

The
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Indians of GUATEMALA

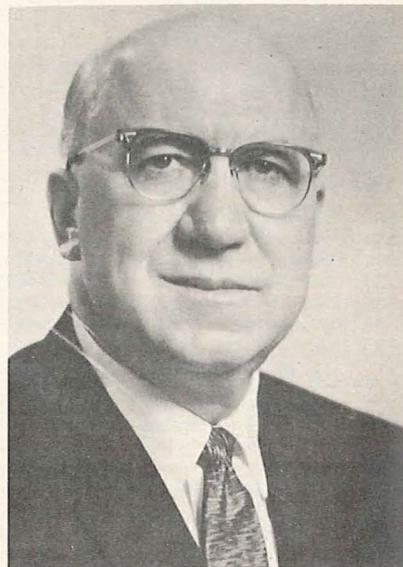
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Photographs by the Author

■ Of the hundreds of different Indian tribes and groups in South America, Central America, Mexico, and North America, none is more colorful than the Indians in Guatemala. There are three and one-half million people in that country. More than fifty per cent of them are full blood Indians. Practically all of these Indians are Mayas, although of different tribes. The Quiché Mayas are the most numerous of the Indians of Guatemala.

The Spaniards conquered Guatemala in 1524. As soon as possible after the conquest, the Catholic padres directed the erecting of cathedrals for the Indians. Also, they did all they could to convert the natives to Christianity. A concentrated effort was made to teach the Indians the Spanish language and to replace their religion with the Catholic brand of Christianity.

Four hundred years' time have passed since the Spanish conquest and the Indians of Guatemala still hold to many of their ancient religious beliefs and customs. They have even retained their ancient Indian dialects in spite of all the efforts put forth by the Spaniards to change them. The Indian men usually learn



Elder Milton R. Hunter

to speak Spanish in addition to their Indian language. This they do as a matter of necessity in making a livelihood. The Indian women, however, usually know only the Indian dialect such as Quiché or Cakchiquel.

The Indians feel that their race and culture are superior to that of the white men whom they consider to be the invaders and trespassers in the land; and so they tenaciously hang on to their ancient language and tradi-



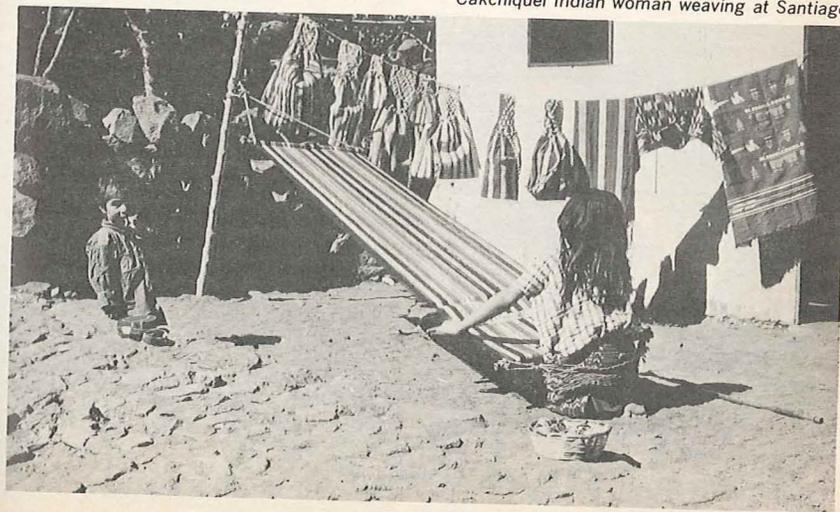
Quiché Maya women at Chichicastenango market

tions. The Quiché Mayas have an admirable system of family life following about the same pattern as the ancient Hebrews with the father as head of the family. They, as a rule, are a good people.

