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Photographs of the First Mexico and Central America Area Conference, 1972

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and James S. Lambert

As Church membership grew to nearly three million in the early 1970s, the Church faced the challenges of extending contact between General Authorities in Utah and many members who lived far from Church headquarters. While some members in the western United States could tune in to radio or television broadcasts of general conference, hundreds of thousands of Church members worldwide did not have access to the broadcasts.

A woman in Columbus, Ohio, writing of her feelings after Elder Lee’s visit there for a stake conference in the late 1960s, expressed the need for Church leaders to reach out to distant members. In a letter to Elder Harold B. Lee, then First Counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she compared her experience as a Church member to crossing a swinging bridge over an expansive river. The area she must cross between her baptism and eternal life, she wrote, is clouded with uncertainty and doubt, but she does not cross the bridge alone:

This is where the visits of the General Authorities come in. It is as though the force of love calling us becomes vocal and adds impetus to our response to it, as a voice calling to us from farther along the bridge saying, “Have faith; this is the way for I can see ahead.” This is what your visit did for many of us and we love you for this. It restored our confidence in the goal by giving us guidance and enabling us to feel the divine Spirit which flowed from our Heavenly Father through you.¹

In 1971, Church leaders took an important step toward bridging the distance of a worldwide Church with the first area conference in Manchester, England. After the success of that conference, the First Presidency chose Mexico City as the location of the next area conference, to be held

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August 25–27, 1972, for the approximately 115,000 members in Mexico and Central America.²

The photographs in this article, previously unpublished, depict this first area conference in the New World and some of the people who might have attended it.

Members in Mexico, 1972

J. M. Heslop (fig. 1), the photographer who took these photographs, was the editor of the *Church News* at the time. Heslop customarily traveled before and after the events that he covered for the *Church News* in order to generate stories about those areas. Before the conference in Mexico, he traveled with the full-time missionaries to small towns around Mexico City to photograph the living conditions of the members who would be attending the conference. The first three photographs were taken by Heslop in his travels to San Pedro and Conejos, villages south of Mexico City. These towns were representative of small branches of the Church that might benefit greatly from the conference. The little Latter-day Saint chapel in Conejos pictured in figure 2 apparently served as a site for secular as well as sacred activity; here a man is selling produce in front of the building.

The two other photographs Heslop took of the rural Mexican members in 1972 are of San Pedro. The first (fig. 3) shows some members of the branch in San Pedro gathering at the town water pump. Heslop was eager to convey the undeveloped nature of the small towns in which he found the Church members. This photograph clearly shows the poverty of many of the members who eagerly anticipated hearing and seeing the prophet in
Fig. 2. A fruit vendor sells his wares in front of the Conejos, Mexico, branch chapel in 1972. This chapel had a dirt floor, recently swept by the women shown in the background. Photographer J. M. Heslop traveled in the villages near Mexico City before and after the area conference, documenting the lives of Church members who might benefit from the conference.

Fig. 3. San Pedro, Mexico, 1972. The San Pedro Relief Society presidency (Sylvestra Martinez, Ofelia Gutierrez, and Emilia Sanchez) fill their buckets at the town pump.
Fig. 4. José Guzman Aguilar, 1972, San Pedro, Mexico. Brother Guzman Aguilar was eighty-three years old and had been a member of the Church for thirty years at the time of this photograph.

person. The subject of the last photograph (fig. 4) is José Guzman Aguilar, eighty-three years old, a faithful member of the Church for thirty years. Guzman Aguilar died almost exactly a year after the conference.

The Area Conference

In March 1972, the Church was growing rapidly in Latin America. From 1963 to 1972, membership had grown from 26,000 to almost 83,000 in Mexico and from 14,000 to more than 32,000 in Central America.³

While the quantity of members was impressive, President Lee noted their quality as well in a press release to Mexico:

For nearly thirty years I have been visiting the great Republic of Mexico to join with my fellow members... Every time I come to this
republic I am touched by the deep faith, the dedication, and warm friendliness of the Mexican people. They are a choice people. There is in Mexico and Central America a super-abundance of the blood of Israel.4

This faith and dedication shows in the enthusiasm of the Mexican Saints for the area conference: “Es un sueño” (“It is a dream”), exclaimed one member upon arriving at the conference in Mexico City.5 Another member said, “It is more than we would have imagined possible—a conference in our own land.”6 Almost 17,000 members attended the three-day conference in the Auditorio Nacional in Chapultepec Park in Mexico City, some coming from as far as Central America.7 Members gathered from “the deserts and industrial cities of the north, from the small pueblitos of the east and west, and from the tropical coastlines and mountainous areas of the south that stretch throughout Central America.”8 Twenty-two members came from Panama and Costa Rica, making the two-week round trip to Mexico City, which cost two to three months’ salary. These sacrifices were typical of the members in the outlying areas, who sold food, performed manual labor, and even sold land to pay for the trip.

