Part 1 - Pre-hispanic Era

In three installments we will present a history of Oaxaca, its people, traditions and activities. We begin in this article with the pre-Hispanic era, to be followed by the colonial and the modern eras.

For more than three millennia prior to the Spanish invasion in 1521, there flourished in what is now the State of Oaxaca, sixteen ethnic groups, each with its language, customs and traditions existed in this paradise of mountains, valleys and tropical forests embroidered with the silver strands of rivers and streams: - from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the north and west -- roughly to a line drawn from Veracruz to Acapulco; and from the Pacific to less than 100 kilometers from the Gulf of Mexico.

It was a quiet world by today's standards, no vehicular traffic, no large animals. The people lived in small settlements nestled among the pristine fertility of land and sea. In their mountain enclaves and fertile valleys, the people planted corn, beans and chocolate, tomatoes, chiles, squash, pumpkin and gourds. There were pineapples, avocados and zapotes.

Primary sources of meat were the tepezcuintle, the turkey (which was domesticated early on), other fowl, deer, jabalí, armadillo and iguana. The rivers yielded freshwater varieties of marine life and fishing was an important occupation in the coastal areas where the fruits of the sea were diverse and abundant.

Villages were basically extended family groups with a patriarchal form of communal authority. As the population grew, the political organization became more complex and sophisticated. Of the sixteen ethnias, two continued to expand in numbers and territory -- the Mixtecs and the Zapotecs.

The Mixtecs inhabited the southern portions of what are now the states of Guerrero and Puebla, moving south and eastward through Huajuapám, Tlaxiaco and Nochixtlán, to the Pacific Coast around Pinotepa and Jamiltepec, eventually arriving in the Central Valley of Oaxaca. They were prolific expansionists and builders, leaving behind numerous as yet unexplored sites throughout the region.

In the Sierra Norte Valley and spreading to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec were the Zapotecs, astronomers who knew the use of the zero, and builders who leveled a mountain top to build the ceremonial center now called Monte Albán. Other important sites were built at Mitla, Lambityeco, Dainzu, Yagul, Zaachila and Guiéngola, all in various stages of excavation and
restoration today. The Zapotec village of Teotitlán del Valle near the city of Oaxaca, known for its exquisite handwoven wool tapestries, is one of the oldest human settlements in México.

Sometime around the Thirteenth Century AD, the Mixtecs invaded the Central Valley, conquering the Zapotecs and adding their influence to the sites of Monte Albán and, most notably, Mitla, as well as influencing the language and customs. The other 14 groups were spread throughout the state and, while they did not achieve the numbers and influence attained by the Zapotecs and Mixtecs, they, nevertheless, represent an important factor in the historical and cultural panorama of Oaxaca.

From earliest times to the Conquest, the principal economic activities were agriculture, fishing, hunting and mining. Gold and silver were fashioned into exquisite adornments and in this activity the Mixtecs excelled, with their use of the lost wax process. Beautiful objects, for decoration and for everyday use, were elaborated from alabaster, turquoise, jadeite, marble, onyx and stone. Blessed with a tremendous variety of native clays, talented hands formed vessels and figures-utilitarian and objets d'art, natural and polychromed.

In the forests they hunted the plumes of the legendary quetzal. From nopal (kind of cactus), they carefully harvested the cochineal (tiny insect) from which they made the most precious red dye. From the rocks of the lonely Pacific coves, with infinite delicacy, they gathered small snails which were made to secrete their unique majestic purple dye, carefully returning them in order to preserve them for the next perilous visit.

The stately palm provided coconuts to refresh; its leaves to thatch houses built from its slender limbs; Petates - for sleeping, floor coverings, and hangings; tenates and baskets to store grains and small objects; hats to shade them from the tropic sun. Skins from the tigrillo, jaguar, deer, jabalí were used to keep out the cold of the mountain nights and for ceremonial dress.

The cotton native to the region, both the white and the naturally brown coyuchi (now called 'ecological'), was spun into thread using a slender rod called a malacate, then handwoven on a backstrap loom into fine fabric, gleaming white, or with colorful designs created from cochineal, caracol, añil, and other plants.

