

MEXICO TO CELEBRATE 150th YEAR OF
INDEPENDENCE WITH A BANG

If there is any generalization that historians will make about Mexico, it is the point that Mexican history is never dull. Indeed it is one of the most tempestuous histories of any nation, replete with battle, conspiracy, revolution, and more than the usual amount of human vice and virtue. For this reason high officials in Mexican tourism believe that a knowledge of the country's history--no less than that of her scenic marvels, resorts, archaeology, and standard tourism sights--should be in itself an attraction to the potential tourist.

This month (September) Mexico celebrates the 150th anniversary of her independence from Spain. It is a month when fiestas will multiply, ~~street~~-dancing will spring up all over the country, fire-works will shoot through the night skies, public buildings will be illuminated throughout the night and many historic ones will remain open at all hours. Families will go on long treks to picnic between visits to the sights and scenes of Mexico's battlegrounds of independence.

The tourist who knows Mexico's history will have his eyes open to a new dimension of enthusiasm. A country is more than what is immediately visible, like pyramids, or consumable, like guacamole. It is also the invisible but quite real tale of how it came to be what it is, and why this one has become one of the most complex and fascinating lands on earth.

Mexicans are getting to know more and more of their own history. The visiting Yankee cannot help wondering why. This month he can find out for himself. For in Mexico City as well as in every hamlet of the republic, the spirit of Independence will be in the air. Six cities--particularly important because the battles for independence were fought in and around them--have been designated the Route of Independence, and thousands of Mexicans from President Adolfo Lopez Mateos on down, accompanied by foreign visitors from the world over, will visit these scenes of Mexico's beginnings as a free nation. They are Toluca, Morelia, Guadalajara, San Luis Potosi, Guanajuato, and Queretaro.

Through the streets of these cities the colorful charros will parade, the armed forces will stomp their modern echoes to the evocation of the Insurgentes, bells modeled after that of Dolores Hidalgo will toll freedom throughout the land. Tourists will find that transportation costs during the month of September will have been reduced in much of Mexico, that the natural amiability of the Mexican people will have a fine channel in the excitement over the anniversary. Advance reservations, of course, are even more advisable during this time than ever.

Mexico City, which will be illuminated by spotlights on all her public squares and buildings, will hear the traditional "Cry of Dolores" from the balcony of the National Palace, while a possible million listeners will gather below in the great Zocalo.

A hundred miles away, in the still somnolent village of Dolores Hidalgo, the "Cry of Dolores" will sound from the lips of the President, who will have declared the tiny village the capital of Mexico for this day, September 16. Needless to say, it was here that Mexico's independence was born.

U.S. visitors will include special groups from the military, naval, and air academies, who have been promised a touch of their own type of food, no less; similar groups of student militarists will come from other hemisphere nations, also to be provided, one hears, with "alimentacion especial" (special food).

Military parades will feature units of Mexico's three services, while jet aircraft will stream across the skies of the Valley of Mexico. On both coasts the Mexican navy will boom salutes to the day.

The Pan American aspect of the celebrations will be emphasized in special exhibits of paintings and sculpture from all the lands of the hemisphere, for it was Mexican independence in Latin America's north, occurring almost simultaneously with Argentina's in the south, that eventually freed all of Spanish America from the madre patria.

September 16 will be a day of festivity in many cities of the U.S., particularly those on the Mexican border, but also in cities with large Mexican populations, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit. There will be special celebrations as well in San Francisco, Tucson, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Austin, and San Antonio.

PART TWO

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Mexico's war for independence is so complex and charged with plot, counter-plot, and subtleties of personal and political delin-eation that it is dangerous to summarize it. But with full apologies for the limitations of space, let us recall the tumultuous events that Mexico is celebrating this month. It happened this way. . .

The sleepy quiet of the undistinguished Mexican village of Dolores was abruptly broken one Sunday morning in 1810 by the fiery words of a liberal priest, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. Dis-contented with the seeming indifference of the Spanish government and the Catholic church to the plight of Mexico's impoverished masses he summoned together a group of villagers on that Sabbath morning, September 16, 1810.

"My children," he shouted at them, "this day comes to us a new dispensation. Are you ready to receive it? Will you be free? Will you make the effort to recover from the hated Spaniards the lands stolen from your forefathers three hundred years ago?"

To the cheers of the crowd, he concluded with a ringing exhor-tation: "Long live our Lady of Guadalupe, down with evil government, death to the Spaniards!"