The conference began with an activities program on Friday night in which 764 members from all over Mexico, who had been rehearsing for months preceding the conference, performed regional song and dance numbers. A large map of Mexico was displayed, and the region where each performance originated was lighted as the group performed.9 The photograph of the dancers (fig. 5) illustrates one of the performances at the Friday night presentation; the dancers themselves made their elaborate costumes for the event. The Friday night program was attended by some 15,000 people and was highlighted by a special performance of an old Mexican folk song, “Las Golondrinas,” sung by

![Fig. 5. Members of the Church demonstrate traditional regional dress and dance at the opening festivities of the Mexico City area conference, 1972. At great personal expense, the members made their own costumes for these performances.](image-url)
all the participants. Every report of the conference, including stories in the Church News and the Ensign as well as the conference report itself, remarked that the Friday night program was unforgettable in its spirit of celebration, sacrifice, and appreciation of traditional folk culture.

Due to pressing assignments in Salt Lake City, President Lee was not able to attend the Friday night festivities; he arrived with his wife, Freda Joan Jensen Lee, on Saturday afternoon just before the first official sessions of the conference (fig. 6). The couple were able to attend both the Saturday evening priesthood and women’s sessions of conference.

The last photograph (fig. 7) emphasizes the celebratory colors of the conference scene. At that time, the Auditorio Nacional allowed users to modify and decorate the stage to meet their needs. Accordingly, the Saints constructed and chose the color scheme for the choir stand and the apron (the projecting stage). Customized color celebrating the conference is further evidenced by the choir’s yellow handmade robes, made specifically for the conference. The 307-voice chorus from the Mexico City stakes had sacrificed to pay for their outfits, selling possessions and, when possible, setting other money aside. (Although the red hymnals contribute to the color of the opening session, they were the standard color of the Church’s Spanish hymnbook.) The conference was unique in its enthusiastic and colorful presentation.

Provenance of the Photographs

The photographs remained in the possession of the photographer, J. M. Heslop, until he donated them to the L. Tom Perry Special Collections of the
FIG. 7. Church leaders, the choir, and the congregation assemble in the Auditorio Nacional, Mexico City, August 1972. Mexican Saints chose the colors for the choir stand and the stage apron; the 307 members of the choir paid for their handmade robes. The choir sang “I Know My Heavenly Father Knows” (a hymn not found in contemporary hymn books), “Abide with Me, ’Tis Eventide,” “How Firm a Foundation” (with the congregation), and “I Need Thee Every Hour.” Those officiating at the conference and seated on the stand included local stake presidents, bishops, Regional Representatives, and General Authorities.
Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University under the care of Thomas R. Wells. The Heslop collection is significant because it reverses a lamentable trend of ignoring the archival preservation of twentieth-century photographs. Historians and archivists have concentrated their efforts on the first seventy-five years of Mormonism, in part because these early images are rare and highly prized. Collecting, identifying, and preserving these older images has required a tremendous effort by individuals and institutions with a vision of the images’ historical importance. Mean-while, the later images have been largely neglected by historians, with a few exceptions such as Thomas G. Alexander, Richard O. Cowan, and Robert L. Freeman. As a result, the effort to document later generations has largely been left to family organizations and individuals. The images that have highlighted articles and books dealing with the twentieth century are often borrowed for reproduction and then returned to the owner without suitable copies being made for preservation. We have lost a whole generation of important images. This collection is a major step in reversing this process.

A First for Many: Looking Back on the Conference

The Mexico and Central America Area Conference of 1972 marked a turning point in the history of the Church in these areas. Since then, the membership of the Church has grown so significantly that there are twelve operating temples in Mexico alone, whereas there were no temples in all of Latin America in 1972. This area conference proved to be a first in many ways: the first area conference in North America, the first conference conducted in Spanish, and the first major Church gathering in Latin America. However, perhaps the most truly remarkable aspect of the area conference in Mexico City shows in the five photographs displayed here: Church members in Mexico and Central America who are strong and faithful despite their poverty.

In his closing remarks at the conference, President Lee quoted the letter in which the woman from Ohio compared life to crossing a dangerous bridge. The 1972 Mexico City conference was an important step ahead on the bridge for the worldwide Church, helping many deserving Latin American Church members on their journey.

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First Mexico and Central America Area Conference

11. Brent Goates, son-in-law of President Harold B. Lee, telephone conversations with Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, February 2003. Goates kindly examined the diaries of President Lee to determine why the President arrived in Mexico City on Saturday rather than Friday.
14. The stories of Charles R. Savage and Charles Carter’s pioneering effort to capture and preserve the early period of Mormon history are highlighted in Nelson B. Wadsworth, *Set in Stone, Fixed in Glass: The Mormons, the West, and Their Photographers* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996). At the dawn of the twentieth century, other important photographers, such as George Edward Anderson and Charles Ellis Johnson, continued recording Church history and life. Their work, including the original glass plate negatives, was preserved by the same kind of visionary efforts; see Wadsworth, *Set in Stone*, 173–230, 271–318.