

HOMES AND HACIENDAS OF MEXICO

By Jose de Olivares

Abjueg, An Ideal Mexican Hacienda

Veranda of a Typical Casa de Campo

Orange Hacienda near Alamo

The Patio of a Mexican Home

It is undeniably a graceful act for the traveler just in from a pilgrimage through Old Mexico to tell of the progress the country is making in the adoption of modern usages. It is both just and encouraging to our prosperous southern neighbor. But nevertheless the features that actually afforded that self-same individual the most enjoyment were the quaint, antique customs and conditions that to so great an extent still characterize the realm. The predominance of the medieval over the modern is what impresses and enthuses the stranger in Mexico. It is the subtle innate romance in the land that allures and inspires. And not the least element involved in this tendency is the fascinating domestic life of the people.

The private residences of Mexico are for the most part constructed of adobe and concrete, though hewn stone is not infrequently employed throughout. In height they vary from one to three stories, the former class being by far the most popular. The exteriors are generally severe from an architectural standpoint, though the use of variously tinted calcimines produces a strikingly picturesque effect. The houses are almost invariably built on the plan of a hollow square, in the center of which is a spacious court or patio, densely filled with potted shrubbery and jardinerias of flowers in endless variety. The appointments of the houses belonging to the wealthy classes are frequently of a most luxurious character, the furnishings almost invariably being of European importation. The locks on all doors are inverted, while the keys thereto are of enormous size, frequently being a foot in length and weighing over a pound.

The interior walls of the Mexican dwelling are never white, but are either embellished in neutral tints or papered, while the ceilings are invariably of painted cloth, more or less elaborately frescoed.

The upper story windows, opening on the streets, are provided with ornate iron balconies, while those of the lower floors are guarded by vertical metal bars. Numerous misconceptions have from time to time arisen concerning the object of this last mentioned feature. The common theory that these bars are for the protection of the property against invasion by thieves is entirely erroneous, as the Mexican robber's averseness to the risks attendant upon house-breaking is proverbial. In point of fact, barred window casements did not originate with the Mexicans, but were introduced with the ingress of the Spaniards in Cortez's time, and constitute a relic of the domestic usages which prevailed in the earliest annals of Spain.

The Mexican town residence invariably occupies the entire ground attached to the premises, and is accessible by an ample arched hall and driveway combined. The latter is closed at night by heavy wooden doors closed from within. If a stable be attached to the premises, it forms a portion of the main structure, and not infrequently adjoins the living apartments in front. Hence, from an exterior view of the establishment there is no absolute certainty as to which of its several departments the shuttered windows open into.

A curious romance is told in connection with one of these antiquated dwellings. A young American who had recently taken up his residence in a certain Mexican town became enamored of one of the fair señoritas of the community, and, with an enterprise characteristic of his lineage, at once undertook the task of acquiring her affections. Now, to any one familiar with the tactics ordinarily employed in such projects elsewhere, this may appear as a simple proposition. But in Mexico it is different, a world of intricacy being involved in its most commonplace courtships. In that unique country a señorita's

devotee, during the initial stage of his attentions, is known as her "bear," and every evening from dusk till midnight, for as long a period as she chooses to dictate, he must conform to the requirements of his role by standing in an attitude of wrapt adoration on the opposite side of the street in view of her window. In the case in question the young man recognized but one impediment to his progress, which was his unfamiliarity



Courtyard at Aranjueg

Carpets are seldom used, the floors being constructed of highly polished tile, over which small, light mats are strewn. The bathroom is fitted with a tub of masonry built into the side of the wall, or in the absence of this apartment a large, portable basin of clay is used. In the kitchen the range is stationary, being of stone or brick, in which charcoal is burned as fuel. Kitchen ware of metal is rarely used, all culinary utensils being of pot-

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gram showing the front elevation of the house wherein the sacred window opening from the señorita's boudoir was minutely indicated. After carefully weighing the matter in his mind the young man decided there was a possible chance of his devotion outliving such an ordeal and determined to see it out.

In due time the allotted three weeks passed by and it is presumed that he carried out his part of the agreement in a thoroughly straightforward manner, for there had certainly been a muffled figure in statuesque posture regularly on duty throughout the prescribed period.

With eager expectancy the enamored swain advanced to the stipulated window. A faint light glimmered through a

narrow opening in the casement. "Ah! she had not forgotten his coming." Gently he tapped on the nearly closed shutter. No response. He waited a moment, then cautiously pushed open the blind, when lo! there was revealed to him the interior of a box stall, wherein, tied closely up to the window was a solitary sad-featured Mexican burro. Made fast to its stubby forelock was a white placard, on which, by the light of a candle placed conveniently near, the crestfallen youth deciphered the legend, "Welcome."

The ladies of a Mexican household never concern themselves with the marketing, invariably leaving that duty to the servants. The latter visit the large markets early each morning, where such provisions

as are required for the day are purchased. The butcher, in cutting up his meat, never uses a knife or saw, but relies entirely upon his cleaver, with which he severs a shin bone or slices off a tenderloin with equal facility. Moreover, he never wraps his wares in paper, but deposits them side by side with the other edibles in his customer's basket.

