



## Cinco de Mayo

Those of us who live in California are probably familiar with the Mexican holiday, Cinco de Mayo. Cinco de mayo means 5<sup>th</sup> of May in Spanish and it commemorates an important battle in Mexico's history. Many believe that this is Mexican Independence Day. Mexican Independence Day is actually September 16 and celebrates Mexico's independence from Spain and was declared more than 50 years before the Battle of Puebla.

Benito Juarez, a lawyer and member of the Indigenous Zapotec tribe in Mexico, was elected president in 1858. He was the first president of Mexico of indigenous origin. After years of internal struggles in Mexico, the country was in financial ruin and Juarez was forced to default on debt payments to European governments. In response, France, Britain, and Spain sent naval forces to Veracruz, Mexico and demanded repayment. Spain and Britain negotiated with Mexico and withdrew their forces. At that time, France was ruled by Napoleon III, and he was trying to carve an empire out of Mexican territory. In late 1861, a well-armed, French fleet stormed Veracruz. The attack drove, then President, Benito Juarez and his government into retreat.

The French army moved west toward Mexico City. The French army was 8,000 strong and had not been defeated for almost fifty years, but they received heavy resistance from the Mexican troops. French

General, Charles Latrille de Lorencez attacked Puebla de Los Angeles. Near Puebla, at the Mexican forts of Loreto and Guadalupe, a huge battle took place. On May 5, 1862, Mexico won the Battle of Puebla against the French Empire. The Mexican army, with only 4,000 soldiers was led by Texas-born General Ignacio Zaragoza and they defeated the French Army. The battle lasted from daybreak to early evening. When the French finally retreated, they had lost nearly 500 soldiers. The Mexican army lost fewer than 100. While it didn't mean they won the war, that symbolic victory did boost Mexican morale and established a sense of national unity and patriotism. On May 9, 1862, President Juarez declared that the anniversary of the Battle of Puebla would be a national holiday regarded as "Battle of Puebla Day" or "Battle of Cinco de Mayo". The Mexican win bolstered the resistance movement.

Unfortunately, it also pushed France to be more aggressive. A year later, France sent 30,000 troops and they defeated the Mexican army and captured Mexico City. The French installed Austrian Archduke, Ferdinand Maximilian I as ruler and emperor of Mexico in 1864. General Zaragoza died of typhoid fever just a few months after the first Battle of Puebla.

During this time in history, the United States was fighting their Civil War which lasted from 1861 to 1865. With that war finally over, the U.S. was able to provide political pressure and military support to their neighbor to help expel the French. Napoleon III was facing persistent Mexican guerilla resistance and pressure from the United States, as well as the threat of war with Prussia. In 1866 he started to retreat from Mexico. Led by Benito Juarez, the Mexicans recaptured Mexico City and apprehended and executed Maximilian I and two of his generals. On June 5, 1867, Benito Juarez entered Mexico City, organized his administration, and installed a new government.

The Battle of Puebla was important to the Mexican People, but it was also important internationally. Historians have suggested that had this battle been lost, the French may have sided with the Confederate States of America and that could have altered the outcome of our Civil War. It is, therefore, no surprise that the celebration of Cinco de Mayo is more popular in the United States than in Mexico.

In Mexico, Cinco de Mayo is primarily observed in the state of Puebla. Traditions include military parades, battle re-enactments, and other festive events. It is not a federal holiday, so offices, banks, and businesses remain open. Schools, however, are closed throughout Mexico. The states of Veracruz and Puebla do observe it as a statewide holiday.

In the United States, celebrations began in California starting in 1863. It is seen as a celebration of Mexican culture and heritage. In the 1960's, Chicano activists raised awareness of the holiday as a way to identify with the victory of indigenous Mexicans over Europeans. The popularity grew in the 1980's due to advertising campaigns by beer, wine, and tequila companies. Today, beer sales on May 5 rival those of Super Bowl Sunday. Some of the largest festivals for Cinco de Mayo are held in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston.

We can celebrate our Mexican neighbors' culture by enjoying mariachi music, folk dancing, and traditional foods such as tacos and mole. We can honor the colors of the Mexican flag. The green has come to represent hope and independence, white represents unity and purity, and red represents religion and the blood of national heroes. You may want to pull out your most colorful clothing or wear a sombrero. While many take this opportunity to visit their favorite Mexican restaurant or enjoy drinks with Mexican beer or tequila, to the Mexican people this holiday has historical importance. As their victory has shaped our history and their culture and heritage is a part of our own, Cinco de Mayo is an important holiday for everyone in the United States.