

Ignacio Fizeo Gonzalez Velazquez

Silver Gelatin Print, 2001



Keepers of the Fire

The struggle to preserve our indigenous heritage lives on

PHOTOGRAPHY Wesley Billingslea

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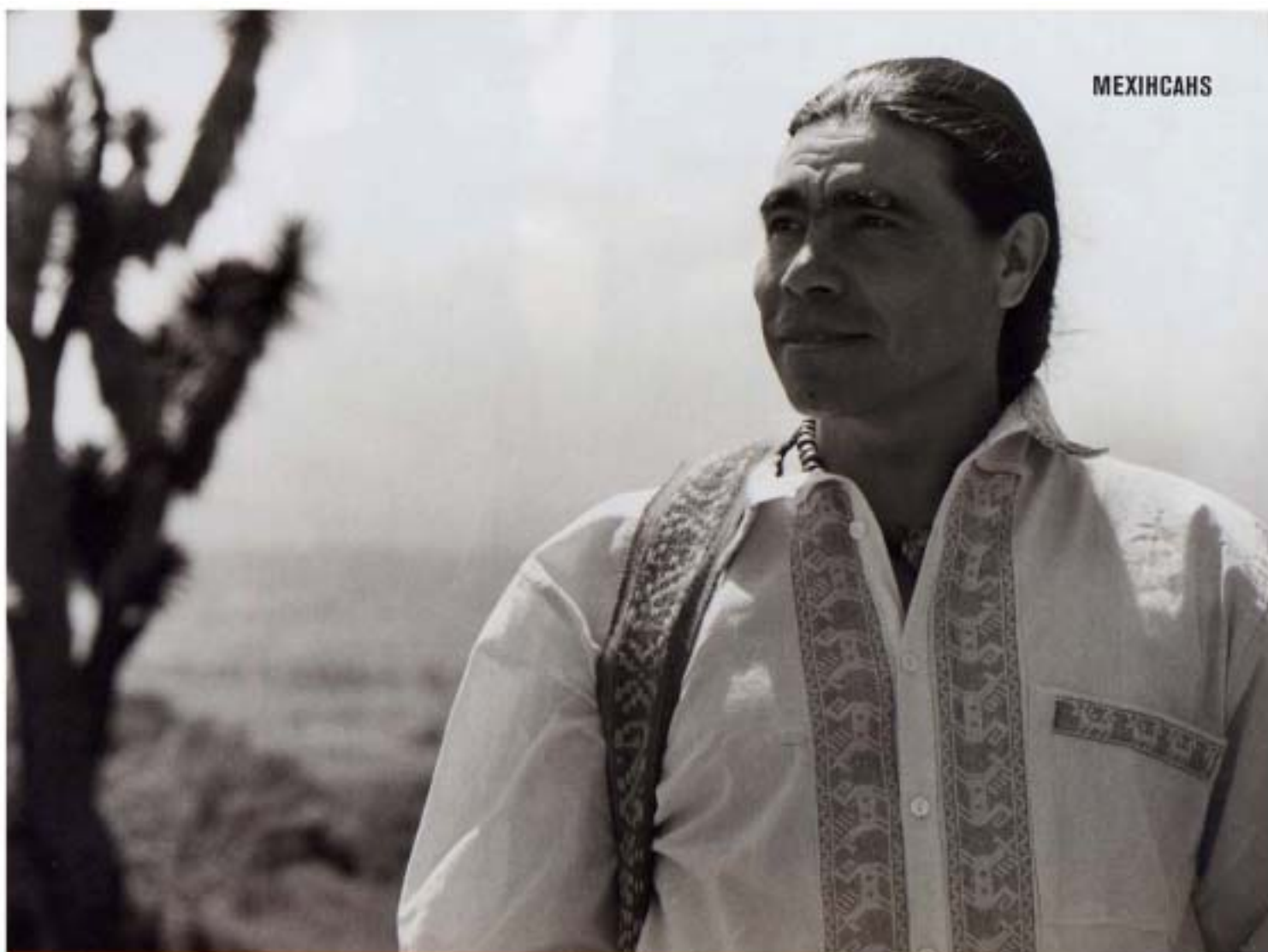
Centuries of government oppression and the resulting struggles for basic human rights have taken an unfathomable toll on Mexico's indigenous population. The truth, however, about the depths of this suffering and the accurate historical accounts of people who once ruled this region have often gone untold. While life continues to be anything but easy for the descendants of a once powerful and respected people, nothing has been able to diminish their enduring spirit. And it is this strong will and a life steeped in tradition that allows them to dream of a day when they will once again flourish under their native sun.

