

THE FORTNIGHTLY CLUB

OF REDLANDS, CALIFORNIA-FOUNDED 24 JANUARY 1895

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REDLANDS, CALIFORNIA

Founded 24 January 1895

Meeting number 1963

4:00 P.M.

“San Miguel de Allende: our almost forgotten Sister City”

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Assembly Room, A.K. Smiley Public Library

San Miguel de Allende: our almost forgotten Sister City

Background of the Author

John Tincher was born in Hollywood California. Living in the family of a Methodist minister meant that he was raised in several different towns in Southern California before graduating from Van Nuys High School in the San Fernando Valley in 1960. He received his BA from the University of Redlands in 1964 and a Master of Divinity degree from Drew University, Madison, New Jersey in 1969. Following seminary graduation, he was ordained into the United Methodist ministry and served several churches in Northern California prior to his final pastoral appointment as senior pastor of Turlock First United Methodist Church, Turlock California. During his years as a parish minister, he also served as a Chaplain in the US Air Force reserve, retiring after 20 years of service at the rank of Lt. Col. In his spare time one evening a week he taught in 3 different community colleges and in the extension division at the University of California, Riverside. He spent a second career in educational fundraising beginning with a position on the development team at the University of Redlands. The last 15 years of his working life were spent as a self-employed consultant in non-profit development deferred giving programs.

A Brief Summary of the Paper

We are fortunate to have Hino, Japan as a Sister City to Redlands because of the many exchanges we've enjoyed with them. However, there is another Sister City to Redlands which is even geographically closer. It is known as San Miguel de Allende. This unique Mexican City really began to come into its own when in 1542 a Franciscan Monk, Juan de San Miguel finished his chapel in an area, located in the center of Mexico, which would eventually become the City of San Miguel de Allende. The purpose of this paper is to highlight this area and this City, a Sister City of Redlands since 1967. As one who has visited this beautiful city three times, the first being in 1962, the second in 2008 and finally again in 2021, it is my desire to share some of its history and cultural background in an attempt to highlight its importance as one of Redland's Sister Cities.

San Miguel de Allende: Our almost forgotten Sister City

A BRIEF HISTORY

Early historical records show that the area where San Miguel is now located was once inhabited by the Toltec Indians around 1200 AD. They settled along the banks of the Rio Laja where they could grow various crops. This same river has given rise to a walking and biking trail along its banks today, as well as a large reservoir which provides water to Mexico's second largest city, Guadalajara. Over the next 300 years others arrived including the Chichimecas. It was the Chichimecas who created the first village in this area which was known as Izcuinapan, "the place of dogs". Near the beginning of the 16th century, with the arrival of the Franciscan monk named Juan de San Miguel, a small chapel in Izcuinapan was constructed. He chose to dedicate the town and chapel, Archangel Michael. The attention created by this small village and the discovery of silver in Zacatecas and Guanajuato understandably upset the Chichimecas who fought the Spaniards to preserve their own heritage. This fight, known as the Chichimeca War continued to fester for 40 years.

With Spaniards came conquistadores and miners looking to get rich on the silver discovered in the area as far north as the state of Zacatecas. This discovery might not have been as important were it not for the fact that San Miguel was on the route between San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas and Mexico City making it a great place to stage indigenous attacks on caravans heading south to Mexico City.

However, violence was not the only thing going on as this century wore on. As mentioned earlier, it was during this time that Juan de San Miguel traveled from Uruapan to this area. Noting how beautiful this area was, he decided to build a mission. Unfortunately, the building codes of those days were not suitable for the construction of durable buildings. Soon, this small chapel collapsed and was replaced and rededicated in 1542. With the construction of this new chapel, the town of San Miguel came into existence.

