

## Neill James: her life and legacy

Author: Tony Burton. 2025. Published at [tonyburton.ca/chapala-history/](http://tonyburton.ca/chapala-history/)

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### Introduction

Neill James' book *Dust on my Heart*<sup>1</sup> is many visitors' first introduction to the extensive English-language literature related to Lake Chapala. In the book, the self-styled "Petticoat Vagabond" tells of her adventures in Mexico and of the terrible accidents she experienced, first while climbing Popocatepetl Volcano and then during a visit to Parícutín Volcano. After two lengthy stays in hospital, James' recuperation eventually brought her, in 1943, to the small village of Ajijic, which was to be her home for the remainder of her long life. The final two chapters of *Dust on my Heart* describe her first impressions of Ajijic and of how she adjusted to life there, learning to appreciate all the idiosyncracies of pueblo life.



But just who was Neill James, what did she accomplish in her lifetime and what legacy did she leave at Lake Chapala? As for several other noteworthy Lake Chapala residents, separating fact from fiction in trying to sort out James' story is tricky, and made more complex by hagiographic portrayals, including recent ones, that simply repeat identical misinformation from former reports with no attempt to check sources or provide any independent evidence or corroboration.

For example, we are led to believe that James was born on a cotton plantation in Grenada, Mississippi, a woman of means who graduated from the University of Chicago, met Amelia Earhart, was visited in Ajijic by Ernest Hemingway, D. H. Lawrence, and George Bernard Shaw, and pioneered the looms industry in Ajijic, before founding the Lake Chapala Society.

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<sup>1</sup> Neill James. 1946. *Dust on My Heart: Petticoat Vagabond in Mexico*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Unfortunately, not a single one of these claims is true. James was born in Gore Springs, Mississippi. While Gore Springs is near Grenada, James was not born on any plantation and her family was far from wealthy. At the time of the 1910 U.S. census, her father worked as a laborer in a saw mill.<sup>2</sup> She never attended the University of Chicago and almost certainly never met Amelia Earhart. The claims about Lawrence, Hemingway and Shaw are equally ludicrous. Lawrence was long dead by the time James first visited Mexico. Neither Hemingway (whom James may conceivably have met in 1941 in Hong Kong)<sup>3</sup> nor Shaw ever visited Ajijic. James did not pioneer the looms industry in Ajijic, and was neither a founder of the Lake Chapala Society, nor even a regular member prior to being accorded Honorary Membership a few years before she died!

My efforts to ferret out the truth build on the work of two individuals who independently spent many years researching Neill James with the intention of writing her biography. Academic sociologist Stephen Preston Banks had access to Neill's descendants in Mississippi and Montana,<sup>4</sup> to her few surviving letters (mostly written to her sister Jane), and to the editorial files at Princeton's Scribner archive. After years of work, he chose not to write a straight biography but a "fictional biography."<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Tomlinson, distantly related to James,<sup>6</sup> also spent years researching James and shares many of Banks' doubts and conjectures about her life. This account is indebted to the excellent scholarship of both these researchers.

Banks' description of James as "a terrific self-fashioner,"<sup>7</sup> is an apt phrase that helps explain how many of these misunderstandings about James' life came about. Before her memory began to fail, James was constantly reinventing her backstory to interviewers and journalists, in an effort to engender the positive spin she craved and control her carefully-crafted public image. This is not meant negatively; to a greater or lesser extent, virtually everyone does this, often unconsciously.

As we delve into James' life and work, though, it is necessary to burst some bubbles along the way in order to identify the truly significant lasting value of her many contributions to Lakeside life.

## 1. Early life

To the best of my knowledge, her birth certificate has never been located. According to her descendants, she was born Nellie Neill James on 3 January 1895 and dropped her hated first name in about 1920. The family's version of her birth year is supported by the 1900 and 1910 U.S. Censuses, which give her age as 5 and 15 respectively.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ancestry records.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Banks, personal communication via email dated 17 April 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Banks, personal communication via email dated 17 April 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen P. Banks. 2016. *Kokio: A novel based on the life of Neill James*. Valley, Washington: Tellectual Press.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Tomlinson's grandfather and Neill James had both sets of grandparents in common, making them double-first cousins. Tomlinson presented a paper titled "The Petticoat Vagabond: Writer, Adventurer, Philanthropist, Spy" at the 59th Annual Convention of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association at Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, 20-22 October 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Banks, personal communication via email dated 17 April 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Neill James was the sixth of nine children in the family; at least one older sibling, Sue Aileen, died as an infant before Neill was born. (Ancestry records.)

Interestingly, though, all her travel documents from the 1920s and 1930s record her as a few years younger, offering 1898, 1899 or even 1900 as her year of birth, depending on the trip in question. Meanwhile, the entry for James in *Lives of Mississippi Authors*, based on her entry in *Who's Who in America*,<sup>9</sup> gives her birth year as 1902.

James' motivation for pretending, presumably deliberately, to be several years younger than she really was is unclear.

Neill James was only a child when her mother, Willie Anna Wood (1861-1901), died. A decade later, in October 1911, she also lost her father, Charles Campbell James (1857-1911).<sup>10</sup> By coincidence, James was later briefly married to a Scotsman whose surname was Campbell.<sup>11</sup>

The loss of both her parents before her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday must have had its effect on James' well-being and sense of security even as it brought her closer to her youngest sister, Jane Elizabeth.<sup>12</sup> The two sisters remained good friends to Neill's death in Ajijic in 1994.<sup>13</sup>

James graduated as a stenographer from the Industrial Institute and College for the Education of White Girls (later Mississippi State College for Women, now Mississippi University for Women) in 1918<sup>14</sup> and began working as a secretary at the War Department in Washington, D.C. Later that year, she was transferred to the state of Washington to work first at Fort Vancouver and then at Fort George Wright in Spokane.

At the end of September 1922, Neill James (listed as 24 years of age) left Seattle for Honolulu, Hawaii, aboard the S.S. Lurline. The ship docked in Hawaii a week later and James found work with an ice company. After eighteen months, she moved on to Tokyo, Japan, where she found work as a secretary with The Japanese Advertiser prior to securing a position at the American Embassy, where she was on staff from 1924 to 1926. During this first trip to Asia, she climbed volcanoes, learned Japanese and visited China and Korea. She completed her first round-the-world trip by traveling to India (October 1926), Germany (where she worked briefly at the American Embassy in Berlin) and Paris before taking the steamer Arabio from Cherbourg back to New York. She arrived back on American soil on 26 September 1927.

After returning to the U.S. she worked first for the Louisiana Ice Company, based in New Orleans, and then (1929) for the Florida Ice Manufacturers' Association in St. Petersburg, Florida. By early the following year, James had relocated to Costa Rica, where she helped promote the circulation of the

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<sup>9</sup> James B. Lloyd (ed). 1981. *Lives of Mississippi Authors, 1817-1967*. Univ. Press of Mississippi; based on *Who's Who in America*, vol 26 (1950-51).

<sup>10</sup> Ancestry records

<sup>11</sup> The Capital Journal (Salem, Oregon), 27 March 1937, 5, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Elizabeth James (1903-2001), born in Grenada County, Mississippi, on 23 July 1903, married Francis Butler Loomis, Jr. (1903-1989) in Shanghai, China, on 31 October 1934, and died in San Diego, California, on 23 October 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Jane visited Neill in Mexico numerous times, including in 1965 when they paired up to play in an international duplicate bridge tournament in Mexico City for a few days. (Guadalajara Reporter, 25 February 1965.)

<sup>14</sup> Anon. Ca 1978. "Philanthropist Leads an Eventful Life in Mexico." Alumni magazine of Mississippi University for Women, 16-17. This article lists her as class of '18.

national daily, *El Diario de Costa Rica*. In March 1930, she left Costa Rica for Panama. After a quick trip back to Florida via Cuba, James was soon back in Panama to board a ship for New Zealand and a job on *The Manawatu Daily Times* that lasted until January 1931.

James took a vacation break to enjoy the sights and beaches of Fiji before traveling back to Hawaii on the *Niagara*, which docked in Honolulu on 20 March 1931. Shortly afterwards, she was appointed head of office arrangements at the Institute of Pacific Relations. James attended the organization's biannual conference in Shanghai, China, in October 1931, and was then given the task of planning its next conference to be held at Banff in Alberta, Canada. When James arrived in Canada in July 1933 en route to Banff, she declared that she had never been in Canada previously and intended to stay two months before returning to Honolulu. Good to her word, she was back in Hawaii by mid-September.

The following year, she quit her job, took Russian lessons and paid for a first class cabin on the S.S. *President Coolidge* to Shanghai; the ship left Hawaii in April 1934. This was the first leg of her second round-the-world trip. From China, she traveled to Manchuria and Vladivostok and then via the Trans-Siberian railroad to Moscow. She eventually returned to the U.S. via Finland and Denmark, stepping ashore in New York from the S.S. *Scanyork* on 9 August 1934.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Writing career

Seemingly out of nowhere, James began a new career as a travel writer. Quite how she joined the stable of writers managed by Maxwell Perkins at leading New York publishers Charles Scribner's Sons is unclear. Perkins was the editor responsible for the success of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Erskine Caldwell, among others, whose works were half-a-world away, in every sense, from the overly descriptive, albeit engaging, tales told by James.<sup>16</sup>

James wasted no time polishing her image ahead of the publication of her first book. Advance notices described her as "Neill James, world traveler, whose articles and stories have appeared in leading national magazines."<sup>17</sup> No record has surfaced of any of these articles and stories, though it is always possible that they were written under a pen name.

Whatever its genesis, James' first travel book—*Petticoat Vagabond: Up and Down the World*—based on her personal travels, was published in New York in 1937.<sup>18</sup> Publicity materials for the book stressed how James had "circled the globe, on her own, with no financial backing beyond the income from the jobs she found or created for herself." James gave interviews and radio talks promoting the book, and the persona of *Petticoat Vagabond*, even before it was published and became fiercely protective of her moniker, even though it was almost certainly not original. The same term had been used, for example, by another globe-trotting woman: Mrs Irene Childrey Hoch, the director of the Dramatic Art

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<sup>15</sup> This date, supported by the passenger manifest for the *Scanyork* on Ancestry.com, differs from the chronology in Banks (Kokio, 145) which has James returning to New York in March 1936.

<sup>16</sup> James' literary agent was A. Monte Stein. 220 Fifth Avenue, New York. After moving to Mexico her main contact at Scribner's was Whitney Darrow.

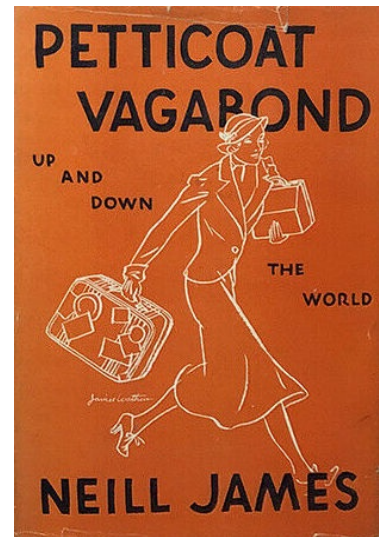
<sup>17</sup> The Honolulu Advertiser, 21 Mar 1937, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Neill James. 1937. *Petticoat Vagabond: Up and Down the World*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Department at Modesto junior college in California. Hoch had traveled the world for two years prior to starting a lecture tour of U.S. universities and junior colleges in 1938.<sup>19</sup>

*Petticoat Vagabond: Up and Down the World*, was generally well received by the American reading public. One reviewer wrote that "the whole book is sprightly. Its youthful, breathless way of telling things captures you," and called Neill James "the Feminine Harry Franck."<sup>20</sup> Franck (1881-1962), who labeled himself an "incurable vagabond," was one of the foremost travel writers of the early twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

By the time the book was published, James had taken on a new persona, as the wife of the "Right Honorable Harold Charles Knilands Scott-McGregor Campbell,"<sup>22</sup> a Scotsman. According to the marriage announcement, the couple had married on Saturday 13 March 1937 at Riverside Church, Riverside Drive in New York, and were now making their home at 1175 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut.<sup>23</sup> Campbell was, according to the paper, from Hawick in Scotland and had served four years with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gordons during the Great War (1914-1918); he was a graduate of Carnegie Institute of Technology and a technical advisor to a large factory in Connecticut.



Despite failing to find corroborative evidence for Campbell's lineage and education, there is no doubt that this marriage was real. The 1940 U.S. census shows that the couple was still living at their Chapel Street address, a home rented for \$30 a month. Harold C. Campbell, 40 years of age, was an electrical engineer in the construction sector whose earnings reached \$2400 in the previous year. His wife—listed as Nellie J. Campbell—was a 35-year-old author, working in radio, whose annual income was reported as \$700.