The bountiful maguey provided the thorn with which to embroider and sew the garments, ixtle fiber for mecatés (ropes), hamacas and other coarse fabrics. From the pencas of the maguey came the first fermentation, pulque, and the distillate mezcal. Gifts from the gods to chase the sorrows of the human condition.

Thousands of plants and herbs were utilized for medicines and physicks. Epidemics, measles, venereal diseases were unknown before The Conquest. It was essentially a healthy society, living a relatively peaceful existence, with occasional local conflicts and, increasingly, the campaigns of the Mixtecs.

While Oaxaca during this time was a remote area, it was by no means isolated. Commercial trade routes passed through from the north to the Mayan lands, Central and South America. Voyagers
arrived and departed for trade and exploration the length of the coast, where the major ports were in what are today Salina Cruz, Astata, Huatulco, Puerto Angel, Pinotepa Nacional.

All the products of the region were traded locally and in the distant markets to the north, as well as in the Orient, Peru, Chile and Colombia. Much of the trade was barter. Depending on the era, shells, gold, silver, feathers and dyestuffs constituted legal tender. All travel was on foot or by sea. Men and women transported goods by foot on their heads or by means of tumplines. Local custom dictated the rules in the market place and the "international trade" enriched the local economy.

This was Oaxaca for thousands of years until, in the mid-fifteenth century AD, the winds of change began to blow down through the pass from the north, into the Central Valley of Huaxyácac. The Aztecs arrived, quickly conquered the local inhabitants and established their outpost on the Cerro del Fortín. They exacted tribute from the Oaxacans. Trade with Tenochtitlán and the north increased as a consequence, but the basic fabric of living was not yet greatly changed by the presence of the Aztecas. There they remained for half a century until a more powerful invader from across the eastern sea vanquished them and descended upon this peaceful land.

**Part 2 - Colonial Era**

Welcome to the continuation of an overview of life in Oaxaca, past and recent. In this article, we will look at Oaxaca in the colonial period from 1521 to 1821, when Mexico received its independence from Spain.

The Aztec capital of Gran Tenochtitlan - and as a result, all Mexico - fell in August, 1521 to Hernan Cortes' handful of adventurers mounted on beasts never before seen in these lands, their skin impermeable to arrow and lance, carrying weapons which spat fire and death. Overnight the world changed.

Nothing could remain unaffected; every aspect of life was irrevocably altered from the time the Spaniards arrived.

In pre-hispanic times, when travelers went on foot or by sea, with man as the only beast of burden, the voyagers and the swift running messengers maintained an extremely efficient communications network. Local traders visited a different regional market daily and international merchants trekked the length and breadth of Mesoamerica and the Andean ranges. By the early Sixteenth Century the Aztecs controlled virtually all territories south and east of Tenochtitlan. Only Maya lands were not under Aztec domination. Nahuatl was the language spoken.

In Oaxaca, the Chinanteca were vassals of the Aztecs, working the fields and doing whatever the Aztecs demanded. The Zapotecs, too, paid tribute to them, and the various Mixtec groups continued their attempts to expand into ever more of the valleys and the coast, under less domination by Aztecs.
Thus, when it was known that invaders had arrived from the eastern sea, who might fulfill the ancient prophecies of the return of Quetzalcoatl, the Oaxacans watched and waited. When the powerful Aztecs were overcome, the Zapotecs sent delegations seeking alliances they hoped would benefit them. Cortes promptly sent Pedro de Alvarado and Gonzalo de Sandoval to the Pacific and into the Sierra looking for gold. Their reports led Cortes to reserve for himself the riches of this beautiful land, claiming the title of Marques del Valle of Oaxaca. On November 25, 1521, Francisco de Orozco arrived in the Central Valley to take possession in the name of Cortes.

In the Sierra Norte mountains around Oaxaca city, resistance was fierce and prolonged; the Mixes, adept in the mountainous terrain, never surrendered. In Coatzcoalcos, on the Mixtec coast, what is now the area around Pinotepa and Jamiltepec and other areas, the struggle continued. BUT, it was not force of arms which finally subdued Oaxaca. The priests and friars arrived in ever-greater numbers in their fiery zeal to eradicate paganism and subjugate, to Christ and Crown, all the benighted inhabitants of New Spain. Such was their perseverance that, in 1560, the Dominicans reported that the natives were completely docile and submissive. And for three hundred years, the area was eminently religious following, at least publicly, the tenents of the conquerors.

