



Illustration by The Columbian

Solving Cinco de Mayo

CLARK COLLEGE PROFESSOR SETS RECORD STRAIGHT ON ORIGIN OF MEXICAN HOLIDAY

By **SUE VORENBERG**
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Rumors abound in Vancouver and across the United States regarding the mysterious origins of the Cinco de Mayo holiday.

Ask a bunch of random strangers about it, and you'll probably get an equally random number of theories about what's being celebrated — even at an educational institution like Clark College, where The Columbian went on the hunt for the real story.

Asked what he knew about it, Jonathan Weiker, a GED student at the college, said his former father-in-law had the inside scoop.

"He used to celebrate it, and he called it Mexican New Year," Weiker said.

Nearby, another young man who didn't want to give his name was quick to correct Weiker.

"It's their Day of the Dead," he said.

John Yoder, walking down one of the college hallways with his friend Samantha Neal, smiled slightly when asked what he knew about the holiday.

"I've heard everybody say it's Mexican independence day, but I know it's not," Yoder said, adding that he wasn't sure what the real story was.

Neal smirked back at him.

"I know it's the day the Mexican army beat the French," she said. "I don't know why they celebrate it. I mean, hey, who didn't beat the French?"

Of the four, Neal is the clear winner — perhaps because her 90-year-old great-grandmother comes from Puebla, the state in southern Mexico where the event actually happened.

"I can't believe I'm the only one

that knew that," Neal said. "I'm going to start bragging now."

At that, Neal got a high-five from her friend Yoder.

Erika Nava, a Spanish professor at Clark College, filled in the rest of the historical details.

The event on which Cinco de Mayo is based is called La Batalla de Puebla. It was a U.S. Civil War-era

battle in 1862 in which the French army, led by Napoleon III, invaded Puebla and was subsequently turned back by a much smaller force made up of the Mexican army and local militia.

But while Mexico won the battle, it ultimately lost the war. The French invaded again in 1863 and installed a dictator who ruled the country for a handful of years before he was eventually overthrown, Nava said.

"It's similar to Gettysburg, that's what it means to people in Puebla," Nava said. "It's also a somber, no-liquor-sold holiday where they reenact the battle."

Unfortunately, it's by no means rare for people in the United States to have been told the wrong story about the holiday, she added.

Nava said she's even seen other Spanish teachers spread misinformation about it.

"I look on the Web and see teachers saying it's Mexican independence day," Nava said. "It's sort of sad."

People from southern Mexico

often cringe when they see how the holiday is celebrated in the United States — often at bars with alcohol and loud banter.

Nava's husband, Hugo Nava, who's a school-teacher in Portland, grew up in Puebla and said he was somewhat mystified as to why people in the United States celebrate the holiday at all.

"The way I see people from the U.S. celebrate it, it's just an excuse to go drink, like St. Patrick's Day," Hugo Nava said. "For us it's a patriotic day. It's important because it's part of the history of Mexico. We have a parade. It's a dry day. Nobody drinks."

The U.S. celebration of the day probably came about because people in the Southwestern United States, which was part of Mexico until 1848, held onto the holiday as part of their kinship with their former country. It eventually turned into a celebration of Hispanic heritage in that region, Erika Nava said.

"It's been sort of adopted as a Latino holiday, and I don't think it's bad to have a holiday that celebrates Latino pride, but I think it's bad when that holiday is based on misinformation," Nava added.

From the Southwest, the holiday apparently spread across the United States, more as an excuse to party than as anything associated with the actual Mexican historical event, she said.

"I guess most people also don't know where St. Patrick's Day came from," Erika Nava said.

There's also probably no way

to change the way the holiday is celebrated in the United States, she said.

Erika Nava said she thinks that's OK, but that people should acknowledge it as a separate thing from the Mexican historical event.

"Let's just call it a holiday that has nothing to do with the holiday in Mexico, it just falls on the same day," she said.

Hugo Nava said he can accept that, although he still thinks people should understand a bit about Cinco de Mayo's origins before they go out and party.

"It's OK if you know the history behind it," he said. "To me, if you just go, get crazy and party — it doesn't make sense. You can do that any day of the year. Knowing about it, there's just a little bit of respect of history."

After learning about the real origins of the event, the Clark College crowd said they were eager to spread the word

to their friends ahead of the May 5 holiday.

"I never knew the history," said Moses Stickney, a Washington State University Vancouver student who previously attended Clark College. "Now that I know, sure, I'll tell my friends."

Weiker said he was glad to learn the truth as well.

"Everybody has their great wars," Weiker said. "They deserve to celebrate it in their own way."

Neal said she planned to celebrate Cinco de Mayo this year the way she usually does — at her great-grandmother's Vancouver home, spending time with family, eating Mexican dishes and not drinking.

"Now that I know people don't know the history, I'm going to start telling them about it," Neal said.

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