The Yaqui Expedition of 1934

Upcoming Events

a little... Controversy

Photograph from the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library
1934 Yaqui Expedition (MPC56-113-13)
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 to 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 Coko 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. 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. 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. The Tech Board of Directors strongly endorsed the project, and the local 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 Stulhoffer, 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 Guaymas, 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 remained in the nearly inaccessible refuge of the Bacatete Mountains while the majority resided in eight principle villages in the Yaqui Valley.

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 the first scholarly book on the Yaqui --- some 300 photographic images of Yaqui lifeways and customs, of individual Yaquis, and of the homeland they had defended for centuries. Numerous sketches and 1200 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.

By Steve Bogener
UPCOMING EVENTS

Aug. 29-Oct. 31, 2005
Icon: The Legend and Legacy of William Curry Holden, a multi-panel traveling exhibit to be shown in the Gallery area of the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University beginning August 29, 2005. The exhibit will then be on display in the University Library's Cressin Room after October 1.

Year Round
Permanent exhibits featuring ranching, community life, rare books, Texas Tech University, and sports, located in the Gallery area of the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library.

Summer, 2005
The Working Life of a Writer, a traveling exhibit featuring the work and life of author Barry Lopez (contact the Southwest Collection for details on venues), and a display of Lopez memorabilia in the East Rotunda of the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library.

Year Round
A Slice of Americana at Mid-20th Century, an exhibit featuring photographs of Lubbock from the Winston Reeves Photograph Collection, located in the stairwell of the SWC/SCL. (Two cases are also available for viewing at the Lubbock International Airport).

Spring and Summer, 2005
Coronel Rotunde Temporary Exhibit Cases: Vincenzo Coronelli and the Coronelli Globe Frank Reagh: Painter of the Postic Texas Landscape A Kaleidoscope of Color, works by Helenn Rumpel Arid Lands Water, the Crucial Resource West Texas Historical Association Vietnam: "the other war" Expressions of the Human Spirit: Art of the Southwest

Coming in Fall, 2005
Hidden Treasures of the Southwest Collection, an exhibit of several cases highlighting seldom seen artifacts, documents, and memorabilia from the archive's rich and varied holdings. Items ranging from rare maps and letters, to ranching artifacts, political memorabilia and material concerning the assassination of President John F. Kennedy will be featured.

Fall, 2005 and Spring, 2006
Events to Celebrate the Southwest Collection's 50th Anniversary (contact Lynn Whittlefield at the SWC/SCL for details).

In 1934, The Lubbock Avalanche Journal sent editor and publisher, Charles A. Guy on Texas Technological College's Yaqui expedition. Guy sent back reports as the group traveled down to Mexico to study the Yaqui of Sonora. The following comes from these reports, dated March - April 1934.

March 1, 1934
"The expedition left at 8:30 a.m. Holden had on his person a bearded rabbit's foot made in the Yaqui country and used by Mrs. R.L. Slaughter, jr., of Lubbock when she made her way from being kidnapped by the Indians in 1927. The Yaquis took Mrs. Slaughter from her husband's Sonora rancho and held her for payment of a ransom of 34 horses, three dozen pairs of trousers and three dozen jumpers."

March 15, 1934
The tech group spent the day moving camp not once, but twice at the direction of Mexican soldiers ending up at Forte Torin overlooking the Yaqui River. Move one: "So we packed up bag and babbage, together with three tons of bug catching and daisy pressing equipment, and made way joyously to Torin, where scores of shelled rains bear mute testimony to the furious cannonading which accompanied the 1913 Madero revolt and laid proud Torin, then Sonora's capital, as low as a snake's tummy."

Move two: "A twenty minute conversation with Colonel Jiaconie resulted in: Camp Must Move. We couldn't camp with the Yaquis, first because the General said we couldn't; second, because he said we couldn't; third, because the Yaquis or bandits, which infest this area, would loot our camp and, maybe, cut our cars off; and, fourth, because a bunch of residents of these parts got playful a month or two ago and cut a guy's throat because he was suspected of having 50 centavos in his pockets, or 15 cents American dinero. So after explaining to the Yaqui boys ... we moved to the garrison - moved all over again under the protective and quizzical eye of los soldados."

March 17, 1934
"El Senor Juan L. Serena, 55, a member of the local Yaqui storm troops, this morning submitted to an operation for the removal of a bullet. The bullet removed by Doctor Wagner had been wagged around by Senor Serena for 19 years, it being one of eleven he picked up in the back after a little misunderstanding with Mexican troopers."

March 24, 1934
"Members of Texas Technological College's Yaqui Indian expedition last night gained an objective of which they have been talking about since before leaving Lubbock and which they doubted they would accomplish. They had April 11, 1934. Lavish in its proportions and completed in every detail, "Bringing with them a wealth of information about the mysterious Yaqui Indians of Sonora, Mexico, all members of Texas Technological College's scientific expedition to the Yaqui villages had returned to Lubbock last night."
Out of Order  Photographer: Matt Gore

The Millennial Collection is a joint documentary project between Texas Tech University's School of Visual and Performing Arts and the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. The collection consists of work from students enrolled in the School of Art's documentary photography class. This project is ongoing and includes several images by students and some professional portfolios.

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CONTROVERSY

In the late 1940s, William Cary Holden's archaeology students were working in southeastern New Mexico at the Bonnell site in the Hondro River Valley west of Roswell. According to information gleaned from Holden's papers in the Southwest Collection and from course listings for the year, during the summer of 1947, from June to July, Holden was teaching a history course at Texas Tech in Lubbock. Although not always present at the various dig sites and field schools his students were investigating, Holden certainly visited them when he could; the Bonnell site was only a short drive west of Lubbock.

It was during this first week of July, 1947 that something reputedly fell from the sky and crashed thirty miles northwest of Roswell. That would place the crash site remarkably close to the Bonnell dig site. The story of the so-called Roswell Incident is full of intrigue and mystery, and it refuses to go away. According to many who investigate such incidents as an avocation, there was a group of archaeologists camping in the area of the alleged crash. Surmising that a plane had gone down, the group resolved to investigate early in the morning. The story goes that the ersatzish dirt diggers discovered the site and were examining the debris when they were promptly interrupted by a military party from the nearby air base and escorted to the nearest highway and asked to leave. Although never a topic Holden was willing to discuss, and vehemently denied by those closest to him, many of the so-called "UFOlogists" persist in claiming that Holden was indeed present at the Bonnell site in 1947, that he and his student archaeologists were the above mentioned group.

Reluctant to discuss the issue in his early years, in 1992 at the age of 96, Holden was interviewed in his Lubbock home and reportedly told a researcher that "[he] was involved ... [that he] was there and [he] saw everything." Of course the larger Roswell story has generated a loyal band of true believers and debunkers over the last fifty years.