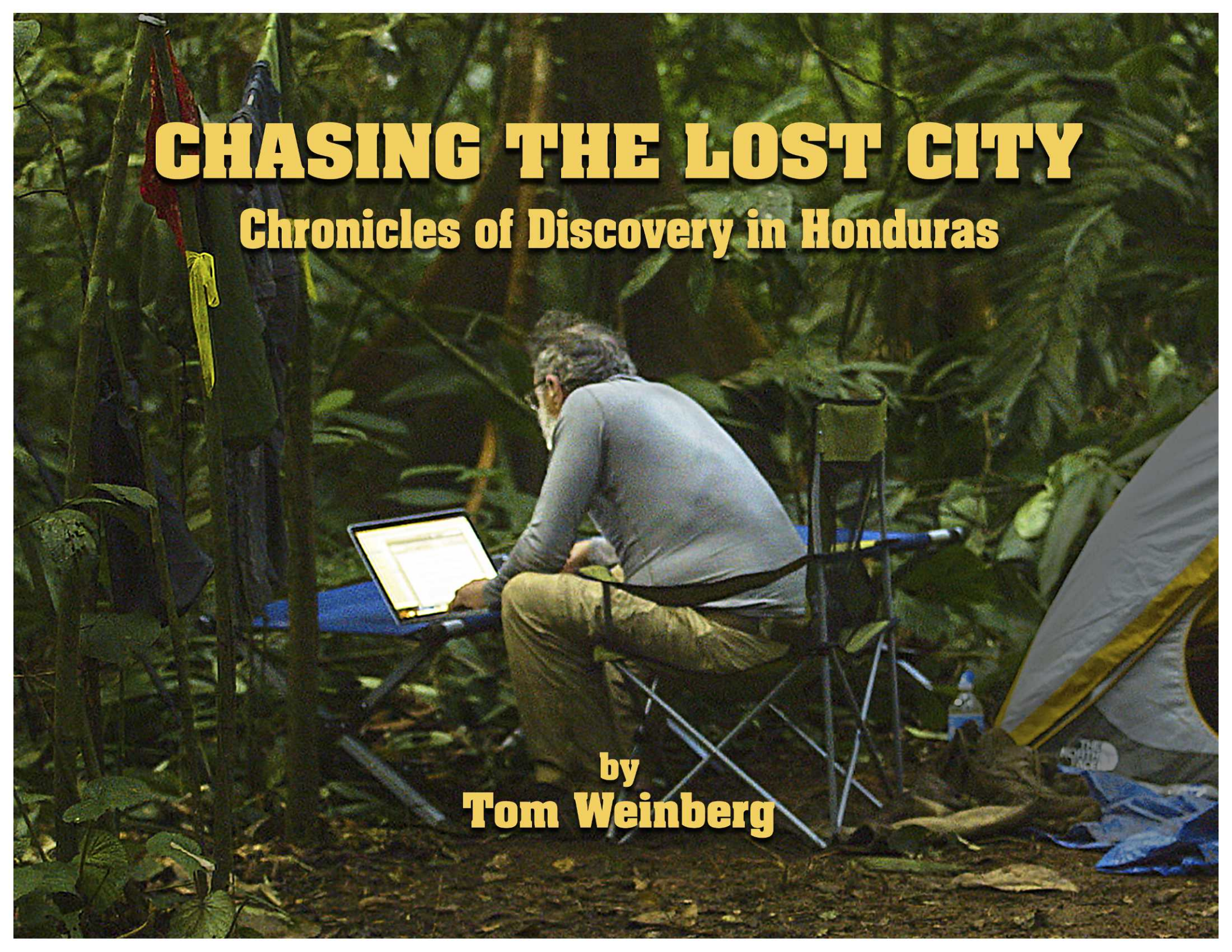


CHASING THE LOST CITY

Chronicles of Discovery in Honduras

by
Tom Weinberg



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PART ONE: MY STORY



February 2015—I was 70 years old, a desk-sitting urban Jewish TV/video guy who had never spent a night sleeping on the ground in a jungle. I hadn't camped out at all for decades.

