

# William Curry Holden and the Yaqui Expedition of 1934



Members of the 1934 expedition are, left to right, Dr. R. A. Studhalter; W. G. McMillan, Sr.; Dr. Carl Seltzer of Harvard, expedition leader; Dr. William Curry Holden; Frank Maddox; Dr. C.J. Wagner; and Benny McWilliams.

William Curry Holden arrived at Texas Technological College in 1929, just a few years after the founding of the school. The unheralded college on the High Plains was still trying to establish its reputation. Holden, for his part, quickly made contributions to the fields of history, anthropology, archaeology and the humanities generally, but also in the role of championing countless programs and projects for Texas Tech and West Texas.

Holden was an unparalleled visionary in those early days at Tech, and although countless thousands of students have passed through the halls of the building which today bears his name, most have no idea why his name is there. Among other achievements, Holden was an inspiring teacher and author. A founding member of the Texas Archaeology and Paleontological Society and the West Texas Historical Association, Holden

counted among his associates the historians Walter Prescott Webb, Carl Coke Rister and J. Evetts Haley. He played a pivotal role in the creation of what would become the Museum of Texas Tech, the National Ranching Heritage Center, the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, the International Center for Arid and Semi-arid Land Studies and the Lubbock Lake Landmark archaeological site. Despite his many accomplishments, perhaps the most enduring vision of Holden is that of expedition leader for the Texas Technological College "Yaqui" Expedition of 1934.

By 1934, Holden had already immersed himself in the fine art of digging in the dirt. Just months before coming to Tech, the young professor had embarked on his first archaeological fieldwork at a site on Tarbox Creek in the Texas Panhandle. Holden arrived at Tech

during the infancy of American anthropological investigation and developed a premier field program in archaeology and anthropology in the midst of the 1930s economic depression.

Gifted with natural curiosity and a knack for instilling enthusiasm in his charges, Holden and his students investigated archaeological sites along the Canadian River, in far West Texas, in New Mexico and in the Big Bend region. Relying on cost efficient ways to send his many students to various dig sites across the Southwest, Holden once reportedly took as payment a \$40 horse in partial payment for a season at a dig site in New Mexico.

A few years after arriving at "The Tech," as it was affectionately known, Holden learned that the Yaqui Indians of Sonora, Mexico, had a tradition of passing from one generation to the next an oral "history" of their peoples. His interest piqued, in 1933, Holden began preparing an expedition to the remote villages of the Yaqui. At the height of the Great Depression, traditional funding for such a project was not forthcoming, so the young professor looked locally for support, and found exactly what he needed. Texas Tech President, Bradford Knapp and the Tech Board of



Holden standing next to Yaqui dwelling.



Wagner, Studhalter, Holden and Seltzer in front of two vehicles.

Directors strongly endorsed the project, and the local *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal* newspaper launched a campaign to raise interest and money. Soon the bandwagon included the West Texas Chamber of Commerce, local businesses and service organizations.

After securing permission from the Mexican government, Holden set about organizing a team in early 1934. Expedition members included Holden, Dr. Carl Seltzer, a physical anthropologist from Harvard; Dr. Richard Studhalter, head of the Tech Biology Department; Dr. Charles Wagner, chief of staff, West Texas Hospital; building contractor and outdoorsman, William McMillan; Charles Guy, editor/publisher of the *Lubbock-Avalanche Journal*; and Tech student Bennie McWilliams, cook and assistant archaeologist.

Leaving Lubbock on March 1, the party traveled to Arizona, then south to Hermosillo, to Guymas, and then east into the land of the Yaqui. Persecuted by the Spanish and subsequently by the Mexican government as well, some Yaqui groups had belligerently remained in the nearly inaccessible refuge of the Bacatete Mountains while the majority resided in eight principal villages in the Yaqui Valley below.

Fortunately, Holden was able to gain the cooperation and trust of the Yaqui people, returning to Sonora in September of 1934, and on subsequent

visits over several decades. The original expedition returned to Lubbock with 144 museum specimens, 71 of which were bound for Harvard's Peabody Museum, the remainder destined for the Plains Museum Society, progenitor of the Museum of Texas Tech.

Expedition members recorded little known information about Yaqui governance, customs, religion, ceremonies, military, marriage, education, domestic life, medicine, architecture, and agriculture. The expedition produced some 800 photographic images of Yaqui life-ways and customs, of individual Yaquis, and of the homeland they had defended for centuries. Numerous sketches and 1,200 feet of motion picture film recorded the groundbreaking success of that first expedition. Furthermore, the expedition was a source of pride for the city of Lubbock and its fledgling college on the High Plains. ■

*The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library is currently designing the exhibit "Icon: The Legend and Legacy of William Curry Holden" in celebration of the archive's 50th anniversary. The exhibit will premiere at the National Ranching Heritage Center in late August. For more information, contact Bogener at [steve.bogener@ttu.edu](mailto:steve.bogener@ttu.edu)*



ABOVE: From left, seated, are: Dr. C. J. Wagner and Dr. W. C. Holden discussing with Yaqui chiefs the Yaqui Bulletin, published after the original expedition. Directly behind Holden is Ramon Valencia, Yaqui interpreter. BELOW: Yaqui woman carrying water