Harold C. K. Campbell was born in Scotland on 7 February 1900. He immigrated to the U.S. in 1919 and became an electrical engineer and naturalized U.S. citizen. He served in Troop F of the 101<sup>st</sup> Cavalry of the New York National Guard for three years from 1931 to 1934. He received an honorable discharge in May 1934 but was recalled to the unit the following September.<sup>24</sup>

Late in 1937, even before her first travel book was released, James had set off alone for Lapland where she lived and traveled with nomads for several

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<sup>19</sup> The Concordia (Moorhead, Minnesota), 4 May 1939, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Honolulu Star-Bulletin, 13 Nov 1937, 40.

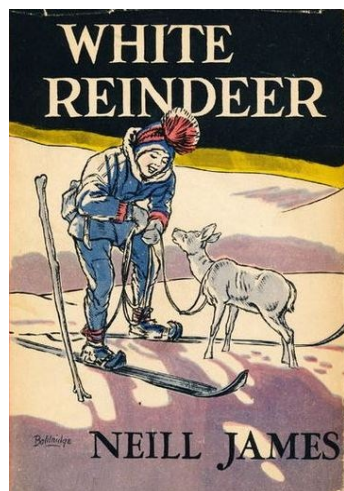
<sup>21</sup> Franck authored some thirty travel books, including volumes on Spain, the Andes, Mexico, Germany, Patagonia, the West Indies, China, Japan, Siam (Thailand), the Moslem World, Greece, Scandinavia, British Isles, Soviet Union, Hawaii and Alaska. As James claimed to have done, Harry Franck often took temporary employment to help finance the next stage of his trip.

<sup>22</sup> The Capital Journal (Salem, Oregon), 27 March 1937, 5, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Prior to marriage, it seems James had been living at 520 East 83<sup>rd</sup> St, New York, the address given on her New York Public Library Card in the Neill James Archive of the Lake Chapala Society.

<sup>24</sup> Ancestry records.

months as they drove their reindeer from the frontier with Russia to the fjords of Arctic Norway.<sup>25</sup> When she arrived back in New York in May 1938 (once again on board the Scanyork), the passenger manifest listed her as "Neill Campbell James", a married woman aged 39 (she was really 43).



Her Lapland adventures provided the material for her second travel book, *Petticoat Vagabond: Among the Nomads*, published in July 1939.<sup>26</sup> They also inspired James to write a juvenile fiction work entitled *White Reindeer*.<sup>27</sup> Illustrated by Cyrus Le Roy Baldridge and published the following year, the book is a lively tale of a 10-year-old Lapp boy and his pet reindeer. It was favorably reviewed in the *New York Times*: "This book has the freshness and charm of a first-hand account and the writer's own enthusiasm and liking for the sturdy people she describes has found its way into the story, touching a sympathetic chord in boy and girl readers."<sup>28</sup>

Her experiences in Lapland also provided a new lecture topic. Full page advertisements in the *Christian Science Monitor* and similar publications quoted letters of appreciation to her and claimed James had been "born on a cotton plantation in the Deep South with the wanderlust in her veins." James offered to lecture on any one of three topics: "With the Tent Folk of the Far North-Lapland", "American Business Girl Abroad", and "Mlle. Marco Polo."<sup>29</sup>

In 1940, James returned to Japan, where she spent a year traveling in Korea, Manchuria, Mongolia and through the war zone of Northern China. She spent months living with the "hairy Ainu, white aborigines of Asia" on the strategically-important island of Hokkaido.<sup>30</sup> James' travel account of this trip—*Petticoat Vagabond in Ainu Land: Up and Down Eastern Asia*<sup>31</sup>—was published in 1942, shortly before she set out to explore Mexico.

These trips to far-flung places were incredibly ambitious trips for a woman of limited means and with no obvious connections. James' pattern of travel, involving so many destinations, some on repeated occasions and many of them unusual, exotic ports-of-call, has led Judy King, Banks, Tomlinson and others to conclude that the *Petticoat Vagabond* was almost certainly living a double life with her travel writing providing the cover for spying assignments on behalf of, first, the Military Intelligence Division and, later, for more than 20 years, for the Navy's Office of Naval Intelligence."<sup>32</sup> Definitive proof

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<sup>25</sup> Anon. 1945. "Neill James in Mexico." *Modern Mexico* (New York: Mexican Chamber of Commerce of the United States), Vol. 18 #5 (October 1945), 22, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Neill James. 1939. *Petticoat Vagabond: Among the Nomads*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

<sup>27</sup> Neill James. 1940. *White Reindeer*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

<sup>28</sup> *New York Times*, 9 Feb 1941, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Copies of the advertisements (undated) are in the LCSNJA.

<sup>30</sup> Anon. 1945. "Neill James in Mexico." *Modern Mexico* (New York: Mexican Chamber of Commerce of the United States), Vol. 18 #5 (October 1945), 22, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Neill James, 1942. *Petticoat Vagabond in Ainu Land: Up and Down Eastern Asia*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Banks, personal communication via email dated 17 April 2014.

that James was a spy may be lacking, but the circumstantial evidence, including a brief period of imprisonment in Moscow, is compelling.

Just before James set out for Mexico and points south, she was interviewed by a reporter in New York and carefully polished her life story, leading the reporter to believe she had been born on a cotton plantation, had returned from Japan in 1940 after three years there, and that she and her husband had "an apartment in New Haven 'where we hang our hats' and sometimes meet between trains and ships." The reporter was clearly impressed by James: "She always works and pays her own way around the world, and always manages to travel first class. Once she lost her money in a miniature golf course in New Zealand and then she had to go second."<sup>33</sup>

She and her husband, Harold, were still living at 1175 Chapel St. in New Haven in February 1942 when he was drafted into the U.S. Army. The draft registration states he was 6'3" tall with brown hair and grey eyes and employed by the Great American Indemnity Co.<sup>34</sup> He named Neill James Campbell as his next of kin.

### 3. Mexico: climbing accidents

When Neill James entered Mexico in 1942 (looking for suspected Abwehr agents if Banks and Tomlinson are correct) she planned to stay only six months before moving on; little did she know that Mexico was about to become her home for more than 50 years, until the day she died.

Her early travels in Mexico, including a few weeks spent with the indigenous Otomi people, are entertainingly told, in rich, keenly-observed detail, in *Dust on my Heart*.<sup>35</sup> During her first few months, James traveled to many very different parts of the country, from the capital city to impoverished rural mountain villages, from Acapulco to Chiapas. She also spent 12 days in neighboring Guatemala.<sup>36</sup>

A week before she was due to return home to New Haven in November 1942, James was invited to accompany the Mexican Explorers Club on an ascent of Popocatepetl Volcano, the 17,899-foot peak visible (on clear days) from Mexico City and camp for two nights in its crater. James, who had extensive previous climbing experience, accepted with alacrity. She had already stood atop several volcanoes, including Mount Baker in Washington state,<sup>37</sup> and Fujiyama in Japan. Adding snow-capped Popocatepetl to her resume must have sounded like a wonderful way to end her trip to Mexico.

Unfortunately, the climb did not end as she would have hoped. The group did all reach the crater but on her descent down the volcano, James lost her footing on the treacherous icy surface and fell tumbling head over heels down the mountain. She was only saved by the heroic actions of two young climbers below who risked their own lives to break her fall. The semi-conscious James,

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<sup>33</sup> Plattsburgh Daily Press (New York), 27 June 1942, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ancestry.com. U.S. WWII Draft Cards Young Men, 1940-1947 [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Neill James. 1946. *Dust on My Heart*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

<sup>36</sup> Stamps in her passport (U.S. passport number 745891, issued 11 June 1942) show she left Suchiate, Chiapas, on 18 October 1942 and reentered Mexico at Tuxtla Chico on 30 October. The passport lists H.C.K. Campbell as her emergency contact. (NJA in LCS)

<sup>37</sup> The Oregon Daily Journal, Portland, Oregon, 16 August 1920, 2.

seriously injured with a badly-broken thighbone, gashed face and broken collarbone, had to endure an agonizing six-hour drive to Mexico City where she awoke to find herself in the American British Cowdray Hospital,<sup>38</sup> with doctors marveling at her miraculous survival.

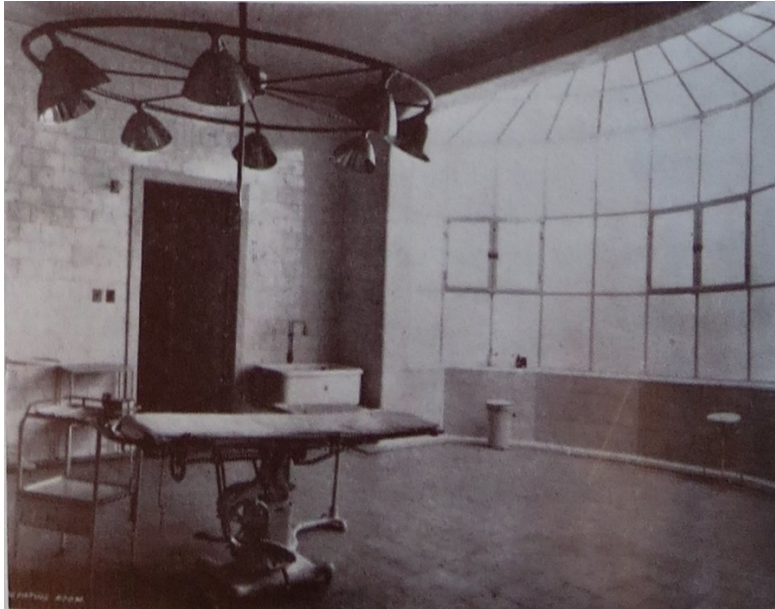


Fig 4. Operating room at ABC Hospital (*Modern Mexico*, Jan-Feb 1949, p14).

Several operations and almost five months of recuperation later, James discharged herself, hobbled out of the hospital using two canes for support, and headed for the small thermal spa of Ixtapan de la Sal, near Toluca.

James was still taking daily walks and baths at Ixtapan de la Sal in April 1943 when she learned that an entirely new volcano, Paricutín, had erupted not far away, near Uruapan in the state of Michoacán. Goodness only knows what compelled her, but she immediately decided she simply had to see it for herself. Traveling with a group of wealthy ladies she had befriended at the spa, James made it to a prime vantage point near the volcano. The ladies chose to shelter overnight in a ramshackle lean-to hut close to the cone. As ashes spewed continuously from the volcano, their weight became so great by 3.00am that the hut's roof collapsed. Her companions escaped with minor injuries but James was trapped in the rubble with a smashed hip and broken leg. This unfortunate accident necessitated almost four more months back in hospital in Mexico City. James was later quoted as saying "If I had to spend three years recuperating from nine fractures in any one place, I'm glad it happened in Mexico."<sup>39</sup>

Finally discharged in August 1943, James initially stayed with friends in Mexico City before 'Marion Morris', a friend from San Francisco, [= Madeline Miedema ?] suggested they travel to a small hotel she knew in Ajijic. The next, and enduring, chapter of James' life was about to begin; her multiple calamities had drawn her to Lake Chapala, which she would call her home for

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<sup>38</sup> The American-British-Cowdray (ABC) Hospital in Mexico City began when the American Hospital joined the Sanatorio Cowdray.

<sup>39</sup> Anon. 1945. "Neill James in Mexico." *Modern Mexico* (New York: Mexican Chamber of Commerce of the United States), Vol. 18 #5 (October 1945), 22, 28.



more than half a century.



Fig 5. Neill James in 1943. Photo courtesy of Lake Chapala Society Archive

#### 4. Ajijic

When the two young women, James still on crutches,<sup>40</sup> first arrived in Ajijic in September 1943 (after a train to Guadalajara, where they stayed for a few days, followed by a bus to Chapala and a small boat to Ajijic, they stayed at Casa Heuer,<sup>41</sup> the informal lakefront posada run by German emigré siblings, Paul (Pablo) and Liesel (Louisa) Heuer. It was a deservedly popular place for get-away-from-it-all vacations; among others, the multi-talented American writer and composer Paul Bowles (1910-1999) had spent several weeks there a year earlier.

In *Dust on my Heart*, James describes the Heuers as "a sparse, tall German whose sandy hair matched his leathery complexion" and "a rather buxom German woman with round face chiseled in a square head, twinkling brown eyes."<sup>42</sup> Despite hosting guests, the Heuers valued their privacy. James was especially taken with Don Pablo's tales of malaria, venomous snakes, black widow spiders and scorpions.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Neill James. 1967. "Ajijic Carrousel", *Guadalajara Reporter*, 11 March 1967, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Neill James. 1946. *Dust on My Heart*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 272 on.

<sup>42</sup> Neill James. 1946. *Dust on my Heart*. 272, 275.

<sup>43</sup> Neill James. 1946. *Dust on my Heart*. 276.