I've always had a roof over my head—and a wet tent in sloppy rain forest mud doesn't qualify. I detested Boy Scouts and was an early dropout. And I couldn't hear much either, unless the sounds were coming from right in front of my face. Thankfully, I had state-of-the-art hearing aids in my ears that worked all the

time I was in the jungle.

So, you can see I wasn't likely to be the MVP Explorer in the **Mosquitia Jungle** of Honduras, one of the wildest and most dense spots anywhere in the Americas.

But, I knew I had to go. I had to see for myself if what we thought was there really existed. Was there a Lost City? Were we really going to find it deep in the jungle?

As you probably know by now, there was and we did.

It began for me in 1994, when my friend since the 70s, **Steve Elkins**, and I first got in cahoots to track down the Lost City. He had been in Honduras in 1994 on a video shoot searching for a place known as **Ciudad Blanca**, the **White City**, also called **The Lost City of the Monkey God**. It had been a legend for centuries. Stories of Ciudad Blanca were written about in the 1500s by Spanish Conquistadors. Indigenous people knew about it for centuries before that.

•

In the 20th century, many adventurers claimed to have found evidence of a civilization, although nobody had photographic proof or a map of the place. But we were hell bent to be the discoverers. Starting in 1994, we figured out the most likely location of the city, used scientific laser technology to uncover ancient structures on the jungle floor, then went there and made a movie, showing it in living color. What we found might not be THE Lost City of the Monkey God, or Ciudad Blanca, but there is incontrovertible evidence (actual relics) of an ancient people whose identity still remains unknown.

For Steve and me, the search became something of an obsession, gnawing at our lives for more than 20 years. It was an itch we scratched every way we could imagine. Finally, in February 2015, we (mostly Steve) had put together a group of about 20 archaeologists, video/filmmakers, mapping professionals, helicopter pilots, and jungle survival experts, and teamed with the Honduran government to enter and hang out in the isolated Mosquitia jungle of Northeastern Honduras.

It was and is the closest thing to the Garden of Eden that any of us has ever experienced.

On the day our group found dozens of unexplainable ancient artifacts on an earthen

pyramid, Steve and I sat by his tent ruminating. He said: “No matter what happens from now on, I feel vindicated. We were right!”

We all feel the need to be right, but it’s elevated for Elkins because he had spent thousands of waking hours (and, no doubt, some in his sleep) concentrating on the science, exploration, and logistics of getting in and out of that jungle and finding out what’s there. It’s almost in his DNA to theorize, learn, test, and prove. His wife Janet called the two of us “The Lost Boys” for many years. We didn’t enjoy admitting it, but it was an accurate name. Neither she nor anyone else could believe that we never gave up.

Although we were both obsessed with finding the Lost City, I had a different monkey on my back: I wanted to discover it and show it to the world on TV. I’ve produced more than 500

nonfiction shows. None was as far-reaching or as impossible to do as this one.

Even so, it never occurred to me that it might have been a wild goose chase, or worse, a disaster.

We both felt a lifetime’s worth of relief and accomplishment in that late afternoon conversation in February, 2015. A pair of spider monkeys seemed to be having a parallel conversation on a branch about 40 feet above us. We were in their space. They’d probably never seen apes like us and they let us know by screeching and dropping stuff on us. Within a week, our group had left their space, but that jungle will never be the same.

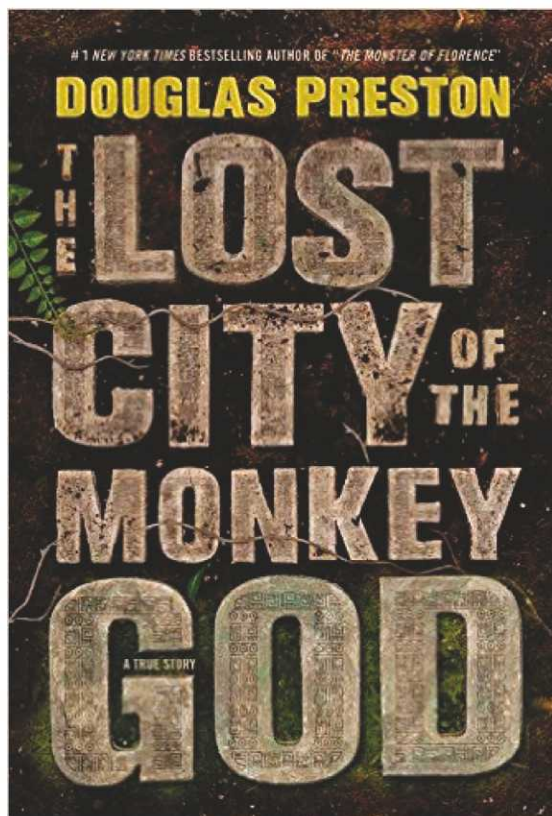
Nor will we.

