her cargo, *Tarbaby*, my BMW R1150 GSA, handled like a sport bike by comparison. It was a real and rare treat to pilot an unburdened bike. The area reminded me of the hills and vineyards surrounding Sonoma, California, without the glitzy wineries and traffic.

I arrived in Curepto, parked *Tarbaby* under a palm tree in front of Tom's church (the only church) which faced the east side of the town plaza. I saw no one. It was like Super Bowl Sunday, and might have been now that I think about it. (Not that it would matter in Chile). I walked the main street looking for an open shop to buy some water. I walked the 200 meters that comprised 80% of the town and spotted an open shop door across the street. Two old men were seated at a small table, enjoying their coffee and conversation. In my best Espanol, I asked if I could join them and began to tell them of



Diane's uncle. (Neither man spoke English) I stumbled my way through the dates and when I mentioned Padre Tomas Wellinghoff, the older man's eyes lit up. He reached for his wallet and fumbled for a small laminated photo which he presented to me. The photo was of Tom, and it was the same one I was carrying, the photo used in the local Curepto newspaper obituary column, from 1949!! (The priest who replaced Tom had sent the obituary to Tom's mother and father, Di's grandparents.)

The man's name was Gustavo, he is now Curepto's municipal judge, ("he de hombre") but was then Tom's best friend. So, the first and (almost) only person I see in Curepto is Tom's friend, *and* he's still carrying a photo of his friend that died fifty four years prior. I get all choked up as the implications of this serendipitous event slowly sink in. (Not that my Spanish would suffer from getting choked up.) I tell Gustavo of my plan to continue south to Argentina and Tierra del Fuego and that Tom's niece, my wife Diane, will join me when I return to Santiago, (a month later?) and that we'll return to Curepto together and would like for him to escort us to the cemetery to find Tom's grave. He understands and agrees.

We embrace and I gesture for him to wait while I fetch *Tarbaby* from the church for a photo op.



On the ride back to Talca, the 'miracle' of this chance meeting began to overwhelm me. What if the BMW dealer in Santiago hadn't squeezed me in for an oil and filter change on Saturday afternoon and I had to wait until Monday to get my bike in their shop? What if it wasn't Sunday? Other Curepto shops would have been open and I probably would never have walked to the edge of town to find *that* shop. Besides, Gustavo would have been at work, in his office or in the courtroom. What if I had arrived an hour earlier or later, would our paths have crossed? The wind dried my tears before they could roll off my cheeks. I couldn't wait to call Di and tell her of my 'miracle'.



I left Talca the next morning and continued on my way south. As I waited for the ferry to cross the Strait of Magellan, I watched the truck and SUV drivers lash wire screen over their grille guards to protect their headlights from flying gravel. I had read all the stories about the horrendous bitter winds and endless gravel roads of Tierra del Fuego. I dreaded the final push and thought it cruel to put the most punishing conditions so close to the finish line.

I arrived in Ushuaia, Argentina at noon on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004.



I made it.

Again, the gods were smiling on me. As I descended the last mountain pass into Ushuaia, the temperature warmed to 27.5 degrees Celsius, (82 F.), the all time warmest day in recorded history for Ushuaia (as I learned from my hostel owner that evening and the

newspaper headline the next morning.) The extraordinary high winds that had sucked the warm air down from the Pacific brought a great storm with it. In my email to Diane that night I commented that “the winds were so intense and unrelenting that if someone in Tasmania farted, I would probably smell it.”

(So many cars in Ushuaia have broken headlights that I renamed the island, “Tierra del Fiero”).

When I left three days later, it was snowing.

Diane flew into Santiago on February 23<sup>rd</sup> bringing me a fresh set of Metzler ME 880's as checked baggage. I left *Tarbaby* at the Hotel Tokio, and picked her up at the airport in a rental car. The next morning we drove south to Talca and stayed at Casa Chueca, ([www.trekingchile.com](http://www.trekingchile.com)) a beautiful hostel to the east of Talca, difficult to find, but worth the effort. We would use Casa Chueca as our base camp for a few days hoping to join Gustavo and finally visit Tom's grave. Gustavo had given me his phone number, and the hostel girl called to arrange a meeting at the church at 11 o'clock on February 25<sup>th</sup>, exactly thirty days and 4133 miles after my initial visit. All was arranged.

While waiting for Gustavo at the church, Diane walked into a small historical museum, adjacent and connected to the church rectory. I stayed outside. Di mentions Tom's name to a man in the museum, who gestures for Di to wait while he fetches someone. The man reappears with another old man in tow. The old man introduces himself to Diane as Father Joe Cappell. Joe was the priest who replaced Tom. He was 95 years old and very frail.

Side story: Tom wrote (typed) his mother a three or four page letter on church stationery every week while he was in Chile. That's 3.5 pages x 52 weeks per year, times 4 years, or about 700 pages. Di's aunt had the letters bound into two beautiful leather books. The letters are a detailed accounting of Tom's journey from NYC where he and Di's dad (in the Navy) tipped a few beers before Tom boarded his train at Grand Central Station enroute to Miami, then onto a Pan Am clipper to Havana, Panama City, Bogotá, Quito, Lima, and finally Santiago. (This during the war) It's a chronology of Tom's adventures: learning Spanish, his first wedding, first funeral, first communion, being propositioned by a prostitute, buying his first horse and learning to ride, (no paved road around Curepto then) and the friends and families he meets and makes in the hills surrounding Curepto.

We had read Tom's diaries, and knew of Joe Cappell, who rode his bicycle from Talca to Curepto on sixty miles of dirt roads.



Joe shuffles the procession to the grave and points to Tom's marker and then to the empty spot where he'll be buried.

Gustavo arrives on time and we all pile into his Ford and head to the cemetery. It's a hot day. Joe's wearing a starched shirt, wool trousers, wool sweater, wool cap and parka. I'm wearing clean jeans and a short sleeve shirt and can't wait to get into my shorts and flip flops.



After lunch at the rectory, Diane and I say our “goodbyes” and part with our new old friends. It was truly one of the most memorable days of our lives.

After six months and 25,370 miles, I arrive home on May 22<sup>nd</sup>. Joe dies on May 31<sup>st</sup>, a week later. His obit is in the Cincinnati Enquirer, (June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2004) Oh, did I mention that Joe Cappell was also from Cincinnati. He grew up in Norwood, about six miles from our house in Blue Ash.