

After 45 Years, a Return to Hualpin, Chile

In 1965, I arrived in the town of Hualpin (population about 1800) to work for two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in rural community development.



Train Station and Main Street, Hualpin, Chile, circa 1965

Hualpin is in southern Chile, about 400 miles south of Santiago, near the mouth of the Tolten River where the Tolten enters the Pacific Ocean. It is in the Araucanian region of Chile, with a diverse population that includes both the original Mapuche native population and northern European (mostly German) immigrants who migrated in the late 19th century to Chile. The town of Hualpin (current population around 2500-3000) grew up around the railroad station built in the 1940s on the recently completed railroad line serving the region. The major agricultural products include potatoes, cattle and sheep and the region has significant forest resources as well. Since it is roughly the same latitude south of the equator as Oregon is north of the equator and lies on the Pacific Ocean, the climate is very similar to Oregon's.



Bruce Weber, circa 1966

Last month, Bobbie and I returned to Hualpin for the first time since leaving Chile 45 years ago. The family that I lived with my first year in Hualpin had four children aged 8-15. Although the parents of the family are no longer living, we were lucky to be able to stay for several days with the oldest daughter, Delia, and her family. She organized a reunion with Arturo and Rene (the other siblings in the region) and we spent a wonderful Sunday afternoon drinking Chilean wine and eating “asado” (grilled meat) with their extended families that included spouses, inlaws, children and grandchildren. The youngest child, Cecilia, treated us to a feast of “curanto” (seafood stew) the following week when we visited her family on the island of Chiloe, several hundred miles south of Hualpin.



Rene, Bobbie, Bruce, Arturo, Delia in Hualpin, February 2011

We also were able to enjoy the natural wonders of Chile. Paul Lewin had suggested that we visit the Conguillio National Park, with its spectacular lakes, waterfalls and views of Volcan Llaima, an active volcano that has erupted several times in the past several decades. Paul and his parents had camped there when he was a child. At his suggestion and with his help, we were able to arrange to stay in a cabin in the park and hike the trails in the park.



Bruce and Bobbie, Conguillio National Park, Chile, February 2011