

San Angel

The Garden of the Valley of Mexico

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“Have you been in San Angel? Have you seen it from somewhere high up, from a tower? Is it not a paradise? Its orchards,

its gardens, its tuneful little fountains; on its network of crystal-clear waters a blanket of flowers unfolds, flowers of every color, of every kind, like a multi-colored knitted shawl thrown over a mirror. Have you seen its village, its bell towers peeping over the balcony onto the Valley of

Mexico among the trees? And there in the background, where the double chain of mountains that circle the valley, the ring in whose setting sparkle the Popocatepetl and the ‘White Woman’ like two diamonds, are lost from view, disappearing in the milky distance of the

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Panoramic view of the towers and domes of the El Carmen Monastery and church.



Carlos Nebel lithograph of the Battle of Padierna, which culminated in the occupation of San Angel by U.S. troops.



The Valley of Mexico in the nineteenth century, as painted by José María Velasco.

horizon, there, very far away, on a background striped with the blue transparency of the lakes, have you seen the yellowish outline of the city that a reverent Alexander von Humboldt called the City of Palaces? Forgive these descriptions. I am overwhelmed by the spectacle, it was so beautiful...!"¹

These little known words were written by a visitor to nineteenth-century San Angel, Don Justo Sierra, to describe the pleasing emotions evoked by a place

that today survives only in literature, in the faded photos and the memories of the few people who had the good fortune to enjoy it as it was. Now, it is a just another part of the city, but it used to be a town with a visage of its own, the product of specific history and geography.

About 12 kilometers from downtown Mexico City, central San Angel is in the foothills of what eventually to the south and west becomes the Ajusco Mountains topped with Ajusco Peak and, at its feet,

the Xitle volcano that a little more than two millennia ago formed the San Angel Pedregal, or “stony crags”. The hills’ many glens nurtured innumerable streams and brooks, the most important of which are the Magdalena or Coyoacán. Crisscrossing each other, they fertilized San Angel and its surrounding land. Thick oak, fir and pine forests covered not only the mountains, but the foothills, enriching the area with resources. The Pedregal lava malpais that physically separates Tlalpan from San Angel was the only jarring note in the landscape, but it also meant more resources.

It was these resources that in the remote past attracted men to the Mexico basin. The archeological remains at Cuicuilco and Copilco el Bajo testify to the degree of development achieved by the ancient inhabitants before the Xitle erupted.

The lack of systematic archeological exploration and the growth of the urban area limit our knowledge of San Angel’s pre-Hispanic past. Historic sources, on the other hand, do allow us to know more about the post-classical period. With the Nahuatl invasions, the Tepanecs became lords of the western river bank of the Mexico Lake in the twelfth or thirteenth century. They set up their capital in Azcapotzalco and occupied Tacuba, Tacubaya, Mixcoac and Coyoacán. And so it remained until the reign of Maxtla, defeated by the Mexicas around 1428, who then became the new masters of the riverbank and, soon thereafter, the valley itself.

Coyoacán was made up of several hamlets, two of which were Tenanitla (meaning “next to the stone walls”) and Chimalistac (“white shield”); this dominion came under the tutelage of Tenochtitlan after the



Chapel door, San Jacinto Church.



Patio of the San Jacinto Tenanitla cloister, founded by the Dominicans in the late sixteenth century.

Tepanec defeat at the hands of the Mexicas.

In contrast with Coyoacán, the seat of the dominion, which boasted a ceremonial center with tall pyramids and temples and more than 6,000 houses, half on the land and half in the water—known as *chinampas*, or floating gardens—as described by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Tenanitla and Chimalistac were full of orchards and gardens, sprinkled with huts and a house or two, to the west, where what is now San Angel lies. Its resources had made them important hamlets since they contributed agricultural products, animals, wood, charcoal, basaltic rock and, of course, water in abundance. When the Spanish took Tenochtitlan and made Coyoacán their temporary headquarters in 1521, many of them unleashed their greed on these rich lands.

