THE Yucatan TIMES
News you can rely on

“Surprising History in Yucatán”

Introduction to the Series

by Robert D. Temple

This series of articles is about true incidents in the history of Yucatán. The focus is on *extraordinary history* — events unexpected, surprising, far from the ordinary, perhaps not well known.
The Yucatec Mayan language has two words that correspond to English “Wow!” — “¡*Maare*!” (a good “wow”) and “¡*Uay*!” (a bad “wow”). May the reader experience both.

These stories are about the Yucatán Peninsula, which includes the modern Mexican states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, and (confusingly) Yucatán, plus a slice of northern Belize and Guatemala.

Each article includes suggestions about places modern explorers can visit that are connected with the events.

Spelling of Mayan personal and place names can be a source of some confusion. The Academia de Lengua Maya de Yucatán (ALMY) introduced a system of standardized and accurate spelling in 1984. However, these articles mostly use the older and more familiar Spanish-style spellings. For example, we use Yucatán (not Yúukataan) and Ahau Canek (not Ajaw Kan Ek’).

Robert D. Temple, PhD, is the author of the award-winning book *Edge Effects* and numerous magazine articles, mostly dealing with matters of local history. He lives in Yucatán, Ohio, and Virginia.

When Did the Caste War End? Part 1 — The Power of General Bravo

[“Surprising History in Yucatán” — Introduction to the Series]

The Caste War of Yucatán officially ended, after fifty-four years of horror, when a Mexican army occupied the Maya capital on May 4, 1901.

But the deep-rooted and lingering war really had no definitive final battle, no conclusive peace treaty. No Waterloo, no Appomattox. The end came several times. Or maybe not.

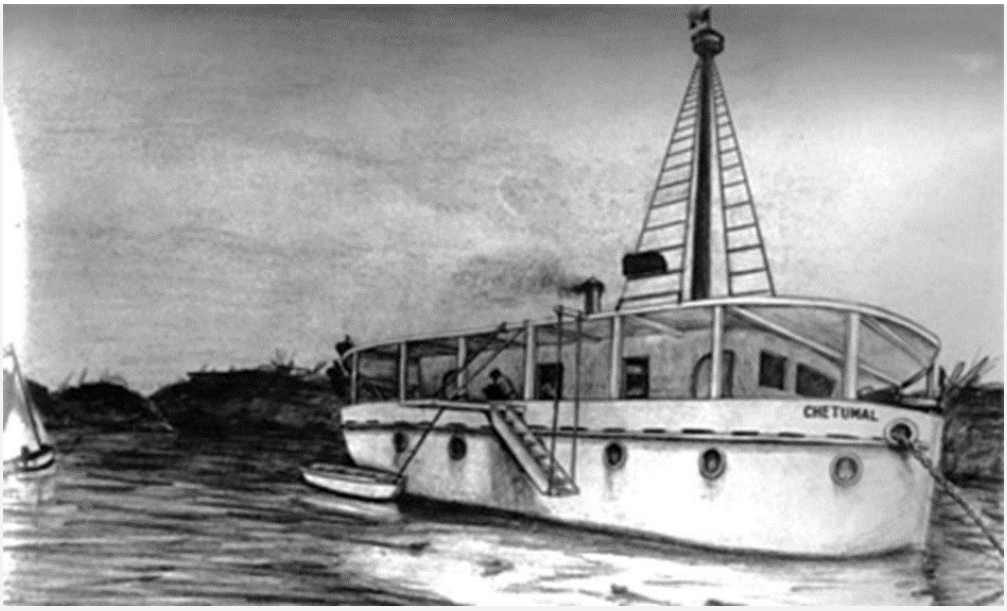
The interethnic conflict began in 1847, raged ferociously for a decade or so, then settled into guerrilla clashes and murderous raids. The cost was about a quarter of a million lives and hundreds of towns destroyed. The Yucatán Peninsula lost a third to half of its population, killed or forced to flee from the violence. The rebelling Maya, defending their culture against subjugation and the advances of capitalist agriculture, established and maintained an independent nation, roughly today’s state of Quintana Roo, with their capital at Chan Santa Cruz.