As we travel northward from Guatemala City, we enter the highland regions. Surrounding Lake Atitlán are a number of colorful highland Indian villages. We observe that in these villages and in the other Indian communities in the highlands farther north all the men in each village

are dressed exactly alike and all the women are also dressed exactly alike as to color, fabric, and all details of their costumes, even to the beads the women wear. We note also that the clothing of the Indians of each community is distinctly different from that of any other village. If one stays in Guatemala long enough, whenever or wherever he meets an Indian he can tell what town the native is from by his clothing.

The Indians do their own weaving on hand looms. They use many bright colors in their



Cakchiquel Indian woman weaving at Santiago

clothing. They wear the same type of clothing that their ancestors have worn for generations back. I have wondered as I have observed them if their type of weaving went back to Book of Mormon days and if the designs in their clothing had been handed down from that period. The Book of Mormon claims that the Nephites were expert weavers.

A few hours' drive from Guatemala City in the highland region lies the spectacular Lake Atitlán. As we come around the bend in the road we see nestled in a valley one of the most beautiful mountain lakes in the world. For sheer magnificence and beauty, Lake Atitlán is surpassed by no other mountain body of water. A feature which makes it so spectacular is the fact that it is surrounded by four or five majestic, inactive volcanoes, each cone-shaped and extending to a peak up into the blue heavens. The reflection extends the peaks into the clear water of the lake.

Of course, we must stay in the hotel on the shores of the lake



Quiché Maya woman weaving

that night and arrange for a boat to take us across Lake Atitlán to Santiago the following morning, to visit the Cakchiquel Indians and their famous market.

It takes a full hour to cross the lake of blue, placid water. The boat ride is an enjoyable experience. Eight o'clock any day of the week is an excellent time to arrive at Santiago, because the Cakchiquels hold their market during the morning hours daily. A few hundred Indians meet on

the public plaza in front of the cathedral, to sell their wares or trade their goods with each other. On special occasions they dance and have religious festivals and processions. These Indians are clothed in what to them is their regular market-day attire. To us they appear most colorfully dressed in their brilliant native costumes. To observe them trading their goods and to photograph them is a thrilling experience. Most of the women like to be photographed; in fact, the younger women follow us to the boat when we are leaving, to get us to take more pictures of them. Many of the men, however, turn



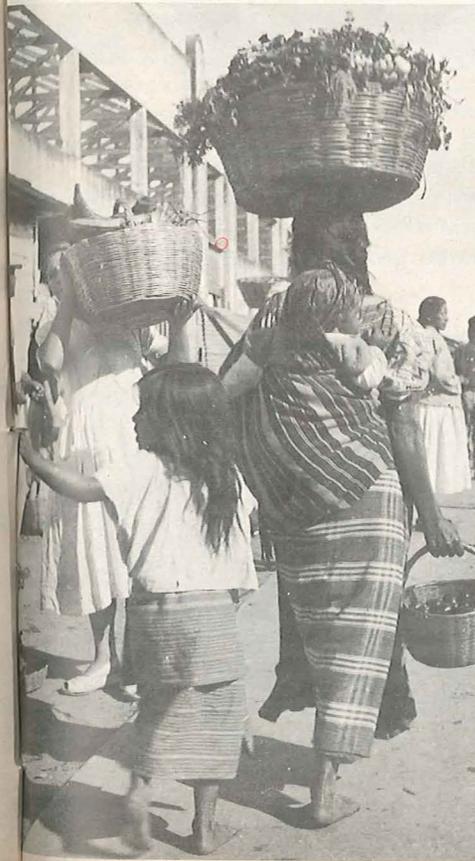
Cakchiquels at Santiago market

their backs when you are going to take their pictures.

