

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 2, 1953

Queretaro

We passed through the colonial city of Queretaro on our motor journey to Guanajuato which proved to be a place of rare charm. It is situated in a valley at the foot of a long hill called Sangremal and has a population of almost 50,000 persons. It is most noted for its flowers, its parks and plazas, the market, the quaint old houses, churches and government buildings, and an eye-catching old Spanish aqueduct. But most interesting to us was the knowledge that it was from there that the Franciscan monks started for California to establish the missions along the coast.

Not a progressive city Queretaro (ball court in the Aztec language) holds much of its charm in the history of its past. The Otomi Indians founded the city long before the discovery of the New World. Mexican history tells us that it was made a part of the Aztec Empire in the 15th century and was overcome by the Spanish forces in 1531.

Here in Queretaro was the headquarters of the Franciscan Monks of the Propaganda of the Faith, whose men spread through Central American and on to California establishing the Franciscan missions up and down the coast. In this city was planned the program for national independence, and here Emperor Maximilian was shot on June 18, 1867.

On the outskirts of the city of Queretaro is the Cerre de las Campanas (Hill of Bells), where Maximilian and his staff fled from the Templo de la Cruz, on the entrance of the Republican forces. Here he surrendered his sword, and here he and his generals met their death before a firing squad.

A few years later the Austrian government asked for and received from the Mexican government permission to build a brownstone expiatory chapel on the slope. We visited the hill but because it was "siesta time" we did not see the interior.

In San Miguel Allende we were fortunate to see our first Sunday evening promenade in the city's plaza. We were eating our evening meal in the dining room on the second floor of the lovely Posada de San Francisco, when the band started playing and dozens of young people began to march around the tile paved walks. The girls, sometimes four abreast, marched in one direction,

and the men in the other, laughing and exchanging pleasantries as they passed. It was truly a gay scene to behold.

A hat is excess baggage in Mexico. We think that we did not see a hat, with the exception of our own, on any other woman in the whole country. A small lace mantilla which may be carried in a handbag, was worn by most of the ladies as they entered the churches or walked on the streets, but the poor and the Indian women wore the familiar black or dark blue rebozos over their heads and around their shoulders from morning until night – one seldom saw a woman without this part of their costume.

Rebozos were used to hold their babies on their backs, to cover their laundry or as a protection from wind or cold. The men wore serapes for warmth and covering or as rain coats, and they wore large straw hats which seemed to shed rain and act as protection from the sun.

Many of the old homes and haciendas have been turned into family industries and shops, as well as providing living quarters. We visited several such establishments where the home, with all the beautiful furniture, ornaments, and atmosphere had been retained around the charming garden patio, while weaving, silver-making, dressmaking, leather work, and all manner of handcraft was being carried on as a business.

To watch the artisans, as one may do in most of the establishments, is sheer fascination. The Indian artists we watched in one pottery shop were certainly masters of their craft. We especially enjoyed a small group of Indian men painting freehand designs of bright feathered birds and flowers on huge jars. They mixed their own colors from native materials, made their own brushes from dog hair, we were told, and brushed the color on, moving the brush from them instead of toward them as most artists do. Another modeled a clay burro as we looked on admiringly.