The independent Maya, known as the Cruzo'ob because of their adherence to the indigenous Speaking Cross religion, were sustained by trade with British Honduras (now Belize). They bought arms and other goods, paying with captured loot and with "taxes" charged to British woodcutters allowed to work in areas they controlled. Great Britain recognized the Maya free state as a *de facto* independent nation.

The war might have ended in 1884. Mexico re-established diplomatic relations with Great Britain, broken seventeen years earlier in retaliation for Britain's recognition of the French-imposed Maximilian regime. Britain responded by acting as a peacemaker, sponsoring negotiations between the Spanish Yucateco state and the Maya Cruzo'ob state — while continuing the lucrative arms trade. A delegation of Maya leaders met with a Yucatecan representative, General Teodosio Canto, in Belize. They reached a peace agreement that afforded the Maya a measure of autonomy, selection of their own leaders, and an exchange of prisoners. The day after the signing, a drunken General Canto insulted one of the Maya leaders, Antonio Dzul. The Maya denounced the treaty and left in anger.

In 1887 the Maya formally requested that Britain annex their territory and place them under the protection of Queen Victoria. The British declined the offer. But this incident inspired talks between the Mexican and British governments aimed at pacifying things along their mutual border.

Mexican President Porfirio Díaz, working to put down several long-running Indian revolts, recognized that cutting off the arms supply was key to winning in Yucatán. A first step was to settle the long-disputed boundary between Mexico and British Honduras. The Spencer-Mariscal Treaty, signed in 1893, did that by establishing the Río Hondo as the boundary. Howls of protest arose from Yucatán over the loss of territory they believed to be theirs. Mexico resolved some outstanding debt problems, and the British agreed in principle to suppress the arms trade. In fact, little changed on the last point.



Pontón Chetumal
(Secretaria de Marina Mexicana)

Within the Cruzo'ob nation, disputes over peacemaking and allocation of timbering proceeds were causing rapid changes in leadership. Central authority deteriorated, people were emigrating, and the number of effective troops was falling. A rare visitor in 1888 reported Chan Santa Cruz depopulated, although still used as a ceremonial and meeting place, with the Speaking Cross shrine heavily guarded. The Cross itself had been taken to Tulum and then, amid further political squabbles, moved to Chunpom, about midway between the two rival sanctuaries. In 1892, a British merchant opened a store in ruined Bacalar, undermining the isolationist leaders.

In 1896, actions got underway that led to the official end-of-the-war date five years later. Independent-minded Yucatán finally accepted that all-out Federal assistance was the only way to end the war. Mexican and Yucatecan troops established a headquarters for invasion at the abandoned town of Sabán, on the frontier east of Peto, about fifty miles northwest of Chan Santa Cruz. President Díaz selected General Francisco Cantón to be governor of Yucatán, a military man to support a joint military effort.

In a move to stop the flow of arms and timber proceeds to the Maya, Federal authorities ordered a young naval officer, Sublieutenant Othón Pompeyo Blanco, to establish a military station and customs post at the mouth of the Río Hondo. Blanco decided he preferred a floating fortress over a land-based one. His superiors accepted the plan, and Blanco supervised construction of a suitable vessel at New Orleans. It was a game-changer.

Blanco's vessel, christened *Pontón Chetumal*, was an unpowered, tub-like barge. Built of cypress planks with an armor-protected deck, it was 62 feet long and 24 feet wide with a draft less than three feet. A single mast supported an armored crow's nest. Armament consisted of one rapid-firing Hotchkiss cannon, one machine gun (a French mitrailleuse or possibly a U.S. Gatling), fifteen Winchester repeating rifles, six pistols, and eighteen machetes. *Chetumal* had a motor launch and small sailboat as auxiliaries.

