

Ricardo Cortez Castro

by Jan Yatsko

Every Friday morning in the town of Atenas (where Tom and I live) there is an outdoor farmer's market lined up under the shade of 16 huge fig trees. People come to sell vegetables, fruit, cheese, meat, tamales, baked items, clothing, flowers and craft items. Without fail, Ricardo Cortez Castro is there at the same corner, crouched next to a stand that sells colorful tropical flowers. Ricardo walks a half a mile to market transporting his products in a wheelbarrow. Ricardo creates replicas of the traditional wooden carts pulled by two oxen and sells these carts at the farmer's market. He also sells fresh beans and hollowed out gourds from his garden and snake fat (Ricardo says it's good for asthma).

Ricardo has always led a simple life. One afternoon a couple of weeks ago, we sat at the location where he was born 79 years ago and he told me a little bit about his life in Atenas. Four of his 16 grandchildren sat with us. Ricardo was 8 years old when his father made a wooden cart with two oxen and gave it to him. As a poor boy with many siblings, this gift made a lasting impression on him. By the time Ricardo reached 4th grade he had to quit school to work as a laborer on a farm that raised rice, beans, coffee and corn. He was one of 11 children and everyone had to contribute to sustain the family.

I asked Ricardo why he creates ox carts. He said he never forgot the ox cart that his father made for him. With 34 years of carpentry experience behind him, Ricardo recycles found materials to create his wooden ox carts. It is not sophisticated work, but it carries the spirit of creation and the honesty of work and tradition. Some would classify his work as outsider art. Tom and I have a collection of seven of his carts.

Ricardo now lives with one of his seven children. As is the custom of many Costa Rican parents, he has divided up his land and has given it to his children. He owns very little and is a very content person. His bedroom consists of a simple bed surrounded by his ox carts and gourds. He still maintains the simple life of a campesino (country worker). At 5 AM he is cultivating his garden of corn and beans. He has lunch at noon, takes a siesta and creates his carts in the afternoon. As he did as a child, Ricardo contributes what he earns at the farmer's market to help sustain the family.

A week later, I stopped to say hello to Ricardo who had brought more ox carts to sell at the market. Ricardo told me that his youngest grandson, Fernando, asked him why he doesn't tell him stories like he told the macha. His grandson was referring to me as it is a term sometimes given to blue-eyed, blonde or light skinned people. Ricardo told me that his grandson made him realize that he needs to tell his stories before they are lost forever. Do you know of someone who might have some wonderful life stories waiting to be told? Ask them before it's too late.

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