

Conversations with Sandino  
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Index:

1. The man and his ideas
2. Social issues
3. Spanish America, Central America and Spain

### **1. The man and his ideas**

During the approximately two weeks that I was in the Army of Freedom camp, I didn't cease to be in daily conversation with General Sandino, who from the first moment treated me with an altogether familial kindness.

Sometimes the chief would call for me and other times I went to his house, watched over by his personal guard with machineguns in hand. I usually awaited the general in a dark room next to that of the guards and he came in smiling, hugging me, as was his custom.

It was a simple room decorated with a calendar and a picture card which showed seal hunters in a tempestuous sea of ice shooting at those mammals that were alarmingly encircling the boat. There was a bench and some chairs; normally on the bench sat some leaders who attended the interview in silence or soldiers from the camp. In the corner one could see a pile of rifles.

The general sat in a simple rocking chair, which he rocked unceasingly. It gives his oval yet angular face a certain kind of asymmetry that works, together with the commissure of his lips, to create strange variations in his face. Frequently his eyes shine with a tender friendliness, but ordinarily they show profound depth; intense reflection. His relaxed facial features, the strength of his jaw, open at an angle, confirm the impression that his messages are of a serene and affirming purpose. His voice is smooth, convincing; no doubts in his concepts, and the words are precise, well-guided by an intellect that has thought through the matters it expresses. It is his habit to rub his hands while holding a handkerchief. Rarely does he change the serene tone of his voice. The impression that General Sandino gives, in both his appearance and in his speech, is of a great spiritual state. He is, without a doubt, a practitioner of yoga, a pupil of the Orient.

The topics of our conversation were varied and normally without much structure. I have tried to frame them under distinct subjects, but naturally without any absolute defining of the concepts and phrases, so that the reader can penetrate the psychology of this extraordinary champion of freedom, who has been portrayed by many as a vulgar and ignorant man, something like the Pancho Villa of the Nicaraguan rebellion. But this is absolutely false. General Sandino is a delicate and fine spirit, a man of action and a

visionary, as we have already said, and even having had very limited schooling, he is an extraordinary person, apart from his role as liberator.

--I see that they took you for an American -- he told me, laughing heartily, the first time he saw me.

--Yes, general -- I told him --; but I convinced them otherwise very quickly, and nothing happened. It had all been a joke.

And later, after we'd sat and the general begins his habitual rocking, I ask:

--I am, above all, interested in the spiritual aspect of this movement, more than its military or episodic ones. I see that there is a great faith in you, and I don't know if it is in the religious sense. I understand that all movements which have left their mark in history have had a great civil or religious faith. The liberalism of the Anglo-Saxon people, united in their religious principles, appear to me to be deeper and more definitive than that of the French Revolution. Do you follow any religion?

Sandino.--No; religions are things of the past. We are guided by reason. What our Indians need is education and culture in order to know, respect and love themselves and one another.

I, without giving up, insist:

--You don't believe in the survival of the conscience?

Sandino.--Of the conscience?

Me.--Yes, of the personality.

Sandino.--Yes, of the spirit, of course; the spirit survives, life never dies. One presumes from the beginning the existence of a grand purpose.

Me.--It's all a question of words; for me, that is religion, the transcendence of life.

Sandino.--As I told you, this great primal force, this purpose, is love. You can call it Jehovah, God, Allah, Creator...

And after explaining, according to his religious philosophy, the bravery of humanity's spirit guides, among whom he places Adam, Moses, Jesus, Bolívar..., while his words express deep conviction and his eyes, dark, come alive, he continues:

--Yes; everyone fulfills his destiny; I believe that my soldiers and I are fulfilling that for which we have been chosen. Here we have united with this supreme purpose to obtain freedom for Nicaragua.

Me.--Do you believe in destiny, in fate?

Sandino.--What is there not to believe? Each one of us does what we have to do in this world.

Me.--And how do you, general, understand this primal force that powers things? As a conscious or unconscious force?

Sandino.--As a conscious force. In the beginning it was love. This love created, evolved. But it is all eternal. And we tend to see that life not be a passing moment, but an eternity of multiple transitory phases.

Me.--I dwell on this point because I believe that all great works are rooted in a great faith, that I call religious and you use other words; but it doesn't happen without a push from the spiritual world. I've perceived in your army this insight, this spirituality.