In 1529, Hernán Cortés became the marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca and was granted the tribute of the indigenous peoples of many towns in New Spain. He

decided to place the capital of his marquisate in Coyoacán, that included towns and hamlets like Mixcoac, La Magdalena, Coajimalpa, Tacubaya, Los Remedios, Tenanitla and Chimalistac. Their abundant resources attracted the Spaniards and the congenial surroundings favored the building of an incipient settlement that began to be called Tenanitla, still a part of Coyoacán.

The missionary friars were a central part of the appropriation process and cultural transformation in this initial stage of the colonial period. In 1524 the Younger Brothers arrived to Coyoacán and shortly thereafter a small Franciscan monastery was set up in the town. However, in 1529, the Dominicans arrived and founded their convent dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. For 40 years, the two religious orders shared the Coyoacán area, establishing small chapels in the towns and hamlets. The Dominicans set up two chapels, dedicated to Saint Sebastian in Chimalistac and to Our Lady of the Rosary in Tenanitla, among

others. From 1569 on, only the friars of Santo Domingo de Guzmán remained to cover Coyoacán and its environs. They used its bounty to turn Tenanitla into a place of rest and convalescence for the sick and the aged in the sixteenth century. The fame of Tenanitla as somewhere healthy began there, rooted in its wonderful natural conditions.

In 1596 in Mexico City, the Dominicans loudly celebrated the canonization of the Saint Hyacinth, the missionary of Poland and Northeastern Europe. As part of their festivities, they agreed to dedicate a house to the canonization, founding it in Tenanitla. Soon, the house began to be called Tenanitla de San Jacinto (Spanish for Hyacinth) or San Jacinto Tenanitla, and the original Marianist origins of the name, Our Lady of the Rosary, were forgotten. A short time later they turned this small monastery into the Hospice for Missionaries of the East, where the friars who came and went from the Philippines recovered from the hardships of their ocean voyage; the church



Oil of Saint Teresa of Avila, El Carmen Museum.

also served as a parish church. The town was given a new name that would not last, but not for any reason the Dominicans could control.

Meanwhile, San Jacinto Tenanitla continued to grow and its visage changed slowly but profoundly. The great flowing Magdalena River, the most important in the southwest of the Mexico basin, was perfect for wheat mills, textile workshops and fulling mills, where wool and other cloth was shrunken and smoothed. Ranches, haciendas, gardens and seed plantations also used its waters to irrigate their crops. The peasants began to add their numbers to the workshop and mill laborers, as did a few city dwellers who enjoyed the benefits of such a magnificently well provided-for natural wilderness.

The barefoot Carmelites, founded by two such outstanding mystics as Saint Teresa de Jesús and Saint John of the Cross in the second half of the sixteenth century, had arrived in New Spain in 1585 to become part of the evangelizing efforts of the new lands that were being



Facade of the San Jacinto Church, one of the first places of worship built by the Dominicans in San Angel.

discovered and colonized, at the same time that they maintained their original contemplative goals. Although they were not destined to evangelize, their religiosity and spiritual values led them to found 16 houses during the colonial period, that formed the Saint Albert Province.

The seventh of these was the San Angel College for which they received a land grant in Tenanitla and Chimalistac in 1597.

In 1614, the barefoot Carmelites decided to move their provincial college. This time they paid no heed to the obstacles put



Chimalistac Chapel, built by the Dominicans in the mid-sixteenth century in honor of Saint Sebastian.

in their path by the Dominicans and founded an ecclesiastic hospice in Tenanitla to prepare for the definitive establishment of the college. Most of the college's facilities were built between 1615 and 1617. Their lands were so vast that they reached from the college to the

Magdalena River and even included part of the Pedregal. Soon they began to turn part of their lands into a model fruit and vegetable garden, surrounded by a high stone wall. Cart loads of mulch and manure to fertilize the ground, dikes and dams to store water, *apaniles* (open water ditch-



Saint John of the Cross, El Carmen Museum.

es) and aqueducts, a selection of apple, pear and peach trees, as well as vegetables, plus enormous amounts of labor by the local population brought forth a garden and orchard that produced good yields for them in that very century. The famous fruit of the San Angel orchard sold easily in Mexico City and elsewhere.