Sublieutenant Othón P. Blanco
(Photographer unknown)

His unusual vessel was towed to Belize City. There Blanco dealt with the delicate diplomacy of enforcing an international boundary on a river woodcutters had long considered their private waterway. The British authorities gave their assent, and on the afternoon of January 22, 1898, an American-flagged steamer towed Blanco with his twelve-man crew into Chetumal Bay and to their station off the Mexican shore at the mouth of the Río Hondo. Blanco's men soon received a letter from the rebel Maya warning them to "leave or have their skulls converted to drinking cups."

Unintimidated, Blanco recognized the need for an actual settlement, not just his floating fortress, to hold this strategic location. He recruited Mexican refugees and founded a town beside the bay on the left bank of the river. Under protection by his sailors, the settlers cleared the brush, put up barracks

and a pier, and laid out sand streets. At dawn on May 5, 1898, and with great emotion, the first residents cheered the raising of the Mexican flag and sang the *Himno Nacional Mexicano* accompanied by a brass band. They called the town Payo Obispo in honor of a bishop — later archbishop and viceroy of New Spain — Payo Enríquez de Rivera y Manrique, who had stopped there briefly in the 17th century.

The humble barge *Chetumal* effectively intercepted the supply of arms, gunpowder, and timber revenue and provided a base for conducting reconnaissance on Maya strength in the region.

Then the serious troop build-up began at Sabán — seven battalions of Mexican regulars and three of state militia, equipped with modern five-shot Mauser rifles, machine guns, and rapid-fire de Bange field artillery. General Ignacio A. Bravo, a long-time military supporter of President Díaz, arrived to take command. A small, seventy-year-old man with a huge, drooping white moustache, Bravo was chosen because of his genocidal success against the Yaquis in Sonora. The General declared he was on a “humanitarian and civilizing” mission.

General Ignacio A. Bravo
(Archivo General de la Nación)

The British government urged last-minute negotiations, but neither the Maya nor the Mexicans had much interest.

Bravo initiated a “scientific” campaign. Well supplied, he progressed eastward on a road built through wide clear-cuts, establishing strong points connected by telegraph lines and field telephones. It was basically a construction project, with the military protecting the work gangs and the state government pouring in money.

Maya soldiers first opposed Bravo’s advance on December 27, 1899. Although they outnumbered the Mexican-Yucatecan army, the Maya found their dry stone walls were no match for artillery fire. Their shotguns, ancient muzzle loaders, and machetes were ineffective against modern weapons, and they

were short on ammunition for the single shot Martini-Enfield rifles they bought from the British. As shot for their muzzle-loaders, they resorted to using bits of telegraph wires they had taken down and cut up. Bravo's fortifications, clearings, and good communication precluded the ambushes they had used effectively for so many years.

In four months, Bravo's army advanced thirty miles toward Chan Santa Cruz, building good wagon road and forts along the way. When the rainy season began in May 1900, the supply routes became impassable, a severe measles epidemic struck the Maya forces, and military action paused. Things resumed in early 1901, with the Maya attacking in force but unable to stop the relentless advance.

A simultaneous naval operation from Chetumal Bay advanced against light resistance and occupied the ruined and abandoned town of Bacalar on March 31, 1901. Forces under General José María de la Vega began advancing toward Chan Santa Cruz from the south. Vega also sent forces to land at a sand spit on Ascensión Bay called Vigía Chico; at Tulum; and at Xcalak, a deserted peninsula seaward of Chetumal Bay. The Maya nation was surrounded.

By Robert D. Temple

When Did the Caste War End? Part 2 — The Power of General May

[Link to "Surprising History in Yucatán" — Introduction to the Series]

Continued from *The Yucatan Times* last month — The forces of General Bravo had surrounded the independent Maya nation…

[Link to Part 1, published January 4, 2016]

In the face of the advancing enemy, the Cruzo'ob Maya abandoned their capital and took the Speaking Cross from the shrine at Chan Santa Cruz to a secret location.