After the arrival of Francisco de Orozco, physical changes began immediately. In 1522 construction started on housing for the newcomers, under the administration of Cortes' brother-in-law, Juan Xuarez. The friars and settlers from across the Atlantic brought with them domestic animals unknown in this land of the sun: horses, cows, pigs, goats, sheep, chickens, ducks, geese, mules, oxen, along with their pet dogs and cats. The diet which had consisted principally of corn, beans, tomatoes, chiles and squash, with occasional fish, fowl and game from the hunt, increasingly included, for the wealthy, the flesh of these strange new beasts.

According to legend, one of Cortes' slaves brought with him three seeds which were planted in Tepeaca, and from that harvest came all the wheat in Mexico. Cortes himself, during his visit to Oaxaca in 1526, ordered the cultivation of wheat in the valley of Etla and the construction of mills. Others brought seeds and cuttings and transplanted fruit trees, vegetables and flowers. They taught the natives in Villa Alta to cultivate sugar cane. They planted mulberry trees and imported silkworms.

Padre Figueroa was sent as precentor for Oaxaca but his interests were wide ranging. He wrote a book of instructions on the cultivation of silk, including the techniques of dyeing. He explored the territory, discovering deposits of precious stones. He taught the potters to vitrify their clay, and he taught music and singing. In less than thirty years, Oaxaca was exporting seeds, plants, and gems to Central America and other parts of la Nueva España.

Although traditional mining technology was less efficient and produced metals of less purity and lower weight than those later exploited in northern Mexico, thousands of Oaxacans worked in local mines to cater to the insatiable demands of the Spaniards for gold and silver. Ships were built for the Pacific trade with the Philippines and the Orient; roads constructed for the new forms of transportation.
The majority of Spaniards came to Oaxaca for personal gain, many with the idea of making their fame and fortune quickly so as to return to their homeland. They looked upon this barbarian land and its sub-human inhabitants as hardships to be borne only temporarily.

In spite of the laws of Burgos, requiring more humane treatment of the indigenous peoples in New Spain, and exhortations by liberally inclined people, abuses and injustice were widespread. The "Indians" were overworked in unhealthy and unsafe conditions, receiving little or no pay and obliged to pay tribute. They were robbed of their money, adornments, food and seeds. The graves of their ancestors were desecrated in the search for treasure.

The invasion brought with it yet another consequence. It is estimated that when Cortes arrived in 1519 the native population of Mesoamerica was around 25,000,000. In 1605 - less than 100 years later - the total was slightly more than 1,000,000. The major cause for this incredible loss was diseases of European origin against which the natives had no immunity. Other important factors were overwork, social disorganization and loss of the will to live.

In Oaxaca, the few natives who survived were scattered in remote villages and continued to cultivate the land and work in the mines, usually for the masters of the haciendas. The new era was here to stay, and as a result of the mixture of the Spanish with the native population, within and outside of marriage, a new "race" evolved - the mestizo.

Spanish forms of government were imposed and important posts filled, first by Spaniards, then their sons and grandsons and eventually, toward the end of the 300-year colonial period, by mestizos. Society, politics and religion became "Europeanized". Schools and churches were erected for the instruction of the pagan and the education of the criollos (recognized sons of the foreigners).

Some of the most beautiful and impressive temples in the world were built by Oaxacan artists and craftsmen during this period: Santo Domingo, Etila, Tlacochahuaya, Teposcolula, Yanhuitlan and many others are still in use today and visited by tourists from around the world. Enormous mansions, with lush gardens and fountains, housed the rich and powerful. Aqueducts brought water from distant springs and streams to the Royal City of Oaxaca. Wool was introduced for weaving, along with the treadle loom which is still used by many artisans in the State.

During the 300 years of the Spanish domination, Oaxaca became the principal producer and exporter - to Spain - of the coveted cochineal dye. The silk industry grew to threaten Spanish interests in other areas and so the mulberry trees, which had been planted to feed the silkworms, were destroyed. The patterns of commerce were distorted to benefit the disastrous economic situation in Spain and all power and wealth was concentrated in the hands of the Spanish landowners and clergy, while the rest of Oaxaca became poorer. The constant siphoning of its resources to Spain caused a tremendous decline in the living conditions of the natives, while creating a new elite.