James became quite good friends with Louisa Heuer, perhaps seeing in her some of the same rugged determination to prove that women were more than equal to men in any task of endurance. According to an account written many years after the fact, "While still using a cane, Neill went on a walking tour with Louisa Heuer. They took a boat across the lake and wandered up valleys and hillsides for a month, sleeping wherever they could lay their blankets."<sup>44</sup> James took photos of Tamazula and Mazamitla on this trip.<sup>45</sup> Louisa Heuer was certainly prepared to hike long distances; James' second-hand version of Heuer's pilgrimage to Talpa is among the more compelling passages in *Dust on My Heart*. James herself visited Talpa in March 1948.<sup>46</sup>

When James first arrived, Ajijic was still a small village, with only a smattering of foreign residents living nearby, including Herbert and Georgette Johnson, Nigel Millett, his father Harry Millett, and Peter Lilley. Ajijic had no electricity and the only telephone was in the post office.

Marion Morris [Madline Miedema] stayed with James at the Heuers for about a month before returning to California. Four months after arriving in Ajijic,<sup>47</sup> James rented a small village home near the plaza for a couple of years. The owner, according to the version in *Dust on My Heart*, was an elderly Mexican woman, "a very religious and rich old spinster."<sup>48</sup> Twenty years later, the owner had become a man:

"I felt experienced enough to accept the offer of an adobe casa whose occupant was forced to go to the city to replenish his exchequer. The rent was 20 pesos (about four dollars) a month. The casa was just off the plaza which was an excellent location... Shortly after I established myself in the adobe casa, our only millionaire (he had found a buried treasure) was kidnapped in broad daylight and held for ransom... For two years I lived happily in my simple adobe casa... added a brick floor, mended the roof, made a garden, learned to draw water from the well... All went well until the patron became homesick for Ajijic."<sup>49</sup>

A decade later, James gave yet a third version when asked by local reporter Ruth Netherton about prices in Ajijic in 1945, in which the owners of the house near the plaza—rented for "5 dollars a month" (or about 27 pesos)—were a German couple who spent less than 2 pesos a day for food, supplies and maid.<sup>50</sup> This third version matches notes James made in 1947 for a story and is probably the closest to the truth.<sup>51</sup> The notes describe how she "made a garden, fenced it in, painted the house inside and outside, put in window boxes, wired it for electricity, at least extended the wiring, cemented down a tile floor laid on sand" only for her "landlady" to raise the rent from \$20 pesos to \$25 and later \$30. At that point, James decided she would build her own house.

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<sup>44</sup> Ruth Netherton. 1977. "More about the Way it Was". (Laguna Chapálac), Guadalajara Reporter, 3 September 1977, 17-18.

<sup>45</sup> These photos are in her earliest Mexican photo album, following photos of the Otomi village in Hidalgo where she had stayed prior to her climbing accident.

<sup>46</sup> Photographs in NJA.

<sup>47</sup> Document dated 1947 in NJA.

<sup>48</sup> Neill James. 1946. *Dust on My Heart*, 290.

<sup>49</sup> Neill James. 1967. "Ajijic Carrousel", Guadalajara Reporter, 11 Mar 1967, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ruth Netherton. 1977. "More about the Way it Was". (Laguna Chapálac), Guadalajara Reporter, 3 September 1977, 17-18.

<sup>51</sup> Unpublished document, "Why I Wanted to Build a House" in NJA.

## 5. Neill James writes about Ajijic

From the moment she set foot in Ajijic, James was concerned to improve the welfare of the village children. Her cook, Apolonia Márquez de Flores, was a widow with three surviving children—Elpidia (aged 15), Josefina (11) and Xavier (9)—when James first employed her.<sup>52</sup> An older son, Delfino, had died in April 1936, at the age of nine, from malaria.<sup>53</sup> James took a shine to Apolonia's children, especially Josefina, and quickly conceived the idea of a children's book about Mexico.

In September 1944, a year after arriving in Ajijic, James wrote to her sister Jane:

"Have swell material for a dyed-in-the-wool Mexican background book for children, written about my village, with all the humor, color, strange customs and daily life packed in. I have my heroine selected. She is my little protégé, Josefina. When I first saw her she was clad in rags. She is bright as a new Peso. I have bought her several dresses, and a pair of sandals (which she has worn completely out and needs more!)"<sup>54</sup>

In the same 1944 letter, James also refers to her latest travel book:

"Am about a third through with the second revision of my travel book and eager to get it finished and start my fiction. It will be the most interesting and sell longer and be more profitable when all is said. I have good stuff for my travel book, however, and have hopes for it. If my project works out and produces enough to live on while I write, I will be happy. And if it makes profit enough for me to begin paying off my debts, Hurrah!"<sup>55</sup>

This reference to debts is clear evidence that James was a woman of limited means, certainly not one supported by any kind of family trust or fortune. It may well be, as Banks suggests, that James had also already been informed by her handler that she would not be offered any future intelligence-gathering roles following her various misfortunes.

On a happier note, James described how she and other villagers had raised 8,000 pesos (\$1,500) to buy a new clock for the church, though things did not work out quite as planned:

"No one in our village can afford a clock, so a village clock seemed a good idea. We had the Ceremony of the Priest blessing the clock, and started it hopefully. It ran one day, then was "discompuesto" [= descompuesto, broken], and we went back to telling time by the shadows on the ground."<sup>56</sup>

Elsewhere in her letters to her sister, James expressed her hope that she would soon be able to start traveling again, a hope that no doubt stopped her from entertaining any long-term plans.

In order to complete the manuscript of her next Petticoat Vagabond book, James

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<sup>52</sup> Neill James. 1946. *Dust on My Heart*, 291.

<sup>53</sup> Delfino Flores, born in Ajijic on 22 December 1926, died of malaria at his home (Ocampo #110) on 14 April 1936. (Death certificate on Ancestry.com)

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Banks, personal communication, 14 September 2016, via email, quoting letter dated 4 September 1944 from Neill to her sister Jane.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Banks, personal communication, 14 September 2016, via email.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen Banks, personal communication, 14 September 2016, via email.

added a couple of chapters about Ajijic. No sooner had she signed the contract with the publishers in 1945 than she immediately began to promote herself and her latest book ahead of its release.

*El Informador*, the Guadalajara daily, was happy to insert a line advertising that the "well-known author" would sign copies of her world travel books at a renowned city bookstore.<sup>57</sup> The book jacket illustration for *Dust on my Heart* was a painting by Alejandro Rangel Hidalgo (1923-2000), a versatile artist, architect and set designer, perhaps best known later for his exquisite Christmas cards, including many commissioned by UNICEF.<sup>58</sup>

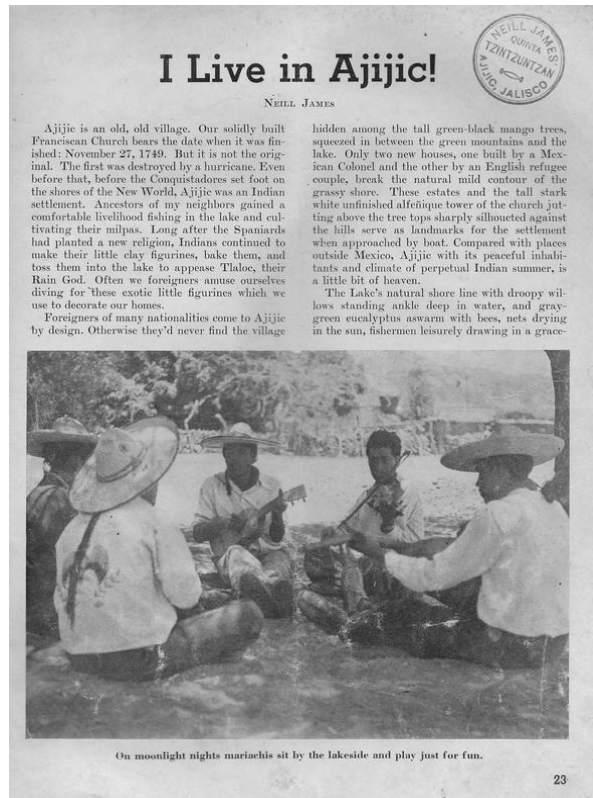


Fig 6. First page of "I Live in Ajijic" by Neill James.

James also gained valuable advance publicity for her new book by writing an article about life in Ajijic for *Modern Mexico*, the monthly magazine of the Mexican Chamber of Commerce in New York.<sup>59</sup> Several paragraphs of "I Live in Ajijic" name artists and authors who were either resident at Lake Chapala or had recently visited. Their names (despite faulty spelling) have proved invaluable to my research into the artists and authors associated with Lake Chapala. Several went on to become quite famous artists, holding major solo shows in the U.S. and elsewhere.<sup>60</sup>

In her article, James claimed that her travel book, *Adobe Hut in Heaven*, was

<sup>57</sup> El Informador, 27 Sep 1945, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Rangel's former studio-home, Hacienda Nogueras, Colima, is now a museum.

<sup>59</sup> Neill James. 1945. "I Live in Ajijic." *Modern Mexico*, (October 1945), 26-27.

<sup>60</sup> Neill James. 1945. "I Live in Ajijic." *Modern Mexico*, (October 1945), 26-27.

being published in New York the following February and that she had already completed a juvenile fiction entitled *House of Five Bird Cages*. In the event, *Adobe Hut in Heaven* was published by Scribner's in 1946 as *Dust on my Heart*, while the manuscript for *House of Five Bird Cages* (renamed *A Peso for the Moon*) was rejected.<sup>61</sup> A Scribner's editor wrote to Monte Stein, James' New York agent, that "She has been much too carried away by atmosphere and church festivals and has no real story.... Too many incidents without sustaining story or characterization. It's just not a book children will read in these days—as you know they demand more plot, a real story."<sup>62</sup>

Readers of *Modern Mexico* learned how James had regained her health at Lake Chapala:

"I came to Ajijic to recuperate. When I landed I was so crippled I had to be helped out of the boat. Daily I worked to regain my health. I sunbathed, swam in Lake Chapala, and exercised. Now I walk upright and without crutch or cane."<sup>63</sup>

Life in Ajijic was certainly not without its dangers, however, with scorpions, snakes, spiders and mosquitos all playing a part in the final chapters of *Dust on My Heart*. James' narrowest escape from death, though, came not at the hands of the local fauna but from arsenic poisoning after Apolonia, her cook, unwittingly stirred the frijoles cooking on the stove with a wooden spoon that James had just used to stir a lead arsenic mixture for the garden.<sup>64</sup>

None of this deterred James from always trying to do whatever she could to improve the lives of the villagers:

"By way of diversion and to aid the women and girls of this village earn some money, I revived an old embroidery home industry, and put them to making beautifully embroidered but tailored blouses for women. They worked with such enthusiasm and the project grew so rapidly that now it occupies my entire spare time and encroaches upon my writing time. My job is to direct the project, furnish raw materials and find a market for their produce! Tourists have made my little adobe house a Mecca, and few leave without one or a half-dozen handmade embroidered blouses 'Made in Ajijic.'"<sup>65</sup>

Note that the veracity of James' claim to have single-handedly "revived" the art of embroidery in Ajijic is unclear in the absence of any evidence that it had ever been a traditional local craft.

She summed up her approach to philanthropy in *Dust on My Heart*:

"When I become acquainted with people living in want of material comforts easily obtainable, I begin unconsciously working out a solution to their problems, and before I realize what is happening I have begun to try to aid them... I believe a man will instinctively better himself if given an opportunity."<sup>66</sup>

James fell in love with Mexico and is quoted as saying: "I love Mexico! It has all the old world culture of the Occident, the glamour, mystery, and color of

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<sup>61</sup> Copies of this manuscript and a Spanish translation of it, entitled "La Casa de Los Cinco Jaulas de Pajaros", are in the LCSNJA. The rejection was communicated in letters dated 23 March 1948 and 1 Dec 1948 from Monte Stein to James (both in LCSNJA).

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Scribner's to Monte Stein dated 21 April 1948, in LCSNJA.

<sup>63</sup> Anon. 1945. "Neill James in Mexico." *Modern Mexico*, October 1945, 22, 28.

<sup>64</sup> Neill James. 1946. *Dust on My Heart*, 303-304.

<sup>65</sup> Anon. 1945. "Neill James in Mexico." *Modern Mexico*, October 1945, 22, 28.