The Carmelites were already established in San Jacinto Tenanitla; their college functioned very well; and the orchard and garden produced enough to support them. The local population benefited from the employment offered by the Carmelites and, in imitation, they also covered the town with gardens and orchards. The boom was beginning and was soon reflected in continual visits by viceroys, archbishops, bishops and other civic and ecclesiastic dignitaries to the college. The number of summer houses owned by city dwellers increased as the town gradually became a favorite resting place.

The Dominicans, on the other hand, were in decline: the local populace took more to the Carmelites; the zeal of the



The former Goicoechea hacienda was converted into one of San Angel's most exclusive restaurants.



San Angel and Contreras in a nineteenth-century oil painting by José María Velasco.

Eastern missions declined; they had less property; and, to top off all their difficulties, their parish was secularized in 1754, leaving them only the hospice for the missionaries of the East and no contact with the population. A gradual but irresistible change was taking place in the town's name; slowly the name "San Jacinto Tenanitla" was forgotten and "San Angel" came into use. At the same time, the economic boom that came with the Carmelites meant that the hamlet stopped being considered a neighborhood of Coyoacán and began to be con-

sidered a town in its own right. The recognized border was an accident of nature, the Magdalena River. San Angel was emerging as a town made prosperous by its vegetable fields and orchards, with its summer houses surrounded by spacious gardens, encircled by other hamlets, haciendas and the Pedregal. This prosperity was characteristic of the eighteenth century.

Liberalism emerged at the end of the eighteenth century as a result of the Enlightenment. Carlos IV's royal decree of 1804 deprived the clergy of much of its

economic wealth and influence, but this was only the first indication of the whirlwinds that were to come. Independence brought significant changes. With the federal Constitution of 1824, San Angel became a municipality of the State of Mexico, ending all political links to Coyoacán. When in 1828 the law was passed expelling the Spanish, the Carmelites realized their future was uncertain. The few religious who remained in San Angel were those born in Mexico and a few ill or incapacitated Spaniards.

During the first attempted reform under Valentín Gómez Farías in 1833, the San Angel Carmelites sold some property to avoid a debacle in their entire province. The vegetable fields and orchards were saved, but their income dropped significantly, and with it, the livelihoods of many of those who depended on them. Other problems came that checked the town's prosperity: the continual coup d'états and the political changes they brought with them, the foreign wars of 1836 and 1838, the shifts resulting from political division and the chronic scarcity of public funds to name just a few. The main stage of the final phase of the war against the United States (1846-1848) was the Valley of Mexico. The battle at the Padierna Ranch and its continuation, the assault on Churubusco August 19 and 20, 1847, were two further defeats for the Mexicans, in addition to the occupation of San Angel for several months. This period did a lot of damage to the population; the invading troops sacked and destroyed property and abused the inhabitants. The college was a favorite target, while the little San Jacinto monastery was used to jail the foreign soldiers of the Saint Patrick's Battalion and then to carry out their sentences.²



Amazingly enough, sunsets like this one can still be enjoyed in San Angel.

The Liberal reform brought other calamities. In 1856, Friar Rafael del Sagrado Corazón Checa, the last rector of the Carmelite college, divided up and sold part of the vegetable garden and orchard to private buyers; these lots were used for new houses that changed the appearance of the heart of San Angel. Finally, as a result of the laws of 1859 the San Angel College no longer belonged to the friars and their garden and orchard were sold to a private individual. The church remained open for worship; the college was managed by the local authorities and the garden and

orchard continued to be worked. Things would not stay like that for long, however.

The college began to fall into disrepair: one part of it was used to house troops and police, another as a municipal jail. Still other parts were torn down to put in new streets, or divided up into lots and sold off. This turbulent period was harmful to the town that one way or another was linked to the Carmelites.