The reforms in Spain, the enlightenment of the American and French Revolutions, and the growing number of criollos clamoring for control of their interests, contributed to a restless second half of the Eighteenth Century. The legendary land of Huaxyacac (the original word for
Oaxaca, which the Spanish could not pronounce), was filled with new constructions, customs and many things which complemented its natural beauty. It also had a decimated and impoverished remnant of its original inhabitants, the beginnings of deforestation and erosion, and a growing mestizo population seeking its place in the hierarchy.

This was the panorama at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century when the Bell of Liberty began to peal and a great shout for independence rang throughout the land.

Next: 1821 and the situation from Independence to the last years of this millennium.

**Part 3 - Modern Era**

Let us continue our overview of life in Oaxaca, past and present. In this final section, we will review the period from Independence in 1821 through 1999 and the incalculable changes which these few years have seen.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries there came about cataclysmic changes throughout the world. The Age of Enlightenment, the rejection of the ancient feudal systems and the successful republican revolutions in France and in the former British colonies in America, all generated a longing for change in New Spain.

The mestizos and criollos now constituted a growing majority and they were no longer content to render unto Spain the benefits of their labor. The clergy also wished to retain their great riches with less control from Spain.

And so on September 15, 1810 in the village of Dolores in what is now the state of Guanajuato, the priest Miguel Hidalgo pronounced the great shout for Independence, exhorting the people to arms. The original intent was to create a constitutional monarchy still under the reign of the Spanish crown but with economic self-determination.

However, it soon became a popular revolution. The descendants of the original inhabitants, after three hundred years of virtual slavery, demanded independence for all and a voice in affairs. For more than ten years, battles raged, until on August 24, 1821 Spain signed the Treaty of Cordoba granting independence to its former colonies in America.

The first national government was set up by the conservative interests, creating Agustin Iturbide Emperor of México. The majority, however, rejected the dictatorship and, in November 1823, convoked the Constitutional Congress representing the 19 states, 4 territories and the Federal District which, on October 19, 1824 ratified the first constitution of the United States of México.

From the beginning of the struggle for Independence, Oaxaca was in the forefront of everything. To borrow words from the Old Testament, there were at that time truly giants in the land. Oaxacans were among the most effective of the combatants.

A few statistics:
19 June, 1821: General Antonio de Leon, of Huajuapam, proclaimed the separation of the Province of Oaxaca from Spain.

29 July, 1821: Troops under De Leon won the decisive battle against Spanish General Obeso at Etla and from that date Oaxaca considered itself independent - nearly one month before the signing of the Treaty.

(An interesting anecdote: The Oaxacan troops under De Leon entered victorious into the city of Oaxaca on July 31, 1821. At 1:00pm that day there was an earthquake in the area and the Coat of Arms of Castilla which had been displayed above the entrance of the Jesuit College was thrown to the ground.)

But the incredible brilliance of Oaxaca is yet to come.

1 June, 1823: De Leon declared the Free and Sovereign State of Oaxaca, one of The Federated states of Mexico - when the Mexican Federation did not yet exist.

6 July, 1823: The first Provincial Congress was convened and by July 28 had established the bases for the state constitution.

In March and July of 1824: The Organic Law of the State was published but the Constitution could not be signed until January 10, 1825 because it was necessary to wait until the National Constitution was written and ratified.

Oaxaca continued to be the pioneer legislature, not only in México but in all Latin America.

March 12, 1825: The Law which arranges the administration of Justice in the Tribunals of the State was published, combining in one document the first penal and first civil procedural codes in all Latin America.

In 1827 and 1828: In three sections, Oaxaca published its first Civil Code - the first in Ibero-America. Based on, but not a copy of, the Napoleonic Code of 1804. This is only one evidence of the brilliance of the Oaxacan literati of the Nineteenth Century. But let's mention a few other statistics from the beginning of Independence in Oaxaca.

