

PRESS RELEASE

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Mexican Honorary Commission celebrates 75th at Cinco de Mayo Fiesta

By Norma Mendoza

For the \_\_\_\_\_

Cinco de Mayo falls on Saturday this year, making even more meaningful the fiesta planned for May 5 by the Mexican Honorary Commission of Granite City.

The festive celebration will be at the Amvets Hall, 1711 Kennedy Drive in Madison. An expanded program of the folkloric dances of Mexico will be presented at 7:30 p.m. followed by the music of Las Ruedas for dancing. The Mexican Honorary Commission is also celebrating the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the organization by the Mexican Consulate in St. Louis. The group was commissioned to assist the many immigrants from Mexico that settled in the Metro East more than 75 years ago.

As the 2000 Census proves, the migration continues with more and more Hispanics making the Metro East home.

In 1926, the industrial hub in the Metro East provided jobs to the Spanish-speaking immigrants where physical labor was more important than the spoken word. Settlers like Guillermo Oropeza, Jose Santacruz, Jose Mendoza, Jesse Martinez, Cenobio Gonzalez, and Joe Valencia, were among the charter members of the Mexican Honorary Commission.

They found strength in numbers as many of their fellow countrymen and immigrants of other nationalities settled near the steel mills in the area "across the tracks" in Granite City. The area was called Hungry Hollow, then "Hunky" Hollow as many Hungarians settled there and built a hall in 1905 that they called Magyar-Haz, or Hungarian Home.

This home was the center of their activities, not only for the Hungarians, but for the rest of the ethnic community in what later became known as Lincoln Place, home to Armenians, Bulgarians, Croatians, Italians, Macedonians, Mexicans, and Polish as well as the Hungarians.

In that small corner of Granite City, the immigrants learned to live, work, respect and grow together. As a result a bond of friendship grew among the many ethnic groups that exists to this date.

In 1970, the Hungarian Club dissolved and sold its building to the Mexican

Honorary Commission. The organization continues to operate from the building, but has outgrown it as a site for the annual Cinco de Mayo and September fiestas.

The celebrations were moved to the Amvets Hall where a large crowd can be accommodated to enjoy the program of traditional folkloric dance and the evening of dancing to Mexican and popular music that follows. Mexican food and drink will also be available.

Tickets are \$8 (\$5 for children aged 3 through 16) and will be available at the door.

Cinco de Mayo is a Mexican holiday celebrated with more festivity in the United States than it is in Mexico, but it can rightly be celebrated by both countries as a day that ensured their freedom and liberty.

Many Americans think of Cinco de Mayo, literally the fifth of May, as the Mexican equivalent of the Fourth of July, or a day to commemorate independence, however it is not the Mexican Independence Day. That event is actually celebrated on Sept. 16.

Cinco de Mayo commemorates the victory of the Mexicans over the French at the historic Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862, more than 50 years after Mexico declared its independence from Spain.

That victory was important to both the United States and Mexico.

It came at a time of turbulence for both nations. The United States was in the midst of the Civil War and Mexico was in dire straits, bankrupted by long years of fighting, and having lost half of its territory to the United States in settlement of the Mexican-American War of 1848.

In 1861, the newly elected Mexican president, Benito Juarez, declared a moratorium on the payment of debts that Mexico owed to foreign nations. The governments of England, Spain and France objected even though Juarez promised to resume payments after the two years were up.

All three European countries sent troops to the port of Vera Cruz in December of 1861. The English and the Spanish soon made an agreement with Juarez and withdrew their forces, however the French had something more in mind.

Under Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, France had been wary of the growing power of the young nation, the United States. France was a super power at the time and was threatened by the new nation.

If France could take over Mexico, it would be in a position to assist the Confederacy in the Civil War. France could remove the blockades of southern ports by Union forces and supply the rebels with arms and manpower for their struggle against the North.

The army of Napoleon III was considered the best-trained, best equipped army in the world at that time. France sent its troops, and accounts vary as to the number, but it was more than 5,000, out of Vera Cruz on a march to the capital of Mexico City, some 225 miles to the west.

Juarez declared martial law and ordered Gen. Ignacio de Zaragoza, a Texas-born Mexican, to block the French at the village of Puebla in the state of Puebla. Zaragoza, with 2,000 Mexican troops and a force made up of Mexican peasants and Zapotec Indians armed only with their farming implements and machetes, were waiting for the French at Puebla.

Zaragoza sent Col. Porfirio Diaz and the Mexican cavalry to the flanks of the French forces. The French made the mistake of sending their cavalry after Diaz whose horsemen quickly annihilated them.

The Indians with their machetes stirred up a few hundred cattle into a stampede and the French army, slogging through muck and mire was outfoxed and overrun. The battle lasted only two hours. The rag-tag Mexican troops successfully defeated the French and turned back the most powerful army in the world, an army which had not been defeated in 50 years.

Although France's subsequent occupation of Mexico diminished the military significance of the Battle of Puebla, it became a unifying and rallying point for the Mexicans. And the time they bought by the historic battle gave the United States another year to pursue an end to the Civil War without interference from the French.

If the French had sided with the South, historians say it could have been enough to tip the balance the other way and the United States could have been divided forever. Once the U.S. Civil War ended, President Abraham Lincoln ordered the French out of Mexico and sent Union troops to the Texas-Mexican border where they supplied Mexico with the weapons, ammunition and manpower it needed to finally defeat the French.

If the French had persisted in the occupation of Mexico, they could have faced two million battle-hardened U.S. troops.

In gratitude to the United States, Mexicans have headed north to enlist and fight with U.S. Armed Forces whenever needed. After the attack at Pearl Harbor, thousands came to lend their strength. Mexicans have deluged American embassies with calls of offers to help fight, as recently as the Persian Gulf War.

That is why Mexicans and Americans alike celebrate Cinco de Mayo, with solemnity in Mexico and with festivity in the United States — to celebrate a turning point for liberty and freedom.

And that's why wherever Mexican-Americans celebrate the day, you will hear the cry, Viva Mexico! Viva America!