<sup>66</sup> Neill James. 1946. *Dust on My Heart*, 292.

the Orient and a very special brand of *mañana* of its own, more devastating than the legendary lotus in captivating the footloose stranger wandering in the realm."<sup>67</sup> She is often mistakenly credited with having originated the famous line about how once the dust of Mexico has settled on your heart you will not find peace in any other land. What she actually wrote (on the first page of *Dust on My Heart*) was "There is a saying, 'When once the dust of Mexico has settled upon your heart, you cannot then find peace in any other land.'" James was merely quoting an old saying; it was not her creation.<sup>68</sup>

In some unpublished notes from 1951 entitled "Mexican Life", James explains why she finds Ajijic such a fascinating, if sometimes infuriating, place to live:

"Ajijic is a place of humor without logic, a witchcraft humor where lights go on and off, where church bells ring for no apparent reason, where definitions can suddenly fly apart like a giant castillo with all its figures shooting off into the air. Devils of fantasy dwell in this village, in the earth, in the lake water, in the air, and daily, hourly, with secret insistence and delight, scatter handfuls of antics, like cascades of laughing crystals, over the roof tops. Edges become blurred, centers vanish into vacuum, straight lines are fluid, poise invariably lists into tumult, and all conclusions are hysterical. Shadow is more important than the object which forms it; the music, the pattern, slide into an off-beat rhythm, an out-of-focus photograph."<sup>69</sup>

## 6. Neill James builds her dream house

By the time *Dust on My Heart* was published in 1946, James's rental property had been reclaimed by its owner or owners, so she set out to purchase some land and elicited the help of retired engineer Herbert Johnson to build her own home.<sup>70</sup>

Ever-resourceful, James considered this "an intriguing project." But first she needed to acquire a suitable building lot. This proved to be more of a challenge than she expected. The price of land in Ajijic had recently jumped from \$1 peso to \$3 and then to \$5 (about one dollar) a square meter.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, foreigners purchasing property in Mexico needed federal government approval and permission prior to purchase. James discovered that her immigration papers were not completely in order. While sorting them out (which took far longer than she would have liked) she was effectively stymied from buying land or building a house.

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<sup>67</sup> Anon. 1945. "Neill James in Mexico." *Modern Mexico* (New York: Mexican Chamber of Commerce of the United States), Vol. 18 #5 (October 1945), 22, 28.

<sup>68</sup> See <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=11323> for more details.

<sup>69</sup> Notes dated 12 Nov 1951 entitled "Mexican Life" in LCSNJA.

<sup>70</sup> For full details of James' land purchases and the legal issues she had to overcome, see chapter 14 of *Foreign Footprints in Ajijic*.

<sup>71</sup> Neill James. Unpublished manuscript entitled "Mexican Story", dated 26 October 1948, in LCSNJA.

The map shows the location of James' home, "Quinta Tzintzuntzan" (C) on Calle Ramón Corona. It was surrounded by extensive gardens (properties A, B, and E), also owned by James, who added an additional property, F, to the gardens in the mid-1950s. Prior to 1945, lots A, B, C and D were a single property, about 2700 square meters in total area. Property D was later owned by Ernesto Butterlin.

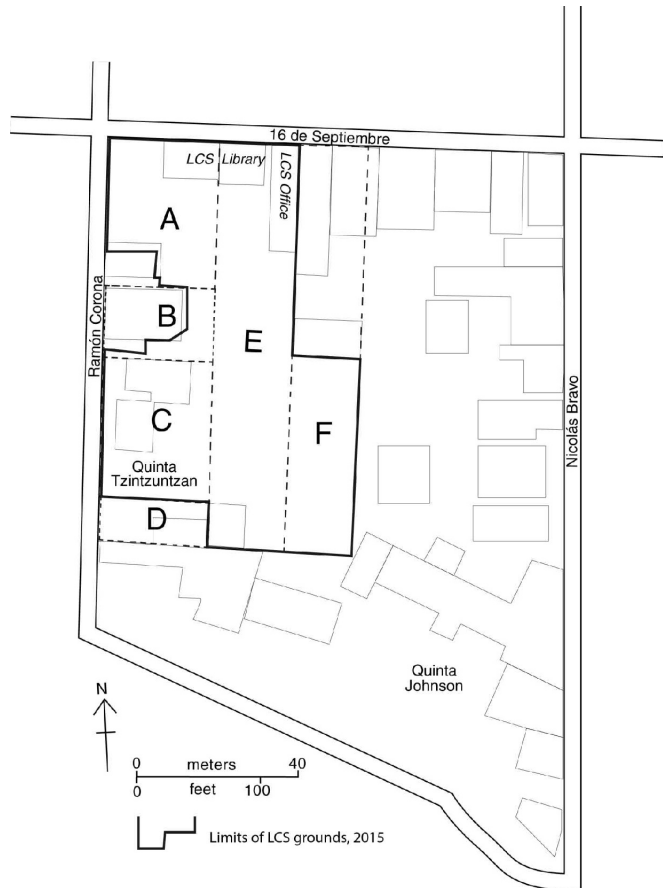
In November 1945, Neill James wrote to the Foreign Relations Secretariat (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores) stating that she was a US rentista (i.e. independently wealthy individual) who had lived two years in Ajijic and wanted to purchase a small house, on a plot of about 10 by 30 meters, together with a piece of land about 25 by 25 meters for a vegetable garden.

"I am an author," she wrote, "and hope to return here to write my books." She gave her name as Neill James Campbell and declared she was number 122000 on the National Registry of Foreigners.<sup>72</sup>

Within a month, James bought a 25.0 by 25.5 meter plot of land from Jesús Ahumada Mercado for the curiously precise sum of 2902.76 pesos (about 540 dollars). Ahumada Mercado agreed to keep it in his name while "legal difficulties [were] straightened out." When SRE asked her to send in her rentista papers, James hired a Chapala lawyer to act on her behalf. Three months later, when James discovered that her papers were "still on [the] shelf of his closet," she found a second lawyer, who "promised to fix everything and I was to pay \$100 after I got the papers." Separately, James also requested permission to buy the house (Hidalgo 433) she had been living in for the past two years.

By February 1946 the land was still not legally hers, so she engaged yet another lawyer to write a letter requesting permission to buy. A month later, and still no result, James hired a fourth lawyer. By May, after repeated excuses from this lawyer, who was busy building his own house, James was becoming increasingly anxious and annoyed.

In October 1946, James hired another lawyer—this time one from Guadalajara—to draw up the transfer of ownership and new deed for the property she had paid for the previous year. James' notes do not explain the long delay that ensued.



<sup>72</sup> James was presumably using her US married name. Her legal name in Mexico was either (Nellie) Neill James Wood or (Nellie) Neill James de Campbell.

But, finally, in December 1947 she received unwelcome news. "[My] rentista papers had been made out wrong, were not in order, and I possibly would have to leave the country at once." Following a "scene at immigration," a "bandit" arrived at her door to solicit a multa (fine). James noted that:

"Two immigration men had field day in Chapala collecting fines from foreigners... [who] were handing out 100 peso notes right and left, being under the impression that such a note would fix up everything. Didn't fix a thing.... Decided to hurry and get my property in name of a Mexican for safety."

James resorted to the legally-dubious practice of borrowing someone else's name (a *prestanombre*) to sign the formal documents, keeping herself at arm's length from what would have been an illicit transaction if conducted in her own name. Despite the evident risks, using a *prestanombre* was quite common. Needing someone trustworthy and unlikely to betray her confidence, James chose Ernesto Butterlin, a Mexican artist born in Guadalajara to German parents, who lived and painted in Ajijic. Part of James's confidence may have been because Butterlin had befriended, and shared his house with, two visiting American artists, Charmin Schlossman and Sylvia Fein, without incident. He also worked with Irma Jonas, a well-connected New Yorker, to run summer art classes in Ajijic for groups of American students.

In January 1948, James, accompanied by Butterlin, took the papers to Ahumada Mercado for everyone to sign, only to discover that her lawyer had made the papers out incorrectly and they needed to be redone. In her notes, James admitted that she wished she'd never heard of land! The deed for the property (C on the map) was finally signed a few days later; it stated that Ernesto Butterlin had paid 500 pesos for 841 square meters.

On the plus side, the successive delays had given James ample time to design her home, and she started construction almost immediately. She "drew house plans, figured dimensions in the metric system and supervised," while Herbert Johnson helped "figure out the stress and strain of wooden and steel beams" and oversaw digging a well.<sup>73</sup> The project gradually expanded to include two bodegas, a rock wall around the house, some lily ponds, a garage and a second well. James and Herbert Johnson remained good friends and had a healthy rivalry as regards their prowess as gardeners. Johnson's formal gardens were a far cry from the somewhat unkempt tropical foliage that James preferred. Both loved roses. When Johnson died in 1960, James cut blooms from their gardens "to fashion a blanket of three thousand roses to cover her friend's bier."<sup>74</sup>

On the minus side, it turned out that her bureaucratic nightmare was far from over. First, James was informed that back taxes were owed on the property, which prevented the formal registration of the sale. After numerous trips to Chapala, the taxes were finally paid in May. Then, when James hired a lawyer in Guadalajara to complete the registration, she learned that the papers had not been properly notarized to the satisfaction of the Registro Público. It was almost back to square one. New documents had to be drawn up, signed and correctly notarized.

Frustrated by the frequent delays, including one when her workmen took time off to build a wall near the church, James moved in even before construction

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<sup>73</sup> Neill James. 1967. "Ajijic Carrousel", Guadalajara Reporter, 11 March 1967, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Ruth Netherton. 1977. "More about the Way it Was". (Laguna Chapálac), Guadalajara Reporter, 3 September 1977, 17-18.



was completely finished<sup>75</sup> and named her new house (not finally completed until 1949), Quinta Tzintzuntzan.<sup>76</sup> The formal paperwork submitted by Butterlin showed that a modest two-story house (101 square meters of construction, with four rooms down and one up) had been completed. This was to be Neill James' home for more than forty years.

When asked, several years later, why she had subsequently bought three adjoining properties, James claimed that the first was to guarantee peace and quiet, the second prevented its owner, a General, from building a barracks there, and the third saved her from having a two-story house overlook her garden.<sup>77</sup> Judging by the quick succession of land transactions (all completed before she had legal title to her own house), it is more likely that James had always planned to extend her property, but felt obliged to offer some justification after the fact. For the new purchases, James relied on another prestanombre, Irma Heinrich de Martínez, who bought lot B, with its buildings on 1 June 1950 for 1000 pesos, and property E six weeks later for 750 pesos.<sup>78</sup>

Despite this flurry of activity, as 1950 came to a close Neill James still did not have any property registered in her name alone. She wrote to the Foreign Relations Secretariat in September 1951 seeking permission to buy yet more property including 500 square meters of land on the west side of Calle Ramón Corona, where she wanted to plant mulberry bushes for the cultivation of silkworms.

Permission in hand, James then "purchased" lot C from Ernesto Butterlin on 28 November. Two weeks later, she purchased lot A from José de Jesús Ahumada Mercado and his wife, and lots B and E from Irma Heinrich de Martínez. James was finally the official owner of over 4200 square meters of prime Ajijic real estate, the perfect setting for an upgrade on her former "Adobe Hut in Heaven," the working title she had used for *Dust on My Heart*.<sup>79</sup> After acquiring lot F (see map) in 1956, the total area of her personal estate was well over 5000 square meters.<sup>80</sup>

James soon transformed her garden into a colorful tropical paradise with a luxuriant mix of vegetables, flowers, trees and ornamentals, perfect habitat for all kinds of animals—ranging from chickens, ducks and roosters to dogs, parrots and peacocks. The gardens and lily ponds were an animal refuge: James was both an animal lover and a committed vegetarian.<sup>81</sup>

James' former home, gardens, store and outbuildings are now part of the extensive property owned by the Lake Chapala Society.

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<sup>75</sup> Neill James. 1967. "Ajijic Carrousel", Guadalajara Reporter, 11 Mar. 1967, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Tzintzuntzan ("Place of the Hummingbirds") is an historic village on the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro in Michoacán.

<sup>77</sup> Neill James. Unpublished manuscript titled "Mexican Story," dated 26 October 1948, in LCSNJA.

<sup>78</sup> Swiss-born Irma Heinrich, who lived in Guadalajara, had been a witness to some earlier land documents relating to James.

<sup>79</sup> James, "I Live in Ajijic."

<sup>80</sup> James later sold about 380 square meters, including most of lot B, to John and Doris Molinari, who moved to Ajijic from California in about 1985. In 2021 the Lake Chapala Society bought this property to extend its existing facilities.

<sup>81</sup> Katie Goodridge Ingram, personal communication.



Fig 7. Neill James relaxing in Quinta Tzintzuntzan grounds. c 1957. Photo by Jacques Van Belle.

## 7. Why did her writing career end?

James signed a contract in 1947 for *Dust on My Heart* to be published in Europe, but there is no evidence that this edition ever saw the light of day. Her signature on the contract was witnessed by Madeline Niedema and Herbert Johnson. While James' royalty checks from Scribners kept trickling in, the amounts were never very large. For example, in August 1947 she received \$131.93 for the sale of 374 copies of *Dust on my Heart*, 2 *Petticoat Vagabond*, and 156 *White Reindeer*.<sup>82</sup> Except for *White Reindeer*, her book for the juvenile market, the shelf life of her books was disappointingly short.

She continued to promote her books whenever possible, and personally presented copies of *Dust on My Heart* in 1949 to the best students at the Instituto Mexicano-Norteamericano in Guadalajara. This may have been a slightly chilly evening since Peter Lilley also attended to give out copies of *Village in the Sun*.<sup>83</sup> Lilley maintained to friends that some parts of James' book were clearly based on tales told in his own (earlier) book, written in collaboration with Nigel Millett.

