

Aztec Roots Live On at Milpa Alta

Don Carlos López Avila is a living example of the wisdom of the remote times of Anáhuac. A peasant of the Milpa Alta community and depository of the vast and harmonious Náhuatl cultural tradition, don Carlos is the author of several books. Among them are a legendary history of Malacachtepec Momoxco, today known as Milpa Alta, a teaching manual for the Náhuatl language, and a collection of Indian tales that will soon appear in France, since no publisher could be found here in Mexico. Ricardo Montejano interviewed don Carlos in Milpa Alto on July 19th. The following are excerpts from the testimony provided by the Nahuatlan wise man.

THE ORIGINS OF MILPA ALTA

When Tenochtitlan expanded with its increased agricultural needs, our ancestors came here. Other areas were already occupied. The Tecpanecos were over there, the Toltecs were there, the Chichimecas there, the Texcocoans there. Thus, our ancestors came here to explore these lands where no one had come before because there was little water. Our soils are very porous, and they just drink up the water. There are no springs, but there are underground rivers. And so they came to plant and harvest. That's why I say, look, over there you see, all of the mountains are terraced rock. They made the terraces where they first planted. And from there, they moved to the highland valleys. That's why at first it was called Malacachtepec Momoxco and later Milpa Alta. And our ancestors found good agriculture in those two or three valleys, yes. And in the process, they discovered that the rock was good for writing.

COATEQUITL

Our ancestors worked the land collectively. This kind of work is called *coatequitl* in Náhuatl. The *milpas** were worked jointly; the whole group took care of them. Everyone worked them for everyone else. And the fruits of the earth, from the *milpa* and from their labor was shared equally by everyone. No one

was the owner of a piece of land. There was only communal land. That way of holding land was wonderful. Their traditions, customs, the Náhuatl language, their poems, songs and dances and their impressive philosophy were all rooted in that practice. But one day the Conquerors took away our lands for their

sage to our people saying "Our sun has hidden. Our sun has died and left us in total darkness. Thus, we will reserve, we will hide our way of living, our way of speaking. Let us hide away in our houses the teachings of our elders, so that one day, when the sun is born anew, when its light shines once again on our

That's why we believe it is necessary, it is so important to defend this land. It must always live for the benefit of human life. Each year that goes by, each year that we plant, the earth talks to us. Because that is our life, that is the message we have on behalf of the plants, the land and the cosmos. We live with the trees,



Photo by Trabajadores de la comunicación

Don Carlos, wise man of Milpa Alta, a scarce 15 miles away from Mexico City.

plantations. After the Mexican Revolution, we recovered them as *ejidos*,** and even now we continue to conserve them so that they can be more and more productive for our Indian peoples here to the southeast of the Federal District. We want the land to hold us together as brothers and sisters, as a family, because this is where our traditions and customs are, our Náhuatl language, our leaders, our songs and poems and all of our ancestors' great philosophy.

CUAUHTEMOC'S MESSAGE

Way back, when Tenochtitlan fell and Cuauhtémoc was taken prisoner, they sent out a mes-

sage to our people saying "Our sun has hidden. Our sun has died and left us in total darkness. Thus, we will reserve, we will hide our way of living, our way of speaking. Let us hide away in our houses the teachings of our elders, so that one day, when the sun is born anew, when its light shines once again on our

DIALOG WITH NATURE

It is speaking, it is with us. The *milpa* and the countryside, the foliage, the trees, they all speak. The trees remember things that happened in the past, they remember them right now, and they will remember them in the future. We understand -and we know it from our ancestors because our oral tradition has been passed down from generation to generation- we understand that a corn plant, that this very land and everything on it speaks with us, and we speak with them.

we know how they live, we know if one is sick. We know what a tree means for human life. That's what our ancestors taught us. And we learned it; and we shall teach the coming generations how to care for this land because it is a part of our lives and it is a part of our grand culture, of the great philosophy of the Náhuatls who are men of maize.

R. Montejano, transcription.
A. Noyola (Communication Workers), text selection and correction.

*traditional cornfields.

**communal property established as part of the land reform after the Mexican Revolution.