A Mexican meal is always served in courses, usually including two kinds of soup and several varieties of meat, seldom more than one vegetable and never but one dessert. Bread is placed upon the table in the loaf and is broken instead of sliced, while butter is noticeable through its absence, being used only in the preparation of the meal. Knives and forks are rarely employed excepting by the upper classes, the food being conveyed to the mouth by means of thin bits of corn-cake, known as tortillas. So adroit are the people in this quaint custom that it seldom happens their fingers come in direct contact with their victuals.

The Mexican people are devout lovers of home life, and hence comparatively few of them get beyond their national boundaries. They are likewise fond of entertaining their friends, and the hospitality of a Mexican host or hostess is a world-wide proverb. To such an extent is this true that in many of the towns hotels are unknown institutions, even strangers being assured of entertainment in almost any household.

Of corresponding uniqueness to the urban homes of Mexico is the life that obtains on the great haciendas of the rural districts.

While engaged in securing material for this sketch the writer recently made a visit to Aranjueg, one of Mexico's most beautiful country places, situated near Guaymas, in the State of Sonora. Here the most idealistic phases of life on a representative hacienda were experienced. The place had been named after the country seat of the King near Madrid; and the fact that, with all its present loveliness, it was originally deemed from the desert in the midst of which, like a veritable oasis, it lies, renders its regal title all the more appropriate.

Notwithstanding the air of idleness which to a greater or less extent pervades the Mexican hacienda, there is combined with it a counter atmosphere of luxurious ease that is deliciously infectious. The country dwelling, or casa de campo as it is commonly designated, is invariably built on a plan best calculated for the comfort of its inmates, its chief characteristics being the broad, cool verandas and graceful arcades surrounding its exterior, the deepest windows and delectable courtyards. The surrounding plantation, which is usually measured by the square league, is inclosed by walls of loose stone or hedges of the maguay plant. The sharp, bayonet-like leaves of the latter render it quite as impassable as, and far more attractive than, the barbed-wire fences of the north. The greater portion of the rich land, however, serves only for pasturage purposes, cultivation being restricted to occasional spots and patches.

The implements used in tilling the soil are generally of the most primitive sort, the plow being fashioned entirely out of wood, with but one handle; and to this is yoked, by means of a board bound across their horns, a pair of domesticated Mexican steers or lumbering oxen. The peon who follows this novel equipage or goes to sleep under a convenient banana-leaf is generally attired in a broad palm-leaf sombrero, with an inordinately high

as are required for the day are purchased. The butcher, in cutting up his meat, never uses a knife or saw, but relies entirely upon his cleaver, with which he severs a shin bone or slices off a tenderloin with equal facility. Moreover, he never wraps his wares in paper, but deposits them side by side with the other edibles in his customer's basket.

Such products of the hacienda as are not preserved for its own use are taken to market upon the backs of small native burros, capable of carrying immense burdens, or by means of ponderous wooden ox-carts, relics of antiquity rarely to be found in use in any other civilized country.

The different seasons witness but little variation in the lethargic serenity of hacienda life in Mexico, whether it be harvest or seed time, the gathering of grain. And if, perchance, possessed of a mad ambition to hasten the packing and shipment of his consignment, he is merely put off with the courteous and delusive assurance that his desires will certainly be attended to—peñudo-manana. The word haste is entirely unknown to the vocabulary of the hacendado. Why should there be any hurry when the whole infinite future is at his disposal?

All the elements of a small manufacturing village are embodied in the average hacienda. There are mills for the reduction of cane to sugar and the officals to flour and meal, gins for the curing of cotton and looms for its manufacture into textiles. There is a distillery for the preparation of mescal and liquors, the national beverages; a general store, a chapel and a community school. And this little principality is owned and presided over by a courtly caballero, who is far more solicitous regarding the welfare and happiness of his small army of dependents or the stranger within his gates than of the revenues of his broad estate, which at the least are sure to be amply sufficient for his needs.

The dawn of the new century is witnessing the advent of many changes in Mexico, but in not a few instances will the inherent customs of the land withstand the tide of progressive ideas. And long after the sun of an advanced civilization has penetrated the most remote recess of her primeval bowers, the toothsome tortilla and resourceful burro will remain two indispensable factors in the dreamy lives of her children.

Exploration has now revealed relics of Menes, the founder of Egyptian monarchy, fashioned more than 6000 years ago. Till quite recently he was regarded as purely mythical. There has also been discovered the forearm of the Queen of Zer, the successor to Menes, still in its wrappings, with four splendid bracelets intact. This brilliant and exquisitely finished group of jewelry is 2500 years older than the jewelry of Dahashur, the oldest yet known, and had the great advantage of being carefully examined, as it was found and restrung in exact arrangement. The arm of the Queen had been broken off by the first plunderers and laid in a hole in the wall of the tomb, and there remained neglected by four parties in ancient and modern times, who successively cleared the tomb.