



Oaxaca Times

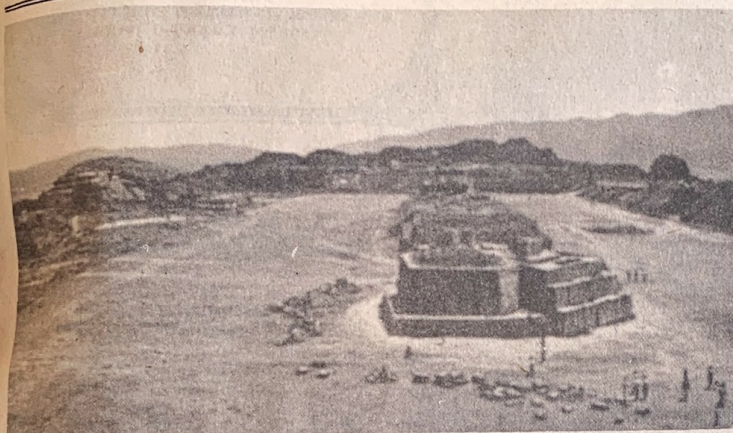
Oaxaca's English Tourist Newspaper

Vol. 2 # 21

OAXACA, OAX.

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THE GREAT OAXACA VALLEY



barren are the mountains that dominate the town of Mitla. These mountains are of particular interest to us, because it is here that the first signs of human occupation in the region were found in caves and rocky outcroppings, dating back some 8,000 years.

THE BEGINNING OF URBANIZATION

It is not until about 2,500 years before Christ when man began his life as a tiller of the soil and started to build small villages. A notable change had occurred: he had left his nomadic life and become sedentary on the land he cultivated. At the same time he began to produce ceramic and other implements. It was during this period that he began to work in obsidian, hard stone, shells brought from the ocean and magnetite. Many of these objects were exported to far-off places. There is evidence of rectangular, wattle and daub huts with stone foundations, packet earth floors, and one entrance. Later, adobe was used for the walls and stucco covered the floors. In this period the first public constructions began to appear, such as temples and "government" buildings. Many sites from this long period have been found, but they are of little interest to the visitor. It is not until the end of this period that a site appeared worthy of a prolonged visit: San Jose Mogote. Aside from several later buildings in ruins, we find a huge mound build of stones, a clear indication of what we will later see in Monte Alban I; that is can be dated towards the middle of the first millennium before Christ. Inside it a bas-relief of a figure of a man, accompanied by hieroglyphs, was found in the valley, and an indication of a civilization. Likewise, it is worth to visit the small museum of San Jose Mogote where there is a reconstructed wall containing the oldest adobes in Mesoamerica. With their rounded rather than rectangular shape, they resemble

The central valleys of Oaxaca enjoy a pleasant climate, except during the dry season from Feb. to May. Even in the rain they possess a natural beauty which at certain times spots becomes breathtaking. Geographically, the valleys form a closed world, surrounded by high mountains with no natural passes and crossed only by small rivers. This geographic isolation brought to bear during the long course of Oaxaca's ancient history and allowed a succession of cultures throughout millennia with relatively little external influence. Thus we find a continuous and unified history, at least from the beginning of urbanization, in the explored ruins and the three hundred or more known but as unstudied ruins, all following the same phases. We can affirm that from the beginning of the Christian era

or a few centuries earlier, the inhabitants were Zapotec. But we do not know who the people who inhabited the area in the preceding millennia were or what language they spoke. The people normally considered to be Zapotec, who still make up the majority of the population of the valleys are called ben zaa in their language which means "people of the clouds" the name Zapotec probably originated in Nahuatl.

The Great Oaxaca Valley is, in fact, made up of three valleys joined in the center precisely where the capital, the most important ancient site of the region, is today. The humid lowlands of the valley are fertile, while the high ground on the east edge of the Tlacoalula Valley, the easternmost of the three valleys, is more or less desert. Even more

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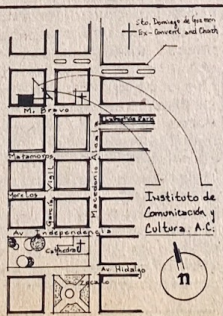
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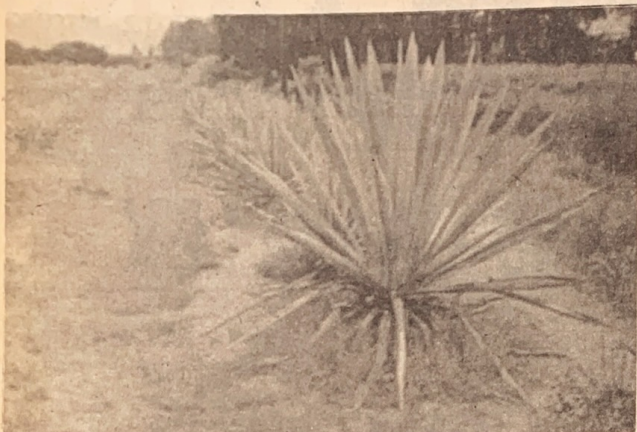
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THE MAGUEY



Maqueys were a source of medication even before the Conquest, but from that time on new therapeutic methods for sickness brought over by the Spaniards replaced them. *was natural medicine* Historians and scientists have made a point of listing ailments that can be treated with maguey, which range from wounds to diabetes.

