

Mission Churches - Part 2

The Mission Churches in Socorro County

Originally published in El Defensor Chieftain newspaper, Saturday, September 8, 2007.

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For El Defensor Chieftain

The early Spanish missions along the Rio Grande remain today as landmarks to the region, giving New Mexico her identity. Part 2 of this series continues with the history of the mission churches in Socorro County.

SAN ACACIA and LA JOYITA

The Rio Grande flows through a gap between two mesas, defining the San Acacia area. Ancient Piro pueblos on the mesas, to early 1600s Spanish structures, indicates the region has been occupied for centuries. The original Spanish settlement was called *Estancia de Acomilla*, first mentioned in 1631.

Jumping ahead 200 years, the area was again settled for farming by the mid 1800s. The village was named San Acacio after the Roman general who was martyred for being a Christian. The name of the village was changed to the illegal form *San Acacia* by the railroad in 1882. In Spanish, it's either San Acacio or Santa Acacia. Evidently, the railroad didn't know this and the awkward form, San Acacia, remains as the official name of the village.

To the east was another small village called La Joyita. It was located near the confluence of the Rio Salado with the Rio Grande and had a small mission church called San José. La Joyita was destroyed by a flood in 1886. The church was rebuilt shortly thereafter in San Acacia on land donated by Enrique Gonzales. It was described as an adobe church with large vigas, also dedicated to San José. In 1920, San Acacia was transferred from the LaJoya parish to Socorro.

During the 1929 flood, as the people of San Acacia literally fled for their lives, the church was washed away. It was rebuilt a few years later, largely due to donations from the Crabree family, who operated a lumber yard and hardware store in Socorro. The paint hardly dried on the new church when it was destroyed by the flood of 1937. For the next ten years, the people



of San Acacia attended mass at the new church in Alamillo.

Following World War II, the residents of San Acacia again built a small, nave type church. It was used until 1957, when it was dropped from the church rolls. The old San Acacia church still stands, with 50 years of non-use clearly evident. This church is unusual in that it faces north; most Catholic churches are built with the entrance facing east.



The San Jose mission at San Acacia as it appears today. It was once a mission church to Socorro.



Photo by Paul Harden



The San Antonio mission church in Alamillo was built in 1928.

Photo by Paul Harden

ALAMILLO

The village of Alamillo was settled in June 1800. It was named for a nearby Piro pueblo of the same name. This first settlement was likely on the east side of the Rio Grande, moving to its present location, west of San Acacia, around 1850.

Today's mission church at Alamillo was built in 1928, dedicated to San Antonio. It escaped serious damage from the floods of 1929 and 1937, and remains a mission church of Socorro today.

POLVADERA

There is little documentation on the original mission church serving Polvadera and the sister village of Chamizal. Much of Chamizal was destroyed by floods in the 1890s, 1929 and 1937, with the old school house atop a hill, at the end of Escuela Street, the only survivor.

Following the 1898 flood, a new mission was built farther to the west on higher ground donated by the

Luciano Luna family. A sign in today's church states it was dedicated on August 10, 1902 with Mayordomo Frutoso Barreras. The first mass was offered by Father Filiberto Martin from Socorro. If there is a reason why the Polvadera mission is dedicated to San Lorenzo, it is lost to time.

Years ago, the statue of the mission's saint was stolen, reportedly taken to Mexico. In today's church, the statue is chained to its pedestal as a symbol he won't leave again.

Several miracles have been attributed to the santos. Due to these miracles, many Socorroan's make the 18-mile round-trip pilgrimage to the San Lorenzo mission each year on Good Friday.

The people of Polvadera, and the mayordomos over the past 105 years, have kept the church in excellent condition and remains an active mission church of Socorro.



The San Lorenzo mission as it appeared in 1910. The first church was destroyed by floods in the 1890s.

Courtesy Socorro County Historical Society



Today's San Lorenzo mission in Polvadera, now with a pitched roof, has changed little since built in 1898.

Photo by Paul Harden



Photo by Paul Harden

Built in 1831, the Lemitar Sagrada Familia mission was modeled after San Miguel church in Socorro.

