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The Aztecs— Island in a Lake

High in the center of the country that we call Mexico is a great valley. It is a good place to live. It is fertile, and it is beautiful. In summer it is not too warm, and in winter it is not too cool.

Indian people have been living in the Valley of Mexico for more than 10,000 years. At first, they were hunters. Then they became farmers, raising corn, beans, squash, and other crops. Over the centuries, they developed fine arts and crafts. They built tall pyramids and many temples to their gods. They built cities. They traded with other peoples, passing along not only goods, but ideas.

For thousands of years, new tribes came in and fought with the old. New civilizations rose and fell.

About 700 years ago, a wandering group of Indians came into their midst. They called themselves Aztecs. At first the Aztecs were weak. But they gained strength. They grew to become the most powerful people in all of North America before Europeans arrived.



Modern Mexico City is built over the ruins of the Aztec island-city of Tenochtitlán. The map above was made by the Spanish after they had conquered Tenochtitlán in 1521. A Spanish soldier wrote of the city: "We were amazed on account of the great towers and buildings rising out of the water."

Somewhere in the large crowd, a deep drum began to pound. It beat like the pounding of a human heart. At the base of the temple, the prisoners stood silently, waiting their turn. One by one, they were led up the temple steps.

At the top of the steps, each prisoner was thrown down on a stone. A priest stepped forward. He held a knife, as sharp as a shark's tooth. It would do its work with speed.

The knife flashed down. It cut open the prisoner's chest. Then the priest reached in and tore out the beating heart from the victim's body. Blood poured onto the stone and down the temple steps.

This grim ritual took place again and again in the city of the Aztecs. The Aztecs were mighty warriors. In the 15th century, they built up a vast empire in central Mexico. The center of this empire was their capital city, Tenochtitlán (tay-NOTCH-tee-TLAHN).

The human sacrifice ceremony of the Aztecs seems horrible to us today. But to the Aztecs it was a perfectly normal thing. They believed it was needed to feed their gods. The Aztecs thought that these gods ate human hearts and drank human blood. According to the Aztec religion, the gods needed these things to keep the sun shining and the world running.

But this belief meant that the Aztecs had to go to war often. War gave them the prisoners to sacrifice. By the early 1500's, war had made the Aztecs the most powerful people in North America.

We remember the Aztecs today not just because they were powerful and performed horrible sacrifices. Tenochtitlán was one of the greatest cities of its time. It held about 600,000 people at the beginning of the 16th century. That made it much larger than London, England, during the same time.

Tenochtitlán was one of the world's most beautiful cities. It was built on an island in a lake. It had gardens

filled with many vegetables and flowers. Broad canals cut through the city. They were used both to move people around and to water crops.

All the canals and roads led to the main plaza in the center of the city. Here stood many flat-topped buildings. At the top of the buildings were temples. In the plaza a huge rack held thousands of skulls of sacrificed prisoners.

When the Spanish invaded the Aztec Empire in 1519, they were amazed at the size and beauty of Tenochtitlán. They found beautiful parks and gardens. They found a zoo containing strange animals. They found a magnificent city gleaming brightly in the Mexican sunlight. Looking down at the city from the hills around it, one of the Spanish soldiers thought: "Never in the world will lands like these be discovered again."

The Aztecs were strong. But they had no iron, no firearms, no horses. The Spanish had these. And the Spanish had another weapon. For years the Aztecs had terrorized many of their Indian neighbors. Some of these peoples joined the Spanish and fought against the Aztecs.

The final battle took place in 1521. The Aztecs held out for 85 days. They were starving. Finally, they surrendered. Their days of power and glory were over.

The Spanish destroyed much of the beautiful city. They tore down the pyramids, temples, and palaces. They used the stones to build their own buildings. The new city, now called Mexico City, was built on the ruins of the old.

Today the Aztecs are not forgotten. Mexicans are proud of their Aztec heritage. Many Mexicans follow ways of dressing, eating, and speaking that came down from the Aztecs. Many words from the Aztec language have entered the Spanish language, which is spoken in Mexico. Many of these words also have come into our language. Words such as chocolate, tomato, coyote, chili, and avocado were used by the Aztecs.

Name: _____

Date: _____

"Measuring a Civilization"

System found in a civilized society

Proof that the Aztecs had it

a FARMING	a
b GOVERNMENT	b
c CITIES	c
d TRADE	d
e ART FORMS/ARCHITECTURE	e
f RELIGION	f