In the construction field, these plants are used to make beams, roof tiles, bridges over streams, guttering and mixing buckets.

Of Mexico's 30 thousand plant species, the maguey is one of the most useful for human beings. It grows comfortably on high terrain exposed to scant or irregular rainfall, frequent frosts and droughts, as well as on windy mountainsides.

After a prolonged maturity process, the agave, as the cactus family to which the maguey belongs, is commonly known, signals its approaching death with a brief but spectacular blooming period; a stalk with yellow flowers that can reach up to a height of 10 meters, shoots up from the heart of the plant. After the flowering is over, which may last anywhere from two to four months, the agave dies.

The maguey was a serviceable part of everyday life in Mexico long before the Spanish set foot on this continent. Its exotic shapes and the properties attributed to it quite amazed them. Mezcal, however, was not produced until the colonial era, for there is no indication that Mesoamerican Indians were familiar with distilled liquor before the Conquest. In fact this process, according to some documents of viceregal New Spain, was introduced in America

Spain was introduced in America by the Iberians in the 16th century.

The preparation cycle for mezcal starts with the cultivation of the "agave mezcalero" (Agave Mezcal) which can be planted during any season. When ripe, it is stripped of its pencas (the

name given to the leaves) and roots, to leave only a pineapple-shaped core. The cores are baked in underground ovens until they turn a reddish color and their inner flesh is tender. The next step is to pile them up and mash them with special wooden instruments. They expel a sweet sap full of particles from the flesh of the cores that is placed in leather filters to start fermentation.

The fermented liquid is poured into clay urns and heated slowly in a closed oven. The boiling contents give off vapors that condense and drip down via a maguey leaf of a wooden trough to the outside of the oven.

The liquor obtained does not always have the same alcoholic content, and manufacturers mix one distillation with another until they obtain a product of between 44 and 50 degrees. Their small factories are installed at the bottom of ravines, to collect water from the streams.

Types of mezcal vary with the method of preparation, degrees of distillation and ingredients added to give a characteristic flavor.

The most common one is the plain mezcal, made by following the above mentioned process. Another popular one, known as corriente, comes from the so-called "stumpy maguey". Then there is the flojo

(weak) or cola (tail-end) kind.

Mezcal is manufactured and drunk all over Mexico, but Oaxaca is the true home of mezcal. Renowned among this state's large selection is the gusano or worm type which in fact, has one or several worms from the maguey plant happily marinated in the alcohol. It is traditionally bottled in small black clay flasks.

Mezcal is topped as an aperitif served in tiny clay jugs, along with salt and lemon. Quite the nicest preamble to any meal particularly Oaxacan food.

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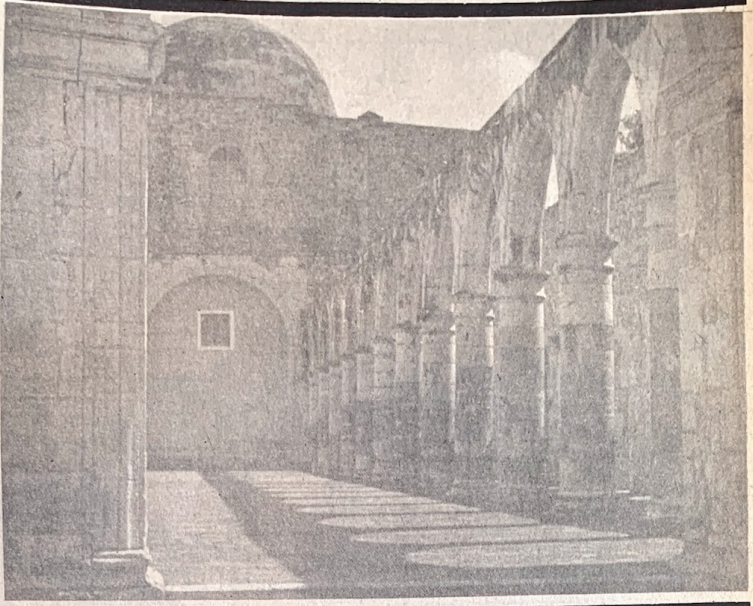
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WHY CUILAPAN ?