LEMITAR

The Sagrada Familia Mission in Lemitar, was built in 1831 after the style of San Miguel church in Socorro. It has been renovated several times over the years and remains an excellent example of the mission church.

In 1848, New Mexico became a territory of the United States. Ousted governor Manuel Armijo returned to his home in Lemitar, where he lived out the rest of his days. From 1848 to 1851, Lemitar was the county seat of Socorro County and local headquarters for the New Mexico Militia. Remnants of this pre-territorial fort can still be seen.

Though Lemitar today appears as a sleepy farming village, it has served several prominent roles in New Mexico's history. The large, beautiful mission church at Lemitar is testimony to these former days.

SABINO

Sabino was a small village on the east side of the Rio Grande, opposite to Lemitar. It is not to be confused with the village of Sabinal at the northern end of Socorro County.

The town existed since the early 1820s, with a mission built and dedicated to San Antonio. Due to its location on the bank of the Rio Grande, the village succumbed to flooding, probably in the late 1850s. The mission disappears from church records after 1858. Today, Sabino, and the San Antonio mission, remain but a footnote in Socorro County history.

LA PARIDA and ELTAJO

Parida was a village on the east bank of the Rio Grande south of Pueblito. The 1850 census was 168 and only 48

by 1860. Church records list a San Antonio mission at Parida from 1867 to 1869, perhaps the year the Rio Grande claimed the village. Archeological surveys of the site have identified some of the surviving buildings, but not the mission.

Around 1850, another village sprang up south of Parida, almost across the river from Socorro, called El Tajo. It was built on a bluff well above the floodwaters of the Rio Grande. Its 1860 census shows 129 persons, presumably some of them the former residents of washed out Parida. El Tajo was visited periodically by the priest from San Marcial, offering mass held in private homes.

BOSQUECITO

The village of Bosquecito is north of San Antonio on the east side of the river, settled as a farming community in the 1830s. A mission church was built in 1892, dedicated to San Gabriel, assigned to the Socorro parish, then to the San Marcial parish in 1916. Father Peltzer celebrated mass at Bosquecito every two months until about 1922, when the parish obtained its first automobile. This allowed Father Peltzer to visit many of the mission churches along the Rio Grande more frequently.

Following the 1937 flood, the floodwaters were slow to recede, leaving much of the village standing in water for weeks. Eventually, the buildings collapsed into the muck.

Today, much of the village of Bosquecito, and the church, are crumbled ruins claimed by the tamarisk and cottonwood trees left by the floods. The San Gabriel



Photo by Paul Harden

This trail through the bosque marks the location of the San Gabriel mission in Bosquecito. The area was inundated in the floods of 1929, 1937 and 1941.



Photo by Paul Harden

The San Jose mission was built by the people of Luis Lopez around 1900.

mission was located west of Bosquecito Road, opposite the home of long-term resident Ambrosio Armijo.

LUIS LOPEZ

The Hacienda de Luis Lopez was established in the 1600s and resettled as a farming community in the 1830s. The first church records begin in 1833 with the first mission, dedicated to San Jose, built shortly thereafter.

The original village was located between today's railroad tracks and the river. The mission, and much of the village, was destroyed in the 1895 flood, forcing the residents to rebuild farther to the west upon higher ground, where the small hamlet is located today.

The new mission was built around 1900 by the local people. And by built, this means every adobe brick, bucket of plaster, and every gallon of gypsum white wash was made by the people. The original stations of the cross were made by Abran Garcia, though replaced in later years when the church at Tokay was dismantled. Today's San Jose mission at Luis Lopez, now over a century old, is another example of a community built church well maintained by the local families. It remains an active mission church to San Miguel parish in Socorro. Census records show Luis Lopez has a population of about 200 persons, about what the 1850 census takers counted.

SAN ANTONIO and SAN ANTONITO

The first mission church at San Antonio was established by Fray Antonio de Artega in the early 1600s, called San Antonio de Senecú. Like Socorro,



Photo by Paul Harden

Today's San Antonio mission was built by the people of San Antonio in 1930.

this mission was destroyed during the 1680 Pueblo Revolt.

