



BARTERING BOOKS: DOING RESEARCH IN CENTRAL BRAZIL

Mary C. Karasch

Brazilians as well as Americans often ask how I can do historical research on the interior of Brazil, i.e., the modern states of Goiás and Tocantins, as they were over two hundred years ago, 1780 to 1835. When the city of Brasília was constructed in the state of Goiás between 1957 and 1960, people believed that it had been built in the middle of an uninhabited tropical rain forest. In fact, it was in the *cerrado* (savannah) and Brazilians have lived in the region since the 1720s. Amerindian settlement is even more ancient. I am working on only a small fifty-year period of the region's human history, which I have chosen due to the rich documentation dating from that time.

The reason for the survival of so many documents is in part due to gold and the desire of Portugal, Brazil's colonial power, to control the mines and collect the king's share of gold. Because of its mineral wealth, the region of Central Brazil, then called the Captaincy of Goiás, was the fifth richest captaincy of Brazil in the late colonial period. Now the state of Goiás, surrounding the federal district of Brasília, is one of the richest agro-pastoral states in Brazil. Its new capital of Goiânia houses one million people and ranks as the city in Brazil with the highest density of vehicles in the country—two for every inhabitant. Traffic is the major threat to one's safety rather than the beasts of the rain forest. Actually, there is no rain forest, since Goiânia is also located in the *cerrado*. The archives,

however, are in Goiânia, as well as in the colonial capital of the Captaincy of Goiás, formerly known as Vila Boa de Goiás and now called the City of Goiás. Documents on late colonial Goiás are either in Goiânia or in the City of Goiás. After Goiânia was founded in the 1930s, the state's documents, especially those of the nineteenth century, were stuffed onto trucks and hauled to the new state capital. The archivists in Goiânia have told me vivid stories of papers flying off the trucks as they headed down the dusty road to Goiânia. In the search for missing documents, one must always check both archives; and when something turns up missing, we can only imagine it lost in the move between the old and new capital cities. One of the principal difficulties in writing the history of the region is that documents do not remain in one place.

Another obstacle to research on the Captaincy of Goiás is the sheer size of the captaincy in the late colonial period—more than 900,000 square kilometers. The area that was once ruled by the Portuguese governor resident in Vila Boa included the modern states of Goiás, Tocantins in the north in the Amazon region, part of the state of Minas Gerais known as the Triângulo Mineiro, and border regions of other states. For this reason documents are spread out in many different cities: São Paulo; Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais; Belém at the mouth of the Amazon River; Cuiabá, Mato Grosso to the west, and Porto Nacional, Tocantins. The greatest collections of documents, however, are in diverse archives in Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon, Portugal. For this reason I have had to do research in many states and two different countries; actually three countries, since the Library of Congress and the Oliveira Lima Library in Washington, D.C. have many rare books on the region in the early nineteenth century. But here I do not want to focus on traditional archival research; instead, I would like to describe some of the more interesting characteristics of doing historical research on a remote region of Brazil in the late colonial period.

First, techniques of doing historical research in the interior involve lots of talking and bartering of research materials.

I have often felt like a nineteenth-century traveler or modern anthropologist taking *brindes* (gifts) to an Amerindian village. The Portuguese left detailed records of the *brindes* they gave the Xavante in the eighteenth century; and the anthropologist Odair Giralдин, who has worked among the Apinaje in the state of Tocantins, routinely takes *brindes* to the Apinaje when he visits them to conduct his anthropological research. Without giving gifts, he tells me, he would be unable to do any research, and his major research expenses involve non-academic types of gifts, such as bags of rice. Academics who go to the interior are also expected to bring gifts, i.e., their books, articles, and information on research in the United States. Because of the poor distribution of scholarly books throughout Brazil, the only way to obtain significant journal articles and books is to go to the places where they are printed, and even then the book may be out of print and unavailable in local bookstores or libraries. In the United States, one can easily order books from all over the country via internet sites, but in Brazil one attends conferences, gives lectures, and accepts in exchange *brindes* of books and articles from those in attendance.

There is also no convenient University of Michigan microfilm service for dissertations. Networking at conferences and giving lectures is fundamental to locating the most recent and important scholarship in Brazilian history. If a young scholar does not personally meet you, he or she is less likely to share research materials with you. Otherwise, research is difficult. In Brazil interpersonal relationships and face-to-face interactions are of primary importance in gaining access to cutting-edge research and essential secondary sources. They are also critical in locating archival documents.