Some peace and progress did exist, however. Although the deplorable state of the roads made using it a torment, stage service between Mexico City and San

Angel was established in the second half of the nineteenth century, with a house in the Carmen Plaza as its terminal. When in 1865 it became known that the Valley of Mexico Circle Railroad Line would extend to San Angel, people hoped for better transportation service. The day the railroad line from Tacubaya to San Angel was inaugurated in July 1866 was the only time Emperor Maximilian and Empress Carlota ever visited San Angel. The steam locomotive sped urbanization of the area, and it became possible to travel comfortably from the city.

The railroad also facilitated the area's industrialization. In the nineteenth century, the old workshops and fulling mills from the colonial period gave way to new textile factories that continued to use the River Magdalena's waters. Although it only reached Tizapán, the project of continuing the Valley Railway to Contreras was undertaken, demolishing part of the old Carmelite buildings in its wake.

The dawn of the twentieth century brought more changes to the town. Electric streetcars came in 1901, making passenger and freight transportation cheaper and easier. The streetcar lines were flanked on both sides by corn fields, flowering hillsides and vegetable gardens and orchards, but soon, the new settlements began to fill with people. The Goicoechea hacienda, as well as the Guadalupe hacienda and San José Ranch, were divided up to make way for the new San Angel Inn neighborhood. The old Carmelite vegetable garden and orchard finally gave way to the push of progress when it was divided and sold off to private buyers beginning in 1906. And then, suddenly, automobiles made their appearance.

The incipient industrial transformation of the nineteenth century sped up with the new means of transportation. One of the textile factories, the Our Lady of Loreto Plant, was refitted to produce paper instead of fabric, thanks to the enterprising Don Alberto Lenz. Tizapán became an offshoot of San Angel, but with a difference: its inhabitants depended more on manufacturing than on agriculture. Workers flooded Tizapán and San Angel, changing the local social structure.

Despite the transformations, San Angel stuck tenaciously to its tradition of

being a summering place. The new century brought with it a rather different ambiance to San Angel due to the factories, the streetcars, the automobiles and the new neighborhoods, but the flavor of a provincial town and a place for spiritual and physical renovation remained.

And just when everything was peaceful came the Revolution. This period had no important direct repercussions in San Angel until the clash between Zapata and Carranza. Zapatista forces beleaguered the south and west ends of the valley and at one point took San Angel in 1916. But despite the overall remoteness of the armed conflict, the general political situation gravely affected normal life in the town.

Culminating the revolutionary period was the 1917 Constitution and the later attempts by Presidents Alvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles to implement it to the letter. The result was the breakout of the religious conflict that led to the closing of the churches between 1926 and 1929.

Finally, something unexpected happened in San Angel's Bombilla Restaurant: Alvaro Obregón, president-elect for a second term, was assassinated there by José León Toral. León was taken to the local jail, situated on part of what had been the Carmelite college, where he was imprisoned together with the nun, Concepción de la Llata, or Mother Conchita, also charged with the assassination, and they were tried in the local municipal building. The affair put the old town in the national spotlight and sparked rapid changes.³

San Angel was a town in the environs of Mexico City. Today, it is part of it, and, as such, shares both its defects and its

virtues. It has this process of assimilation in common with many other parts of the city that used to be individual towns: Coyoacán, Tlalpan, Tacuba, Tacubaya, Mixcoac, Xochimilco, Azcapotzalco and others. Despite their similarities, however, it had its own traits that made it unique. The purpose of this article has been precisely to give the reader an overview of how those traits have developed from the remote past to the twentieth century. No one can appreciate what he or she is not familiar with.

Now, when you return from southwest Mexico City, remember the words of Justo Sierra, "Imagine! I've just been to San Angel!" **MM**

Photography: *Luis A. Aguilar*

NOTES

¹ Justo Sierra, *Obras completas. Prosa literaria*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: UNAM, 1977), p. 394.

² See the article by Jim Fogarty about the battalion in the "History" section of this issue of *Voices of Mexico*.

³ María García Lascuráin deals with this process in her article in this issue.

FURTHER READING

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