1824: the total population of the Free and Sovereign State of Oaxaca was 457,504, of which approximately 17,000 - mostly mestizos and criollos - inhabited the capital city of Oaxaca. The city at that time had two principal plazas, the Zócalo and San Juan de Dios, now the Benito Juárez Market. The Zócalo was cobblestone with stone benches and ash and fig trees. The downtown area consisted of 15 streets laid out in a grid north-south and east-west, with oil lamps. Because of budget limitations, the lamps were lit only half the month, while the waxing moon provided illumination for the other fifteen days.

There were three hospitals, three apothecary shops, one granary, two jails and one theater called El Coliseo. There were two printshops (one of them government operated), one newspaper and two libraries (one public and that of Santo Domingo).
All the roads were unimproved dirt in poor condition, with the only acceptable being the road to Tehuantepec and Central America.

**November 1824:** the first normal school was founded and supported by the organization of Los Amigos de los Niños.

**January 1827:** The Instituto de Ciencias y Artes del Estado opened its doors, graduating its first lawyer in 1834 - Benito Juárez, future President of the Republic. The influence of this golden age in Oaxaca can readily be seen in the Reform Laws issued by Juárez in 1857 and during his administration.

The political goal was the creation of a yeoman economy of small farmers and industrialists with a single standard of legal justice through a democratically elected representative assembly, and legislation and institutions supporting these ideals abound. Other factors, however, were present which affected the reality.

For more than 100 years the State - and the country - were in a nearly continuous turmoil to establish the forms of administration and control. In the first twenty years there were at least twenty governors and nearly as many changes in the Presidency.

**In 1836 and 1847:** Two serious disruptions were the war with Texas and the Invasion by the United States. 1861 saw the intervention by France and the imposition of Maximilian Hapsburg as Emperor of México, aided by the conservatives who had been fighting for decades against any reform.

**Finally, in 1867:** the Republic expelled the foreign troops and the country could begin to recover from so many years of strife. Again, Oaxaca provided the leadership of the era. Benito Juárez, first as Governor of the State, then as President and Defender of the Republic, finally achieved what many call the second independence and some much-needed reforms were instituted. Unfortunately, Don Benito died in 1872 with much consolidation still to be accomplished.

**In 1876:** Porfirio Díaz, the great Oaxacan general and hero of many battles during the intervention, became President and Dictator until the Revolution of 1910 which again threw the country into bitter conflict for nearly twenty years.

During the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Oaxaca remained basically an agricultural community with little industry. The mineral deposits were exploited in a few communities on a small scale. Roads were built, but the coming of the automobile changed the pattern of travel, leaving villages, which had been important in earlier epochs, totally outside the new communication network.

The railroad connected the city of Oaxaca with México City but cut it off entirely from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and its industrial port at Salina Cruz.
Centuries of deforestation resulted in areas of widespread erosion, particularly in the Mixteca. As early as 1900, people in search of a better life began emigrating to the cities, to agricultural areas in the north and to the United States.

**Today:** numerous attempts continue to rescue and improve the technology of the past for the production of silk and cochineal, without success. There is very little industry in the State: the cement plant and the Oil Refinery in the Isthmus, the Industrial Parks in Tuxtepec and Santo Domingo, while representing commercial enterprise, are almost all on a local level, with many of the consumer goods brought in from outside the State.

The principal industry, since early in this century, is tourism. With more than 500 kilometers of Pacific Coast beaches, a treasure house of archeological zones, colonial architecture, mountains, valleys, a perfect climate, Oaxaca is a paradise for the visitor. And its infrastructure supports tourism. Impressive hotels, restaurants with exquisite regional and international cuisine, folkloric entertainment, an abundance of popular art and handicrafts, modern airports and the new superhighway to Mexico, combine to make the tourist service industry an important source of employment for Oaxacans and an attraction for visitors from around the world.

Oaxaca remains one of the richest states in the world - in history, culture, tradition, natural beauty, unexploited mineral deposits and other natural resources. It is also one of the poorest - in average income, in modern and efficient services of water, drainage and electricity, health care, and, unbelievably considering its past brilliance, in quality of education.

Oaxaca has all the raw material to build a future glorious not only in words, ideas and courage but in an improved economy and quality of life for all its citizens. All we need is dedication and honest application of the means at hand to enter the next millennium in a style worthy of our past.