In his novel about Neill James, Banks includes a lengthy account of what transpired when English writer Sybille Bedford and her American partner Esther Murphy Arthur visited James in Ajijic. Bedford visited Mexico in 1946, stayed at the Villa Montecarlo in Chapala, and a large portion of her subsequent travel novel—*A Visit to Don Otavio*—is set at Lake Chapala. In Banks' version, Bedford and James quickly realized they had nothing in common and began arguing about Spam (the canned meat) and Aldous Huxley. Bedford stormed out,

<sup>82</sup> Letter in LCSNJA.

<sup>83</sup> *El Informador*, 18 Dec 1949, 9.

but not before turning to Arthur and asking, "I wonder who could have written her books?"<sup>84</sup>

In a span of nine years from 1937 to 1946, Neill James had written four travel works and a juvenile novel. However, after completing *Dust on My Heart*, she never published another book, though several extracts from her final book did make their way into *Mexican Life*, a Mexico City-based monthly, between 1949 and 1956. James' archive contains several more story ideas and outlines that were never fleshed out or completed.

In addition to the rejected manuscript *A Peso for the Moon*, James also finished several parts of "a humorous account of the building of a house with all the queer characters of Ajijic woven into it," provisionally entitled *My Castle In Ajijic*.<sup>85</sup> Writing to Scribner's in 1949 about an unrelated matter, James was still hoping they would accept this book and made a point of mentioning that:

"My new house, built of brick, stone and glass brick is now completed with exception of my living room. I built some of it this spring. It is 45 feet long, glassed on 3 sides of one end with fountain there and Lapland fireplace in opposite end. It will have a colonial type tiled floor. I designed the house and used local labor, supervising the construction myself. It is built fo out-of-doors living, perfect for the climate here. I am now working revising my patio and garden." She followed up with her sympathy card: "My nine fractures, though not disfiguring, trouble me at times. Fortunately radio-active thermal baths are not too distant nor too dear."<sup>86</sup>

By 1950, James seems to have accepted that Scribner's was not going to green-light any further manuscripts. In an exchange of letters about a privately funded reprint of 300 copies of *Dust on My Heart*, James wrote that rather than rewrite *A Peso for the Moon*, or finish her book about building a house, she believed "it best to spend my energy on improving my writing." The reprint enabled her to stock her (newly opened) gift shop in Ajijic so that visitors could purchase autographed copies.

Banks, especially, is critical of James' writing abilities and argues that her books were possibly ghost written, perhaps by her espionage handler, in order to help establish a plausible cover story for her off-the-record activities. It is certainly strange why James, once she was cast adrift in Mexico after submitting *Dust on my Heart*, stopped writing anything other than short journalistic reports for local papers. Did her enforced lack of travel, due to her shaky finances, mean she had nothing to write about? Did the poor sales of her travel books lead the publisher to decline further manuscripts? Or did James mentally consign her writing to a previous life as she began to rebuild a new persona, one better suited to survival and success in Mexico?

A short, undated note in her archives, outlines James's own perspective: "My books are now out of print. I got into the house building and became enchanted instead of writing another book. One has just so much energy. And I like to do what fascinates me at the time."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Stephen P. Banks. 2016. Kokio, 210-212.

<sup>85</sup> Neill James. 1947. Unpublished manuscript entitled "My Castle in Ajijic", dated 18 December 1947, located in LCSNJA.

<sup>86</sup> Copy of letter from James to Scribner's dated 25 April 1949 in NJA.

<sup>87</sup> Unpublished, undated note in LCSNJA.

Whatever the reasons for not writing more books, James certainly capitalized on her short-lived period of fame as *The Petticoat Vagabond* whenever the opportunity presented itself, using all her southern charm to captivate visiting journalists and tourists alike.

## 8. Neill James the capitalist

### Knitting and embroidery

Even if she was motivated by providing some employment for local women, James had no independent wealth and needed to generate some income for herself.

In March 1944, even before starting the embroidery business, James had tried to interest the local ladies in knitting, a project which barely got off the ground because it took too long to produce finished items. With her rudimentary Spanish, James called this her "panuoleta project." Spelled correctly, pañoleta is Spanish for headscarf or shawl. At the start she kept meticulous records of costs (wool, knitting needles, hoops, bus fare to Chapala), and of who knitted what, in what colors, and whether or not it sold. A handwritten note in one of the record books lists recent household purchases: eggs, milk, *ocote* (torch pine, used for starting fires), *carbón* (charcoal), *frijol* (beans) and peaches.<sup>88</sup>

After giving up on knitting, James began to buy plain white cotton blouses and then pay local women piecework rates to embroider them. Towels were also embroidered. Early examples of the embroidered blouses were on display with other art and handicrafts at the Johnsons' house in December 1944.<sup>89</sup> Later, they were sold as "Hand Embroidered Blouses, American Models, Tailored for Sports and for Afternoon Wear."

Many of the original designs were created by two female American artists: Irma Rene Koen,<sup>90</sup> who lived only briefly in Ajijic, and Sylvia Fein, who lived there from 1943-1946. Interviewed at her spacious hilltop home outside San Francisco, Fein showed me photos of the big luau with hula dancing that James had organized on the beachfront and described in *Dust on My Heart*.<sup>91</sup> Fein helped market the finished blouses to Mexico City department stores whenever she visited her mother, who was then living there.<sup>92</sup>

Dozens of women participated in the embroidery project, including members of the Campos, Flores, González, García, Ivon, López, Márquez, Pantoja, Pérez, Rochín, Saucedo and Navarro families. In addition to the women doing the embroidery, the project employed a woman (virtually) full time to wash the finished blouses before sale. In January 1946, Apolonia Flores was washing as many as 19 blouses a day, receiving \$0.15 pesos for each one (earning US\$0.50 on a good day).

By 1952, when the total population of Ajijic was estimated at 2500, as many as 80 village women were doing piecework embroidery and blouse-making for

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<sup>88</sup> All of James' record books referred to here are in LCSNJA.

<sup>89</sup> *El Informador*, 19 Dec 1944, 12.

<sup>90</sup> *The Des Moines Register*, Iowa, 13 Feb 1949, 36.

<sup>91</sup> Neill James. 1946. *Dust on My Heart*, 293-294.

<sup>92</sup> Sylvia Fein. Personal communication, interview.

James.<sup>93</sup> Every Thursday, they would line up in James' tropical garden, to be greeted by James' dog, Pluto, and her parrot, Paco, and exchange their latest work for badly-needed pesos.



Fig 8. Neill James receiving piecework. Photo by Leonard McCombe, c 1957.

The challenge facing James was how to market all this merchandise. James had already begun to sell finished blouses out of her own home and now decided to open Ajijic's first gift shop.

James certainly foresaw the tourist potential of Mexico in general, and Ajijic in particular. Even before the second world war ended, she noted "a surge of tourists southward over the Pan American Highway, by car, by train, boat and airplane". She thought many of them would eventually settle in Mexico.<sup>94</sup> In fact, she feared that Mexican might soon be overrun by tourists, and believed that "come the end of the war, Mexico will have to erect strong barriers to protect her Paradise."<sup>95</sup>

From the late 1940s on, despite her reservations, James started several new tourist-related ventures. As we shall see, along with running her own tourist store, she built and rented out village homes and began a clothing business, including weaving and, for quite some time, silk production. All these activities were still going strong into the late 1960s.

### **Beekeeping**

Over the years, she also tried all manner of potentially lucrative, though often short-lived, ventures, including keeping bees and selling honey.

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<sup>93</sup> Mabel F Knight. 1952. "Ajijic—The Gem of Jalisco", Pemex Travel Club magazine, 1 Feb 1952: 2-4.

<sup>94</sup> Anon. 1945. "Neill James in Mexico." *Modern Mexico*, October 1945, 22, 28.

<sup>95</sup> Anon. 1945. "Neill James in Mexico." *Modern Mexico*, October 1945, 22, 28.

Austrian cellist Alex von Mauch had tried keeping bees and selling honey in Ajijic back in the 1930s; Neil James tried again in the late 1950s, when she kept 12 colonies of honey bees for close to a decade.<sup>96</sup>

A series of postcard images of Ajijic taken by Dutch-Hawaiian photographer Jacques Van Belle, and used by James to publicize her store and assorted businesses, includes this image of a beekeeper (not James) attending her hives.



Fig 9. Beekeeping at Quinta Tzintzuntzan. Photo by Jacques Van Belle. c 1957.

## Real Estate

Her real estate efforts were presumably inspired by building her own home and realizing that lots of other foreigners might well want to settle in Ajijic. James became an informal rental agent, seeking inexpensive land on which she built small, modern cottages suitable to tourist or long-term rentals. Her nemesis in this activity—as it was for her weaving venture—was Helen Goodridge, who had moved to Ajijic with her young children in 1947 after many years in Mexico City. The two women could hardly have been more different. East coast met Dixie. Goodridge was fluent in Spanish and had highly influential connections in Mexico City, especially among the artistic elite; despite her travels, James had limited language skills and no real connections in Mexico. Goodridge was never long out of a relationship with a man and was married half-a-dozen times; James was a lesbian and her relationships tended to be rare and fleeting.

When Canadian photographer Leonard McCombe arrived in Ajijic in 1957 to document the allegedly indolent lifestyle of expatriate Americans at Lake Chapala, he photographed Neill James—who “writes books, builds and rents houses, runs a dress shop and organizes local charities”—using a metal detector to look for gold on a recently-acquired property.<sup>97</sup> Searching for

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<sup>96</sup> Anon. Ca 1978. “Philanthropist Leads an Eventful Life in Mexico.” Alumni magazine of Mississippi University for Women, 16-17.

<sup>97</sup> Anon. “Yanks Who Don’t Go Home. Expatriates Settle Down to Live and Loaf in Mexico.” Photos by Leonard McCombe. Life Magazine, 23 December 1957, 159-164.

buried treasure was one of her more offbeat pastimes. As an increasing number of village homes passed through her hands; James never failed to check for treasure before moving on. Over the years, James built, furnished and rented 14 village homes in total.<sup>98</sup>

Prior to the early 1960s, when the first specialist real estate firm was established in Ajijic, Goodridge and James shared the expatriate real estate market between them. James, not surprisingly, turned out to be far better at garnering publicity for herself. For example, a full-page article about Ajijic in a Long Beach paper in March 1962, profiling Ajijic as an "unspoiled paradise," reported that maid service was \$4 a week and that Neill James rented out "comfortable Mexican-style homes with a gas stove, refrigerator, and fireplace for \$65 a month."<sup>99</sup> By this time, Ajijic had a population of 2,326 including an estimated 300 Americans.<sup>100</sup>

### **Weaving cotton and silk**

The second strand to James' business activities was the manufacture of textile items, including clothing. Her attempt to introduce knitting had not lasted very long. The short-term promise of her "revival" of embroidered blouses had fizzled out when marketing problems reduced its appeal. Meantime, Helen Goodridge, with her husband, Mort Carl, had started a commercial looms business in 1950 which was attracting attention.

While James could not compete directly with their venture, she could, and did, begin to teach local women, from June 1952, how to use smaller hand looms to weave small cotton and wool items such as women's blouses and scarves.<sup>101</sup> Whereas Goodridge employed only men as weavers (very much the tradition in this part of Mexico), James's workforce was almost entirely female, in line with indigenous practice in southern Mexico.

It had already occurred to James that some of the same weaving techniques could be used to produce items made from silk and that silk items could be sold for premium prices... if only a steady supply of silk was readily available. James quickly hatched a plan to introduce sericulture (silk production), a process she had seen in Japan and written about in one of her early travel books. She needed to source not just silkworm eggs but also the silkworm caterpillar's essential diet of mulberry leaves.

James seems to have been completely unaware that the Chapala area, like many other parts of Mexico, had once had native silkworms. For example, when a nationwide appeal was made for silkworms in 1885, one response (from Guadalajara) indicated that "in Chapala there are no longer any wild silkworms because they lived on the guayaba trees that have been cut down."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Anon. Ca 1978. "Philanthropist Leads an Eventful Life in Mexico." Alumni magazine of Mississippi University for Women, 16-17.

<sup>99</sup> Irma McCall. "Ajijic-Paradise Under the Mexican Sun." Independent Press-Telegram (Long Beach, California), 11 March 1962, 82.

<sup>100</sup> Rex and Catherine Magee. 1962. "Petticoated Benefactress: State Woman is First Lady of Sleepy Mexican Village." Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, Miss.), 20 Feb 1962, 7.

<sup>101</sup> Neill James' own notes on the history of her silk making project. LCSNJA.

<sup>102</sup> Rebeca Vanesa García Corzo. 2012. "Entramados de la seda en México a fines del siglo XIX y principios del XX." PhD Thesis (History, Social analysis etc), Universidad de Oviedo, Spain, 292; footnote 865.