Thronged people were to discover that the Rio Laja Valley was a fertile place well-suited to cattle. This led to incredible colonization in the 1700s. In those days nearly 30,000 people lived in what was then called San Miguel el Grande. Interestingly enough, in those days the city of Boston was inhabited by 16,000 people and the city of New York by 25,000 people. It was considered one of the poshest areas of new Spain at the time. Many wealthy haciendas were built. Additionally, many Baroque and neoclassic architectural styles were displayed as new buildings were constructed. Some of those are still around to this day.

Unfortunately, the 19 century saw the weakening of the city as the Mexican war of Independence arrived. Two men who were to become prominent in the fight against the colonial government, Juan Aldama and Ignacio de Allende, were born in San Miguel el Grande. The original home of Ignacio de Allende still stands to this day. They would later join Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla and Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez. All four of these

men, who were born in the homes of Spanish colonizers, eventually deserted from the Spanish forces to lead those who were fighting for independence from Spain and would play a significant role in the Grito de Dolores which turned out to be a failed call to war against the colonizers on 15 and 16 September, 1810. Spain executed all four men, for their role in the 1810 uprising. It was to San Miguel that the insurgent army eventually came to free prisoners of the government. San Miguel would then become the first Mexican town to receive its independence.

Although there was no further military action in the area, it suffered agricultural setbacks as well as a decline in population. In 1826, five years after Mexico received its independence, it was declared a city by the state Congress. At this time, it was renamed San Miguel de Allende in honor of its local war hero, Ignacio de Allende, who as stated earlier, had played a significant role in Mexico's struggle for independence.

The arrival of the 19th century saw a rebirth in San Miguel de Allende as aqueducts and dams were constructed to aid agriculture. However, this was short-lived as the City was soon to become nearly a ghost town due, primarily, to the termination of mining in the state of Guanajuato as well as a pandemic of influenza. What was left was eventually declared a colonial city by the government and by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia, although the accuracy of this claim as well as the exact year have been disputed by some historians. Several such cities exist today and are expected to abide by guidelines and restrictions aimed at maintaining their colonial appearance. This means that Home Depot, McDonalds, and Wal Mart must locate outside the city limits of such designated cities.

Having emerged from the 19th century as a smaller city, San Miguel de Allende would soon undergo an attempt to transform it from being an agriculture-based economy to a service-based economy. This created some unpleasant tensions between locals who wanted to preserve its Mexicanness and foreigners who would strive to bring art and culture to this beautiful centrally located area. It was in the 1930s that Mexican opera star Jose Mojica would emerge from his foreign home of Hollywood California to purchase a large hacienda property in San Miguel de Allende. He named it Granja Santa Monica probably celebrating the city from which he had actually moved. During his time in San Miguel de Allende, from 1936 to 1942, he was instrumental in preserving some of the historic sites within the city. He also gave the city a new appreciation for art by creating an art school in San Miguel de Allende.

THE MODERN ERA IN SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

But it was in 1937 that found two distinctly different men Stirling Dickinson and Emigdio Ledesma Perez standing on the railroad station platform of San Miguel de Allende with two different visions for this City. What made this a rather interesting contrast was the fact that Dickinson had recently graduated from Princeton University and had grown up in a very wealthy environment. He was interested in finding a place to

allow his artistic interests to mature. He really hadn't planned to live there full time but loved the City so much that he never left. He died there in 1998.

Ledesma, however, was raised in a typical Mexican family. His father was lured away from Mexico City in order to boost production at San Miguel's textile factory. He joined his father at the factory, eventually being elevated to the position of textile worker's representative. He would later be celebrated for preserving religious traditions and festivities which were very much a part of Catholic societies in Mexico and other parts of Latin America.

