

Alfredo's Aztlan

A 73-year-old man with no formal training says he has found the lost homeland of the Aztecs in the mountains around Blythe. Amid the scoffing, there are smart people who think he may be right.

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by Ann Japenga*

ON A TWO-LANE HIGHWAY ALONG THE COLORADO RIVER NEAR BLYTHE, a vehicle bearing the Figueroa family merges into a stream of RVs and sand buggies. The 73-year-old patriarch, Alfredo Acosta Figueroa, tips the passenger seat back so he can keep an eye on the surrounding mountains: the Big Marias and Little Marias, the Mules, McCoys and Palens. His daughter, Patricia, is at the wheel; I share cookies in the back seat with Figueroa's wife, Demesia.

When Figueroa spots something he wants to show me—a rift, a knob, a shadow on the mountains—he bounces straight up and calls out: “Oh stop . . . you see that guy's face? The eye and the mouth? That's the same guy I showed you on the codices. He's got the beak of a hawk. You get it now? You think it's clear?”

Patricia mashes the brake with little heed to the traffic. Figueroa becomes more excited. “Get it?”

I can't make out what has him so keyed up, so Figueroa takes my notepad and draws outcroppings that look like noses, gullies that look like eyebrows. “Get it now?” When I finally discern the shape in the hills, Demesia nods approvingly and the old man and his daughter whoop and cackle.

What the family is trying to show me are the gods of the Aztec creation story—Tlaloc, Quetzalcoatl, Huitzilopochtli—reposing right here in the mountains. It's a difficult concept to grasp, and I have an added disadvantage. An Anglo who grew up in Covina, I know nothing about the Aztec deities or their homeland—Aztlan. It's not just me. The figures are well known to kids schooled in Mexico, but to most Californians these characters—if they're known at all—are cartoon warriors emblazoned on T-shirts and on video games. As for the mysterious land of Aztlan, it's the utopia from which the Aztecs supposedly departed on their trek south to what is now Mexico City. The migration, according to various stories, was spurred by earthquakes, oppressors or a command from a cosmic spirit. The majority of U.S.-born folks have never heard of this abandoned homeland, or if they have it's as a symbolic “place in the heart.”

So why am I here, driving around with people who watch the mountains instead of the road, who see dubious gods in the hills and make constant reference to matters I don't understand? It's all because of Robert Gonzales Vasquez, director of Inland Mexican Heritage, a group that has chronicled life along Interstate 10, among other projects. Gonzales Vasquez notices things that others don't, so I was intrigued when he said he believed that Figueroa, a sixth-generation resident of Blythe, had found Aztlan in (of all places) homely Blythe and the surrounding lower Colorado River basin, an area encompassing roughly the southeastern border of California along the river from Needles to Yuma. “It's a hell of a thing to grasp,” says Gonzales Vasquez. “Alfredo has found Atlantis, basically.”

Though the news is—on the surface—incredible, Gonzales Vasquez's belief in Figueroa prompted me to ask around about the father of nine and grandfather of 26. Other folks I respect—Joshua Tree activists Donna and Larry Charpiet, retired Bureau of Land Management archeologist Boma Johnson—also believe there's substance to the man and his theory. Johnson knows the lower Colorado River basin as well as anyone, having studied its archeology and history for 25 years. Of Figueroa he says: “I think he's on to something.”

But could there even be a real land called Aztlan? During the Chicano movement of the 1960s and '70s, Aztlan became a rallying point for Mexican Americans, but it was embraced more as a symbol of pride and belonging, not an actual place. The prevailing view among historians is that Aztlan is mythical, but there always have been scholars and explorers who claimed Aztlan was real. For about 500 years believers have been seeking the homeland's physical location, looking for clues in ancient Spanish texts called codices. To a man like Figueroa, finding Aztlan would be the equivalent of a Christian finding the glade where Eve dropped the apple core—a profound discovery that elevates legend to fact.

The possibility that Aztlan actually existed was reason enough to pursue Figueroa, who truly believes he has found it. But there was something else. For the last decade, since moving to the desert, I've immersed myself in the local canyons, legends and vocabulary. In an era of disembodied information, there's nothing I trust as much as a person with a long knowledge of a specific terrain. When I heard about Figueroa, his dedication to the hometown gods and

his generations-deep connection to Blythe and the Colorado River basin, I knew I wanted to meet him.

Driving from Palm Springs on the I-10, I know I've reached the outskirts of Blythe when I see signs warning drivers not to pick up hitchhikers because they may be escapees from the local prison. My routine when I'm en route to Arizona is to stop here for fuel and a snack, but like most travelers I never venture the few blocks into town.

This time I leave the freeway after dark and drive into El Barrio Cuchillo, where Alfredo and Demesia Figueroa raised their nine children in a small house that stands out because of the illuminated Aztec shrines in the front-yard—a crumbling turtle, an alligator of driftwood stone. In the living room and dining room there are more shrines: Jesus, posters and mementos of the farmworkers movement, images of revolutionaries and Aztec gods. The phone rings every few minutes. All but one of the Figueras' grown children live nearby and family members come and go, helping themselves to leftovers in the kitchen.