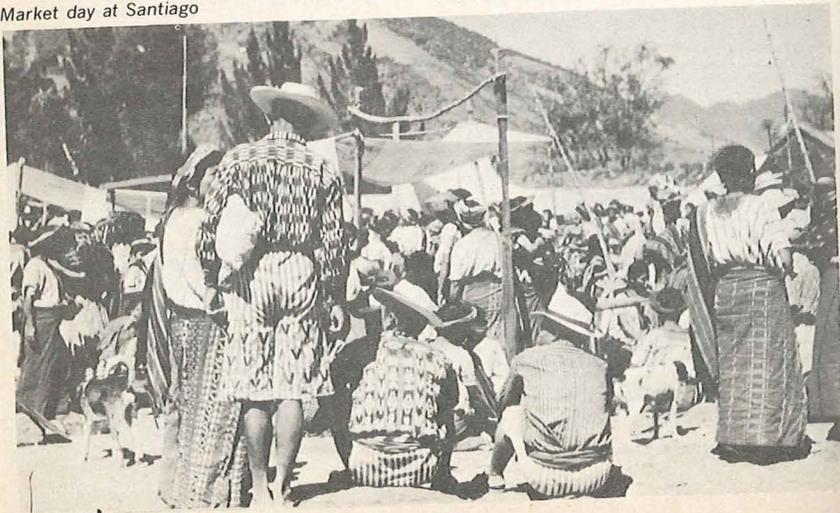
About noon we returned across Lake Atitlán and then drove to Chichicastenango. Thursdays and Sundays are the market days for the Quiché Mayas in their sacred city. The people collect there on those two days from all the surrounding communities. Some of them walk thirty miles or more. They leave their homes and travel to Chichicastenango during the nighttime on foot and carry on their back all the goods that they are going to trade or sell at the market. One Quiché man may have a large wooden rack on his back loaded with pottery. Another may have so many blankets on his back that you can hardly see him. Others carry chickens, or turkeys, or ducks. Their loads appear to be much larger than human beings could lift, and yet these small Indians travel along at a little trot carrying such loads.

At five or six o'clock in the morning on market day we must be out of bed and on the plaza between Santo Tomas Cathedral and the Indian cathedral. The

Typical Indian market scene

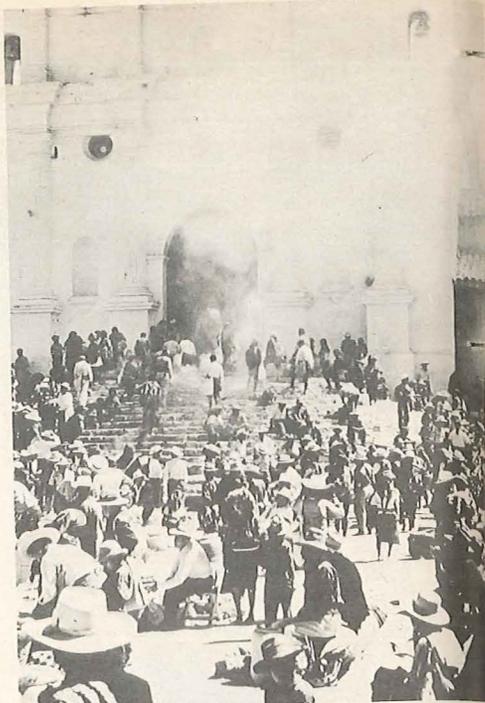


Market day at Santiago



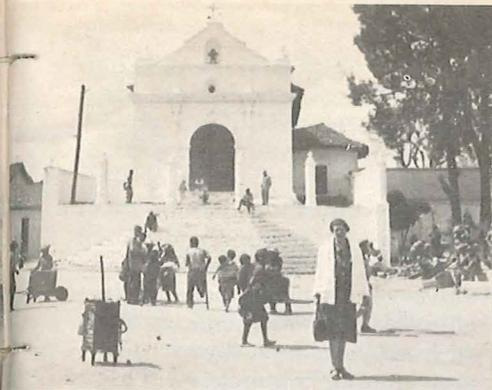
Indians begin arriving shortly before daybreak. They set up their booths and display their merchandise often on the ground. They spend the day until midafternoon in trading, as well as in worshipping in the Catholic cathedral, in the Indian cathedral, and at a pagan idol on the top of a nearby hill. The Quiché men burn incense and kneel on the cathedral steps in prayer, believing that the smoke from the incense will take their prayers to heaven.