To demonstrate further how this works, I will use examples from my recent trip to Brazil between mid June and mid August of 2000. My research trip began with a Brazilian Studies Association meeting in Recife, Pernambuco. Along with Professor David McCreery of Georgia State University, I helped organize a panel on frontiers and gave a paper on Vila Boa de Goiás. The meeting took place at the beach-front Sher-

aton Hotel with a palm-shaded swimming pool. The setting was lovely, the hotel comfortable, and the networking excellent. I met the new chair of the history department at the Federal University of Goiás and revived a friendship with another historian from the same department. At the book exhibit I purchased a book on Indian policy in Goiás that was unavailable in the book stores in Goiânia. Of course, I also had the opportunity to hear many papers, discuss mutual research interests, and see American and Brazilian friends from other universities, including John H. Welch, who used to teach here at Oakland. He is now at Barclays Bank in New York and travels frequently to Brazil. Among many topics we discussed was World Bank funding of hydroelectric projects in Brazil, specifically the Tocantins River projects to be discussed below.

Also attending the BRASA meeting was the anthropologist Odair Giraldin, who has been involved in protests—at least via internet—designed to call attention to the plight of the indigenous peoples whose lands are being flooded by the hydroelectric projects. He participated in our panel and invited David McCreery and me to speak at a regional historical meeting in the state of Tocantins. Because the meeting was being held in Araguaina in the north of Tocantins state, David and I were interested in visiting the north. David and his wife Angela, who is Brazilian, had already driven their car from Brasília to Recife across the backlands (*sertão*) of Bahia. Since David's research concerns the nineteenth-century trade in contraband cattle between Goiás and neighboring states, such as Bahia, he wanted to drive the old trade routes, now modern highways, to Bahia and Recife, Pernambuco, and then from Recife to Araguaina and Goiânia. Since I had always wanted to see the backlands of the Northeast, the three of us set off in a 1976 Volkswagen beetle, termed a *fusca* in Brazil, which was owned by Angela. Her major anxiety on our trip was that her beloved car would be stolen by the notorious bandits of the *sertão*, but we avoided all bandits—no one wanted to steal a 1976 *fusca*—and suffered only a flat tire on the outskirts of the small town of Carolina, conveniently near a gas station.

Our trip between Recife and Araguaina, Tocantins, took three and a half days of hard driving. Fortunately, David had honed his driving skills on the unpaved roads of Guatemala. He was expert at avoiding most pot holes and huge trucks, who waltzed from side to side of the road as they too evaded enormous potholes. The two-lane roads were generally paved but unrepaired from the damage heavy rains and trucks had done to the pavement. Because there was so much truck traffic, we had no difficulty in finding gas stations and truck stops for meals. Even the hotels were comfortable, and one had a large swimming pool. The trip was spectacular, especially in southern Maranhão, as we drew close to the Tocantins River, and the old river port of Carolina. The *chapadas* (tablelands like mesas in Arizona) were covered in green vegetation but appeared to be blue from a distance. Cattle grazed in pastures below the *chapadas*, and rich fields of soybeans and sorghum testified to the cash crops transported on trucks to Leopoldina for shipment via railroad to the port of Sao Luis, Maranhão, for export to the global markets. Buritis, a type of palm found in Maranhão, added to the tropical greenery, and birds of every type flew along the roads. Our objective had been to see the *sertão* and understand the physical geography of the region through which merchants, explorers, and Jesuit priests had passed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We were not prepared for the great beauty of the region, which surprised us with the extent of its greenness and bird life. The dry season with its fires and choking dust and smoke had not yet turned the *sertão* into a dust bowl. We heard from the truckers that it was also abundant in snakes, as they warned us not to travel at night, when the snakes crawled out on the pavement left warm by the sun. Just folklore? But in the early morning we did see the remains of snakes killed by trucks.

When we reached the Tocantins River at Carolina, we had to ferry the car across in the early morning and enjoyed the view of a blue *chapada* in the distance. The last part of the road was under construction, so we had to detour around the construction crews until we reached the paved section near

Araguaina. The country here too was beautiful, but our sense was that all this wild ranch country would completely change once the road was paved to Carolina, and the big rigs would cut over from the Belém-Brasília highway to drive the new road to Carolina and Imperatriz. We did not want to end our trip, but looked forward to seeing Araguaina. We expected it to be in a location as beautiful as those we had seen near Carolina, and we were anticipating seeing macaws, parrots, and toucans, not to mention more exotic creatures. Instead, Araguaina turned out to be a large commercial town, which owed its economic life to the Belém-Brasília highway. Our hotel, the Transhotel, was slightly better than a trucker's dormitory with clean, comfortable, and air-conditioned rooms designed for motorists making an over-night stop on the highway. To escape urban ugliness and enjoy a little nature, we located a park near a small river, where we watched small boys play in the polluted waters. Since it was too risky to swim there, we went to a private club where Angela convinced the guards to let us swim. So much for a tropical paradise!