Sandino.--If nothing else we all have a mutual understanding; we are all brothers.

Me.--I remember you making at some point a historical reference to Napoleon and Bolívar.

Sandino.--Ah, Napoleon! He was an immense force, but there was nothing more to him than egoism. Many times I've started reading about his life and have thrown down the book. On the other hand, Bolívar's life has always moved me and made me cry.

Later, with the general making a reference to the spiritual forces that act on the conduct of men, I ask:

--Do you believe, general, in forces of that nature acting on men without the power of words?

Sandino.--Completely; I myself have experienced it not once, but many times. On various occasions I felt a kind of mental trepidation, palpitations, something strange inside of me. One time I dreamed that the enemy troops were closing in and that with them came someone like Pompilius, someone who previously had been on my side. Two hours later, still before dawn, the Americans were there, initiating combat.

--There is a part of our body where the organ of premonition exists.

--I'll tell you were --says the general, and taking my head he points to the back of the neck-- Do you believe it?

Me.--I don't deny the possibility of this type of essence. And I certainly believe that you have a special nervous system: a great spiritual power. I see it in your army.

And I remember having read a letter written by his brother Socrates that Don Gregorio showed me, which said “Augusto had an enormous telepathic receptacle.” And in another letter, “that he had seen his father and mother in his dreams and sensed that they must be very restless.”

And I add:

--I’ve seen in the soldiers an admirable spiritual sentiment. Speaking with many of them, I’ve heard them say that justice was on their side and because of that they were able to overcome feeling inferior. How have you been able to instill those principles?

Sandino.--Talking with them many times about the ideals of justice and about our destiny, instilling in them the idea that we are brothers. Above all, when the body wavers is when I’ve tried to raise its spirit. Sometimes even the bravest fall. It is necessary to know the troops, to choose them. And to drive off the fear, making them see that death is a mild pain, a crossing.

Me.--Through mutual understanding?

Sandino.--Yes; we have a shared understanding of our mission, and, because of that my ideas and even my voice can reach them directly. The magnetism of a thought conveys it. The waves flow and are cornered by those who are inclined to understand them. In combat, with the nervous system tense, a voice with a magnetic sense has enormous resonance... The spirits also fight, both in bodily form and without.

Me.--Do you believe in the transcendence of this movement?

The general surely did not understand me in the realist sense in which I put forward the question. Now in the midst of his supersensory impressions, to call them that, he continues unraveling his thoughts on more far-off and difficult concepts.

But it would not be possible for us to encompass his complete thoughts, and we will only touch on the bare bones of his ideas that already spin on unreal axes:

--I will tell you; the spirits also struggle both in bodily form and without...Since the beginning of the world the land has been in constant evolution. But here, in Central America, is where I see a formidable transformation...I see something that I’ve never said...I don’t think it’s been written about...In all of this Central America, in the lower part, as if the water will reach from one ocean to the other...I see Nicaragua covered in water. An immense depression that comes from the Pacific...Only the volcanoes remain above...It’s as if one sea will empty into another.

It is a fanciful description that I have not been able to get a hold of completely, but it translates into a vision of a great maritime catastrophe in Central America. And Sandino raises his hands to his eyes, as if wanting to pull the vision out of them. Once again the opaque tone of his gaze becomes more animated.

It is Sandino, the hero and brilliant Sandino, the visionary.

--Faith -- I think -- is eternally infantile and a creative; infantile, because it unites the real world to the marvelous one, and, pushing aside doubt, which is skepticism and old age, takes us to the dream world of those first years, those which perhaps, as the poet Wordsworth said, men still maintain the reflection of an un-mentality or of an embodiment, as the theosophists said, that still had not been erased from the mind by the years and under the reality of the senses.

And it is creative because man feels not like the miserly sharecropper of a transitory life that dissipates like smoke, but the proprietor, or rather, like an actor in an endless and forever renewing drama.

When I leave Sandino speaks with an elderly soldier, charged with bringing salt to the columns that are coming in, and as he is leaving with his loaded mule, the general sends him forth with a "May God keep you."

## **2. Social issues**

We saw General Sandino while he rode with some officials, inspecting his troops and he said to me:

--You see, we are not soldiers. We are people, we are armed citizens.