I put my butt on the line for this project.



What You're Reading

I have assembled my writing about our discovery of a Lost City, now officially called “City of the Jaguar.” I wrote two sets of chronicles during my stays in Honduras—one in 2012, the other in 2015. Nearly every night I wrote my personal impressions of our journeys into the unknown.



In 2012, we were using LiDAR (Light Detection And Ranging) laser techniques to see through the jungle canopy. That let us discover what was there on the ground. I wrote 17 chronicles on that trip. Then, in 2015, I wrote 12 chronicles during

our ground-truthing jungle expedition. Those chronicles are the core of this book. Each is dated and is almost exactly as I wrote it on my laptop at the time. I approached it as a daily assignment, kind of like a beat reporter with a deadline. I have added pictures, but haven't changed the chronicles. They are more than half the pages of this book. The rest I wrote later in 2015 and in 2016, to express my feelings after more than 20 years of involvement. I am addicted to writing, so my primary motivation was my need to tell my personal story and for you to read it.

To find out the whole story, you must read Douglas Preston's terrific book, *The Lost City of the Monkey God*, published in January, 2017. It is comprehensive and brilliantly written, documenting the history, archaeology, medical implications, and thrills of the entire adventure. It's the big picture.

I've limited this book to my own experiences and the visual impressions of what was the adventure of my lifetime. The pictures are from several sources starting with UTL Productions (from frames in our video) and master photographer Roberto Ysaïs, who was with us in Roatan in 2012.

I'm A Where Guy

Perseverance is a main theme of the histories of explorers and seekers, whether in the Mosquitia Jungle or anywhere else. Of course, one person's perseverance is another's obsession, but I don't want to go there right now.

I just reread *Jungleland*, journalist Christopher Stewart's 2013 book about his exploration in the Mosquitia. His obsession was Theodore Morde—finding out and telling the most minute details of Morde's 1940 exploration. He was piggybacking on Morde's

need to go into the unknown and find artifacts—stuff nobody had ever brought to the boss, the big rich George Heye in New York City.

With the latest research by Douglas Preston, we now know that Morde was a fraud. The artifacts he picked up—the ones that went into the Smithsonian—weren't from the heart of the jungle at all. He got them near the ocean in one afternoon. He was really looking for gold. In his private journals he wrote that he was absolutely convinced there was NO Lost City in the Mosquitia. Despite that, he took credit for discovering one and became a famous hero in 1940. Morde never went back to Honduras, despite his promises to do so, and he committed suicide fifteen years after his famous self-proclaimed “discovery.”

Me, I just knew that Ciudad Blanca—or at least the place in a valley that we first tracked via satellite in 1996 and then with LiDAR in 2012—was a place nobody else had likely been for centuries.

That's what always turned me on. When I was 8 or 10, tromping through the ravines near my home in the Ravinia neighborhood of Highland Park, IL, I consciously thought about the place I was walking/standing and that it hadn't been stepped on since the times when the Indians (that's what we called them then) wandered through on their way to Lake Michigan.

I loved that idea—that I was somewhere special. It made me feel special, unlike any of the other kids who stayed on the sidewalk—and definitely not like the dads who went on the train five mornings a week to Chicago's Loop or the moms who, from what I could tell, were fully occupied with their in-the-house lives. For any of those adults, finding virgin patches of earth down in the ravines wasn't who they were or what they thought about. Maybe there was a time when they did, but they'd probably given

up and buried it in adult life decades earlier.