And, like Socorro, it remained abandoned until the early 1800s. By the 1830s, numerous farms had been established along the fertile lands hugging the Rio Grande.

A church was built during this era, supposedly over the foundation of the Senecú mission. It was called San Antonio de Aquinas mission. The structure was very similar to the plan of the San Miguel church in Socorro without the towers.

The exact history of this church is a bit hazy. Some sources state this mission was destroyed by the earthquakes in 1906. This is based largely on a photograph of the church with the inscription, "Destruida 1906," or, destroyed 1906. Searching the 1906 Socorro Chieftain's, issue after issue contains detailed reports of area earthquake damage. However, there is no mention of damage to the San Antonio church.

Geologist and seismologist Dr. Alan Sanford, now retired from New Mexico Tech, has performed detailed studies of the magnitudes and epicenters of the 1906 Socorro earthquakes. Likewise, he finds no evidence that the tremblors were sufficient to cause significant damage in San Antonio. Thus, the inscription on the old photo of San Antonio de Aquinas mission remains a mystery.

Church records tell a different story. San Miguel church history, written by Father Bernard Boudreau in 1973,



Photo by Paul Harden

This photo of the old San Antonio de Aquinas mission is labeled “destroyed 1906,” supposedly by an earthquake. Records show it was replaced by today’s church in 1930.



Courtesy Herbert Yeo Collection

The final days of the San Marcial church at La Plaza Viejo following the floods of 1937. The new parish church, just dedicated, was destroyed as well.

states San Antonio de Aquinas mission fell into disrepair until it was no longer used as a church.

At this same time, a new church was built in nearby San Antonito, a few miles south of San Antonio, between 1904 and 1906. Was this church built due to the disrepair of the San Antonio church? Regardless, it was dedicated in 1906 as a mission church to the newly formed San Marcial parish. It served the area until it, too, was destroyed by the floods of 1929.

The area now had no church. A committee was organized to rebuild the San Antonio church. Though times were rough due to the onset of the depression, Constancio Miera, and Mayordomos Mauricio Chaves and Seledon Jaramillo, led the project to completion in 1930. This is the community built church in San Antonio today. When the San Marcial parish was destroyed by the 1937 flood, San Antonio was transferred back to Socorro.

The old church, San Antonio de Aquinas, is now only a mound of melted adobe to the east of today's church.

SAN MARCIAL and LA PLAZA VIEJA

The area around Mesa del Contadero, or Black Mesa, was once a complex of several villages. The first was the farming community of La Mesa, established in the early 1800s on the north flank of the mesa. A mission church was built and served by priests from Socorro. Plagued by floods, the village relocated to the west side of the Rio Grande in 1866, on slightly higher ground, and named San Marcial.

With the Rio Grande and Mesa de Contadero (Black Mesa) to the east, and sandy hills to the west, the narrow

valley in between proved ideal for growing a variety of crops and grazing for livestock. Most important is the fertile valley had ample water from the Rio Grande, the fields irrigated by a network of acequias. The area grew with farmers and ranchers.

One of the area ranchers, Pablo Gomez, donated land in San Marcial for a church. It was eagerly built by the area families, being designated a mission church to Socorro in 1880. By 1887, the growing church was redesignated to a parish, receiving it's own priest, to serve San Marcial and the surrounding communities.

In the 1890s, the railroad moved their main yards from flood prone Socorro to San Marcial. Many workers relocated to build the maintenance shops, offices, and the roundhouse to service the AT&SF line. Local people were hired as well. This was a major boom to the growth of the area, which by now had actually developed into three towns less than a mile apart: old San Marcial (La Plaza Vieja), San Geronimo, and New Town San Marcial. The population exceeded 2000 people.

In the early 1900s, Father Peter Peltzer was assigned to the San Marcial parish, serving the mission churches in the area. This included the missions at Paraje, Valverde, San Pedro, San Antonito, San Antonio, and Bosquecito. Additionally, the Padre offered mass in private homes or schools at Milligan Ranch, Cantarecio, Carthage and Pueblitos. All of these towns and villages were assigned to the San Marcial parish.

