



Burt Balaban and Hector Acebes, 1937

Hector Acebes

A Portrait

Ed Marquand

Hector Acebes was an intrepid boy. The second son of a successful Spanish and Colombian family—importers of Spanish wines and manufacturers of Columbian textiles—Acebes was born in New York City in 1921. He attended elementary school in Madrid and middle school in Bogotá. After he ran away from home at age thirteen to “sail around the world” (an ambition thwarted in a posh hotel over 400 miles away at the Caribbean port of Barranquilla), his father sent him to the New York Military Academy. Once he adjusted to the tight routine, he became a good student and was popular with his classmates. He participated in camera club activities, which gave him an opportunity to practice his favorite hobby, shooting and printing photographs. He gleaned most of his advanced skills from popular photo magazines.

Acebes spent most summer vacations in Colombia, but these were not ordinary school holidays. At age fifteen, he persuaded his father to let him make a second daring solo excursion—a sequence of boat trips up the rivers of eastern Colombia. This adventure, full of encounters with prospectors, missionaries, indigenous peoples, colorful swindlers, and the lurking threat of tropical illnesses and wildlife, thrilled Acebes and convinced him that a routine desk job could never satisfy him. At age sixteen, Acebes and his school chum Burt Balaban drove an aging coupe from New York to Mexico City and back.

Acebes attended the Chauncey Hall School in Boston and then studied engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He married his wife, Madeline, with whom he eventually had a son and two daughters. In Boston he set up a small photo studio and developed his technical skills, more as an avocation than as a commercial enterprise.

When the United States entered World War II, Hector’s father, through family connections, secured a draft deferment by arranging for his son to be appointed vice-counsel at the Colombian consulate in Boston. Hector, however, found the idea of serving in Europe too thrilling to miss, and before learning of his father’s intercession, enlisted in the U.S. Army. He served two years in Germany, France, and Belgium. After the surrender, Acebes stayed in Germany to complete his stint. To make his job more interesting and allow him more freedom to travel,