In my teens, I spent five summers out West, mostly in the Colorado Rocky Mountains at Vagabond Ranch for boys and girls—a place the owners, the Paveks, didn't want to call "a camp." We rode horses, fished for trout in the creeks, did ranch work on fences, houses, barns and stables, and loaded into woody DeSoto station wagons to camp out, mostly in national parks. I loved seeing new places. I did all that, but what had the biggest impact was hiking to unnamed spots on hilltops and planting my booted or Conversed feet on untrampled places and having those same powerful "nobody has been in this exact spot" feelings.

I've tried to figure out why I spent all those years chasing after something that might not even exist. And in 2017 I got the answer—I had spent my first 50 years becoming aware of the uniqueness of where I was and what it took to be there.

For me, the driving force in the exploration wasn't so much the buried objects that might be in the jungle or the people who had been there, or even the legend of gold or monkey god effigies. Those were the cool material things, "the excuses" that everyone could understand as motivation, the same as dozens before us. For me the tingle, the drive, the thing that has always taken over whatever else I was doing, is the gut-need to go to and experience what it feels like to be in an unknown place on the earth, no matter how big or small.

We were all taught that Balboa "discovered" the Pacific Ocean—though non-European people had been there for centuries. Huh? He was driven to go to the next unknown place. That's the deal with being the human who must keep finding places and looking for stuff.

I have been a "who, what, where, when, why, how" professional since my first newspaper

job in 1962. The subject of the legend of a mysterious city in the jungle was not on my radar of usual beats—culture, politics, sports, and video portraits of known and unknown common people. A Lost City in the jungle seemed far-fetched to me, but it absolutely and steadily crept into my consciousness. In 2012, I ended 11 years of college teaching to spend as



much time as possible on this wild goose chase adventure of jungle discovery.

My brain always wants to know where—as precisely as possible—when someone's telling a story. I know that they're telling it because of what happened to them. But I need to find out

where it happened before processing the effect it had or what the lesson was or how it changed their lives.

Of all the fundamental questions we journalists were taught, the "where" was huge for me.

All of this is a long way to explain why the thing that was most important to me about our jungle quest for the Lost City is that no human being had likely set foot in that exact spot on the earth for centuries. Looking down at nothing but dense forest from the helicopter and anticipating what was there was my first thrill. Setting foot on the ground was the big payoff for those moments and years in the ravines and in the mountains. And it was sacred. I've never experienced the spiritual and natural feelings that this spot in the jungle made me feel.

I guess that makes me a committed "where-guy."

Where We Started In The 1990's



Steve Elkins, aka in the Latin American press as “Dr. Helkins the American scientist,” and I have known each other since 1975. He was an outdoor education instructor with the alternative Van Gorder-Walden School in Chicago and mostly living alone in a Wisconsin farmhouse. I was a TV documentarian based in Chicago. Steve and Janet, both from the Chicago suburbs, got married and in 1979, they headed to the West Coast to start a career selling hot dogs from a wiener mobile on Venice beach. His life’s work morphed into a successful video rental business, PAL America, that serviced European TV producers. He became a skilled videographer who was in demand for decades. We had friends in common, were in touch occasionally, but never spoke about the Lost City until 1994.

We haven’t stopped speaking about it since.

Our relationship as trusted friends and colleagues, with daily phone calls and e-mail correspondence, continues to this day. I don’t think anything much happened leading to the discovery without our discussing and debating it.

Steve has a rare combination of abilities—a cinematographer and producer with scientific expertise and curiosity, consummate organizing skills and a no-nonsense personality. His dogged determination is tempered by his genuineness. We’re a good match. My experience producing verité TV documentaries and videos, and my people-connections and skills complement Steve’s many strengths. He has always been the jefe of the whole project.



