

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Reign of Maximilian

MEXICO – Proceeding south to Mexico City we paused at Ixmiquilpan, an interesting, primitive village, which was once the capital of the kingdom of the Otomi Indians. There is another old church there and a former monastery of the Order of St. Augustine, founded in 1550.

We were now in the Maguey (Mah-gay) zone, we learned from the AAA Guide Book. As we traveled along the highway we saw both men and women spinning the maguey fiber into balls of string as they walked along the road. Some were herding their sheep, goats and even turkeys, as they spun. We stopped a group of five men and women, all busily spinning, and gave them several pesos (11 cents) to pose for movies.

The giant maguey plant grows all along the roads, is planted in rows in fields and used profusely to form division fences. It looks much like what we call a century plant at home. It becomes a familiar sight from Ixmiquilpan to Mexico City and beyond, we were told. It is a very useful plant from which are made paper, vinegar, molasses, medicines, rope, thread and three native drinks: Pulque, which is a little stronger than beer, and tequila and mezcal, both very potent drinks. Once a month the juice is drained from the center of the plant and the lower leaves are cut for the fiber they produce.

Very soon we were climbing to the highest point on the route to Mexico City. At 8,209 feet we reached the high plateau on which Mexico City is located. From here the road drops gradually into the great Valley of Mexico. Near this point is the "Monumento de Buena Amistad," (The Friendly Relations Monument), erected by the American colony of Mexico City in 1936.

A masterfully executed great wall of earth and stone, built centuries ago by the Spaniards to prevent the waters of Lake San Cristobal from emptying into Lake Texcoco, was interesting to study as we approached the great City of Mexico.

Mexico City, historians say, is probably the oldest city in America. In 1325 the Aztecs founded their capital, which they named Tenochtitlan. The city probably had a population of 300,000 when the Spaniards arrived, according to historians. Cortez was the first white man

to enter the city, Nov. 8, 1519. The Spaniards remained until June 30, 1520, when they were driven out. In 1521 the Aztec Empire came to an end and the city remained in the hands of the Spaniards for three centuries. In 1822 the republic was proclaimed but in 1864 the French installed Maximilian as emperor. His reign lasted only three years but they must have been glorious years for him and his wife, Carlotta, for we viewed the grandeur in which they lived in Chapultepec Castle on "Grasshopper Hill" today.

The meaning of the word Chapultepec in the native Mexican language is "Grasshopper Hill" or "Cerro de Chapultepec" in Spanish. In Mexican "Chapulín" means grasshopper and "Tepec" indicates hill. During prehispanic times the Aztecs settled this hill which they lost during a pitched battle with the Tepanecs. When the Spaniards consummated the conquest of Mexico City, the woods and Hill of Chapultepec were declared a Royal Site, and the second Viceroy of Mexico dedicated the entire wood to Charles V of Spain. For many years it was used as the summer palace by the Viceroy.

On the 13th of December, 1940, it was decreed by President Cardenas, that the castle be used for the home of the National Museum of History, being inaugurated on the 27th of September, 1944, by President Manuel Avila Camacho.

There are at least a dozen rooms in the palace which may be visited by anyone interested. The walls are covered with handsome brocades, original rugs are on the floors and glittering crystal chandeliers, now lighted by electricity instead of candles as in the days of Maximilian. Carlotta's bedroom and bath are a delight to behold. Handsome silver, English and Chinese porcelains, and types of pottery popular in Mexico during the XIX century, are to be seen in abundance. They are truly of intrinsic value as well as artistic and decorative, showing the great wealth of Mexico's Maximilian reign.