



# Chihuahua City of the Desert

Carlos Lascano\*

**T**oday, the modern city of Chihuahua is located between the warm loneliness of the vast deserts of the North of Mexico and the spurs of the Sierra Madre Occidental. The Sacramento and Chuvíscar Rivers flow

through its valley, joining at a point called the “Meeting Place of the Rivers.” It was there that Envoy Juan de Oñate, during his journey to colonize New Mexico around the year 1598, claimed this valley for the Spanish, making contact with its millennia-old inhabitants, the Concho Indians.

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▲ The Cathedral represents the baroque style of the North.



Photos courtesy of Carlos Lascano

▲ The aqueduct, begun in 1751.

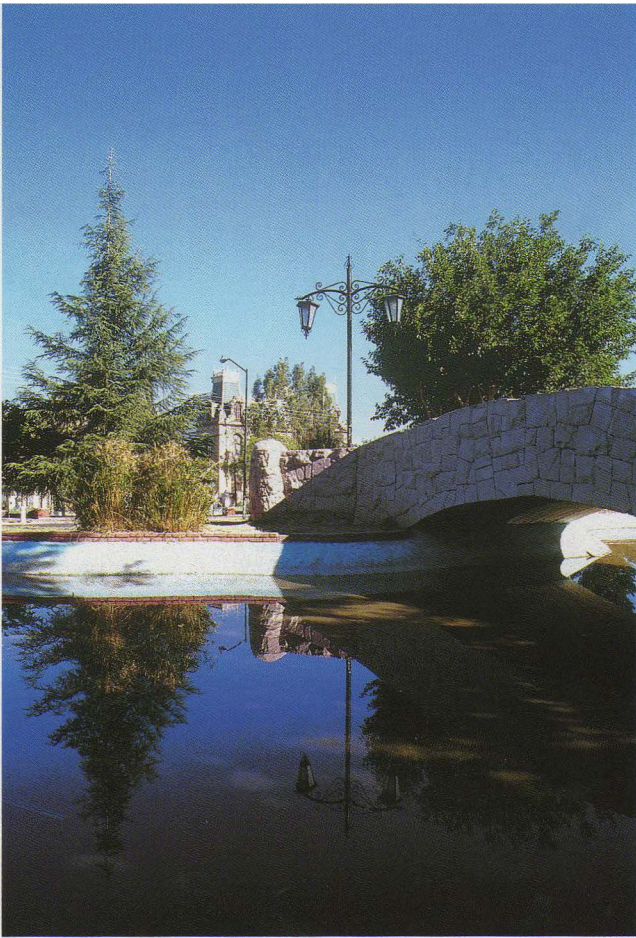
Life was relatively peaceful during the colonial period. Many of the governors of New Vizcaya resided here.

The colonization of the Chihuahua Valley began slowly, lasting the entire seventeenth century. Indigenous towns, cattle ranches and a few ore-refining haciendas were the main forms of settlement. The rich mines of Santa Eulalia were discovered in the eighteenth century, unleashing a gold fever that led to the formal establishment of the city of Chihuahua, October 12, 1709. Although most historians recognize Don Antonio de Deza y Ulloa, the governor of New Vizcaya province, as the founder of the city, there are those who think the real founders were the indigenous Juan de Dios Barba and Cristóbal Luján, the discoverers of the Santa Eulalia mine.

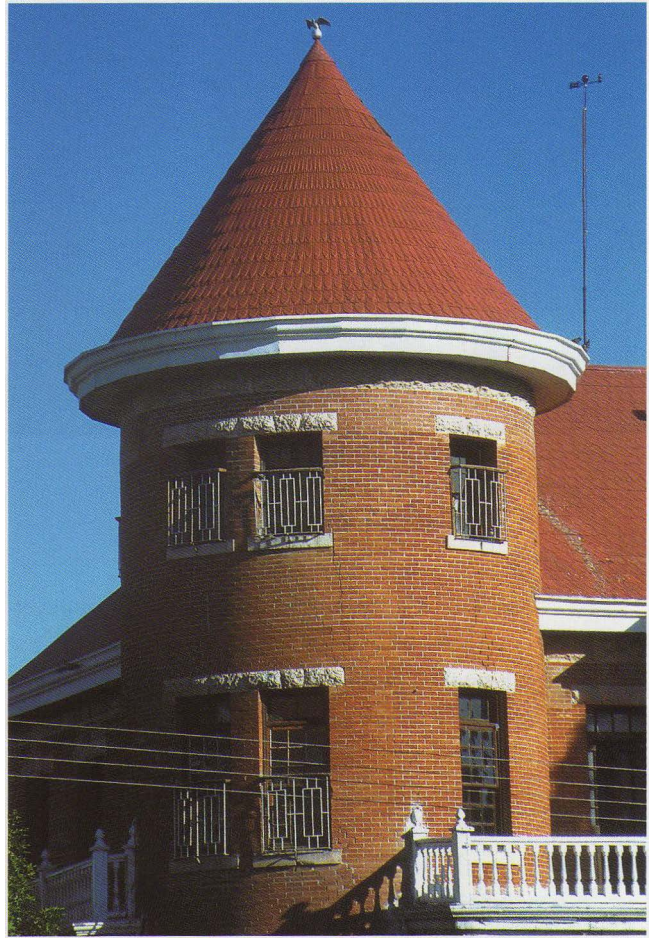
The city's first name was Real de San Francisco de Cuéllar, in honor of Saint Francis of Assisi and