Janet Elkins, successful in her own events business for decades, was dubious for many years, but never was heard a discouraging word. She always supported our cockamamie scheming to search for the Lost City, although she never let us forget that we were “**The Lost Boys.**”



Steve Morgan, a self-identified captain, was the explorer in our group who originally pursued the Lost City. I met him through Steve Elkins in 1994. Captain Morgan was well-steeped in the legends of Ciudad Blanca by then. The three of us became business/explorer/documentary partners in 1995, shortly after the two of them returned from trekking and filming in the Mosquitia Jungle. They had been involved in initiating the discovery of **The Cave of the Glowing Skulls** near Catacamas. The skulls were radiocarbon dated and proved to be from 3,000 BC to 1,100 BC and were from a culture that couldn't possibly have been Maya or Aztec, the heights of which were millennia later.

Captain Morgan, in his 40s when I met him, grew up near St. Louis. He was ambitious, attractive, swashbuckling, convincing, conniving, and curious—always fascinated by science, history, and discovery. But his major motivator was money and that had a tendency to influence his judgment and straight-forward relationships.

By 2003, he had moved to the Philippines to search for buried treasures at the bottom of the ocean. He was moderately successful finding doubloons and stuff like that. He later suffered a series of strokes and couldn't speak. Sadly, he was incapable of participating in our 21st century expeditions to

Honduras in search of what he believed was the Lost City of the Monkey God. His 1995 expedition journal *In Search of the Lost City of the Monkey Gods* articulated how impossible it was to negotiate the rivers and interior of the jungle.





Bruce Heinicke, a Missouri grade school backyard fossil-digging pal of Morgan's, lived in Eastern Honduras for ten years and married Honduran-born **Mabel** ("MAY-bell"). Bruce had one of the most colorful lives of anyone I've ever known. He was gruff, lived hard but had a good heart. Bruce was our Honduran connection—think "fixer." He'd been a quasi-legal drug cowboy character in the "wild west" days of the 1980s.

Mabel stuck by Bruce in Honduras, St. Louis, and Las Vegas, in sickness and in health, until his death in 2013. Mabel was instrumental in the revival of the project to search for Ciudad Blanca in 2009, after we had been stalled for several years.

Bruce's life, loves, and lucre were mercurial. He thrived on smoking, drinking, and telling real-life tales frequently involving saloons, guns, drugs, and dead guys. He genuinely cared about Mabel and their eight children. Their life was like a soap opera, replete with a devastating home fire. Bruce wound up in a coma for at least a month and then miraculously recovered. Bruce and I were opposites in many ways, but we got along fine and were able to focus on common goals for the years we teamed up.

Bruce died after realizing his dream of locating Ciudad Blanca with us in 2012, but he wasn't around when we went to the jungle in 2015. Mabel was in dire need of money and after our accomplishments had attracted worldwide attention, she tried to leverage her involvement into cash. She did get some financial help, but we couldn't come close to what she needed or expected, which eventually isolated her from the project. A long and exciting book could be written about their lives.



I'm a fourth-generation Chicagoan. When Steve Elkins first told me about the Lost City of the Monkey God in 1994, it captured me and never let up. The technical requirements and logistics involved in finding the Lost City were never my prime interests. It was living the story and then telling it on TV. I wanted the world to find out about the adventure, what fascinated us, how we stuck with it for 20 years, what we were able to do and not do, our cast of characters, and why the whole thing mattered in a larger historical and global context.

I have a unique history as a producer. Most of what I've done doesn't follow anyone else's template. That's always been the attraction for me and the viewers. I've had a pioneering TV/video life, using the tools to show the world and ordinary people as they are, not staged or manipulated in any way: **TVTV**—the first non-fiction portable video ever broadcast on television (1972-1977); **Image Union**—the first regularly scheduled series of truly independent video and film (1978-1988); the first new generation of video personality portraits on MTV News; **The 90's**—a groundbreaking PBS series with worldwide video correspondents (1989-1992); **Time Out**—a weekly informal sports show shot in a saloon set and incorporating unique sports music videos (1992-93); plus a few dozen documentaries, nearly all with quirky innovative twists.

My hands-on expertise with video equipment peaked in the last century. I have mostly been a hands-off organizer-producer-editor-director for a few decades. I taught as an adjunct professor from 2001-12 and founded the **Media Burn Independent Video Archive** in 2004—where we now have over 7,000 videos with about 3,000 of them online and free to view at mediaburn.org.