Historians believe that Dickinson discovered San Miguel de Allende as the result of a tip from opera star, Jose Mojica. He was astounded by the beauty of this Mexican City. Perhaps he was most impressed by the baroque/neo gothic architecture of the Church called Parroquia de San Miguel Arcangel (which by this time had been renovated to its current architectural condition). What a contrast this must have been compared to the ecclesiastical domed churches found in most other Mexican cities. After arrival, Dickinson met Felipe Cossio del Pomar, another artist and author. Together they would establish an art school which was called Bellas Artes. That art school continues to exist today. Later, they would also team up with the former governor of the state of Guanajuato, Enrique Fernandez Martinez in the creation of another art school which would be called Instituto Allende. Not too surprising, the creation of these art schools attracted artists from many parts of Latin America as well as North America. Perhaps some of the most notable artists included Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Their artistic presence may have encouraged ex-pats to begin to arrive after having heard of the artistic emphasis of this beautiful city. The passage of the GI Bill of Rights in 1946 is widely credited with expat interest as the Veteran's Administration expanded the program beyond US borders making it possible for veterans to study art at Bellas Artes as well as other art schools which were to spring up in the City. Gradually they began to find living year-round in the City to be a definite advantage, what with living expenses considerably lower than in the States. By the summer of 1948 it is estimated that there were 1,000 veterans studying in Mexico of which 20% were studying and living full time in San Miguel de Allende. Gradually their presence brought many hotels and restaurants which gave an even more cosmopolitan emphasis to San Miguel de Allende.

It should be noted that their presence was not appreciated by all residents. By 1939, a local boy, Jose Mercadillo, who had studied for the priesthood took over the Parroquia parish. During the next several years he would influence the community to place higher value on their Catholic heritage. This also meant projects to restore dilapidated buildings were initiated by his followers. Retreats he organized at the Church attracted the attention of people from the states of Jalisco, Mexico, Hidalgo, Queretaro as well as from other parts of the state of Guanajuato. A boycott of the Bellas Artes by its students, most of whom were VA supported, created friction between the US and Mexico ultimately resulting in the Veterans Administration's withdrawal of recognition of Bellas Artes. It encouraged the 125 students from the US to find other schools in Mexico for study.

Socially conservative Catholics in San Miguel de Allende complained bitterly of the immorality of these foreigners. They cited the use, by the artists, of nude models as evidence of this immorality. Perhaps the “straw that broke the camel’s back” was a painting by one of the foreign students portraying a cigarette-smoking Jesus surrounded by nude women. Although Bellas Artes never recovered its standing with the US Veteran’s Administration as did some others, most of the students stayed to continue their studies, setting the stage for what would become one of the largest expat communities in Mexico.

While many of the business leaders supported the art students, the rift between conservative Catholics and those who would want the community to grow more relevant for its time served to emphasize the differing visions these two influential men, Ledesma and Dickinson, had for San Miguel de Allende. While Dickinson’s vision was of a city with world class art and culture with international reputation, Ledesma saw its future in industrialization. These differing views would play out boldly in the discussion of whether to be an industrial center, with its annoying smoke stacks, or a tourist centered economy without smoke stacks and in their place cultural and artistic schools.

Although industry was important, specifically the textile factory on the outskirts of town, it was probably San Miguel de Allende’s culture and charm which helped propel it successfully into the latter part of the 20th century. During this time many ex-pats made their way from the United States and Canada. By the year 2010, the number of ex-pats, living there full time, totaled approximately 10% of the entire population of the City. Many of its old historic buildings have been sold to these ex-pats for far more than structures selling in Mexico City.

In July 2008, the City and its surrounding area were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. According to UNESCO’s articles, this selection was based on the City’s unique well-preserved colonial Baroque architecture as well as its role in the Mexican War of Independence.

To this day, San Miguel de Allende continues to attract ex-pats from the United States, Canada, and Europe. Several historical records claim that the greatest growth from these ex-pats occurred between 1980 and the year 2000. Later in this paper I will have more to say about these expats and the enticing factors which attracted them to this City. Perhaps this influx of expats is the reason that it has become a common location to meet foreigners. I will also be sharing interviews that I have had with current ex-pats.

DEMOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Although silver is no longer mined in the immediate area, the roads established for that market continue to connect San Miguel de Allende to Mexico City, located about 3 hours south. This connection is especially important because corn, beans, wheat, and fruit are grown there and distributed to the entire country from the San Miguel de Allende area. Several sources indicated that as much as 12% of all chickens raised in Mexico come from that area.

Similar to our country where unincorporated areas around an incorporated City are commonly referred to as in the “sphere of influence” of that city, the region around San Miguel de Allende is referred to as the municipality of Allende. The city of San Miguel Allende is the largest of several cities that exist in this municipality. As of 2012, San Miguel de Allende’s population totaled nearly 130,000 with approximately 10% of the number comprised of expats from the US and Canada. The other cities in the municipality tend to be much smaller (the largest of which is approximately 2,500 residents). These smaller cities tend to be inhabited primarily by indigenous tribes which include the Otomi, Nahuas, Mazahua, Huateca, and Purepecha. This municipality is fortunate to have three institutions of higher education located within it: the Instituto Tecnologico SSC, the Universidad Tecnologica de Leon, and the Universidad de San Miguel de Allende. It is presumed that their presence, in part, contributes to the fact that the illiteracy rate in San Miguel de Allende is the smallest of any city in the state. One educational institution was uniquely connected to Redlands. After his graduation from the University of Redlands in 1963, Gary DeMirjyn, a fraternity brother to Larry Burgess and me, moved to San Miguel de Allende to teach at one of several bilingual schools, the Academia Hispano Americana. He was later appointed its Administrator. Since Gary was born and raised in Redlands and his father, Chuck, served as mayor, these facts probably encouraged the naming of San Miguel de Allende as Redlands’ second sister city in 1967. Gary would have been a valuable resource in the writing of this paper if he had not recently passed away in San Miguel de Allende from cardiac complications.

SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE TODAY

As indicated earlier, San Miguel de Allende is located approximately 3 hours north of Mexico City. It boasts weather that is very similar to that of Redlands. Unlike Redland’s elevation of around 1,500 above sea level, that of San Miguel de Allende is nearly 6,400 feet above sea level. It is far enough south and closer to the equator making sub-tropical weather possible in spite of its elevation.

There appear to be many things which attract gringos from our Country and Canada. As we visited and toured the Instituto Allende, we saw several students from our Country who were studying art there. Many have their study funded and supported by way of the GI Bill and Veterans Administration which reinstated its recognition of art education, this time at the Instituto. The Instituto continues to grant Bachelor’s degrees in the visual arts through its relationship with the University of Guanajuato.

The cultural and artistic colonialism of this very special town has attracted more than just the people who make the decisions regarding UNESCO designations. Live theatres, foreign movie theatres and an active opera house are just a few of the cultural and artistic offerings of this unusual City. As one walks the streets enjoying the presence of historic structures and architecture, not seen in the United States and Canada, it is no wonder that expats chose this location in Mexico as their place for retirement. Many of these old structures appear to be small as they are viewed from the cobblestone or flagstone streets. However, if you’re fortunate enough to be invited in through the door, you are likely to

be treated to a beautifully landscaped patio which is enclosed therein. Some of these patios now house restaurants, calling attention to the lack of zoning restrictions found in most of Mexico. Located in the center of the City is El Jardin, a beautifully landscaped park with sufficient trees to shade scores of benches. Just sitting on one of those benches and enjoying the peaceful and beautiful park setting brings needed relaxation to the most stressed out resident or tourist.