A few days before Christmas 1950, James acquired 25 mulberry trees from Dr Varton Osigian, a world-renowned silk expert living in Mexico City,<sup>103</sup> and planted them in her garden as a test. The following April, she planted a further 80 trees. In September she tried to hatch some silk eggs brought from Mexico City. In November, Dr. Osigian visited Ajijic, bringing with him some silk worms that were about to make cocoons. On 22 November 1951 the "first cocoon ever spun in Ajijic" (a slight exaggeration)<sup>104</sup> "appeared on a piece of dry asparagus stick in a jar".<sup>105</sup> The good doctor held an open meeting two evenings later in the plaza to explain the industry's potential for helping village residents. The mulberry trees were thriving. In just eight months, a single tree (stripped) yielded 8.5 kg of leaves.



Fig 10. Girl examining silk. c 1955. Photographer unknown.

In December 1951, James wrote excitedly to a friend in Wyoming that "My silk caterpillars grow apace. If this silk project is a success, ours will be the richest village in Mexico in 5 years. Can't wait to see!! I have unwound one silk and it is very fine."<sup>106</sup>

In February 1952, James hired Consuela Flores as her first "silk employee." Flores' initial monthly salary was \$65 pesos (US\$7.70), raised to \$90 (US\$11.00) in August 1953. Working alongside Flores with the silkworms and silk

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<sup>103</sup> Dr Varton Kriekor Osigina came from an Armenian family of silk experts and had perfected a process whereby silkworms spun silk in any one of eighteen distinct shades. (Popular Science, November 1920).

<sup>104</sup> Any claim that James introduced sericulture to Mexico, or to Ajijic, is spurious. See Rebeca Vanesa García Corzo's PhD Thesis and her 2016 article "Intentos de implementación de la industria de la seda en la Nueva España en el siglo XVIII." *Fronteras de la Historia*, v 21 #1, (Jan-Jun 2016), Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, Bogotá, Colombia, 118-144.

<sup>105</sup> These details come from extensive notes kept by Neill James on her silk-making project. The notes, and several related photographs, are in the LCSNJA.

<sup>106</sup> Letter from Neill James (Ajijic) to Hazel Kerper (Cody, Wyoming) dated 31 December 1951. NJA of the LCS.



spinning in October 1952 were Digna Padilla, Anita Padilla, Antonio Ramos and Venancio Cárdenas.<sup>107</sup> James was also employing two brick masons, three weavers and a girl to spin the delicate silk thread, as well as her domestic staff of two women doing the washing, two gardeners, a maid and a housekeeper.

James acquired more mulberry trees and continued to experiment with different kinds of silkworm and sericulture techniques. Among the cocoons harvested in November 1952 were some Golden Chinese that "produce a most beautiful rich golden thread." James eventually brought in hundreds of white mulberry (*Mora alba*) trees,<sup>108</sup> from Uruapan in Michoacán, and planted as many as she could in her own garden, offering others free to families around the village.

Whereas she had purchased her first silkworm eggs, she now developed a self-sustaining system in which she retained and hatched eggs laid by her own adult butterflies each season.

In December 1953 she was proud to be invited to take part in the "Primera Gran Feria de Jalisco," held in the Antigua Central Camionera in Guadalajara. James' well-decorated booth attracted lots of interest from the viewing public and a thank-you letter signed by the organizer of the event, businessman Jorge Dipp Murad.<sup>109</sup>

Scaling up silk production was not without its challenges. In the mid-1950s, James built a specialist silk farm to house up to 60,000 silk worms at a time, all fed on fresh mulberry leaves for about 40 days before making cocoons and, 18 days later, hatching out as butterflies. James collected the eggs the adult butterflies laid and stored them in her refrigerator for up to a year until the time was right for the next batch of worms.<sup>110</sup>

Some batches were trouble-free. In April 1954, James reported that she had harvested 1292 cocoons weighing 1.57 kg. In August, however, a large proportion of the next batch of silk worms had a "horrible death" when they were fed on mulberry leaves that were too close to some olive trees that had been sprayed two months previously with clordane and nicotine (widely used at the time but now banned) as protection against a plague. Two months of rain since the spraying had done nothing to diminish the potency of the pesticides.<sup>111</sup>

In 1960 James wrote to "El Director, Museo Nacional De Cosas Regional" (sic),<sup>112</sup> in Mexico City, enclosing information about natural silk, samples of material spun and woven in Ajijic and a price list. A silk blouse with hand embroidery was \$85 pesos, a rebozo of natural silk, hand made in Ajijic, \$125. James also quoted for "original clothes made in Ajijic": girl's dress \$75, girl's blouse \$17, Boy's shirt \$25 and woman blouse \$30. Finally, James

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<sup>107</sup> Handwritten list of salaries paid to her employees in James' notebook in LCSNJA.

<sup>108</sup> The white mulberry (*Morus alba*); mora blanca in Mexico.

<sup>109</sup> This letter, dated 11 January 1954 and promising that a diploma is being sent separately, is in the LCSNJA.

<sup>110</sup> Mabel F Knight. "The Silkworm returns to Mexico". *Mexican American Review* (Mexico City: American Chamber of Commerce), Vol XXIII #8 (August 1955) 16, 33.

<sup>111</sup> Entry dated 31 August 1954 in James' notes about her silk business. LCSNJA.

<sup>112</sup> This refers to "El Museo Nacional de Artes e Industrias Populares", located at the time in the former Corpus Christi Church in downtown Mexico City.

offered three woodcut prints of the silk industry in Ajijic at \$10 each.<sup>113</sup> These were the work of American artist Raphael Greno and included depictions of unraveling the cocoons and spinning the silk thread.<sup>114</sup>

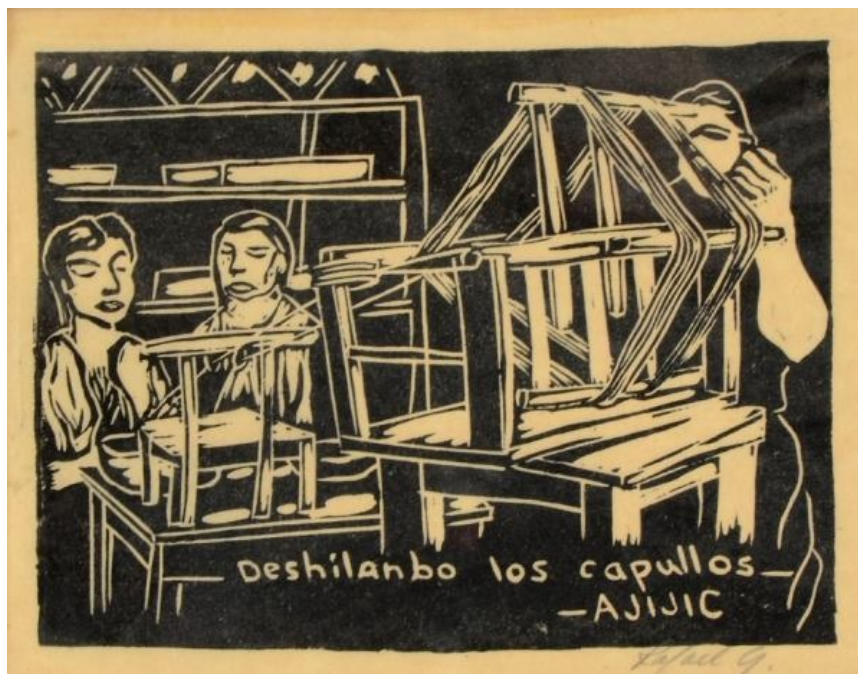


Fig 11. Raphael Greno. *Deshilando los capullos* (unraveling the cocoons). Undated woodblock print.

Two years later, in 1962, James successfully applied for her silk business to be granted a 10-year exemption from state and municipal taxes on manufacturing and real estate.<sup>115</sup> Her silk industry was in full flow at this time and garnering publicity far and wide. One U.S. paper included photographs of silkworm cocoons and girls working silk,<sup>116</sup> and another offered a detailed description of the processes involved.<sup>117</sup> Silk blouses were especially popular and commanded a much higher price than their cotton equivalents. Silk rebozos also sold well. One report claimed that visiting Japanese silk experts pronounced the Ajijic silk supreme in the world.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Letter dated 22 May 1960 from James (Ajijic) to the director of the "Museo Nacional de Cosas Regional" (Mexico City); copy in LCSNJA.

<sup>114</sup> Raphael Greno (1909-1982) and his wife, Violet, lived in Ajijic in the 1970s: <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=8647>. James' letter shows their connection to Ajijic began earlier. The third woodblock may be Greno's portrait of Neill James with parrots and typewriter.

<sup>115</sup> *El Estado de Jalisco* (Periodico Oficial del Estado), 20 December 1962, Tomo CCXVIII, Num 3, 29.

<sup>116</sup> Irma McCall. "Ajijic-Paradise Under the Mexican Sun." *Independent Press-Telegram* (Long Beach, California), 11 March 1962, 82.

<sup>117</sup> Rex and Catherine Magee. 1962. "Petticoated Benefactress: State Woman is First Lady of Sleepy Mexican Village." *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), 20 Feb 1962, 7.

<sup>118</sup> Ruth Netherton. 1977. "More about the Way it Was". (Laguna Chapálac), *Guadalajara Reporter*, 3 September 1977, 17-18.

Such optimistic external validation may have given James the confidence to spend about \$2000 (\$24,206 MN) to purchase a brand new, bright red, Volkswagen Bug in 1964, complete with white-walled tires, radio and antenna.<sup>119</sup>

The following year, writing to a California silk enthusiast, James lamented the fact that she had failed to interest the local people in planting mulberry trees or setting up their own silk business:

"Not a single Ajijican was willing to abandon his milpa (which grew food for family, corn, beans) and set our established mulberry trees free for asking. A padre came from a distant village to learn to grow silk and spent two weeks with me. I gave away all my trees to be planted on golf course and in parks. A couple of farmers took some as food for animals."<sup>120</sup>

Despite the tax breaks, publicity and her own hard work, long-term financial success proved to be elusive. After 16 years of efforts, James conceded defeat. A variety of alternative explanations have been offered for why the silk industry flopped, ranging from the impatience of the local workforce to see quick results, a cold winter that killed the silkworms,<sup>121</sup> a lack of profitability,<sup>122</sup> problems with labor unions,<sup>123</sup> and a government campaign spraying pesticides to prevent malaria.<sup>124</sup> While the last-named is quite probable (a similar campaign in Oaxaca in the 1950s certainly wrought havoc in that state's silk industry),<sup>125</sup> James herself put the blame on a single employee. Replying to a silk enthusiast in California to thank him for an unexpected gift of some silk eggs, she wrote that:

"My trouble was that the girl whom I taught all about silk ... and who took care of it for 15 years decided to leave my employ. Under Mexican law, if I discharge her I have to pay her 3 months salary for every year in which she has worked for me making a total of 45 months salary. Naturally I wouldn't dream of firing her. In desperation she finally left me without a day's notice and ran off with a lover. Last year when I went to the refrigerator to get eggs out for a new crop of silk, THERE WERE NONE! She had not saved a single egg! I had both the golden cocoons and the white Bagdad and could take care of half a million silk worms."<sup>126</sup>

James later admitted to a visiting journalist that "The silk I produced by

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<sup>119</sup> The original receipt is in the LCS Neill James archive. It was referenced by LCS archivist Marianne O'Halloran in the LCS newsletter for August 2016, 3.

<sup>120</sup> Letter dated 3 January 1965 from James (Ajijic) to Mr Leong (Los Angeles). LCSNJA.

<sup>121</sup> Michael Hargraves. *Lake Chapala: A literary Survey*.

<sup>122</sup> Ruth Netherton. 1977. "More about the Way it Was". (Laguna Chapálac), Guadalajara Reporter, 3 September 1977, 17-18.

<sup>123</sup> June Summers. 1992. "Happy 97th Birthday, Neill James." Chapala Riviera Guide, Vol 3 #3.

<sup>124</sup> Stephen Banks. Kokio, 205.

<sup>125</sup> Leslie Grace. 2004. "460 Years of Silk in Oaxaca, Mexico." Textile Society of America 9th Biennial Symposium (2004). Univ. Nebraska-Digital Commons, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/482/> [21 November 2018]

<sup>126</sup> Letter dated 8 March 1968 from James (Ajijic) to Bill Johns (Downey, California). LCSNJA.

hand cost me twice as much as I sold it for."<sup>127</sup>

James quietly abandoned her silk-filled ambitions and her workforce went back to weaving cotton and wool.