Remembering these impressions about the social aspect of the Sandinista movement, one afternoon I asked the general, while we were talking and he was rocking in his chair.

--You have said on occasion that your rebellion has a marked social character. Up to the point that some have called you communists. I understand that follows a line of tendentious and discrediting propaganda. But is there no social program?

Sandino.--It has been tried on different occasions to distort this national defense movement, turning it into a struggle of a more social character. I have opposed this with all my strength. This movement is national and anti-imperialist. We carry the flag of freedom for Nicaragua and for all of Spanish America. As for the rest, on the social terrain, this is a popular movement and we propose an advancement of social aspirations. The International Labor Federation, the Anti-Imperialist League, the Quakers, have come here to see us, to influence us... We've always opposed them with the decisive criteria that this was essentially a national struggle. [Farabundo] Martí, the communist propagandist, saw that he could not achieve his program and left.

The general becomes quiet and pensive.

In some countries, such as Mexico, many thought that the Sandinista movement was fundamentally agrarian. I have had the opportunity to confirm, during my stay in

Nicaragua, that property is much divided and that the country is one of small properties. There are hardly any large estates and even those are not very big. Agrarianism, as such, does not have a broad appeal. The few that don't have lands do not die from hunger, as some have told me. And, in fact, I had the opportunity to verify these impressions of this Promised Land in a way that is certainly not very flattering. Near Granada there is a beautiful span of mangos that runs all the way to the lake. Although a kind of Cerebus has the contract to collect what it can, two or three ragged men wait for the chance falling of a fruit for their daily meal. It is not profitable to work in the coffee plantations because they are only paid 15 cents, and they would prefer this modest leisure. The country is in pieces; there is no work anywhere, according to them.

I persist on the question of land with the general and I ask him if, to fulfill the sense that this country is one of small properties, he is a supporter of giving lands to those who don't have them

Sandino.--Yes, certainly, and this is something that will not pose difficulties for us. We have uncultivated lands, perhaps the best lands in the country. It is where we ourselves have been.

And the general explains his project of colonizing the Coco river zone, which is extremely fertile.

--Nicaragua imports products that it shouldn't: cereals, fats, even meat, through the Atlantic coastline. All of this can be produced here. For the time being, we'll make the river navigable; later we will start to open to the lands to cultivation. But there is incredible vegetation. At the moment, only the wild cacao is available to us for economic exploitation.

Me.--Do you believe in the development of capital?

Sandino.--Without a doubt capital can do its job and develop; but only ensuring that the worker is not humiliated or exploited.

Me.--Do you believe in the advantages of immigration?

Sandino.--There is much land to distribute here. There is a lot they can teach us. But on the condition that they respect our rights and treat our people as equals.

And later the general added, in a joking manner, that if there were foreigners here with other ideas, inspired by a spirit of unacceptable exploitation or political dominion, they [the Sandinistas] would try to put spikes in their path so that their efforts would not be quite so easy. But the rest of the foreigners would be received like brothers, with open arms.

We are reminded in that moment of the admirable disinterest that General Sandino has shown at all times, and the special stipulation in the agreement that he had just signed

expressing that his representatives indicate in his name “his absolute personal disinterest and his irrevocable resolution to not accept anything that could call into question the goals and motives of his public conduct.” So I ask him:

--You don't have the ambition of owning your own land?

Sandino.--Ah, they think that I'm going to turn into a large landowner! No, nothing like that; I will have no properties. I have nothing. This house I live in belongs to my wife. Some say this is foolish, but I have nothing in order to do other things.

Remembering that General Sandino is about to have children, I ask:

--And your children, if you have them?

Sandino.--No, I have not objection to that. There is enough work and activities for all. I am more in favor of having the land belong to the state. In the particular case of our colonization of the Coco, I lean towards a system of cooperatives. But we will have to go on studying this slowly.

With regards to these matters -- the general adds, smiling --: today I had one of the many cases of those who come to tell me of their suffering, that depict the anxious spirit of those people who handle money. There is a poor man with a large family who had been lent 300 pesos a long time ago. Now the man who lent it is demanding it back, and as they don't have it, he wants to take their house, their livestock, everything, even their children as slaves. And I said to the lender: “Do you believe that your money is worth as much as the tears of this poor family?” Later I told another to go and get one of those justice lawyers and come back another day. I hope to convince them. You've seen - adds the general - what happens here - as his mouth opens into a frank smile, showing his excellent humor.