Figueroa sits at a round oilcloth-covered dining-room table that doubles as his workstation. Beside the radio—playing songs in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs—are stacks of photographs from his field trips. Near at hand are dictionaries of the Mohave, Nahuatl, Quechan and Cahuilla languages, as well as 20 volumes of the codices. A slight man with a broad, smooth face, Figueroa has an ebullient, mischievous style. He treats me like a slow student who requires teasing and prodding if she is to learn anything. Talking in a nonlinear, single-minded rush to share his discoveries, he tells me that for almost 50 years he has studied the migration story laid out in the codices. He has interviewed scholars in Mexico and Indian tribes living along the Colorado River, and stirred into the mix the indigenous songs and folklore he learned growing up.

Above all, he has studied the land. Whether he's driving to a fandango to play his guitar or to the senior center to get a flu shot, he's always matching up the images he sees in the mountains with the codices. "People say this is God's country—you better believe this is God's country," he says with a triumphant cackle.

Based on his fieldwork, cross-referenced with the old texts, he has found some 300 petroglyphs, pictographs, mountain images, ancient trails, sacred sites and natural phenomena along the lower Colorado River that he says relate to the Aztec creation story. One bit of evidence: The fields of white herons and egrets you see while driving through Blythe. It all fits, Figueroa says, because Aztlan was known as "the land of herons."

Figueroa's most impressive evidence may be the geoglyphs—giant ground drawings of humans and animals—found here and in only a few other places in the world. The figures, some as large as 171 feet, were made by people (some say aliens) scraping away gravel to expose the lighter soil beneath. Figueroa describes one figure as an enormous bowman, arms outstretched, aiming his body like an arrow at the sun—a figure that also shows up in the codices. Someday, Figueroa says, people will see these signs for what they are and recognize Blythe as one of the greatest indigenous shrines on the continent. He and his supporters plan to build a cultural center dedicated to Aztlan alongside the freeway. He dreams that the geoglyphs will be protected forever, and seekers from all over the world will flock here to visit the center and take low-impact balloon tours of the sacred sites.

When that day comes, the notion of a mythical Aztlan will die—as it should, says his friend Gonzales Vasquez. "People say Aztlan is a 'place in the heart.' Well, honestly, that's garbage," he says. "If it's a place in the heart, then we have no beginning. Alfredo wants to give us a home."

As I listen to Figueroa's worldview unfold, it's impossible not to feel like Carlos Castaneda interviewing Yaqui shaman don Juan. The clueless apprentice meets the mystic sage. This feeling intensifies when Figueroa reaches behind a cabinet and pulls out a jug of agave brew with a fermented snake coiled in the murky liquid. He pours a slug in his coffee and offers me a swig of the potion.

I take a big swallow (it has a meaty flavor), then immediately feel anxious and self-conscious, wondering what I've just imbibed.

Figueroa's don Juan-ish appeal has not been lost on New Agers, who have recruited him to lead group tours to the sacred sites around Blythe. He scorns the invitations and resists when people call him a shaman, a mystic or one of those "crystal people." He prefers the title "field investigator."

His teaching is couched in street language ("If the glove fits, you gotta convict," he says, about the process of matching mountains to codices), but he also challenges me with pop-quiz questions on geography, astronomy, world history and politics. He is impatient when I flub the answers.

This pedantic streak is a trait his friends try to see past. “The problem with Figueroa—and I love him dearly as a brother—is he is kind of a loudmouth,” says Philip Sonnichsen, an ethnomusicologist who is writing a book on the Figueroa family and the history of Blythe and the Palo Verde Valley. “Underneath that blatant exterior the guy really knows a hell of a lot. There is a lot of substance to that man and his family and what they’ve been through.”

In truth, they’ve been through a lot including—in Figueroa’s case—being beaten up by cops and jailed. Born a few doors down from his present home, to a mining family of Chemehuevi and Yaqui-Pima descent, he seemed destined by upbringing to be an activist. His miner father, Danuario, schooled him in unions and social justice; his mother, Carmen, a midwife, taught him the catechism. (Danuario died of the miner’s lung disease, silicosis.) Like his father, Figueroa worked the gold, copper and manganese mines in the mountain ranges along the lower Colorado.

His father’s union loyalties gave Figueroa a natural sympathy for farmworkers. He had known Cesar Chavez since 1949, met labor activist Bert Corona in 1962, the year the precursor to the United Farm Workers was formed, and began organizing for them three years later. He also joined one of the first UFW picket lines in Coachella in 1966. He traveled all over the state, marching and organizing farmworkers from Mexicali to Sacramento, from Delano to Blythe, playing Woody Guthrie and Joe Hill songs on his guitar. More recently he made news as an environmental activist, helping to stop the Ward Valley Nuclear Dump and protesting the Eagle Mountain Landfill as well as other developments near Blythe.