On the morning of May 4, 1901, Mexican and Yucatecan troops led by General Ignacio Bravo marched unopposed into abandoned Chan Santa Cruz, establishing the official date for the end of the Caste War.

Bravo announced his great victory by telegraph, provoking wild celebration in Mérida the next day. In June, Governor Cantón came to visit the fallen rebel capital. He reviewed the troops while a band

played, and he ordered the town renamed Santa Cruz de Bravo. Some two thousand Yucatecans and Mexicans had died in General Bravo's campaign, mostly from illness.

Troops rapidly moved out to extend Bravo's control, northeast to the miserable beachhead at Vigía Chico on Asunción Bay and south to Bacalar. The defeated Maya rebels scattered to refuges deep in the forest and swamps, to British Honduras, and to Guatemala. Refusing to stand to a battle, they continued to fight. Bravo's forces destroyed food stores and burned milpas. Prisoners were condemned to labor on haciendas in Veracruz. Groups that would surrender received promises they could choose own leaders and be left in peace, but few accepted. There was no general surrender, submission, or amnesty.

Bravo's victory did not mean that Yucatán regained its long-lost territory. The price of bringing in the Federal army to fight their war was soon evident. Within months, President Díaz implemented a plan — proposed as long ago as 1888 — to create a separate territory in the eastern part of the Peninsula. Yucatán had never really controlled the region but had fought intensely for it during half a century, and vigorous protests came as it was snatched away. But Díaz was not to be disobeyed, and he named the new territory for Andrés Quintana Roo, Mérida-born hero of Mexican independence.

General Bravo pursued pacification and development of the territory and its capital vigorously and with an iron fist. In Santa Cruz, he created a pretty plaza with orange trees, built a modern reservoir and a market, and installed an electric generator. But there was little natural immigration to the long-despised region, viewed as a tropical hell. Bravo brought in convicts for labor, making the place essentially a penal colony. The great Balam Nah sanctuary of the Speaking Cross became a chaotic prison dormitory. Construction of a railroad line to Vigía Chico began, using narrow-gauge Decauville track. The workers, mainly political prisoners sentenced to hard labor, advanced under dreadful conditions as unconquered Maya snipers shot them. Attacks continued after the line was completed, and the trains regularly included armored boxcars with machine guns for protection.

Bravo's administration continued for eleven years. His systematic persecution of the Maya increased their resistance. Down at Payo Obispo on Chetumal Bay, Othon P. Blanco carried out development more effectively. Santa Cruz de Bravo grew to a population of about 4,000, including soldiers and prisoners; Payo Obispo to around a thousand.

Balam Nah, the original sanctuary of the Speaking Cross today. The smaller yellow building is the replacement built after 1915. Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Quintana Roo. (Photograph by Robert Temple)

The year 1915 is another date that one could cite as an end of the war. The Mexican Revolution had sent Díaz into exile, relieved General Bravo of command, and ended his private empire. The Revolution came to Yucatán in the person of General Salvador Alvarado, Governor and Military Commander of Yucatán and Quintana Roo, who made sweeping changes. He introduced reforms that addressed Maya grievances. Prisoners were released, and most of the troops departed. He offered a peace treaty, and after some Maya groups signed it, he ordered all non-Maya people to leave Santa Cruz and moved the territorial capital to Payo Obispo.

This official and sanctioned separation of ethnic groups had long-lasting importance in the history of Quintana Roo. It allowed the Maya separatists to strengthen and a new generation of leaders to emerge. They wanted nothing from the Mexicans. They wanted isolation. Declarations of peace were irrelevant.

The separatist Maya might have welcomed Alvarado's withdrawal from Santa Cruz as great good fortune, but they were contending with a severe smallpox epidemic at the time. This they regarded as punishment for allowing the fall of their historic capital. Recovery and return were gradual. The Cruzo'ob faction that reoccupied Santa Cruz at last was under the leadership of Francisco May Pech, who claimed the rank of General.