I smiled as well in thinking about this reminder of benevolent justice that shows his persuasive spirit and not his guerilla's sword.

Me.--General, do you like nature?

Sandino.--Yes.

Me.--More than the city?

Sandino.--Yes, nature inspires and gives strength. Everything in it teaches us. The city wears us down and belittles us. But the countryside is not for us to selfishly enclose ourselves in it but to march to the city and make it better.

The sight of the plants, of the trees; the birds with their habits, their life... are a continual lesson.

The clear and precise diction of the general, the didactic style he gives to his explanations, including the gesturing of his hands, which move incessantly and have short and firm fingers, they show us that the general is not a man of fantasy, but of deep and restless thought in who boils the eternal desire to knowledge. And I ask him:

--Is it true that you would like to pursue an education?

Sandino.--Yes, I am interested in the study of nature and of the deepest relations between things. That's why I enjoy philosophy. Naturally, I am not going to implement a scholastic plan at the moment. But to know; to learn, always!

Later, we move on to talking about military matters, about the exterminatory aspect the campaign had, and I ask him:

--Were the Americans cruel?

Sandino.--Ah, this I'm not going to talk about! Ask about it out there and you will see.

Me.--There is talk, amongst your enemies, general, of unnecessary deaths, of crimes that are attributed to your troops.

Sandino.--Well, if there is blame for any wrong, whatever it may be, I am the only one responsible. Do they say that there were murders? Then I am the murderer. That there were injustices? Then I am the unjust. It was not only the invader who had to be punished but those who were linked to him.

The general sits up and speaks with energy and his eyes shine with indignation.

Me.--For me, when they have spoken of these things, I have said that freedom is not achieved by smiling at the invaders. That it is the price of freedom. But, naturally, I think that is very hard for an outsider to say.

Sandino.--Oh yes, the price of freedom!

General Sandino has passed, through shared ideas, the rigor shown by his own troops to maintain discipline. As something to speak to this point, I ask:

--How many of your troops have you ordered executed?

Sandino.--Five. Two generals, a captain, a sergeant and a soldier. One of the generals because he committed abuses. They told me he had raped several women. I verified the facts and ordered him executed. The other, for treason.

And the general recounts how since General Sequeira arrived he thought he saw in him a man whose loyalty was suspect. One day the planes had surprised them and unleashed a furious bombardment. General Sandino remained motionless in a corner when, in the

middle of the hail of bombs, he felt someone was stealthily approaching him. It was Sequeira, with pistol in hand. "He wants to kill me!" thought Sandino; and immediately took out his gun and, standing over him forced him to holster his automatic. Sequeira stayed on without any authority but still participated in operations. Yet again the general surprised him in a situation similar to that from before. When he tried to capture him he fled in the direction of the American base. Sandino sent out forces to bring him back, dead or alive. They brought him back dead.

Me.--Is it true that all of your weapons, rifles or machine guns, have been taken from the enemy? What percentage do you estimate?

Sandino.--Yes, you could say all of them, aside from a few rifles from Honduras and the primitive "Con Cons" that don't work anymore. Those who didn't have a rifle waited to get what they could from the enemy or entered the action with bombs or pistols, or simply served as reserves.

Me.--Did you, General, during the fighting have an intuition of definitive moral victory?

Sandino.--No; I believed, in getting myself involved in this business, that I wouldn't get out of it except by dying. I considered it necessary for a free Nicaragua and to raise the flag of dignity in our Indo-Hispanic countries.

I recall have heard similar sentiments expressed amongst his troops, who I'd heard say: "Death before humiliation" and "We didn't retreat until the 'machos' did."

Me.--Was your wife an obstacle or motivator of the struggle?

Sandino.--She was a motivator. I met her when I arrived here, after the fighting started. I became close to her. Her ideas and mine were the same; we identified with one another. I was separated from her for five years. Later she was able to come in through the mountains. My wife's spirit has never given up.

But, you haven't met her? - added the general, and calls - Blanca! Blanca! I'm going to introduce you to a man with a very long last name of which there is no way to pronounce correctly at first.

The wife of the chief appears. She is a very young woman, with regular features, of sweet air and white complexion. I greet her and shortly after she leaves, after saying a few words.