He’s not the only one in the family who struggles for justice. His daughter, Patricia Figueroa Pinon, now a school administrator in Desert Hot Springs, inspired a walkout at her Blythe junior high school in 1972 to protest, among other things, a ban on Mexican cultural events and a lack of access to education for migrant students. She and her mother founded a K-12 Chicano school, which still operates in Blythe.

Figueroa’s son, Jesus Roman Figueroa, has run, literally, from Alaska to Mexico more than once in relays celebrating indigenous solidarity. Jesus, Patricia and other family members perform corridos and protest songs at rallies, while their father sings and plays on his bumper-sticker-plastered Guild guitar. The family members talk matter-of-factly about the faces in the mountains, as if everyone knows the gods live here in Blythe.

I’ve met my share of solitary fanatics, but never have I seen an entire household united by such belief in what is—by most accounts—a wild idea. Solidarity around the dining table is one thing; in the outside world Figueroa’s claim does not meet such unanimous approval. For one thing, he’s not the first to say he’s found Aztlan. Over the years, researchers claim to have located the mystical homeland in East Texas, Chaco Canyon, off the coast of Mexico and other places. University of Utah professor Armando Solorzano recently traced Aztlan to Utah—calling it Utaztlan.

Yet none of these finds has been confirmed. So far few people have challenged Figueroa’s discovery. One reason for that is not many archeologists or academics have heard of him. He has no PhD, no website or publicist. To propagate his ideas, he self-published a book—“Ancient Footprints of the Colorado River”—but ran out of money after printing 1,000 copies.

Even if an expert decides to take on Figueroa, archeologists say it would be difficult to definitively disprove his claim. Debate over the location of Aztlan turns on complex interpretations of linguistics and migration patterns. Given the intricacies of the evidence and how much is still unknown, there’s unlikely to be a consensus on the actual site anytime soon.

Of course Figueroa can still be dismissed on general grounds. Daniel McCarthy, archeologist for the San Bernardino National Forest, once told a reporter that Figueroa is like someone who watches the clouds and sees what he wants to see. As word of Figueroa’s “discovery” gets out, he can expect more scoffing from archeologists, anthropologists and historians, says Gonzales Vasquez. “They don’t want some little old man from the desert telling them he’s found Aztlan.”

Patricia Figueroa pulls into a convenience store parking lot and her passengers troop inside for Cokes and jalapeno jerky. Continuing the field trip, we bump along a sandy road paralleling the I-10, stopping beside a small hill with a prominent bump on top. We proceed on foot. On top, the bump turns out to be a giant chair handcrafted of quartz and a crude cement. It’s sitting out in the middle of nowhere, facing west. Figueroa says this is the throne of the creator, as depicted in the codices, and offers it as one more piece of evidence that Blythe is la Cuna de Aztlan, or the cradle of Aztlan.

While the family mills around the throne, I sit in it and look toward Palm Springs, taking in the expanse of Figueroa’s world. Here, the rightness of the patriarch’s vision washes over me. While other Aztlan hunters have

searched with the aid of helicopters and houseboats, maps and GPS units, Figueroa knows this entire territory from an infinitely deeper vantage. His mother once lived under an ironwood tree at the gold mines east of Blythe. He has lived in caves and camps all over the hills and has even seen the mountains from the inside, boring 200 feet into the core with a jackhammer, his work lighted only by a carbide lamp.

There on the hill, in view of the Aztec gods, I decide I believe in Figueroa's Aztlan. I'm not sure how I'll defend this conviction given that I'm not Carlos Castaneda; I can't get away with shamanistic leaps of logic. Hoping to forge a more rational polemic, I telephone Marty Bachman, the Rollerblading editor of the local Blythe newspaper, the Palo Verde Valley Times. "Figueroa really believes this is the birthplace of civilization and, you know what, I don't doubt him," he says.

When I express my worries—"Yes, but how do you explain this to others?"—Bachman says outsiders like me cannot breeze through on the freeway or even spend a few nights in town and expect to grasp either Blythe or Alfredo Figueroa. To understand these things you have to steep yourself in the shape-shifting Palo Verde Valley known only to locals. Contrary to what people see when they stop for gas, he says, "It's a magical world out here, man."

Bachman is talking about a sort of truth that exists in context. It's different from the kind of truth revealed by carbon dating and pottery analysis, but it's truth all the same and it's the reason I believe in Figueroa and in people with a cellular knowledge of home: They live in context. Out of context, Blythe is poor and drab; in context, it's magical. Out of context, Figueroa may be a crank; in the context of his history and this place, he has found his homeland.

Credit: Ann Japenga is a Palm Springs journalist and essayist who writes about California deserts and the West. Her work also appears in the book "The New Desert Reader."