General May's people were not happy when they found what the foreign occupiers had done to Santa Cruz, and they set about erasing the "improvements." They blew up the reservoir and market with dynamite, burned the buildings used as barracks, and wrecked the generator. They cut all telegraph and telephone lines. They tore up the railroad to Vigía Chico, destroyed the locomotives, and burned the rail cars. Balam Nah, the sanctuary of the Cross, had been desecrated beyond possible restoration and remained unoccupied. A small chapel adjacent to the main large church became the new shrine of the Cross.

News of the destruction arrived in Mérida and raised fear of a new uprising. A small detachment of troops went out to Santa Cruz. Encountering opposition, they backed off and left the Maya alone.

The main Cruzo'ob factions now centered at Santa Cruz and at Chunpom, about 30 miles to the north. The groups maintained separate and mostly friendly relations, with their own versions of the Speaking Cross. The Santa Cruz inhabitants unofficially renamed the place for Venancio Pec, the rebel leader who died defending it in 1852.

General Francisco May Pech
(Photographer unknown)

The Mexican government made serious efforts to engage General Francisco May. He visited Payo Obispo — the first real town he had ever seen — then Mérida, and eventually Mexico City, where he met President Venustiano Carranza. May was honored by being made a general in the Mexican army,

given a fancy uniform, and presented with a military review, complete with airplanes. Allegedly his hosts also introduced him to a house of prostitution. May returned to his milpa much impressed.

After about 1917, a boom in the harvesting and sale of chicle changed life for many of the separatist Maya. Chicle, a resin made from the sap of the *zapote* or sapodilla tree, was the main ingredient in chewing gum, which was gaining popularity in the United States at the time. The Maya used their *zapote* trees to their advantage, collecting rent from concessionaires and eventually learning the trade themselves.

The railroad to Vigía Chico was renovated to aid export. They were soon making cash money and attracting traders. Their acquisitions expanded beyond the traditional shotguns and salt to whiskey, jewelry, canned food, and cigarettes, seducing them into the world of trade with "foreigners."

General Francisco May took firm charge of the chicle trade. He converted a two-story hotel in Santa Cruz into his office and warehouse, opened a store, and hired a series of Ladino assistants to translate and handle affairs of the capitalist world. But conflicts with concessionaires and *chicleros* arose, the developments attracted government interest, and troops returned. May, who had become rich by local standards, reluctantly accepted Mexican intervention to keep the peace. His more militant associates regarded him as a traitor, and in 1929 they left in disgust.

The largest dissident faction, led by Evaristo Zuluub, established a new settlement at a previously uninhabited site they called Xcacal Guardia (variously spelled), about thirty miles northwest of Santa Cruz. They took the Cross with them and installed it in a new sanctuary, in what they initially viewed as temporary exile. With about 700 supporters, they built a small thatched church and barracks, marked boundaries with crosses, established a rotating system of armed guards, and barred outsiders. The main interpreter of the Cross was Pedro Pascual Barrera, grandson of José María Barrera, the man who found the original Speaking Cross carved on the trunk of a mahogany tree beside a cenote and named the place Chan Santa Cruz.

As civil control advanced, skirmishes continued with settlements that refused to acknowledge Mexican authority. Non-Maya people risked being killed if they ventured into the forest. The Cruzo'ob of Xcacal led continuing guerrilla warfare. In April 1933, rumors of revolution and murder brought elements of the 35th and 42nd Battalions of the Mexican Army to the village of Dzula, west of Santa Cruz, to arrest Evaristo Zuluub. A skirmish followed, five Maya and two Mexican soldiers died, and the village burned. Zuluub escaped.

Some historians regard Dzula as the last battle of the Caste War, yet another possible "end" date, more than 85 years after it began.