In the mid-1920s, Father Peltzer was transferred to San Miguel parish in Socorro, being replaced by Father Emile Barrat to head the San Marcial parish.

Many of these towns along the Rio Grande, and the churches, were inundated by flood waters on August 20, 1929. New Town San Marcial, La Mesa and Valverde were completely destroyed, including the new parish church under construction near the train station. Once the floodwaters receded, area ranchers rebuilt the soaked mission at La Plaza Vieja.

Building the new church was also restarted, being dedicated on May 10, 1937. Unfortunately, only a few months later, another disastrous flood down the Rio Grande destroyed everything in the area, including the new parish church.

The 1937 flood was the kiss of death to the area. Virtually no residents remained, nor are there but a few today. The San Marcial parish was discontinued and the area missions were transferred back to the Socorro parish.

MAGDALENA

A small wooden building near the railroad station was Magdalena's first Catholic church. Being 26 miles from the Rio Grande, at least it was safe from floods. Instead, it was destroyed by fire in 1918 - burning to the ground because the village had no water.

The construction of a new church was quickly begun. A large basement was first built as the foundation for the planned church. Shortly after construction began, the mines closed and the population and money waned. It was decided to complete the structure with the funds they had, building the church in the basement. Dedicated in 1920, it may be the only Catholic church in the southwest built underground.

Naturally, the church was dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalen after the "face on the mountain" -- an image so recognized since early colonial times. Receiving it's own priest, Magdalena became a parish.

In 1973, Father Emmanuel DeBaenst was transferred from Magdalena to Carrizozo. Magdalena lost her parish status.

KELLY

In 1894, Adolfo Torres organized the families in the growing mining town of Kelly to start a church. The first church was an old saloon. As the town continued to grow, they built a new church atop a hill overlooking the town and the mines, dedicated to San Juan Bautista. It was first served by a priest from Socorro, then became a mission church to the new Magdalena parish in 1919.

The Kelly mines went silent by the mid-1920s. Few people remained. Many of the abandoned houses and buildings were dismantled for their wood and furnishing during the 1930s depression years. When the mines were temporarily opened during World War II, there wasn't much of a town left.

Many of the former residents of Kelly moved to Magdalena and Socorro, but kept the church in good repair for the annual fiestas. However, the church atop the hill was getting difficult to reach as the years went by.

In 1948, the former residents decided to tear down the old church and rebuild it across from the Kelly Mine for better access. Headed by Adolfo Tafoya, they dismantled the church, plank-by-plank, and rebuilt it exactly like the original. This is the landmark church in Kelly today.

The San Juan Bautista mission was rededicated in 1949, served by Father Salvatore di Giovanni from the Magdalena parish for years. The first Mayordomos were Mr. and Mrs. Dominico Zamora. In 1973, Kelly was returned to the Socorro parish.

Today, Kelly may be a ghost town, but the spirit of the church and her people has never died. The former residents keep the church in pristine condition. Mass is still held in the mission each June for the Juan de Bautista fiestas and annual town reunion. Carlos and Olivia Tafoya are today's Mayordomos.

According to church records, Socorro priests also served Herrick's Camp and Culebra in the 1890 through



Photo by Paul Harden

Mass is still held at the San Juan Bautista mission at Kelly for the fiesta and town reunion.

1910 era. The author has been unable to identify these sites. If you know anything about these two sites, or have additional information on Socorro's mission churches, please contact the author.

The history of the missions in northern Socorro County, and the area's Protestant churches, will be presented in future articles.

Some of the references used in this article: San Miguel church records; "Rio Abajo" by Michael Marshall; "Old San Miguel Mission" by Father Bernard Boudreau; additional church records and research courtesy of John Taylor; Socorro Chieftain archives; Herbert Yeo 1937 flood photos, and interviews with Bennie Barreras, Ted Armijo, Charles Headen, Carlos and Olivia Tafoya, and others.

Additional photos not appearing in the original article.



Photo by Paul Harden

The San Acacia Cemetery as it appears today, with Ladron Peak looming to the west.



Courtesy Philip Varney

The San Pedro mission church, circa. 1980, from Philip Varney's excellent book, "New Mexico's Best ghost Towns."