Guadalupe Hidalgo

By Carleton Beals

Many a December twelfth I have walked out down the long poplar-lined road from Mexico City to Guadalupe Hidalgo, the religious capital of Mexico, mingling with the eager pilgrims on this river of bobbing sombreros. Once this vast Romería was made slowly and on the knees, with lengthy prayers before each of the fourteen chapels along the route—the ever-celebrated fourteen stations of the cross—but now it is made with song and jostling and jest. The whole road is lined with vendors of “dules” and candied fruits; of jewelry, and fruit, and religious accessories. Here are man-high candles, garishly twisted, decorated with miraculous Biblical scenes or pictures of the Santísima Virgen; “gorditas de la Virgen,” holy sweet-cakes, almond-sized, made from the meal of the big “Caahuatzinfla” corn; rosaries of carved wood, of glass, of silver; aluminum medallions stamped with the Virgen; tiny opera-glasses, cunningly carved out of bone no larger than a penny-slot and with pin-hole openings revealing magnified images of picturesque local panoramas. But here and there are also incongruous pre-Cortez things: petrified deer-eyes, with scarlet strings and bits of gnarled pine-wood stuck in the edges, to be hung about the neck as a protection against the evil-eye; oranges wigged with red corn-floss, the pagan offering to the local Indian goddess Tonantzin; carved serpent canes from Apizaco, once the somber “fasces” of an ancient ceremony.

Guadalupe Hidalgo is the greatest remaining center of the religious afflatus of the old race which swept on, modified and softened into the channels of Catholicism. Puebla, the second Mecca of Mexico, a creation of the Spaniards, is cruelly colonial, sentimentally and shoddily modern. Cholula, with its star-jabbing pyramid to Quetzalcoatl, dozes in forgotten isolation. The sanctuary of Ocotlán beyond Taxcaula, is hidden in a relatively inaccessible mountain-ringed valley. Indian Mexico turns to Guadalupe Hidalgo; here lies the mystical center of all miracles, the dreamed-of-goal of every religious heart. Guadalupe Hidalgo is the faithful guardian of noble and ignoble superstitions, of beggars, flis, raw sores, glory, and resurrection.

This place inevitably had to become an important religious center. The Hill of Tepeyac is the nearest imposing outcropping of hill near the capital. In the old days it overlooked imperial Tenochtitlán, citadel of Moctezuma; through the long passing ages it has commanded an unbroken view of the volcano-rimmed Anahuac Valley. And from time immemorial men have flocked to such places to found their temples, their forts, and their palaces. Even in the ancient Indian days, Guadalupe Hidalgo was a great