On the right bank of the Atoyac river they are two interesting sites fairly close together, for those who have the time to visit them. Cuilapan is well known for its splendid monastery and church which were begun in the 16th century. These indicate the importance of the place at the end of the pre-hispanic era when it was inhabited by Mixtecs (even today the Mixtec language is still spoken there) who had encroached upon the Zapotec world. An extensive prehispanic city is to be found on the other side of the Valiente river, though it has been little explored. However, at the beginning of this century an important tomb was found there which perform the nucleus around which a pyramid was build. Its architecture is most unusual in Mexico and reminds us, in a more modest form, of the tomb in Palenque, in that pyramid was constructed as a consequence of the tomb. also in Cuilapan is wide access stairway with nine steps of varying widths. It leads to a spacious antechamber with lateral niches. from there one passes under a magnificent stone lintel into the tomb itself. The roof of the chamber is partly flat and partly angular and has a niche at the back. All this indicates that it was a Zapotec tomb, probably from period IV. Take a little time from your vacation and visit Cuilapan it's worth it!





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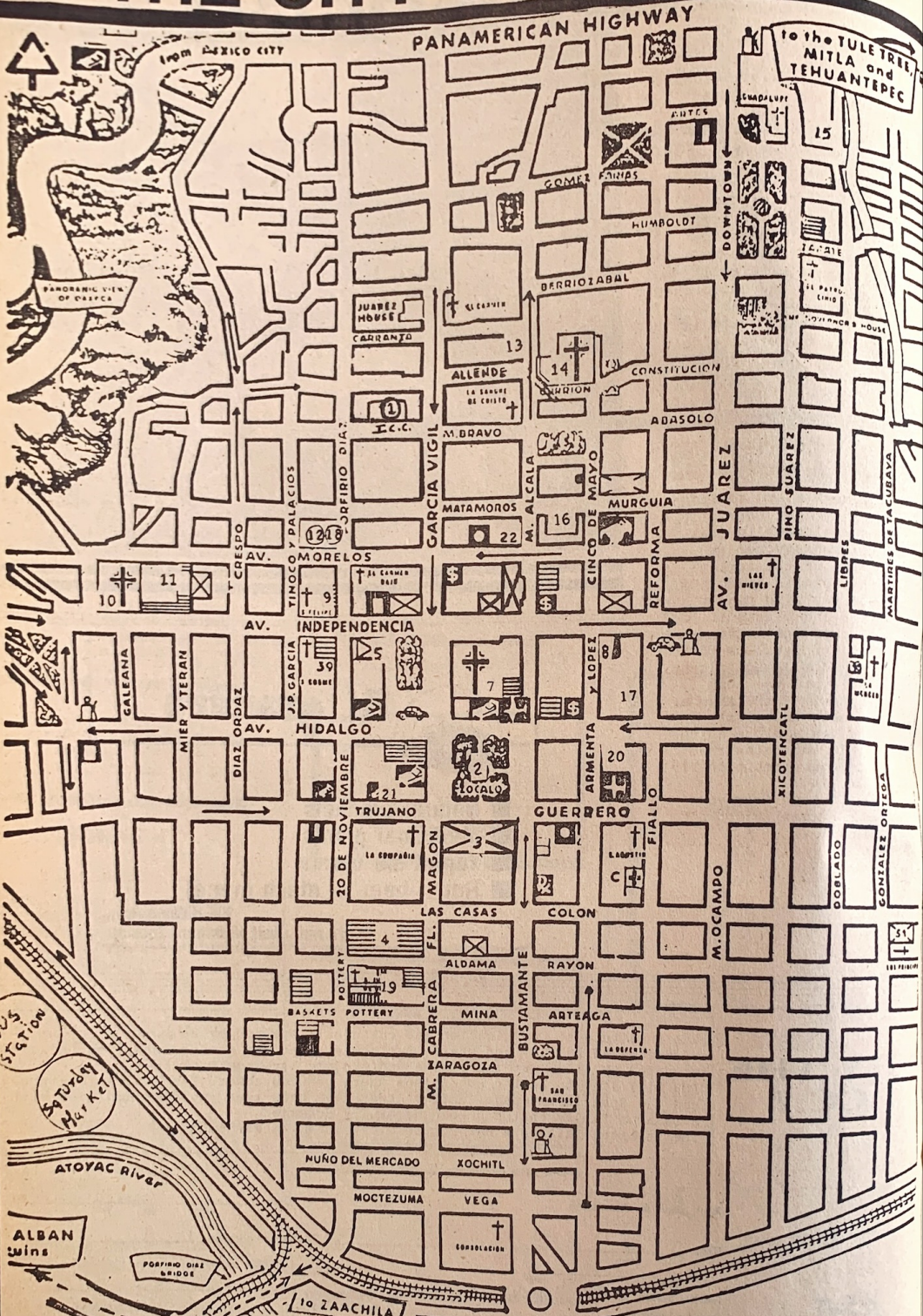
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