

## **A Brief History of Cinco de Mayo**

### **Setting The Stage**

The battle at Puebla in 1862 happened at a violent and chaotic time in Mexico's history. Mexico had finally gained independence from Spain in 1821 after a difficult and bloody struggle, and a number of internal political takeovers and wars, including the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and the Mexican Civil War of 1858, had ruined the national economy.

Cinco de Mayo's history has its roots in the French Occupation of Mexico. The French occupation took shape in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War of 1846-48. With this war, Mexico entered a period of national crisis during the 1850's. Years of not only fighting the Americans but also a Civil War, had left Mexico devastated and bankrupt. During this period of struggle Mexico had accumulated heavy debts to several nations, including Spain, England and France, who were demanding repayment. Similar debt to the U.S. was previously settled after the Mexican-American War. On July 17, 1861, President Benito Juárez issued a moratorium in which all foreign debt payments would be suspended for a brief period of two years, with the promise that after this period, payments would resume.

The English, Spanish and French refused to allow President Juarez to do this, and instead decided to invade Mexico and get payments by whatever means necessary. The Spanish and English eventually withdrew, but the French refused to leave. France was eager to expand its empire at that time, and used the debt issue to move forward with goals of establishing its own leadership in Mexico. Their intention was to create an Empire in Mexico under Napoleon III. France took action on its own to install Napoleon III's relative, Archduke Maximilian of Austria, as ruler of Mexico. Some have argued that the true French occupation was a response to growing American power and to the Monroe Doctrine (America for the Americans). Napoleon III believed that if the United States was allowed to prosper indiscriminately, it would eventually become a power in and of itself.

### **Mexico Confronts The Invasion**

France invaded at the gulf coast of Mexico along the state of Veracruz (see map) and began to march toward Mexico City, a distance today of less than 600 miles. Although American President Abraham Lincoln was sympathetic to Mexico's cause, and for which he is honored in Mexico, the U.S. was involved in its own Civil War at the time and was unable to provide any direct assistance.

Marching on toward Mexico City, the French army encountered strong resistance near Puebla at the Mexican forts of Loreto and Guadalupe. Lead by Mexican General Ignacio Zaragoza Seguin, a smaller, poorly armed militia estimated at 4,500 men were able to stop and defeat a well outfitted French army of 6,500 soldiers, which stopped the invasion of the country. The victory was a glorious moment for Mexican patriots, which at the time helped to develop a needed sense of national unity, and is the cause for the historical date's celebration.

Unfortunately, the victory was short lived. Upon hearing the bad news, Napoleon III had found an excuse to send more troops overseas to try and invade Mexico again, even against the wishes of the French populace. 30,000 more troops and a full year later, the French were eventually able to depose the Mexican army, take over Mexico City and install Maximilian as the ruler of Mexico.

Maximilian's rule of Mexico was also short lived, from 1864 to 1867. With the American Civil War now over, the U.S. began to provide more political and military assistance to Mexico to expel the French,

after which Maximilian was executed by the Mexicans - his bullet riddled shirt is kept at the museum at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City. So despite the eventual French invasion of Mexico City, Cinco de Mayo honors the bravery and victory of General Zaragoza's smaller, outnumbered militia at the Battle of Puebla in 1862.

### **Today's Celebration**

For the most part, the holiday of Cinco de Mayo is more of a regional holiday in Mexico, celebrated most vigorously in the state of Puebla. There is some limited recognition of the holiday throughout the country with different levels of enthusiasm, but it's nothing like that found in Puebla.

Celebrating Cinco de Mayo has become increasingly popular along the U.S.-Mexico border and in parts of the U.S. that have a high population of people with a Mexican heritage. In these areas the holiday is a celebration of Mexican culture, of food, music, beverage and customs unique to Mexico.

Commercial interests in the United States and Mexico have also had a hand in promoting the holiday, with products and services focused on Mexican food, beverages and festivities, with music playing a more visible role as well. Several cities throughout the U.S. hold parades and concerts during the week following up to May 5th, so that Cinco de Mayo has become a bigger holiday north of the border than it is to the south, and being adopted into the holiday calendar of more and more people every year.

## Anticipation Guide: Cinco de Mayo

Answer these T/F questions (on the left) before you read the history of Cinco de Mayo and then answer again after you read to see how you did!

Before

After

1. Cinco de Mayo is a major celebration in Mexico every year.
2. Benito Juárez was the president of Mexico at the time.
3. Mexico was also fighting with the US in the Mexican American War.
4. The US President was Abraham Lincoln and he was sympathetic to Mexico.
5. Mexico was very wealthy at this time because of the great year of crops.
6. Mexico had incurred war debts to France, Spain and England.
7. President Juárez suspended all war payments in 1861.
8. All three countries to which Mexico was indebted invaded Mexico to get their money back.
9. The English and the Spanish refused to leave Mexico until Pres. Juárez repaid them.
10. France was under the rule of Napoleon III at this time.
11. President Lincoln sent all of the troops that he could to help Mexico when France invaded.
12. France's intentions were to create an Empire in Mexico & install Napoleon's relative Maximilian of Austria.
13. Gen. Ignacio Zaragoza was led a large, well-equipped army and was in charge of defending Puebla.
14. France's army was well fitted and well over 6500 men.
15. The Mexicans defeated the French and this helped develop a sense of national unity.
16. The Mexican victory was short lived and Napoleon sent 30,000 troops to invade Mexico.
17. Maximilian ruled over Mexico for more than twenty years and then was executed.
18. Cinco de Mayo is popular in cities with a high population of people with Mexican Heritage.