The conference itself was three long days of listening to papers, mostly given by students and local professors. I did not expect to learn much that I did not already know about the colonial period, but I was mistaken. A young historian, who lives in Palmas, Tocantins, came to participate on the same panel with me. She had recently returned from organizing the microfilming of the eighteenth-century documents in Lisbon, Portugal, that concern the state of Tocantins. She told me that she had found uncatalogued censuses of the population of the captaincy of Goiás in the 1780s. I had never seen them in Rio de Janeiro or Lisbon; they were also unknown to the director of the state archive in Goiânia. In this truck-stop town I learned of the existence of censuses that are fundamental to my future book on the population and society of the region between 1780 and 1835. The microfilms are going to be archived in Palmas, the capital of Tocantins, so next year I will either have to go to Lisbon to work on the original censuses or return to Brazil to copy the censuses from the microfilms.

After sitting through so many panels in the tropical heat, we were all ready for a party (*feira*). In Brazil, students and professors often dance together at *festas*. Usually, I can get by with a little *samba* that I learned years ago in Rio. This time, however, I had to master the dance which is so popular in contemporary Brazil, and that is the *forro*, which actually comes from a corruption of the English, “free for all,” which is used to describe Afro-Brazilian dances of the Northeast of Brazil. One of the students taught me how to dance it, and I joined other professors, such as Temis Parente from Palmas, in dancing with the students.

The next morning, David, Odair, and I rose early to drive to Porto Nacional. Not wanting to attend the conference, Angela had already left by bus to join her sister in Palmas. We drove part of the way south on the Belém-Brasília highway before crossing the Tocantins River to drive past the Xerente reservation to Porto Nacional. We reached Porto Nacional on the Tocantins River about noon. After checking into our hotel and changing clothes, we went to the beach on an island in the river. Angela, her sister, and her sister’s family had driven over from Palmas and met us there. To get to the island, we had to take one of the long boats designed to ferry lots of beach goers to the island. In 1998 I had enjoyed swimming here in the Tocantins River when the waters were clear and tourmaline green in color. Odair’s son could easily see and catch tiny minnows that darted in the shallow water. This time the water was opaque and sediment filled. Construction work on dams had already changed the color and texture of the river, and I could no longer see the fish or the bottom of the river. Much of our conversation was about the building of the dams and the way in which they would create a great lake which would flood part of Porto Nacional and Indian lands to the north. The beach, which is the principal source of recreation for the people of Porto Nacional, will also be flooded. Meanwhile, we enjoyed the cool waters of the river and talked of the threats to the people’s quality of life, not to mention economic livelihoods.

The next day David went to visit his wife's relatives in Palmas, and I spent the day at the beach, learning to play Pataca, an Indian game that resembles badminton; swimming in the river; sampling grilled goat and drinking beer; and talking research with Odair and the other professors who joined us. While relaxing at the beach, I heard of the oral history project on black communities in the state of Tocantins, and received an invitation to speak to the students working on the project, which I then did on Monday.

While I was in Porto Nacional, I also learned of the return of eighteenth-century documents to Natividade, an old colonial town. I had been trying to see these documents for years. When I had visited Natividade in the past, I had been told that a judge had taken them with her to Goiânia. With the help of archivists and historians in Goiânia, we located the name of the judge and her collection of documents. But then the judge died, and her family refused to let anyone consult them; so I was delighted to learn that her family had recently returned the documents to Natividade where they belonged. Temis Parente, one of the professors I had danced with in Araguaina, arranged for David and me to visit the local library where the documents were being held. On Tuesday morning we then drove to Natividade via the newly paved road to check them out.

When we arrived in Natividade, we stopped at a gas station on the outskirts of town. An elderly man recognized us as the "gringos" his daughter Simone was expecting. Temis had called ahead to inform her we were coming. He then led us to her business, a hardware store. Simone then took us to the cultural center, Ascuna, which she had set up to house old documents and books. Unfortunately, the old documents she had to show us turned out to be almost all from the nineteenth century with only fragments of eighteenth-century manuscripts. What a disappointment! Although we were unable to do any significant research, we spent a pleasant two hours visiting with Simone, admiring the gold jewelry that is being made in eighteenth-century styles, and visiting her

mother's home. From there we drove on to Alto do Paraiso, which is another scenic drive, and on to Brasília and Goiânia. Our trip through the Brazilian interior left us with lasting images of the region and its people before the dams and development transform everything, and I can now write the geographical chapter of my future book.