In worshipping inside of either cathedral, the Indians place their seed corn on the floor. Then they place candles by it and also petals of various colors of roses. Each color represents a different request to God in their prayers. The family kneels around the objects they have spread on the floor. Then one of the older men of the family, or some other man whose prayers the family feels will be answered, offers long supplications for the family in which all blessings are numerated to the Lord.



Santo Tomas Cathedral and Quiché worshippers

The first time I went to Chichicastenango, I was puzzled when the guide told us that each large group kneeling together—



Quiché Indian Cathedral

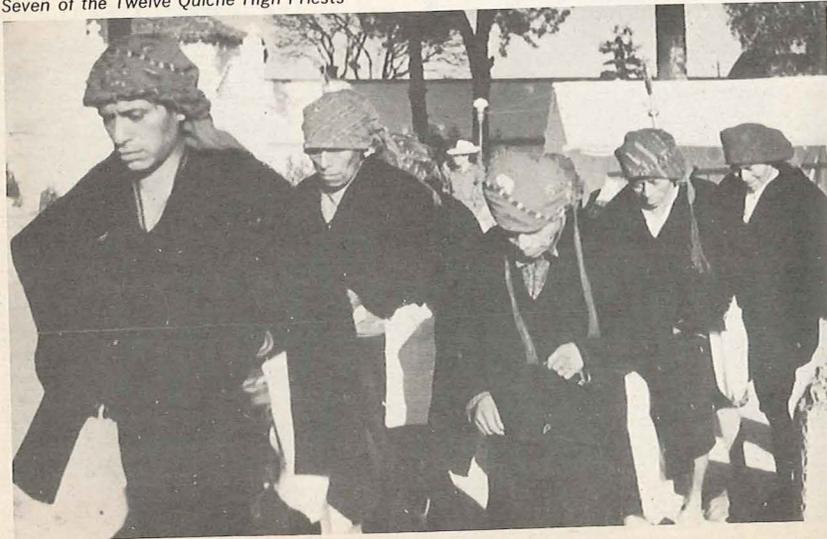
sometimes thirty-five or more people—constituted only a single family. Then he explained that a Quiché Maya family was patterned after the patriarchal order with the grandfather and grandmother and all of their posterity constituting a family. It seemed to me that this was very significant. The family was also organized under the patriarchal order in ancient Biblical and Book of Mormon times. This would indicate another tie between the Quiché-Lamanites and the people of the Book of Mormon.



Quiché Maya costume

There are twelve high priests who preside over the religion of the Quichés and direct their religious worship, with headquarters at Chichicastenango. I was informed that the system of having twelve high priests is very, very old, dating back generations, long before the coming of the Spaniards. Definitely it is not Catholic

Seven of the Twelve Quiché High Priests



Market day at Chichicastenango



in origin. There is only one logical place to look for its origin—the Book of Mormon period. The Nephites had twelve apostles in the Church of Jesus Christ in ancient America.

The Indians of Guatemala retained many teachings and practices which were handed down from Book of Mormon days. Of course by now they are much altered and adulterated, but they have a resemblance to the truth. For example, they claim to have priesthood. They practice baptism, but in many places they baptize by taking the devotees under waterfalls. The priest performs marriage ceremonies for the righteous Quiché Mayas in which they believe he marries them for life and eternity. Those Indians who are not righteous the priest refuses to marry. They are obliged to have a civil ceremony performed which is only for this life. An elderly lady who was a tradition-bearer of the Quiché Mayas told me about fifteen years ago about all of these Indian religious beliefs and practices. She said they all predated the Spanish conquest; in fact, they were inherited from their ancestors. Personally, I agree with her explanation and believe that their origin was the true gospel during the Book of Mormon period. Changes came as the Nephites and Lamanites lost much truth through apostasy, especially after the close of the Book of Mormon period.