### Gift and clothing store

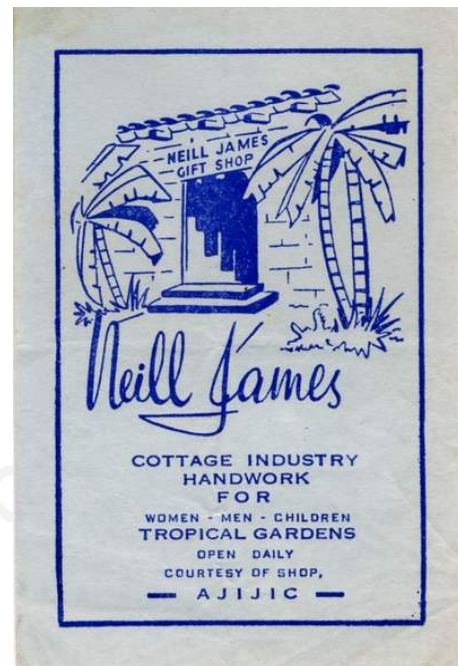
The longest-running strand of James' business activities was running a small store out of her own home, selling items made in Ajijic as well as handicrafts from elsewhere. This store was certainly in existence by 1949 when a Mrs Shloss from Des Moines purchased a hand-embroidered blouse there.<sup>128</sup>

The gift shop labels proudly proclaimed "Neill James: Cottage Industry Handwork for Women, Men, Children. Tropical Gardens. Open Daily" below a sketch of the shop entrance.

Veteran tour guide writer, James Norman, who authored later editions of *Terry's Guide to Mexico*, was less than impressed with the store. He noted how, in comparison to the locally embroidered blouses at Casa Mexicana, run by weaver Alfredo Villaseñor: "Quinta Tzintzuntzan is a larger, louder, Jones Beach kind of shop run by ex-author Neill James. I was not particularly stirred by the haphazard abundance of embroidery, the informal earring apparel and similar items. A block away in the tiny Casa Ajijic on Marcos Castellanos 235, I found much more appealing embroidery on table linens, blouses and skirts."<sup>129</sup>

Among the challenges James faced in running her multiple business ventures was how to retain a loyal workforce while minimizing her expenses as regards taxes and benefits. James was apparently quite creative in her approach to legal and accounting issues. For example, she allegedly insisted on some occasions that her helpers were not direct employees but members of a co-operative. Mexican labor laws are very protective of workers and labor unions tend to win through in the end. Mexican sociologist Francisco Talavera was not being complimentary when he described James as a typical combination of capitalist and philanthropist.<sup>130</sup>

James' labor troubles began in 1971 when Miguel Rojas, the leader of the Chapala branch of the all-powerful union confederation CROC (Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos), visited James' store and unionized her workforce. Two years later, on 26 October 1973, James fired Rosario



<sup>127</sup> Anon. Ca 1978. "Philanthropist Leads an Eventful Life in Mexico." Alumni magazine of Mississippi University for Women, 16-17.

<sup>128</sup> The Des Moines Register, Iowa, 13 Feb 1949, 36.

<sup>129</sup> James Norman. 1959. In Mexico. Where to Look, How to Buy Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts. New York: William Morrow, 241-242.

<sup>130</sup> Francisco Talavera Salgado. 1982. Lago Chapala, turismo Residencial y Campesinado. Mexico City: INAH.

Morales, the sole operator of her gift shop, for "being one hour late every day" and for "robbing the till."<sup>131</sup>

Morales refused James' offer of severance pay and sought the help of Rojas and CROC. Rojas visited James, ordered her to close the shop and then, according to James, persuaded her two gardeners to down tools. To bolster the case against James he convinced two of the 80 or so women who did piecework embroidery that they were really full-time employees and therefore owed vacation pay and overtime.



Fig 12. Entrance to Neill James' hand looms and store, Quinta Tzintzuntzan, c 1957. Photo by Jacques Van Belle.

Recognizing that the odds were stacked against her, James fought back as best she could, enlisting the help of supposedly influential friends in Mexico City. She was able to reopen her shop provided no one else worked there. James lived in perpetual fear. She explained, in a letter to a friend that "The *presidente* of Chapala sent two policemen to guard my place at night. They say they are watching the day too. Am so happy to have them as have had *molestaciones*."<sup>132</sup>

CROC stepped up the pressure in 1974 by launching five cases in the labor conciliation court against James on behalf of five former workers: the shop girl, the two gardeners and two piecework embroiderers.<sup>133</sup> Conveniently for CROC, the court never notified James of the cases against her until after the hearings had concluded. The total indemnification against James, having lost

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<sup>131</sup> Letter from NJ (Ajijic), dated 26 March 1974, to Antonio Guzmán Rodríguez, Director, Mexican Government Tourism Department in Washington DC. Copy is in LCSNJA.

<sup>132</sup> Letter dated 12 December 1973 from NJ (Ajijic) to Raymond \_\_ (USA). (LCSNJA)

<sup>133</sup> James names the five individuals, in letters in LCSNJA as Reyes Villanueva, Isabel Rojas, Rosario Morales Castilla, Otilio Flores and Celedonia Flores.

all five cases, was \$153,876 pesos (US\$12,310).

Her lawyer was eventually able to bargain this amount down to \$100,000. Even though James paid up immediately, she was seriously worried that the other 78 or so piecework embroiderers might follow suit in demanding indemnity for past work. She estimated that in the worst case scenario she could be forced to find almost \$3,000,000 pesos (US\$240,000) to settle with all potential claimants.<sup>134</sup>

Fortunately for James, CROC did not file any further claims. Even so, as James bemoaned to the director of the Mexican Tourism Department in Washington, DC, "The CROC Syndicate headed by Miguel Rojas killed a thriving tourist industry and were the cause of the Tropical Gardens being closed."

By the end of 1974, James had closed her handlooms business, the enterprising embroidery piecework and her tourist shop. A small display advertisement in *El Informador* in November 1974 announced that, following her retirement, the store and tropical gardens had closed to the public.<sup>135</sup>

## 9. Neill James the philanthropist

James is best remembered today for her many positive contributions to the health and education of her adopted community. In the 1940s, Chapala and San Antonio Tlayacapan had electricity, but Ajijic did not, making it almost impossible to preserve perishable food items. Ice was brought in daily from Guadalajara. By the time it arrived in the afternoon, it was already half-melted.

Local lore (impossible to verify) is that James wanted to open her own ice factory to supply the village (shades of her previous lives in Hawaii and Florida). She cajoled villagers into action, pressured the mayor of Chapala, and argued for the electricity system to be extended to Ajijic. Within months, the poles and wires were up, supplying power, albeit intermittently in those early years. As an ancillary benefit, the poles could be used to string telephone lines to Ajijic, thereby reducing the village's total dependence on a single phone in the post office.

Every Christmas, James (later ably assisted by her good friend Iona Kupiec) held an open-house on Christmas Eve at her home, Quinta Tzintzuntzan, serving eggnog and fruitcake to all visitors, young and old alike.<sup>136</sup> This quickly became an established tradition.

James was always determined to preserve her own personal little slice of heaven. For instance, in 1968, she was one of the signatories of an open letter in the press calling on President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz to order an immediate halt to work building a lakefront promenade (*malecón*) between existing properties and the beach. If allowed to continue, it would, wrote the authors, "destroy the charm of a village where fishermen's nets lend a native character, adding to the picturesqueness of horses being ridden to and fro. A malecón will destroy the natural charm of the beach" and cause "tourists to lose interest in Ajijic." It appealed for help to preserve the natural beauty

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<sup>134</sup> Letter dated 22 May 1974 from NJ (Ajijic) to Antonio Guzmán Rodríguez, Director, Mexican Government Tourism Department in Washington DC. Copy in LCSNJA.

<sup>135</sup> *El Informador*, 20 November 1974, 2-C.

<sup>136</sup> For example, in 1964: *Guadalajara Reporter*, 24 Dec 1964.

of Ajijic.<sup>137</sup>

Exactly fifty years on, in 2018, the news that permits have been granted for a subdivision on the wooded mountain slopes above Ajijic, close to the Tepalo waterfalls, has given rise to similar public protests about preserving the village's natural beauty.<sup>138</sup>

Having helped educate the children of her domestic helpers from the very beginning, James broadened her scope in the 1950s to open the area's first public library (biblioteca pública), principally aimed at serving the needs of the local children.

### **Libraries**

The first public library for children in Ajijic opened in about 1953 in a room, donated for the purpose, on Ocampo near Serna's grocery store. James persuaded the *municipio* to part with funds for books and arranged for Angelita Aldana Padilla to oversee its activities.



Fig 14. Children's Art Class, Ajijic. c 1957. Photo by Leonard McCombe.

As their reward for reading and studying, students were offered the incentive of free art supplies and classes. This humble beginning led, after many twists and turns, to the justly-praised Children's Art Program, now managed by the Lake Chapala Society, that has helped nurture the talents of so many fine local artists. James arranged scholarships, enabling several of the most talented artists, starting with Javier Zaragoza and Florentino Padilla, to

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<sup>137</sup> El Informador, 8 Aug. 1968, 5-A. The other foreign signatories included Helen Kirtland, Dickinson Bishop and Sally P. Kingsbury; Mexican signatories included Carlos Gómez Arias, Ma. Guadalupe A. De Segura, Ma. Guadalupe Avila V. and Guillermo Valdés C.

<sup>138</sup> Dale Hoyt Palfrey. "Lakeside's new guardians: natural resource defense group takes shape." Guadalajara Reporter, 11 October 2018.

attend art school at the Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende.<sup>139</sup>

The idea of providing a library for children had been suggested by George B. Smith of Los Angeles, who wrote to James in April 1952:

"I used to send books to the Goodridge children who are now at school in New Jersey, so I understand. I have some nice books on hand, mostly children, a few good adult volumes - - I thought that it might be a good idea to establish a little library of some sort, especially for children - - if you or some one would be able to take charge of it. I will send books from time to time in both English (mostly) and some in Spanish..."<sup>140</sup>

Apparently, Smith had not realized that the books he had sent to the Goodridge children were already in use as an informal library. As Katie Goodridge Ingram, one of the children, recalls with gratitude, their mother (Helen Kirtland Goodridge) "created a small library across the street from our house and a variety of visiting children took books home and brought them back."<sup>141</sup>

In 1973, the original one-room library on Ocampo was relocated to premises rented for \$200 pesos a month from Aurelia Vega at Calle Constitucion #41. A grand re-opening of the "New Free Ajijic Library", with separate spaces for books and painting, was held there on 7 July 1973. James continued to pay the electricity bills, the salary of an art teacher and provide all the necessary art materials; the Junta de Agua Potable waived the water bill.<sup>142</sup>

Some years earlier, James had opened a second library, with its own supervisor, in a building she owned near Seis Esquinas, to serve children who lived on the western outskirts of the village. This building was known as La Colmena (The Beehive). After the supervisor left, the running of the library was turned over to some well-meaning teenagers. Sadly, the library was then badly vandalized; all remaining books and supplies were moved to the library on Calle Constitucion.

Running a public library in rented facilities was not without its problems. For example, in 1975, the decision by Aurelia Vega, the owner of the Calle Constitucion building, to try to repossess the property led to an acrimonious dispute that threatened to cause a deep rift in the village. By all accounts, in the end, the library remained here for another decade until it was relocated to a building on Neill James' own property, at Calle 16 de Septiembre #16, in 1984.<sup>143</sup> Here, the books joined the small children's collection of the Lake Chapala Society which had relocated all its activities, including its own library, here the previous year.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Letter, 19 Dec. 1959, from James (Ajijic) to Stirling Dickinson (director, art school in San Miguel) asking for a first report on the progress of 'Favier Zaragossa' and if 'Florentino Padillo' could start classes there in January. LCSNJA.

<sup>140</sup> Letter dated 7 April 1952 from George B. Smith (Los Angeles, California) to Neill James (Ajijic). LCSNJA.

<sup>141</sup> KGI, personal communication, July 2019.

<sup>142</sup> Various unpublished documents in LCSNJA.

<sup>143</sup> Andres Ivon. 1984. "New Mexican Library in Ajijic. Building donated by Miss Neill James", *Welcome*, 30 March 1984, 4.

<sup>144</sup> The Lake Chapala Society had started a children's library in Chapala (the first library in that town) in the mid-1950s at the premises of its adult library at Francisco I. Madero Nte 248. From December 1975, the children's section was located in its own dedicated space at Zaragoza #334. (Guadalajara Reporter, 6 December 1975, 20.)



## **Jardín del Arte (Garden of Art)**

After Neill James closed her store and retired in 1974, the wonderful gardens of her home—Quinta Tzintzuntzan—had no longer been open to the public. But, in 1977, James agreed that a new artists' group—the Young Painters of Ajijic (Jovenes Pintores de Ajijic)—could use her grounds every Sunday afternoon to exhibit and sell their work. Many of the young artists in this Jardín del Arte had benefited from the free Childrens Art Program classes at the libraries started by James. The members of Young Artists included organizer Dionicio Morales López, Antonio López Vega, Daniel Palma Pérez, Julián Pulido Pedrosa, José Manuel Castañeda, Alejandro Martínez and Victoria Corona.

