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## Photo essay brings forgotten people to light

por Joe M. Arce y Joe Cardona-Faus

They are the forgotten ones, even among their own people in Mexico and the United States. They are the Mexihcahs (or Mexicas), who are also known as the Aztecs.

History books would lead one to believe that they disappeared completely under the violent rule of Hernán Cortés and his men, but according to photographer Wesley Billingslea, they number anywhere from 5 million to 18 million in today's Mexico.

The plight of the Mexihcahs has been a driving passion for Billingslea, a San Jose, Calif., resident who has documented their culture through pictures. He will bring an exhibit of black-and-white photographs of the Mexihcahs to a special exhibit at the Guadalupe Cultural Center. The exhibit will run from the first week of October through the first week of November.

"Mexihcahs: Keepers of the Fire," is both a photo essay and a personal testament to the Mexihcahs' cultural vibrancy, and to the challenges and obstacles they face in a society that isn't aware of their existence.

Gilbert Guerrero, associate director of education and youth development at GCI, confessed to some having been confused about the Mexihcahs before learning of Billingslea's work.

But "this show is about the Aztecas, a group we always learned about," he said. "When I saw this, I thought, 'Wow! They're still alive!'"

Fittingly enough, Guerrero was surfing the web when he came upon a site that featured Billingslea's exhibit. A former history teacher, Guerrero became more excited as he read more. In one serendipitous moment, he'd found a vehicle that brought together all his ideas about teaching culture in one exhibition, he said. "If I had wanted to design a project myself, this is what I would have designed."

The detailed exhibit includes of 25 of Billingslea's photos, as well as handmade clothing like that of a Mexihcah warrior, and a hand-carved drum. Text panels describe the items in English, Spanish, and Nahuatl.

In addition to the exhibit, the cultural center plans a series of seminars and talks for area schools, as well as a seminar on the Nahuatl language spoken by the Mexihcahs and other indigenous groups. Sergio Ocelocoatl Ramirez, a Mexihcahs priest, will attend the opening and provide valuable insight into the Mexihcahs culture. Eight of Ocelocoatl's pen-and-ink drawings are part of the exhibit.

"This is going to give us an opportunity to learn a lot about ourselves," Guerrero said.



Photo by Billingslea

The exhibit will coincide with Hispanic Heritage Month events, including GCI's annual Day of the Dead shrines. "It was something we were looking to do in October because there are a lot of things happening in Kansas City," he said. "We'll be having conferences focusing on our culture and education. We see a hunger for people wanting to know about our own culture and our own traditions."

Billingslea shares Guerrero's hopes for the exhibit. "We hope that people gain a better insight to some of their heritage ... and begin to break some of the stereotypes," he said. "There's a stereotype out there that (indigenous people) are not as intelligent, not as successful — and people both in America and Mexico view them in a negative light."

Billingslea said he chose the black-and-white format because he feels that for pure emotional content, there is no better form. "I love black-and-white (photography). For me it has something about it that I think is magical."

Billingslea trained under one of the world's masters of the West Coast School of black-and-white photography, who in turn had worked with an American master of the art, Ansel Adams.

For Billingslea, the process of taking a photo doesn't end with the shot itself. Instead, it continues with the magic that takes place in the darkroom.

"In my opinion, if you don't print the image, you miss half of the artistic vision," he said. "I have the ability to complete what I see in my head when I look through the view lens in the darkroom, and manipulate (the processing) a little bit to try to evoke what ever emotion I felt at that moment."

Billingsley spent nine months in the dark room, manipulating and refining his photos of the Mexihcahs until he was satisfied with the results.

"I spent night and day working on these images," he said. "I'm very proud of them. I'm very honored to have had the experiences that I had with those individuals."

Billingslea's passion for the Mexihcahs developed during the time he spent living in Mexico City, in Coyacan, the colonia where Frida Khalo once lived and where there is still a thriving community of artists.

He became acquainted with some of the Mexihcahs and was accepted by them. Because of those friendships, he was taken to places that not many people have been privileged to see.

Some of those places dated to pre-Columbian times. According to Billingslea, there are an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 ancient cities and pyramids in Mexico. Of those, the Mexican government has only unearthed about 1,600.

At any given time, research continues on about 500 sites, but the work is hampered by lack of funding and a shortage of archeologists.

"I've had some amazing experiences," Billingslea said. "I've met people and seen some of these ancient ruins and artworks that the average person has not had the chance to see."

Billingslea said he's methodical about gaining the confidence of the people who sit for him. "Some of the photos are the consequences of three days talking to them before they trusted me enough to let me shoot the picture. It has to feel right for me and right for them, because for me it's all about the experience (of taking the photo)."

He added that he's pleased and honored by the reception that his work has received from the Mexihcahs. The Mexihcahs have a strong desire to let the world know their history, and they're gratified that the project will be reaching more and more people.

“They’re happy to have someone tell the world their story and (let people know of) their existence and their struggles and challenges,” he said.

Billingslea sees a positive outcome of his exhibit, though it’s one that’s slow in coming. He notes that the Nahuatl language is spoken fluently by many of the elders. There is now a concerted effort to pass the language on to younger Mexihcahs, who are increasingly making Spanish and English their primary languages.

Scholars have assembled and printed dictionaries of the language and there are college courses that keep the traditions alive. Brief lessons on a number of websites also make Nahuatl accessible for school children.

Billingslea is hopeful that his work will not come across as controversial or as having a moral message to impart.

“I’m not making a judgment about what happened (during the Conquest), about whether it was right or wrong,” he said. “I want people to have accurate and interesting information so they can make up their own minds — and then take the next step to find out more about the Mexihcahs people and other indigenous cultures.”

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