Sandino.--My wife is from here, she's 95 percent Spanish. Here the Spanish mixed very little with the Indians.

Me.--Generally, the Spaniard mixed with the Indians in areas where there was a lot of fighting. In Mexico, for example, there was little mixing in Sonora and in Sinaloa. In the rest of the country it's almost completely mixed.

Sandino.--Well here, little. The Indian fled to the mountain. But there's some. Enough that there is a refrain that says: "God will speak through the Indian of Las Segovias." And get out of here if he talks! They are the ones who have done a great deal of this. He is a timid, but cordial Indian, sentimental, intelligent. You've seen it with your own eyes.

Then the general calls for a soldier and invites him to talk with his commanding officer, who is sitting in the guardhouse and is of the same race as the Zambo Indians of the Atlantic.

The two of them speak, and one perceives a hodgepodge dialect of words from several languages, from English to French to Spanish.

--Now speak to them in English! - he says to me.

I talk to them for a bit and see that they speak perfectly.

--And now Spanish- he adds.

In fact, they speak perfectly.

Sandino.--So now you can see that they are intelligent. But they have been completely abandoned. There are some 100,000 without means of communication, without schools, without anything from the government. It is where I want to bring my colonization to lift them up and make them real men.

Me.--Do you believe in the transformation of societies through state pressure or through individual reform?

Sandino.--Through internal reform. State pressure changes the exterior, the appearance. We believe that each gives what he can. That every man is a brother and not a wolf. The rest is mechanical, external and superficial pressure. Naturally the state has to have its intervention.

Me.--What do the colors on your flag mean?

Sandino.--The red, freedom; the black, mourning, and the skeleton, that we won't give up until we die.

### **3.- Spanish America, Central America and Spain.**

It was the same, usual rainy afternoon; Sandino walked into the dark room, next to the guardhouse, and upon seeing me, exclaims:

Sandino.--Yes; come in, we have the great happiness of having a Spaniard in the camp, so that you see who we are and what we've done! Yes; from Spain we have received great moral support.

Me.--Positive support would have been preferable, volunteers...

Sandino.--No; they have given us something better: the waves that come with moral support. This is worth more than if they had sent us a gunboat with soldiers and parquets.

And he speaks about how a while ago a Spaniard came to the camp who was good at walking and had been around the world. He was there several days and told interesting stories about his travels and of Spain.

I understand that this walker died later on, run over by a train. Without a doubt he traveled economically. And the truth is I don't remember his name, which they told me.

At the moment they bring him a letter, and I request that he read it, interrupting the conversation, and the general adds:

--No, we think of you as a member of our great Indo-Hispanic family and we have no reservations. Look at this letter: it is from a priest friend, who was here much of the time. It's about free ideas, his family, children, estate, and about those who were able to say: "Do as I say, not as I do."

And Sandino smiles his frank, benevolent smile. After he reads the letter, in which the priest congratulates the general for the peace, which says that it shouldn't slip through the cracks.

I ask the general:

--Could this movement have some connection with the idea of a united Spanish America?

Sandino.--Yes, Bolivar's great dream is still remains in view. The great ideals, all ideas, have their stages of conception and perfection until their realization.

Me.--Do you believe that this dream could be realized in a generation? There's still a lack of preparation for this. Communication, intimate understanding, a harmonious sensibility to grasp the common problems.

Sandino.--I don't know when this will be realized. But we continue laying the foundation. I have the conviction that this century will see extraordinary things.

I then remember the situation in Central America. These small republics, which Yankee diplomacy, if not American companies, above all the fruit companies, play with like dolls.

They make and undo elections and install without great effort men they trust. Now, in the recent revolution in Honduras, they have wastefully given out many things; naturally, in order to cover themselves in some form. While the best of these countries put restrictions on white immigration, these companies are emptying the island of Jamaica onto the Atlantic coast, in order to reduce wages and the blacks continue to increase enormously. In this way these small republics have their mediated sovereignty.

Me.--General, do you believe a Central American Union is necessary?

Sandino.--Yes, absolutely necessary.

Me.--When do you think the project will be feasible?

Sandino.--It will come, it will come.

And the general gets pensive; I, not wanting to be indiscrete, do not dwell on such a delicate matter.