Many indigenous leaders continued to express loyalty to Francisco May as overall "chief of the Maya tribe." Without official authority, and repudiated by more militant factions, May influenced many to sign various local treaties with Mexico through the 1930s and 1940s. General May himself was party to a formal peace treaty in 1935, another possible date to regard as the end of the War. But scattered settlements of recalcitrant *macehuales* (from the Náhuatl word for peasant farmer) remained in control of much of Quintana Roo. Some refused to consider themselves Mexican and, remembering the long years of support from Belize, claimed to be British subjects.

A curious series of incidents in the 1930s involved the prominent North American archaeologist, Sylvanus Morley. Morley established contacts with Maya leaders while doing scouting work on ancient sites during the First World War. (He was also acting as a paid spy for the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence, but that is another story.) As Morley continued his work, leaders from Xcacal Guardia began contacting him, seeking arms to use against the Mexicans. They also wanted U.S. flags to indicate they were not part of Mexico. In 1939 they asked to be annexed by the United States, with Morley to act as their "white chief." Morley gave ambiguous responses and wisely refused to meddle in Mexican politics.

Ethnographers and other visitors continued to report occasional observations from *macehual* villages: A proclamation from the Speaking Cross signed by "Juan de la Cruz" in 1957. Requests for rifles to drive out the Mexicans in 1959. A British flag flying in Xcacal Guardia in the 1970s. Remote Cruzo'ob villages that believed the Caste War was still going on. The guarded and worshipped Cross in Xcacal Guardia, where residents were expecting "help" from the Americans and British as late as 1997.

The guard at Xcacal Guardia, 1930s
(Photograph by Frances Rhoads Morley, Brigham Young University)

Central Quintana Roo has been transformed in the past half-century, as roads, schools, and modernization penetrated remote areas and people became increasingly dependent on a government once considered their enemy. But the Caste War remains immediate historical reality in tales told with pride and horror. Distinct Maya culture and ideology endure. Maya officers and priests continue to exercise authority in villages far from the beach resorts, far even from the language of the conquistadors.

The Maya did not win the War, but they accomplished their objective of stopping expropriation of their land for commercial agriculture. They kept the best land, leaving the Ladinos with the poor northwest, suitable only for henequen.

Maya prophecy regards history as cyclic. In that tradition, the present may be a time of relative peace and freedom, but subjugation will come again, and the Cross will deliver a signal to resume the war and drive out the foreigners. Events in history do not so much *end* as come around again in the next cycle.

Epilogue

In 1934, during a brief period when Quintana Roo was reincorporated into the state of Yucatán, the name of Santa Cruz de Bravo was changed to *Felipe Carrillo Puerto*, honoring the state's martyred governor. (Many still call it Santa Cruz.) In 1937, the Governor of re-established Quintana Roo, Rafael E. Melgar, resolved to remove all religious place names from his territory. He changed the name of Payo Obispo to *Chetumal*, recalling the names of Sublieutenant Blanco's naval vessel and the ancient Maya chiefdom of Chactemal (probably meaning "red-tree-place").

The founder of Chetumal, Othón P. Blanco, had a distinguished naval career, rising to Vice Admiral and Undersecretary of the Navy. A ceremony at Chetumal honored him in 1956, three years before his death at age 92. Chetumal's *municipio* (county) bears his name.

Blanco's boat, the *Pontón Chetumal*, which changed the course of the war, is still on station, sunken and buried in mud near the mouth of the Río Hondo.

General Francisco May lost his wealth because of his limited abilities to deal with the modern world. Practicing the traditional custom of burying his treasures for safekeeping, he lost several fortunes by failing to find them. May lived in Santa Cruz (Felipe Carrillo Puerto) until his death in 1969 at age 90. He remains an honored but controversial figure in the transition of the rebel Maya into peacetime.