Lupe and Yaopamitl

Selenium Toned Print, 2001

“Maria Guadalupe Torres Segura and her four-year-old daughter, Yaopamitl. Mazatl is the father (in the “3 Young Warriors” photo). This photo was taken in Malinalco, Mexico. A very sacred and amazing place, several hours outside of Mexico City.” – WB





WHO ARE THE MEXHICAH?

We are the descendents of the great Mexhichah people (referred to by most today as Aztecs). We are here to perpetuate our face, our identity, and our culture. A culture that despite 512 years of invasion, massacre, persecution, still flowers and lives. Despite all of this we have managed to conserve our traditions, customs, and our language.

In the past we were free, strong, autonomous. We developed a very advanced culture. Our ancestors took science and the arts to the highest levels. All of our people were educated. They knew how to read and write. The fruits of the land were for everyone and belonged to everyone. We were strong and rich, but, most importantly, we were free. With the arrival of the invading Spaniards and Europeans, we were submitted to armed aggression. We have now known the role of the defeated. We don't live, we survive. Our heritage was destroyed at its peak. The city of Tenochtitlan was razed. Nothing was left. The remaining stones were used to build the grand churches and palaces of the Spanish. Our land was taken from us and we were put to work on our land, but as slaves, like animals. We were given the foreign names of the invaders.

Despite all this we have managed to preserve our language, culture, and traditions. We are alive! And we should not forget our glorious past. He who doesn't know where he came from, doesn't know where he's going. He who doesn't know who he is, doesn't know what he wants and is lost. We know where we come from. We know who we are. We know what we want. We are fighting to recover all our culture, relics, riches, and past glory. We must never forget who we are.

– Maestro Sergio Ocelocoatl Ramirez

Sergio Ocelocoatl Ramirez

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“The Maestro, my brother. Photo was taken in Acozac, Mexico, a very beautiful and sacred place. High up on a mountain. Difficult to see but the volcanoes are in the background. Cactus tree is considered sacred to the Mexhichah.” – WB



Kochiquetzal & Yocoxna

Selenium Toned Print, 2002

“Beautiful young girls, committed to learning of their ancestry.” – WB

3 Young Warriors

Silver Gelatin Print, 2001

"Tizoc, Quetzalcuahtli and Mazatl. All great friends of mine.
The next generation of Mexihcah, very dedicated to their way of life." – WB



Gerardo Toto Toto

Selenium Toned Print, 2000

“He is the younger brother to the twins. He is much larger and taller than his older brothers. A fierce dancer who loves to laugh and tell jokes.”



FIGHTING FOR CHANGE AND KNOWLEDGE

I view myself and my photography as part of a bigger collaborative effort in conjunction with the Mexihcah, which enables them to tell their story and voice their own opinion. Our goal is for the Mexihcah to share their history and culture in their own words. Unlike the history books that we've read and what we've learned in school, this isn't some professor, academic, or archeologist telling their story. What I really hope that these photos accomplish is change people's perceptions, change some of the prejudices, and really just inform and educate. The average American doesn't know much about the Aztecs. A lot of Latinos know a little bit about them, and a lot of that, in my opinion, is mistruth. So I hope that my work can inform both audiences.

-Wesley Bivingsia

Ome Tochtli: The Twin

Selenium Toned Print, 2000

“He has a twin brother. Both are strong dancers and live life to the fullest. This photograph was taken at the zocalo in Mexico City at a big celebration. There were probably 50,000 people in the zocalo that day. He knelt down in front of Templo Mayor and I moved very close to him so you would not see any other people around us.” – WB





Resistance

Silver Gelatin Print, 2003

"The Indigenous Council of Oaxaca was formed by a number of communities in the state of Oaxaca. They banded together in order to peacefully protest for water, healthcare, education and roads. The Oaxacan State Government has responded with violence and prison terms for their leaders. Sad, very sad." – WB