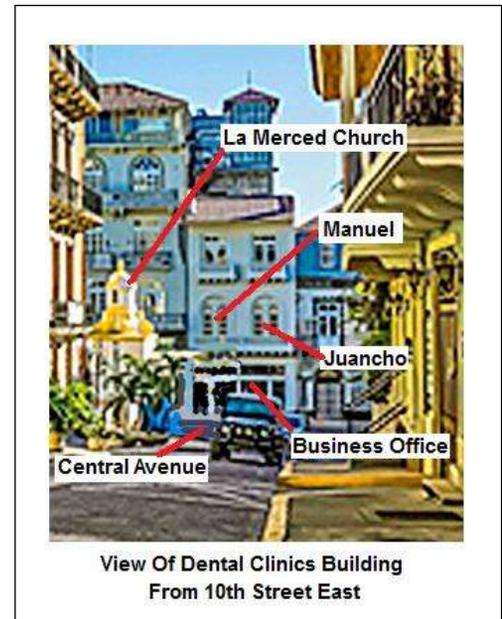


## A Grinding Never Forgotten

It has been 63 years since I last visited the place, but in those years I have never forgotten the period of 13 years during which Dr. Juan "Juancho" Diaz, DDS, worked on my teeth. He was such nice man I really regret that my memories of time spent in his clinic are not pleasant ones.

My visits to "Juancho", as we all knew him, began when I started growing my permanent teeth. Prior to that time, my uncle Lucho Azcarraga, was the official baby tooth remover. Working with string and a tooth pick, with which he used to help locate the string in the proper place, he would tie up the tooth and, with a quick jerk, he would have it out. The waiting with the mouth wide open while he did the tying was the worst part. When the permanent teeth began to come in, it was time for Juancho to take over. He did have to remove a couple of baby molars and I clearly recall my mother telling to keep still by grabbing the arms of the chair as tightly as possible. This was the same instruction repeated when time for work on cavities came around. You may recall that pain control had not been introduced yet in Panama until the 1950s. At least, by 1952, Juancho was not using them. Thus, a visit to the dentist was almost as bad as having an appointment with torture.



First came entering the big door at street level, next to a business office. Immediately I became aware of a long flight of stairs to the second floor some 16 feet above. The stairs were wide, of dark wood and seemed to never end. At the top of the stairs, one veered to the right and entered the main waiting room. The soft noise of the fan as it turned through the air is still in my memory cells. And it made the room uncomfortably cold (most likely the fear rather than the fan was responsible for this cold). The room seemed to be poor lighted in spite of the four ugly lamps sticking out under the fan. There was a table in the middle of the room with magazines which I never looked at, and wooden chairs around the room. A second visiting room, connected by a door, was behind the main room and it had a window opening into a patio on ground level. The only separation between Juancho's dental clinic and the waiting room was a pair of louvered swing doors such as one would find in a bar. Therefore, whatever was happening inside the dentist's clinic, was immediately known to those of us waiting our turn at the pain chair. My cousin Freddy Humbert once ran into the balcony and threatened to jump if they touched him.



You might remember these were the days of the slow RPM drills which were noisy, grinding and slow. No suction hoses then, so a lot of mouth-washing and spitting took place, a painful operation once the drill had gone into the nerve. Finally, when ready for the filling,

Juancho would pry my mouth open with some wire gadget and proceed to stuff gauze and cotton into my mouth by the baleful. Then came the filling and an interminable wait while it dried.

During that time, Juancho and his life-time assistant, Emilia, would stand by the window and, watching the people walk by, gossip about this person or that one as they spotted them down below. One has to remember that in those days, the now called Casco Viejo or Antiguo, was a thriving place full of residences and businesses, and the sidewalks always had a number of people going to and fro.

Once the dental work was completed and I was released from the chair, I always left the place as quickly as possible. It felt so good to get outside in the warm sun once again. Naturally, in my younger days, my mother always took me, as my father worked, but once I started Junior High School, I had to go by myself. That required taking a chiva at the Balboa Clubhouse. Most chivas were going to Rio Abajo, but some went to some other destination towards Cathedral Plaza. Those were the ones I would take and I would get off at Herrera Park behind Juancho's clinic building. I would walk across the park and up to Central Avenue and then into the torture chamber. Afterwards, depending on the time, I would walk to Cathedral Plaza, where my uncle David Azcarraga managed an office supply company, The Office Service, and ride home with him. If I was too early, I would catch the bus home. While in college, I had little dental work required and it was done in Henderson, Texas by Teddy Wolfe, the brother of Dr. Alfred Wolfe, husband of my aunt Raquel. He used pain killing injections!!! Still, I remember Juancho and Emilia fondly . . . with reservations.

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