

Mary Owen Guatemalan folktales collection

1150

Finding aid prepared by Jody Rodgers.

Last updated on March 02, 2017.

University of Pennsylvania, Penn Museum Archives

November 2009

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Summary Information

Repository	University of Pennsylvania: Penn Museum Archives
Creator	Owen, Mary
Title	Mary Owen Guatemalan folktales collection
Call number	1150
Date [bulk]	1915
Date [inclusive]	1915-1991
Extent	05 linear foot
Language	English
Abstract	<p>The Mary Owen Guatemalan Folktale collection consists of two folders of folktales gathered by Mary Owen at the request of her friend George Byron Gordon, Director of the Free Museum of Science and Art, later the Penn Museum. Mary Owens transcribed seventeen folktales with notes and explanations from her valuable years of experience living in the Alta Verapaz region. Mary Owen's folktales were published in 1938 as a children's book co-authored by Marie Hendrick Jessup and Leslie Bird Simpson. Her work is also recognized in the book, "Maya Folktales from the Alta Verapaz", edited by Elin C. Danien.</p>

Cite as:

[Item name]. Box [Box number]. Mary Owen Guatemalan folktales collection. Penn Museum

Archives. Accessed [Date accessed].

Biography/History

Mary Owen resided in Guatemala for over 30 years as the wife of Captain William Owen, manager of the Northern Transportation Company in Livingston. She met George Byron Gordon when he traveled to Central America for the fourth Copan Expedition sponsored by the Museum of Free Science and Art (later the Penn Museum). Mary and her husband befriended Gordon and assisted him in acclimating to Guatemala. Later, when Gordon became Director of the Museum, he and Mary Owen renewed their friendship. Gordon requested her assistance in providing the text of native folktales for publication in the Museum Bulletin. Despite her protestations and wishes that her name not be used, Owen not only recorded the tales, but provided notes and explanations from her valuable years of experience living in the Alta Verapaz region.

Mary Owen's folktales, with attribution, were published in 1938 as a children's book co-authored by Marie Hendrick Jessup and Leslie Bird Simpson. Her work is also recognized in the book, "Maya Folktales from the Alta Verapaz," edited by Elin C. Danien.

Scope and Contents

Expeditions to Central America to study the culture, language, and monuments of the indigenous Indian population began at the end of the nineteenth century. George Byron Gordon was among the first to travel to Honduras for the fourth Copan Expedition in 1894. On this, his first trip, he made the acquaintance of Captain William Owen of the Northern Transportation Company and his wife, Mary Owen who resided in Livingston, Guatemala. Later, when Gordon was Director of the Museum of Free Science and Art, later the Penn Museum, he asked Mary Owen to record and send him native folktales for publication in the Museum Bulletin. Despite her misgivings about her ability, Mary Owen did transcribe seventeen folktales for Gordon, insisting that her name not be used in their publication. She also included notes and explanations to aid the reader in understanding the culture and implication of the stories.

The Mary Owen Guatemalan Folktale collection consists of two folders of material. The pages are type-written in English. Occasionally, some handwritten commentary or correction has been made on the pages. Some pages are in fragile condition but can be easily read. There are a total of seventeen tales, previously numbered in pencil. There are notes from J. Alden Mason and Elin C. Danien concerning authorship/translation dating from 10/2/56, 1979, and 1991.

The initial folder holds eight tales and two papers, "Notes on the Aborigines" and the rules to a native game, Buulix Ixim, played with grains of maize. Among the tales in the first folder are "The Pupol Vuh" or Creation Myth, and "The Medicine Man's Toothache Cure," with an eye-witness account of the

ceremony.

Other tales in the first group include, "The Tricky Toad," "Eb Li Chol-Guinc," "The Chol Man," "The Horned Serpent," "Xucaneh," "Purple Spots," and "The Creation," including "How the Monkey Deceived the Creator and Played a Trick on the Tapir." The tale of the "Purple Spots" is accompanied by a paper, "Aboriginal Characteristics to go with the Purple Birth Marks."

The second folder has the text of nine additional folktales. One Moon Tale is distinguished by Owen from "three other accounts" with the news that this is a new tale "sent by a friend" a "master of the Kekchi language" who may have been Robert Burkitt. Other tales, "Why the Rabbit has Long Ears," "The Discontented Tortoise," "Why the Cat Hates the Rat," "El Sisemite," (three copies) "The Boy Who Would Not Put His Shirt on," (two versions) "Uncle Burntailbrokentoothsoreeye," "The Tiger's Master," and "So Be It" complete folder two.

Administrative Information

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Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

Additional correspondence between Mary Owen and George Byron Gordon from 1903 to 1909 can be found in the George Byron Gordon records of the General Ethnology section under "O". In addition, correspondence between Mary Owen and George Byron Gordon from 1910 to 1927 can be found in the George Byron Gordon records of the Director's Office under "Miscellaneous'O'."

Controlled Access Headings

GEOGRAPHIC NAME(S)

- Guatemala

PERSONAL NAME(S)

- Burkitt, Robert James, 1869-1945
- Gordon, G. B. (George Byron), 1870-1927
- Owen, Mary

SUBJECT(S)

- Anthropological linguistics
- Folklore

Collection Inventory

	Box
Folktales and papers.	1

Folktales.	1
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