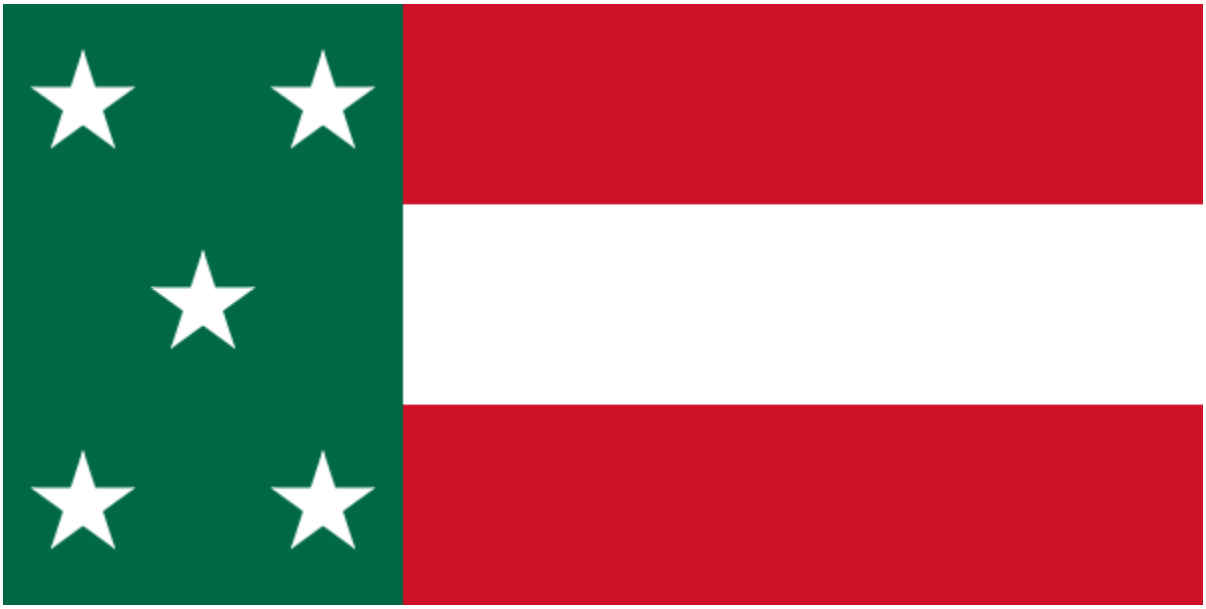
The living memory of the Caste War of Yucatán may inspire the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation), which declared war on the Mexican government in 1994. This coalition of Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Lancandón, and other Maya and non-Maya people continues to defend a territory and enjoy a measure of autonomy in eastern Chiapas.

By Robert D. Temple

Balam Nah, the great church that was the center of the independent Maya government, still dominates the center of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Quintana Roo. Since its fall in 1901, it has been a prison, stable, store, movie theater, and Masonic lodge. It was deeded to the Maryknoll Fathers in 1942 and is now one of their churches — the "Indian" church.

Also in Felipe Carrillo Puerto, the small chapel General May had built for the Speaking Cross still stands, immediately south of the large main church. A bronze plaque commemorating General May, hailing his work for peace and the wellbeing of his people, is nearby in the main plaza.

Xcacal Guardia is just off Highway 295, 30 miles north of Felipe Carrillo Puerto. The road is unmarked, and the reception tourists might find is questionable.



Little known facts about our area: The flag of the independent Republic of Yucatan. Yucatan was twice a sovereign state. First declared on May 29, 1823 until December 23, 1823 when it joined the Mexican

Federation. The second republic of Yucatan began in 1841 when it seceded from the Mexican federation. It remained independent for 7 years, until 1848. This area of the former Republic included Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo. The Maya Social War of 1847 and ongoing forced Yucatan to seek allies. A Yucatan delegation approached US President James Polk and offered "dominion and sovereignty" in exchange for putting an end to infighting, blockade and uprising. The Mexican Federation was the first to offer such aid so it once again became part of Mexico. The story is more complicated and intricate with many characters, plots and deceit. Sorry was just supposed to be a footnote on the flag. We do need to teach African and Meso-American history to our country. Many decision makers don't have the faintest idea of what we are so how can they know where we are going?