Antonio Cárdenas Perales and Victor Romero also exhibited at the group's first garden show on Sunday 28 August 1977, with entertainment provided by the Folkloric Dance Group of Ajijic and the wind music group of Luis López. Jardín del Arte shows were a regular weekly event for some time. In March the following year, the group organized what was billed as Ajijic's "first annual cultural week" in the gardens, with art exhibits, guitar concerts, ballet recitals, and a stage play. Sadly, plans for a repeat event in 1979 never worked out. The Young Painters Group was the forerunner of the Asociación de Artistas de Ajijic.<sup>145</sup>

## **Health Center**

In 1977, James donated 1083 square meters of land, on which she had built three rental units (Casa Oro, Casa Bambú and Casa Xalasuichil), to be used as the village's first Health Center (Centro de Salud). The property was at Seis Esquinas, a few blocks west of the village plaza. Casa Oro, the largest of the three units, was converted into an 8-bed clinic. The adjacent unit, Casa Bambú, became the doctor's office with lecture rooms, while Casa Xalasuichil was used as a residence for two nurses.<sup>146</sup>

The 8-bed clinic opened in May 1977, supported by state and federal funding that provided three doctors, all graduates of the University of Guadalajara: Dr Jorge Ibarra, a native of Ajijic, who was the clinic's administrator, Dr Salvador Pérez, a gynaecologist, and Dr Helena Hermosillo, a pediatrician. The clinic offered free family planning and was equipped to handle minor surgeries.<sup>147</sup> It was accepting patients even before a phone line was installed.

A station wagon, donated by a New Yorker, Alice Pariaplano, was converted in California into an ambulance for the clinic.<sup>148</sup> It arrived a few months later, together with adjustable hospital beds, adjustable examination tables and assorted operating room equipment donated by Riverside Hospital in Studio City.<sup>149</sup>

With the aid of numerous local and American volunteers, James helped ensure that the plan remained on track. As local columnist Ruth Netherton wrote at

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<sup>145</sup> Guadalajara Reporter, 13 August 1977, 10 September 1977, 8 April 1978. <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=8163> My thanks to Dionicio Morales and Antonio López Vega for sharing their memories of this group.

<sup>146</sup> Anon. Ca 1978. "Philanthropist Leads an Eventful Life in Mexico." Alumni magazine of Mississippi University for Women, 16-17.

<sup>147</sup> Guadalajara Reporter, 21 May 1977, 17.

<sup>148</sup> Guadalajara Reporter, 21 May 1977, 17.

<sup>149</sup> Valley News, Van Nuys, California, 27 May 1977, 16.

the time, benefactress Neill James "rises above petty local attempts to embroil her in legal squabbles and goes on doing good."<sup>150</sup> The property (now Ocampo #90) also houses the DIF day care and kindergarten.

Even so, an update on the Health Center a year later acknowledged that the initial burst of good intentions and enthusiasm had not achieved lasting results. Fortunately, further government funding and a fresh group of volunteers had put the project back on track.<sup>151</sup>

Notes in her personal papers of the time show that James was actively trying to form a group of like-minded individuals to undertake "the glamorization of Ajijic," to improve the village's appearance. James suggested that help for the project be sought from SEA, the Students of Ajijic. Her list of suggestions included placing information signs to explain the names of each of the central streets, to write "Aztec maxima" on street walls, and to persuade property owners to paint Mexican scenes on exterior walls.<sup>152</sup>

Though not implemented immediately, the last of her glamorization ideas was the genesis of the remarkable variety of mural art now on display in Ajijic. The earliest classes in Ajijic devoted to teaching students how to make murals for their homes were held in May 1977 by José Manuel Castaneda, a graduate of childhood art classes in Ajijic who had then studied at the Art Institute in San Miguel de Allende. He began teaching children at the Biblioteca whenever he was in Ajijic, offering regular art classes on Saturdays and a special class about making murals on Sundays.<sup>153</sup>

## 10. Neill James in retirement

James had undertaken a round-the-world trip in 1971, a few years before retiring. In 1977, now fully retired, she traveled to the Orient again, accompanied by a friend, Dorothy Early, and with a group of 12 Mexicans from Mexico City.<sup>154</sup> In his novel, Banks suggests that this was a late reward for her years of government service as a spy and that a suitable excuse was invented, offering her a working-holiday to Hawaii, Japan, China, Thailand and the Philippines to carry some supposedly important document.

When she returned to Ajijic, one of her close friends, Iona Kupiec (an equally extraordinary character in her own right), gave the Petticoat Vagabond a fun and fancy brunch, featuring festive Far East cuisine served by hostesses dressed in the appropriate national costumes.<sup>155</sup> The guests included Gustel Foust and Betty Kuzell.

In fact, James had amassed quite a nest egg from her Ajijic property dealings, boosted by the high interest rates available in Mexico, and could easily afford the trip as a post-retirement present to herself. She undertook two more international trips in the 1980s, one to Ecuador and the Galapagos

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<sup>150</sup> Ruth Netherton. 1977. "More about the Way it Was". (Laguna Chapálac), Guadalajara Reporter, 3 September 1977, 17-18.

<sup>151</sup> Guadalajara Reporter, 2 Sep 1978, 14.

<sup>152</sup> Neill James. 1977. Unpublished notes titled "Ajijic", dated 1977, LCSNJA.

<sup>153</sup> Neill James. 1977. Unpublished notes entitled "Ajijic", dated 1977, LCSNJA.

<sup>154</sup> Anon. Ca 1978. "Philanthropist Leads an Eventful Life in Mexico." Alumni magazine of Mississippi University for Women, 16-17.

<sup>155</sup> Guadalajara Reporter, 10 Dec 1977, 19.

Islands (thereby finally adding South America to her travels), and the second to the Panama Canal and the Caribbean Islands.



Fig 15. Neill James serving guests at Quinta Tzintzuntzan, c 1957. Photo by Jacques Van Belle.

In 1983, James offered to let the Lake Chapala Society use part of her Quinta Tzintzuntzan property rent-free for five years, provided it took over running the Ajijic children's library located there.<sup>156</sup>

James's biography as an author had been included in the 1950-51 edition of *Who's Who in America*. In the early 1980s, she received a series of invitations to submit her entry for inclusion in *The International Who's Who of Intellectuals* and similar volumes published by the International Biographical Centre in the U.K. Proud of having been 'selected', James sent the IBC significant sums of money for multiple copies of the published books, which she proudly gave to friends, without ever being aware that they were worthless, vanity press volumes.<sup>157</sup>

About a year after the Lake Chapala Society moved its office and library to Quinta Tzintzuntzan in October 1983, James suffered a stroke that severely impacted her memory and faculties. Her later correspondence became rambling and even incoherent. After 1989, she stopped sending letters, even to her sister Jane.<sup>158</sup>

The will James made, with Jane's help, in October 1986 left all her property

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<sup>156</sup> Guadalajara Reporter, 17 September 1983, 18.

<sup>157</sup> See WAScamNet. "International Biographical Centre." Some sites aptly call them "phone books with fake leather covers" or a "Who's Who of gullible people".

<sup>158</sup> Stephen Banks, *entre alia*.

and accounts to surviving nieces and nephews, with the exception of the library building which was bequeathed, with the ground beneath it and all its books, to the LCS, provided they maintained the children's library in perpetuity.

This was apparently not generous enough for the LCS, whose membership and services had grown rapidly during the 1980s. Perhaps not surprisingly, one faction within LCS had long coveted acquiring all 4500 square meters of James' property with its two brick houses, fish ponds and gardens.

Shortly after Jane, who had been managing James' financial affairs, lost her husband in 1989, she was contacted by former FBI undercover intelligence officer Arthur Melby, the newly-elected LCS President, proposing that LCS take care of all James' future day-to-day needs, and give her whatever support was needed for her to remain in her own home, in exchange for ownership of the entire property. For a mixture of motives, Jane, who had already declared she had no interest whatsoever in property in Mexico, accepted the proposal.



Fig 16. Neill James' former house. Photo by Jorge Varela Martínez Negrete.

Melby's own account of how this agreement came about is refreshingly blunt:

"At our first board meeting, I announced that we should convince Neill James to gift her entire property to the LCS in exchange for lifelong elder care. Miss Neill, now well into her 90's, was having a difficult time managing her own affairs and I felt that we could create a win-win situation for both her and us. Both Miss Neill and the board eagerly agreed and 34 years after its founding, the LCS had its own home."<sup>159</sup> None of her close friends believed that Neill James was in any fit state to sign any such agreement.

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<sup>159</sup> Arthur Melby. 2009. "History and Vision for the Lake Chapala Society". El Ojo del Lago, December 2009.

The legal title was transferred in January 1990<sup>160</sup> and the LCS orchestrated a campaign to ensure that James was recognized as a major benefactress of the village. James was named "Woman of the Century" and was the subject of numerous adulatory newspaper pieces. She was, quite rightly, awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1990. Homage was also paid to James by Ajijic's homegrown artistic community.

Yet, despite their stated love of James, the LCS board allegedly rejected a suggestion from Jane that she pay for her sister to have a television with satellite channels in her final years.<sup>161</sup> It also later dismantled James' small personal library. Thankfully, at least one interesting volume, signed by James, found its way from the discard stack outside the LCS Library to my own bookshelves.

James died on Saturday 8 October 1994, only three months shy of her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her ashes were interred at the base of a favorite tree in her beloved garden. Some twenty years later, a thoughtless remodeling of the garden disturbed her remains, causing offence to many who still remember her. The gardens today are but a pale shadow of what they were like when James was tending them, or how they looked after Alejandro Treviño's tasteful restoration in the early 1990s. The original plaque in LCS commemorating James mistakenly gave her birthday as 6 January, not 3 January.

As an authoress, the Petticoat Vagabond's final ignominy came posthumously when her copyright of *Dust on My Heart* was infringed, albeit possibly unknowingly. James had renewed copyright of the book in 1973, a renewal that under U.S. copyright law remains in effect until 2041.<sup>162</sup> Even so, the LCS published (and claimed copyright for) a re-issue of *Dust on My Heart*, printed in Guadalajara in 1997, barely three years after the author's death.

During her lifetime, Neill James played numerous roles, some more virtuous than others; she was many different things to many different people. Like Zara ("La Rusa") and other larger-than-life personalities who had chosen to settle in Ajijic, James was continually reshaping stories of her previous life, travels and experiences, leaving behind a confusing mix of facts and fantasy for would-be biographers to untangle.

Given her early career as a travel writer, it is only fitting that, in her honor, the Mississippi University for Women now awards at least five Neill James Memorial Scholarships each year (worth up to \$4000 each) to Creative Writing students.<sup>163</sup> First offered in 2007, these scholarships are funded with the proceeds from a charitable trust established by her sister Jane.<sup>164</sup>

Despite not having always been a member of the Lake Chapala Society (and certainly not a founder member), it was James' generosity that enabled the organization to move from Chapala to Ajijic at a time when it was struggling,

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<sup>160</sup> Lake Chapala Society. Undated. "History of the Lake Chapala Society." <https://lakechapalasociety.com/public/history.php> [21 November 2018]

<sup>161</sup> Stephen Banks. *Kokio*, 235.

<sup>162</sup> Neill James was granted copyright for *Dust on My heart* on 24 June 1946, and renewed it on 18 July 1973.

<sup>163</sup> Neill James Memorial Scholarships <https://www.muw.edu/case/llp/scholarships/neilljames> [17 November 2018]

<sup>164</sup> Anon. 2007. "Mississippi University for Women News" in *System Review* (Mississippi's Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning), vol 2 #30.

and desperately needed new premises. Were James still alive today, I suspect she would be the first to point out that her worst fears from years ago have been realized, that Ajijic—her chosen Paradise—is now visibly suffering under the strain of too many visitors.

A legend in her own lifetime, Neill James loved Mexico and was especially keen to improve the opportunities for its children and young people. She helped initiate Ajijic's transformation into a center for the visual arts. Whatever her flaws as an entrepreneurial capitalist, she was a committed philanthropist: her persistence was instrumental in bringing electricity, libraries and a health clinic to Ajijic.

But what was it about Ajijic that she found so irresistible? After living only five years in the village, she expressed its appeal:

"Perhaps the real charm of the place lies in the people themselves who treat you in a friendly spirit and accept you as you are, or, as you've always imagined yourself, be it a Russian princess, titled Englishman, a baroness, famous psychiatrist, great painter or simple writer. No one checks your story."<sup>165</sup>

If you have the opportunity to explore the grounds of the Lake Chapala Society, take a moment to remember Neill James, to consider her need for adventure, her struggles to overcome adversity, her ability to constantly reinvent herself to enjoy life to the full, and on the extraordinary changes—many not necessarily for the better—that Ajijic has witnessed since she first set foot here in 1943.

Given her amazing accomplishments and the legacy she left Ajijic, there is no possible need to embellish the story of Neill James, one of Lakeside's most truly colorful, memorable and enterprising characters of all time.

Note: This document was the basis for the various chapters relating to Neill James in *Foreign Footprints in Ajijic: Decades of Change in a Mexican Village*.

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<sup>165</sup> Neill James. Unpublished manuscript entitled "Mexican Story", dated 26 October 1948, in LCSNJA.