The UNESCO designation is of grave concern to Mexicans and expats, alike. A City once built to encourage industrialism, agriculture, and art now finds that its main industry is tourism. Several expats told me of an effort to construct a Mc Donalds restaurant within the Central Zone. Apparently, this was turned down by City government because it would likely have jeopardized the status of their UNESCO as well as Colonial City designation. Unfortunately, somehow a Starbucks coffee shop managed to lease a 400-year-old building just across a street from El Jardin. There are many shops available in this zone but they are not marked with large signs and they are not “big box” stores. These stores include small grocery and convenience stores. However, if you really want groceries in a super market setting, you need to take a taxi or drive to the outskirts of town where you will find two very new grocery stores which also feature other items such as you might expect to find in a Super Walmart or Super Target store. The main difference we found was that these two stores were far newer and high tech than most Walmart’s or Targets we’ve seen in our Country. One of the stores is called “the City Market” and interestingly enough contains generic items labeled “Kirkland”. There are no other major stores within the region. Many big box stores, including Costco, are located in the town of Queretaro 45 minutes’ drive away and in another state. Needless to say, the expats that I interviewed were very familiar with those stores.

In addition to art, culture and weather, expats also seem to be attracted to the lower cost of living in San Miguel de Allende. Almost everything costs less or no more than if it were purchased in the United States or Canada. Going out to dinner or to a movie were cited by many expats to be significantly less expensive than in the town from which they had moved. One expat from California indicated that he and his wife had searched all over the U.S and Europe to locate the perfect place to retire. They finally came to San Miguel de Allende and fell in love with the City. They are now full-time and happy residents.

I asked a Mexican, who had been a resident of the City for nearly 28 years how the Mexicans feel about all the gringos who have made the City their home. He felt that many would not comment to other Mexicans on such a subject out of politeness. Others he suggested, were grateful for the money brought into the City by these people as well as their interest in preserving the traditions and culture of the City. Of course, he said, there are also a few ugly Americans. But he was quick to point out that Mexican tourists from Guadalajara, Mexico City and other large Mexican Cities were even more likely to be a problem for the City due to their lack of understanding of its traditions etc.

Like most Mexican cities, San Miguel de Allende is blessed with many traditional celebrations. Perhaps one of the most revered is Dia de Los Muertos. On November 1 this holiday celebrates and provides opportunity to give thanks for those who, though departed, are not forgotten. In the City, the celebration started on October 31 and continued through November 2. Face painting is a major event participated by young and old alike. In addition, a parade, which includes tall figures (costumed people on stilts) highlight the festivities. Doors to businesses and homes alike, are also decorated with beautiful flowers.

One expat who had moved from Europe to San Miguel de Allende seemed to be up to date on what was going on at City Hall. He seemed concerned that mayors of the City traditionally pick assistants and City cabinet members with no qualifications to do a job, but are personal friends, rather than picking leadership with knowledge of the area for which they are hired to supervise. He praised the government for establishing what he referred to as a committee to hear concerns of foreigners living in the City. He seemed to feel that resident's concerns were heard by this committee and forwarded to the mayor and his/her staff expeditiously. He said that he had three groups of friends, Mexicans, Europeans and Americans, thus highlighting the three main residential groups he sees in the City.

When one reads the newspaper in the U.S. its easy to assume that Mexico is somewhat of a war zone due to cartel fighting. I asked several expats and Mexicans whether they felt safe in the City. Most replied that they felt safer in San Miguel de Allende than in many of the cities in the U.S. There are two cartels fighting for control of the region. They seem to be more active in the neighboring city of Celaya than elsewhere in the area. Everyone said that they felt safe from the cartels because they are mostly concerned with killing rival cartel members rather than the public. Because drugs are getting more difficult to transport, the feeling is that the cartels have established a new way to make money. They are now forcing small businesses to pay a fee to keep their business safe and operating successfully. Harm will come to those shop owners who disregard this mandate. One expat was aware of a small shop owner who could no longer afford to pay the cartel and simply closed his shop. He was not harmed for doing so. Thus, the expats agreed that although they knew of the cartel's battles for control, they did not feel their presence and felt safe virtually anywhere in the City.

Those who live there extol the virtues of being able to walk everywhere. They also note that, because of the presence of big box stores in neighboring Queretaro, its fulfilling to be surrounded by history but not far from the conveniences offered by big box stores. As one who has spent most of his life-changing moments as a resident of Redlands, I'm proud to call San Miguel de Allende our Sister City

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