Don Francisco Fernández de la Cueva, marquis of Cuéllar and viceroy of New Spain. The new town grew rapidly and by 1718 was recognized by the crown as a *villa*, acquiring a new name, San Felipe el Real de Chihuahua, in honor of the king of Spain, Felipe V. With the independence of Mexico, the city was given the name it bears today, Chihuahua.

Life was relatively peaceful during the colonial period. The economy was largely based on the Santa Eulalia mine and thanks to this, many of the governors of New Vizcaya resided there, despite the fact that the provincial capital was the city of Durango. The arrival of governors and the far-away Apache attacks were the only events that occasionally disturbed the town's tranquility.



▲ Vallino Park.



▲ Touché Mansion.

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Toward the end of the colonial period, the new winds of independence reached Chihuahua. Miguel Hidalgo, who began the insurgents' fight, was captured and sent to Chihuahua, where he was tried and shot. Many other founding fathers were struck down with him. When Mexico finally achieved its independence from Spain in 1821, the state of Chihuahua was founded, establishing its capital in the old *villa* of San Felipe el Real, now Chihuahua.

The nineteenth century, turbulent throughout Mexico, had a big impact on Chihuahua. It went through many revolts, riots, foreign invasions—the United States and France each took the city several times—and, in addition, the Apache war intensified toward the second half of the century. During the time of Maximilian's empire and the French

invasion, President Benito Juárez took refuge in the city of Chihuahua and for more than a year made it the seat of his government. Under the *Porfiriato* (the 30-year regime of Porfirio Díaz) the system of large cattle-raising haciendas was consolidated, bringing with it great wealth that was concentrated in a small elite. Chihuahua was modernized, but without benefitting the great mass of the people.

By 1910, injustices were so blatant that they spurred the break-out of the Mexican Revolution against, in the first instance, President Porfirio Díaz. The Revolution began in the state of Chihuahua and many of its most important battles were fought there. General Francisco (Pancho) Villa, the head of the Division of the North, occupied the city of Chihuahua in December 1913 and was named gover-



▲ The Sanctuary of Guadalupe.



▲ Government Palace.

nor of the state. During his brief term, Villa confiscated all the haciendas, property and businesses of the Chihuahua oligarchy and did everything he could in favor of the poor. He left a profound mark on the history of the state and of Mexico. To this day, the house where the general lived is preserved as a museum of the Revolution (see *Voices of Mexico* 62).

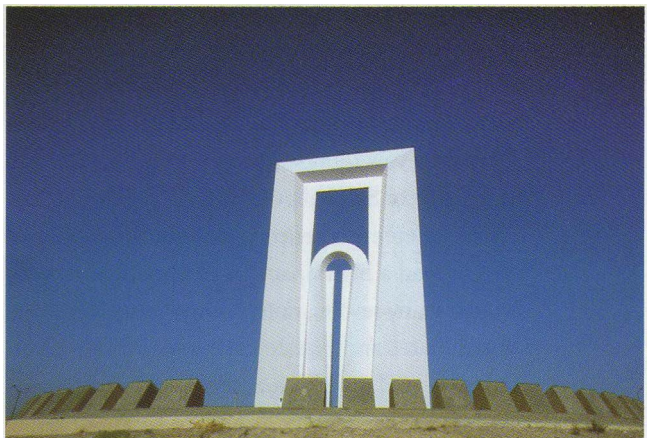
At the end of the revolutionary movement, the modern stage of the city of Chihuahua began and little by little it became one of the most important cities of Mexico's North. With sustained growth, until the 1950s the city provided important services to the agricultural, cattle-raising, forestry and mining sectors. With the decline of these sectors, the city has turned to the maquiladora industry, which has made for striking changes in society, not all for the better.

Today, Chihuahua is a dynamic city with a strong tradition of hard work and progressive people who rely on personal initiative to develop their community. Although there is no lack of problems and tensions derived from unbridled growth and drug trafficking, the city is quiet, with real charm that captivates anyone who goes there, beginning with its own inhabitants.

Some cities are visited for their natural attractions, others for their architecture, their museums or artistic activities; others are commercial centers. The city of Chihuahua is visited and remembered mainly for its people, its ambiance of warmth and generosity. In a world where everything is speedy, Chihuahua invites the visitor to live in tranquility and harmony, without having to give up any of the advantages of modernity. **NMM**



▲ Lerdo Park.



▲ Door of the Sun monument.