Once a year, America’s streets teem with youngsters masquerading as ghastly ghouls, green-faced ogres, and witches in pointy black hats—their sights set on capturing as many treats as possible. Aside from counting and carefully dividing their tasty loot into mini-mountains, most trick-or-treaters don’t give much thought to the holiday. And even fewer understand its origins—or its connection to Latin American culture. Scholars at Arizona State University are working to change all that. Assisted by colleagues from around the country, professors at ASU’s Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies (CCS) compiled, wrote, and edited a brand new encyclopedia. The end result is *The Encyclopedia of Latina and Latino Popular Culture in the United States*. The publication will highlight North America’s Latina/Latino cultural, ethnic, racial, and historical diversity.

One of the entries is focused on *Día de los Muertos*. Some Americans mistakenly tie the day to Halloween, probably because of its calendar proximity to All Saints Day and to *Día de los Muertos*. The United States is a nation of many cultures. Americans borrow bits and pieces of cultural traditions to form a series of their own hybrid celebrations. Halloween is a prime example. The day blends traditions from Celtic, Roman, Christian, Irish, and Aztec cultures. The Mexican celebration of *Día de los Muertos* is different. November 2 is a holy day set aside to remember and pray for the souls of deceased family members. The *Encyclopedia* reports that these Mexican celebrations include the construction of altars laden with pictures of the departed, calaveras (skeletons), candy, and ritual foods. The food is prepared in tribute to the deceased. Skeletons and candy. Sound familiar?
The South American MOLCAJETE is a utensil found in many homes and restaurants in the United States. From the Nahuatl language, the word is derived from molli, meaning salsa, and caxitl, meaning bowl. The molcajete is a mortar made of volcanic stone. A bowl with three short legs, it is used with a pestle or mano, made of the same stone material. The molcajete is used to pound or grind spices, chile, and other herbs.

The first definition for TORTILLA in most Spanish language dictionaries describes an egg dish cooked with potatoes, seafood, and other ingredients and served in pie wedge slices. The familiar thin, flat, round... Mexico in the 1500s named the flat corn bread a tortilla when it was filled with other ingredients. The name stuck.

BUILDING THE BOOK: With thousands of submissions, multiple drafts, and staggered deadlines, the project required strict attention to detail. Editors used Excel spreadsheets to track all entries in progress, their due dates, and categories.
The population of Hispanic groups in North America is growing rapidly. The Year 2000 U.S. Census reported a 25 percent growth among combined Hispanic groups. They now total 39 million and constitute the largest ethnoricolour minority group in North America.

But Cordelia Candelaria says the Hispanic population is still misunderstood, even among Hispanics. Candelaria is the chair of CCS and a professor of English and American Literature. She is one of three ASU professors who spearheaded the mammoth Encyclopedia project, along with specialist coeditors Arturo Aldama and Peter Garcia. The editors say that the growing size of the Hispanic population in the United States, coupled with the scarcity of current Latino culture information, makes the Encyclopedia a necessity.

Teachers interact with Mexican-American students on a daily basis. Physicians treat Latino patients. Journalists cover Mexican culture. Businesses want to reach Hispanic consumers. All of these groups would likely benefit from an easy-to-use reference tool like the Encyclopedia.

Candelaria is executive editor of the project. She says that several local teachers and policy makers requested copies of the manuscript before it was sent to press. The three-volume Encyclopedia is being published by Greenwood Publishing Group. It is expected to be available in 2004.

Scholars at CCS field dozens of queries each week. Callers want to know the definitions of Spanish concepts. Others want to know about the origins of Mexican traditions—like Cinco de Mayo. Still others seek information about Hispanic founding fathers of Arizona towns or the birthplaces of famous Latinos. The questions pour in.

“We are specialists in Latina/Latino studies,” Candelaria says. “The Encyclopedia’s editors are frequently called upon to serve as human dictionaries, atlases, and all-purpose almanacs of Hispanic information. Our work is a needed reference tool. It will meet the needs of classroom teachers, students, policy makers, journalists, health professionals, law enforcement, and social service professionals on a daily basis.”

Aldama thinks that the Encyclopedia also serves Latino children. “A great deal of curricular material about Latino culture taught in today’s schools is stereotypical at best,” he says. “As a result, many Latino children don’t have a sense of cultural self-esteem or cultural historical awareness.”

Candelaria emphasizes the linkages of the project to the long historical tradition of encyclopedia development. That tradition stretches back to the French Enlightenment period of the 18th century. “This is a project to preserve and expand the history to the learned traditions of native Mesoamerican record-keeping through storytelling, art, and architecture. The completed work is the first-ever comprehensive Pan-Latino popular culture encyclopedia. The reference tool includes Chicano, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, related Caribbean, and South American cultural forms. All have contributed to the fabric of American society.

“Condensing so much critically important information into just three volumes proved to be the biggest challenge,” says Aldama. “We could have produced a 10-volume encyclopedia and still not cover everything,” says Aldama. Team members echo that sentiment. Some have begun research projects that are direct spin-offs of initial Encyclopedia research. Garcia and Candelaria’s next joint effort is a video documentary on mariachi music—a topic that, when researched for the Encyclopedia, revealed a scant body of existing information.

The Encyclopedia is just one of a series of CCS research projects designed to illuminate Latino American culture and its impact on everyday life in the United States.

Peter Garcia is a musician and assistant professor of ethnomusicology. He was responsible for sections on music, folklore, and religion. ASU students participating in studio workshops also contributed as members of focus groups, researchers, fact checkers, and contributing writers.

Alma Alvarez-Smith also played a key role in the project. The ASU doctoral student coordinated project logistics. She tracked submissions, revised drafts, and maintained communication between team members. Team members completed the majority of work within their own fields of study. However, they admit to having learned a great deal about Latino and Pan-Latino culture outside their specialties.

Aldama was surprised when his research uncovered the racially-charged comic book culture of the 1920s. Latinos were routinely portrayed as dangerous villains who were often slain in the cartoons. During that period, comic books were a main form of entertainment, he says. They were very influential in shaping cultural attitudes toward Latinos.

While Garcia didn’t discover any startling new information, he did expand his knowledge base as a result of the project’s Pan-Latino focus. Garcia studies Latin American music and its cultural implications. “But when it comes to Cuban, Puerto Rican and South American folklore, I relied heavily upon colleagues and our expert advisory board.”

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