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 jesting. The whole road is lined with vendors of ‘‘dulces’’ 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 ‘‘Caahuatzintla’’ 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 affiliations 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 crudely colonial, sentimentally and shoddily modern. Cholula, with its star-jabbing pyramid to Quetzalcoatl, dozes in forgotten isolation. The sanctuary of Ocotlán beyond Tlaxcala, 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, flies, 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 pausing ages it has commanded an unbroken view of the volcano-rimmed Anáhuac 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
religious center. Near here, on the adjacent hill of Yoaltecatl, every new year in the month of Atlacoaleo (which began, apparently, on the second day of our February, the beginning of the dry dusty part of the year), the Aztecs sacrificed children to the Tlaloques, the gods of the rain. The sac- rifices laid the victims upon the sacrificial “teccatil” over which waved black, color-rayed banners. With razor-sharp glass blades they slit open the tender breasts and offered up the smoking hearts of the children to the gods of rain. And on Tepeyac hill itself, legend has it, once stood the ancient “Cu,” or temple, of Tonantzin, the protectress of the Tononqui Indians, on the same site that Cristobal de Aguirre subsequently erected the chapel “La Capilla del Cerrito,” which he endowed with a fund to annually commemorate the appearance of the Virgen. Tonantzin, was the goddess of Earth and Corn, the equivalent of the Greek Ceres. Also she was Cioeactl—“Woman of the Snake,” and “Our Mother.” Being a Virgen, she became Mary; being associated with that original and oriental and primitive religious symbol, the snake, she became “Eve, our Mother, who was tricked by the serpent.” Legends cluster about her. She dressed, as a rule, in white, with her hair done into two small horns on her forehead. Across back and shoulder she carried a cradle in which slept the Divine Son. This cradle she would leave in the “triaquitl” among the village women. Upon looking within, they would find a hard stone, shaped like a lance-head, which would subsequently be used to sacrifice the human offerings in the “Cu” at the summit of the hill. “And all this was a sign that Tonantzin had been among us.”

This native life seems so patiently persistent, that it is no wonder that the crafty bigot of the time, Bishop Zumarraga, found difficulty in converting the people. Ultimately he had to make use of the Indian faith by identifying the Virgin Mary with the pagan goddess Tonantzin. The excuse for the erection of a Christian chapel on the site of her Cu, was found in the experience of a credulous Indian, Juan Diego, to whom the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared for the first time on the mainland of the Western Hemisphere, here on the Tepeyac Hill. On the spot where she appeared a fountain gushed forth. To enclose it has been constructed a delightfully symetrical church, a perfect gem of Mudjar art, with yellow and azure tiles set about a circular stucco-carved entrance with deep star-shaped windows. To this enclosed well come the halt and the main and the blind. The sulphurous waters gurgles up near the tiled floor; they are drawn forth by a steel chain and a copper bucket. The sick drink; the syphilitic pour the precious fluid over their sores, letting the residue fall back into the well; the crafty fill numerous small bottles which they peddle in their home towns at extortionate prices.

But though churches have sprung up and miracles have been worked, which astound the credulous, the old rites of Tonantzin linger on. The twelfth of December is the fourteenth day of the month of Atemutzil of the Nahua calendar when primitive dances were held and native festivities aroused joy and passion. These same dances survive today. They are now spontaneous, without the old pagan Satraps to direct them, being organized, as a rule by neighborhood groups probably once upon a time consanguineous. Sometimes these groups consist of a handful of people, sometimes they include several hundred persons from black-eyed three year old tots to grandmothers and great-grandmothers, for as the Talmudic proverb has it, “The woman of sixty runs to the sound of music like the girl of six.” The dancers wear sandals, short, bright-colored tunies, embroidered blou...
ses, and elaborate head-dresses of silver, beads, mirrors, feathers; and popped corn called monochtli, which is “like a snow-white flower.” At their belts dangle clinking tassels of shells, miniature cooking utensils, magic wind pebbles of the wind-god, Eheatl, carved obsideon, bits of claw-like jade. Music is provided by one-stringed violins and “teponastles”—queer drums. Special caricature actors clog in the center of a large ring. These wear odd headaddresses and skins of animals; opossums, bears, leopards, lions coyotes—perhaps a remnant of village totemism. A sort of black-faced monkey, called a huehue, scurries around, tripping up the dancers, swishing a lash at stray crows and destroying the solemnity of the affair, somewhat after the fashion of the “marshallih” in medieval Jewish weddings. The onlookers laugh uproarously but the dancers obviously try not to be amused; when they fall, they too feel the huehue’s lash. Hour after hour these dances continue—slow, solemn, a round of melancholy, unmelodious rhythm.

Here in Guadalupe are all the greatest popular veneration, ancient and modern. And so Guadalupe Hidalgo, the old-time Quatitlapán of the Aztecs, is to Mexico what Lourdes is to France or Loreto is to Italy. It is to modern Mexico what the great Cholula with its four hundred flaming pyramids looming over the Puebla plains, was to the early Toltecs. It is the Mexican Toledo, for in Guadalupe Hidalgo, every religion and every culture that has ever reached the upland plateau has left its indelible trace.

LA VILLA DE GUADALUPE

Muchos doce de Diciembre he caminado por la larga calzada bordeada de álamos de la ciudad de México a Guadalupe Hidalgo, la capital religiosa de México, mezclando con los ansiosos peregrinos en este río de móviles sombreros. En otra época la romería se hacía lentamente y de rodillas con largos rezos delante de cada uno de las catorce capillas esparcidas en la calzada, las siempre celebradas estaciones de la cruz, pero ahora se hace con cantos, empujones y regocijo.

Todo el camino está bordeado por puestos de vendedores de dulces y frutas comestibles; adornos, frutas y accesorios religiosos. Aquí hay grandes cierres tornados admirablemente y adornos con escenas milagrosas de la Biblia o con pinturas de la santísima virgen; gorditas de la virgen, pastelitos benditos del tamaño de una almendra hechos con harina de maíz grande de Cacahuatziotlán; rosarios de madera esculpida, de vidrio o de plata, medallas de aluminio con la estampa de la virgen; jemelos pequeños hechos de hueso no más grandes que un agujero de alcancía y con agujeritos del grueto de un alfiler por los cuales se ven imágenes aumentadas de pintorescos paneles locales. Pero aquí y allá hay también incongruentes cosas preocurrentes: ojos petrificados de venado con cordones de escarlata y pedacitos de madera de pino encajados en los lados para colgárselos del cuello como protección contra el mal de ojo; naranjas adornadas con peinetas de barbas rojas de maíz, ofertas pagana a la diosa indígena local Tonantzin; bastones de Apizaco tallados en forma de serpiente que antes fueron sombreros facaces de una antigua ceremonia.

Guadalupe Hidalgo es el mayor centro que queda del astro religioso de la antigua raza que barrida, se modificó y suavizó a través del catolicismo. Puebla, la segunda Meca de México, creación de los españoles, es crudamente colonial, sentimental y aparentemente moderna. Cholula con su atrevida pirámide a Quetzalcóatl derrumbado en olvidado asidamiento. El santuario de Ocotlán más allá de Tlaxcala, está oculto en un valle relativamente inaccesible, rodeado de montañas. El México indio se vuelve hacia Guad-