Research in Goiânia was more prosaic but also typical. I went to the state archive to see if they had copies of the eighteenth-century censuses, but the director Carmen did not know about them, so I also consulted indexes and appropriate documentary collections but found no references to them. My major objective, however, was to work at the Sociedade Goiana de Cultura on the church records that the bishop of Goiás had sent there for archiving. When I had last seen the archivist Antônio César, who was in charge of the microfilm project for Goiás, in 1998, he had told me that they included official visitors' reports on the state of the church that would be fundamental on the religious life of the people for my future book. I had already looked for the originals of the visitors' reports in the Curia Metropolitana of Rio de Janeiro but had failed to find them. When David and I arrived at the Sociedade in search of documents on our mutual topics, we were surprised to learn that the collection had been moved to a basement room, and books, documents, and journals were piled everywhere, awaiting yet another move to a new building. They had, however, a copy of the index of the documents Antônio César had microfilmed in Lisbon, which I quickly checked for 1780s censuses and found them listed there. While I did the index, David went in search of nineteenth-century documents and began to bring plain black folders out of a back room. What he discovered kept me busy for two weeks: copies of the visitors' reports I had searched for in Rio and various types of clerical correspondence. As a result, I was able to do two good weeks of typical archival research; David was not so fortunate, and he soon drove on to Belo Horizonte to rejoin Angela and her family.

After checking all the folders I could find, I then flew to

Rio for a third conference, this time of the Brazilian Society of Historical Research, which met at the Historical and Geographical Institute of Brazil. Here too I collected documents on Goiás. Regina, who is currently doing a reclassification of the colonial documents of the Historical and Geographical Institute, spoke about her work and afterwards permitted me to Xerox a copy of religious documents that she had found in the Institute's collection.

After the conference ended, I did yet another week of archival research at the Research Institute of the Casa de Oswaldo Cruz, which is one of Brazil's best scientific institutes with a fine library in the history of medicine. Gilberto Hochman, whom I had met at a Latin American Studies Association meeting in Chicago, had told me about their collection, and especially their photographs of the people of Goiás made in 1912. Not only did he give me a personal tour of the Oswaldo Cruz campus, but he also showed me its library of rare books. Prominently displayed was a first edition of one of the French travelers who went to Goiás in the early nineteenth century. He also introduced me to one of the directors of the institute, who, of course, gifted me with a beautiful book on the science in nineteenth-century voyages of exploration in Brazil.

Back at the institute, I easily located the photographs I had been seeking since the collection is well catalogued and selected some of the best for possible use in my future book. In addition to working on the photographs, I also read the original copies of the journals kept by Artur Neiva and Belisário Pena, the scientists who explored Goiás in 1912 and reported on public health issues, such as Chagas' disease. I concluded my week of research at the National Archive and did two packages of uncatalogued documents on Goiás, one of which had a seventeen-page report on the north of Goiás with many good descriptions of the indigenous populations in the early nineteenth century.

After my week of archival research, I thought my research was finished. My last week in Brazil was to be devoted to

publicizing my book, the Portuguese translation of *Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro*, which was published by Companhia das Letras in São Paulo on August third. On Tuesday August 8 I flew to São Paulo in time to arrive for lunch with the publisher and his wife, the historian Lilia Schwartz. During lunch I mentioned that I had been unable to find a new book on Brazilian slavery by Robert Slenes, *Na Senzala, Uma Flor*. By the time I returned from my lecture at the University of São Paulo and dinner afterwards, I had a package of books awaiting me at the hotel, including *Na Senzala, Uma Flor*. The next day I went to see an art exhibit on five centuries of Brazilian art, which I expected to enjoy as a leisure activity, but found myself once again doing research. Included in the exhibit were fine baroque statues of saints; masks and other popular arts from Goiás; and many Amerindian baskets, masks, and ceramics by the Karajá, Xavante, Apinajé, Krahó, and Kayapó, who are among the principal Amerindian groups of Central Brazil—and subjects of my future book.

Only with the end of this exhibit could I consider this year's research trip completed. I had had a remarkable variety of experiences that had all contributed to furthering the documentary base of my future book. I had also obtained a better understanding of the physical environment and the remarkable trips that colonial men and women had made to reach the region. I am also grateful to have seen the natural beauty of the savannah lands and portions of forest that still remain before the dams are completed and more burnings take place and development in general destroys this region's flora and fauna. What I have left to remind me of this extraordinary summer are the books I acquired as gifts, and in three to five years I hope to have my own new book on frontier life in Central Brazil to exchange with friends and fellow researchers.