On a certain occasion I was on a train going from Guatemala City to Quirigua, an ancient archaeological ruin. A good-looking, intelligent, middle-aged Indian woman came over and

sat by me. She could speak English. She introduced herself. She said she was a Quiché Maya woman from Totonicapan. She then gave me an account of her conversion to the Church. She said:

“When I was a girl about twelve years of age many years before Mormon missionaries first came to Guatemala, two strange men came to Totonicapan. They were dressed differently from our people. They were much larger in stature than our people and in skin color much whiter. They called the people of Totonicapan together in the street and talked to them. I remembered distinctly that their principle message was that the Lord had restored his true church to earth again. It would soon be sent to our people. We would be able to recognize the true Church by the messengers who brought it to us. They would be young men traveling by twos. When the Mormon elders came I was a grown woman. I immediately recalled the experience I had had when I was a child. I knew for sure that the elders were the messengers with the true religion, and so I joined the Church.”

In January 1959, I toured the Central American Mission with President and Sister Wagner. We held a meeting at Patzicia, not far from Lake Atitlan. We called on Brother Daniel Mich, a Cakchiquel Maya Indian and a recent convert to the Church, to bear his testimony and to tell of his conversion to the Church. He had had a remarkable experience. This is the essence of his story:

A few years ago some of the

Indians rebelled against the government officials, who were primarily of Spanish blood. The government officials decided to put to death all of the people who had participated in the rebellion at Patzicia, especially those who had instigated it.

Daniel Mich had taken no part in the rebellion; however, the government officials thought that he was guilty and had him on the list to be killed. The Spirit of God whispered to him and told him and his brother to flee to the mountains and hide in a certain place. If they did not they would be killed. They followed the instructions of the Holy Spirit. As they arrived in the hiding place suggested by the Spirit they lay on a ledge and looked over the precipice. Below them they could see the government officials searching for them along the mountainside.

Many Indians were captured and put to death. Daniel Mich and his brother stayed in their mountain hide-out for two full years. Food was brought to them by friends. Finally they were captured. Conditions had changed during the two years to the extent that the Mich brothers were not killed but were thrown into prison. They lived under the most terrible conditions in prison for four long years. Their clothing wore out. It was cold, and the jail was unheated. They were given very little food; in fact, they nearly starved to death. And to make matters worse, Daniel Mich received word from his wife that she and the children were also starving. During the two years of his hiding and the four years of his imprisonment,

they had not been able to make a livelihood.

In desperation and in deep grief, Daniel Mich knelt down and prayed to God, pleading that the Eternal Father would be merciful to him and let him die. He also prayed that the Lord would extend his mercies to his wife and children, that they also might soon die. He pleaded with God to release him and his family members from the misery and suffering that they were having to endure.

But the Lord did not answer Daniel Mich's prayer as he had asked it. He did not let him die. Instead, Daniel Mich had a vision, or a dream. In his vision he was climbing the side of a steep mountain on a well-defined trail. He came to a place where a side trail forked off the main one. A man stood on the side trail and said, "Follow me."

Daniel Mich replied, "No, I cannot follow you. I must follow this trail straight ahead."

He went some distance farther and another man stood on another side trail, and said, "Follow me."

Once again Daniel Mich replied, "No, I cannot follow you. I must go straight ahead." This experience repeated itself three or four times.

Daniel Mich explained: "Finally I came to the summit and there standing in front of me was a tall, handsome man, with beautiful white hair. He had a kindly and beautiful smile. This man said to me, 'Daniel, follow me.' I replied, 'I will follow you,' because as I made that remark, the Spirit of God whispered to me and said, 'That man has the truth.'"