This, the famous "Cry of Dolores," was to become the battle-cry of the Mexican revolution against Spain--the only one to begin out-side the capital city of any of the Spanish colonies.

Simply, emotionally, this was Mexico's unofficial Declaration of Independence. Not a carefully phrased document written by the renowned, respected national leaders of the country, but a shout and a by-word carried from mouth to mouth of a people exploited for three centuries under an absolutism unknown to the Anglo-Saxon colonists of the North.

A ragged "army" of Indians, half-breeds, and an occasional creole (Descendant of Spaniards) formed around Hidalgo, who marched across the countryside gathering adherents armed with knives, machetes, hoes, rakes, scythes, and even a few old fire-arms. They numbered scores at first, gathering hundreds within a few weeks, perhaps as many as 60,000 before the passage of a few months. They were men, women, and children, most of them with little idea of what they had in mind, except that the hated "gapuchin" or Spaniard must get out of Mexico.

This "army" seized by sheer force of numbers the gold and silver city of Guanajuato, killing the Spanish defenders to the last man, sweeping onward toward the even greater city of Guadalajara before turning on Mexico City itself. There Hidalgo hesitated, fatally, either from fear of what his "army" would do to the population of the capital or perhaps from natural caution before this central fortress of Spanish power.

Thus Hidalgo failed to take Mexico City. He rejected a Spanish proposal that he surrender with honor and full amnesty. "In the discharge of our duty," he replied, "we will not lay aside our arms until we have wrested the jewel of liberty from the hands of the oppressor."

In words similar to those of Thomas Jefferson, whom he admired, he wrote memorably. "We are resolved to enter into no arrangement which has not for its basis the liberty of the nation, and the enjoyment of those rights which nature's God has granted all men--right inalienable which must be sustained by the shedding of rivers of blood if necessary..."

Within 10 months of the "Cry of Dolores," Father Hidalgo was captured by the Spaniards, stripped of his ecclesiastical rank, and shot by a firing squad. He himself began the Mexican revolution, but it was for others to carry the torch he had handed them; he died with the feeling that he had unloosed class hatred, that his insurrection was in fact doomed.

While Hidalgo's severed head rotted atop the fortress wall at Guanajuato, his lieutenant, former student and fellow-priest, Jose Maria Morelos, a short, stout one-time mule-driver, was waging war against the Spaniards in the south of Mexico. A prime manager of men and weapons, a natural strategist, he kept his army together and met the Spaniards triumphantly in battle after battle. It was he who summoned Mexico's first constitutional convention to formalize Mexico's severance from Spain. Morelos advocated racial equality and the division of the large landed estates into small land parcels for the peons. He demanded the abolition of special privilege for the clergy and the military, the removal of government monopolies and the imposition of a sales tax. A devout Catholic, he nonetheless advocated the confiscation of church funds and property for general distribution to the people as a whole.

By 1821, ten years after the "Cry of Hidalgo," Mexico had won her independence from Spain, and the desiccated heads of the fighting priest and three fellow--conspirators were removed from the Guanajuato fortress. But a long time was to pass before the social and economic policies he and Morelos advocated began to take shape in Mexico; indeed Morelos was a good century before his time, but the two priests, Hidalgo and Morelos, set the indelible stamp of liberalism on Mexico's future.

Morelos himself spent much time in formulating a constitution and in stating his war aims before having in fact won his war. This gave the Spaniards a chance to regroup and plan to snare him, which they did. On December 22, 1815, he too was shot by a firing squad.

Mexican independence from Spain was finally won in 1821, largely through the skillful maneuverings, political and military, of Agustin de Iturbide, who had himself proclaimed emperor after Spain was expelled from Mexico. Thus began the first century of Mexico's political, social, and economic history as a free nation, a cavalcade of dictator opportunists, oligarchs, foreign exploiters, and other tragic and ironic aftermaths of the dream of Hidalgo and Morelos.

Not the tyranny and frustration of the century to come, the troubles with the United States and France, the entrenchment of dictators and special privileges and corruption was to prove the character of the Mexico that was to emerge in the 20th century.

This more recent Mexico became a land determined to bring to life the long dormant hopes of Hidalgo and Morelos.

Another revolution, longer and bloodier than the war for independence from Spain, was to create a Mexico closer to those first abortive hopes.

Independence was and is a great fact of Mexican life. The Revolution of 1910 was to give it force, solidity, meaning, and dignity. But this is another story.

* * * *

From - James J. Thompson
30 Rockefeller Plaza
New York, New York