

Mexican Independence Day: 16 De Septiembre

By: Peter Hightower

"My children, this day comes to us a new dispensation. Are you ready to receive it? Will you be free? Will you make the effort to recover from the hated Spaniards the lands stolen from your forefathers three hundred years ago?"

Such were the stirring words of the aging Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla in the pre-dawn morning of September 16th, 1810 as he rallied his destitute parishioners to the town square. Soon a crowd of several hundred had gathered to his battle cry. His cry, or "Grito" rang out through the hills and countryside of Guanajuato. Armed with hoes, machetes, faith and defiance his group began a slow march toward Mexico City gathering adherents with snowball-like velocity. He marched at their head carrying two flags. One bearing the Virgin Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico, the other a red, white and green banner which soon became the symbol of the newly born nation.



Within days they had sacked the nearby cities of San Miguel, Celaya and Guanajuato. From there they continued their march South eventually taking control of Toluca and Mexico City. His rag-tag army/mob numbered over 100,000 when he marched on Guadalajara. They soon ran into set-backs though and Hidalgo was forced to surrender supreme command of his army to a friend and co-conspirator Ignacio Allende. The following Spring, Hidalgo was ambushed and turned over to the Spaniards. After four months in captivity he was shot as a traitor with his hand gallantly placed over his heart. Though he survived less than a year after igniting the revolution, he is credited to this day as The Father of Mexico. His words and actions sparked a revolution that took fourteen years to become reality. His name commands a Washington-like reverence from the Mexican people.

Eventually all four of the leaders of the revolution were captured and beheaded including Hidalgo and Allende. Their heads were displayed publicly until 1824 when Mexico finally gained full independence from Spain. The central state of Guanajuato is literally and figuratively "The Heart" of Mexico. It is known today as "La Cuna de la Revolución" (The Cradle of the Revolution). The tiny village of Dolores has since been renamed Dolores Hidalgo in his honor. It's sister city San Miguel is known today as San Miguel de Allende and has ironically

become a Mecca for art-loving expatriates, mostly from the United States. Missionaries in the Leon Mission will have ample opportunity to learn about the Mexican Revolution while serving in and around these towns in the hill country just outside of Leon.



Even though Guanajuato is the Cradle of the Revolution, their Independence Day is celebrated nationwide and even among some Mexican communities in the US. Americans can attend Diez y

Seis de Septiembre festivities in cities and towns throughout the Southwest.

But the biggest celebration of all takes place outside the Presidential Palace on Zocalo Plaza in Mexico City. Hundreds of thousands flock to the event each year. The ceremony begins with the singing of the national anthem. The president then leads the massive group in what is called “El Grito de la Independencia” or The Independence Shout. He rings Hidalgo’s bell then shouts “Viva Mexico” to which the crowd responds “Viva!”. He then waves a giant flag once or twice. This is repeated three times. The same process is followed for each of the heroes of the revolution. He cries out “Viva Miguel Hidalgo!” “Viva Ignacio Allende”, etc. The crowd responds each time. After the short ceremony the president declares “Let the fiesta begin!” The president then leads the group in the singing of various patriotic songs. Afterward they can attend one of many festivals with rides, watch fireworks displays or attend a parade.



By law, the mayor of each town or city leads a similar ceremony on a smaller scale. He may lead a procession of followers through the streets of his town while they shout “Viva!, Viva Mexico!” Many will even dress in period clothing and bring along torches, pitchforks and machetes, banging them overhead between each shout. Local celebrations also include smaller parades, folkloric dances, school plays and fireworks. Missionaries in most areas are cautioned to remain indoors during these festivities as Mexicans are not known for their restraint when it comes to parties. After the festivities begin, the streets will soon be swimming in paper wrappers from firecrackers and bottle-rockets. Some revelers may even fire live ammo.

Church members in Mexico join in some of these celebrations. Most however, prefer to attend festivities with fellow ward members. Most wards hold a folk dance or banquet at the ward building to commemorate the event. Almost every Mexican woman and girl has a special traditional dress that is saved for just such occasions. All elementary school age children are taught the typical folk dances of their region and many will take advanced dance classes when they’re a little older. Thus, every ward has enough talent to stage a pretty good show. The missionaries will most certainly be invited since they won’t be doing much tracting on this particular afternoon. So, be sure to ask your missionary what he *did* do on the “Diez y Seis” because it for sure wasn’t missionary work.

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Traditional folk dancers at the State Capitol Building in Austin, Texas.



Elementary school girls in festive Mexican attire.