Cloth displayed at market

Daniel Mich and his brother were released from jail shortly after Daniel had had this dream or vision. The Mich brothers returned to their homes in Patzicia. Soon thereafter and perhaps about a year before my visit to Guatemala, missionaries came to Patzicia. A few days after their arrival, the mayor sent for them to come to his office. When the missionaries arrived, they saw two hundred or more angry Indians crowded in front of the mayor's office. As the missionaries approached, the crowd of Indians opened a pathway and the missionaries walked on into the mayor's office.

The elders asked the mayor what he wanted of them. He replied that he had a petition signed by two hundred citizens of the community demanding

that the missionaries leave town immediately and cease teaching their religion in Patzicia.

The elders replied that they would not leave Patzicia until their mission president transferred them to some other place.

One of the missionaries suggested that the mayor telephone the governor and perhaps the governor would instruct him regarding the missionaries. The mayor immediately telephoned the governor and explained the situation.

The governor emphatically instructed the mayor to let the Mormon missionaries alone, that they had a right to preach in Guatemala. He explained that they had religious freedom in Guatemala. Daniel Mich was with the people in front of the mayor's office waiting to see what happened to the missionaries.

The mayor released the two elders. As they left his office, Brother Mich invited the missionaries to come to his home and teach him the gospel. They had taught him only three or four lessons when an important event occurred. One day in the midst of one of the lessons, one of the missionaries opened his book and Daniel Mich saw a photograph of a tall, handsome man, with beautiful white hair.

Brother Mich immediately and excitedly exclaimed. "This is the man! It is he whom I saw!"

Of course the missionaries wondered what he was talking about and he told them the story that I have accounted herein. Then Brother Mich asked, "Who is the man whose photograph you have in your book?"

"His name is David O. McKay," the missionaries replied, "God's prophet, seer, and revelator and the President of The Church of Jesus Christ. He holds the keys of the kingdom of God on earth at the present time."

Brother Mich told us that he replied to the missionaries: "I know that all the things you have told me are true. I know that you are missionaries of the true Church of Jesus Christ. At the time that the tall, handsome man, with beautiful white hair—who you told me was President David O. McKay—said to me, 'Daniel, follow me,' the Spirit of the Lord whispered to me and said, 'Two young men will bring you the truth.' Since you came into our town I have continued to watch you. Now all things I believe have been proven to be true. David O. McKay is a prophet of God and you have the true religion of Jesus Christ, and so," he continued, "I asked the elders to baptize me. This is how I was brought into the Church."

Brother Daniel Mich had related the story of his life, his dream, and its fulfillment in joining the Church. While he was telling his wonderful experiences, tears rolled down his cheeks. As he completed his testimony, there was not a dry eye in the house. The Spirit of God was there in great abundance.

Nearly two years ago Dr. Robert Blair, Chairman of the Department of Linguistics, and seventeen BYU students had been down in Guatemala to study the Cakchiquel language and to transcribe it phonetically, To-

ward fall they returned to the BYU and brought with them Daniel Mich and Manuel Ismuel Tay from Solola, a town near Lake Atitlán. These faithful men stayed at BYU for a year.

The Cakchiquel is a language in which books are practically unavailable. The purpose Dr. Blair and his students had in going to Guatemala was to study Cakchiquel and get The Book of Mormon translated into that language.

The Cakchiquel Indians do not know how to read nor write. Under the direction of Dr. Blair at the BYU, Daniel Mich and Manuel Tay translated The Book of Mormon into Cakchiquel and put it on tape. Also, Brother Mich and Brother Tay translated The Joseph Smith Story and parts of the New Testament and put them on tape. They also recorded stories of their lives. This was a great contribution that these good Cakchiquel men have made in making possible the teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ to approximately 50,000 Cakchiquels in Guatemala. The Indians of that land who speak Cakchiquel can listen to the recordings and learn the Book of Mormon and New Testament stories. These translations of Cakchiquel should provide a great missionary tool.

The Indians of Guatemala have been throughout the past as colorful as any Indians in the Americas. The Spirit of the Lord is working upon them. Hundreds of them are receiving the gospel. They are a humble, a spiritual people, and a joyful group to be with.