I remember that President Sacasa told me that he considered the Union necessary; but with time, when shared ideas and communications had been sufficiently unraveled and only on the basis of mutual agreement, but I think that there are intelligent Central American leaders who believe that the separation represents a sickly state, a common weakness, encouraged by imperialism, and who want to create a Union through force. Certainly there is a very pronounced kind of Central American patriotism.

Sandino.--At any rate, we do not profess an excessive nationalism. We don't want to close ourselves off here alone. Naturally, may foreigners, including Americans, come!

Nor do we think that the whole solution is in political nationalism. Above the nation, the federation; first continental; then broader until it reaches all.

Me.--What do you think about Spain?

Sandino.--A pre-destined nation. In the future, Spain will be in charge of organizing universal communalization.

Me.--Communalization?

Sandino.--Yes, fraternization. Spain has a glorious past. There, according to legend, María and Santiago, the siblings of Jesus, are buried. As well, it is giving the world admirable examples. The advent of the republic is something of note. As well as the attitude of the king and the people, and even the colonization...See for yourself! Some time before I viewed Spain's colonizing efforts in opposition; but today I view it with profound admiration. It's not that you are ahead. Spain gave us its language, its civilization, and its blood. We, it is better for us to consider ourselves as Spanish Indians from America.

Me.--And do you believe in the moral influence of Spain on the future America?

Sandino.--Undoubtedly! Its work is not finished. It will go on.

As a reference to the regionalist problems in Spain, Sandino indicated that he was interested in this subject of temperamental diversity and exclaims:

--Tell me, what difference is there between an Andalusian and a Basque?

Me.--Well, I believe that the Andalusian represents the predominance of the imagination, easy understanding of other ideas, ingenuity, conceptual clarity, an inclination to opposing ideas, brilliant optimism, sometimes weary, other times skeptical. Many races have passed through there. On the other hand, the Basque is primitive, with simple ideas, fixed thinking; these take root in the deepest part of his being, and he is not content with living but he has to take action. A great spirituality is hidden there. He is a natural optimist.

Sandino.--These differences are interesting to me. Are there others?

Me.--Yes; the Catalán and the Galician, for example, also offer profound regional and racial variety within a historical and spiritual unity. As for the shared harmony of the grouping, everything depends on great common ideals.

Later, Sandino made a reference to the Basque language.

--I have worked with Basques - he says - and I know them well. The Basque language is related to Sanskrit.

There is something international in the Basque spirit. They are tied to the world. Because of that they are found everywhere as if it is their home.

Later, turning to the topic of Spanish politics, he asks:

--Are things going in the right direction?

Me.--I have the belief that they are. Before Spain there is a magnificent character: Azaña. His work is to reinforce the traditional soul, the skeleton of Spain, and to incrust it in modern evolution. He is a true leader. He does not go begging behind the masses; he shows them the way and guides them. He knows to confront an unjust or ignorant opinion, even though the majority holds it. I hope that he gets a proper party behind him, a good part of the best Spanish energy: the intellectuals, the professionals, the small independent business owners and a conscientious and evolutionary capitalism. Azaña is a man of action, he is heaven-sent.

Sandino.--And the republic?

Me.--To my way of seeing it, the republic has to resolve the great contradiction of modern times, maximum statism with maximum freedom, the advance of the ideal of labor with the defense and encouragement of the common good. The future is with the middle class. This and a conscientious capitalism can still hoist a great flag, not an embarrassing flag but proud and independent. If capitalism should one day give up its inheritance or definitively transform itself, it should do it with dignity as someone who has fulfilled a historic mission, not like a thief caught red-handed. In the meantime it should lead; it should participate in government, as a vital force. As well, today freedom is at risk again, and I'm not talking about a partial eclipse, which can be necessary.

Liberalism has not died, nor will it ever die, so long as there is a man with a free heart. I believe that the program of the Spanish republic should revolve around this.

Sandino.--You asked me for an autograph?

Me.--Yes, my general.

Sandino.--I will give you one, with a greeting to Spain.

TO THE SPANISH PEOPLE, A SALUTE TO THE CONDUCT OF THE XXXX  
WRITER MR. BELAUSTEGUIGOITIA, WHO HAS RECEIVED THE IMPRESSIONS  
OF OUR LAST FEW LIBERATORY FORCES.

S[an] Rafael del Norte, Feb. 13, 1933.