The Missions of New Mexico

By Margaret McIntosh, AF 1957

Mellowed in history, their rugged walls are standing monuments to the undaunted faith and missionary zeal of the Franciscan Priests. Pre-dating the California missions, in some cases by more that 150 years, the New Mexico Missions are acknowledged to be the most interesting series of religious structures in the New World. Early explorers such as De Vaca, Coronado in 1540 and Espejo in 1580, aroused much interest in New Mexico, but little progress was made in the missionary field until the coming of Onate in 1598.

After experiencing many delays, Juan De Onate led an army of 130 soldiers and colonists northward into the Rio Grande Valley. They bought their families with them in an enormous wagon train. They also drove a herd of come 7000 cattle with them. They crossed the east bank of the Rio Grande where El Paso now stands and them moved northward up the valley thorough the Indian Pueblos to a point about 35 miles north of Santa Fe. Here, where the Chama meets the Rio Grande, they established their little mission colony, which they called San Juan Los Caballeros, this was the first mission established in the United States, except possibly for the chapel of San Augustine, Florida.

With the help of two Mexican Indians, who acted as interpreters, Onate held a conference of the Pueblo tribes, in which they agreed to accept the sovereignty of the King of Spain as their Fatherland. With Onate’s Army were 10 Franciscan Friars, and, after another conference, Onate divide the territory I n 7 districts. To each of these districts he assigned a friar. They started out alone to their own district and soon colonists followed. The first church was built in San Juan and was in service by the end of the year 1598. No time was lost in erecting mission churches in the various pueblos, and by the end of the 16th century missions had also been established in Socorro, Nambe, San Felipe, Picuris, Santa Ana, Zia, and Pecos.

A little later several missions were established a various points. Among these latter missions was:

1. *San Ildefonso*, which was widely known for the treachery and cruelty of the Indians.
2. Another of these later missions, San Augustin or Isleta Pueblo, which is south of Albuquerque, erected their church 1629. At this mission church they also had a convent and an Indian School. The church was destroyed in 1680 and has since been rebuilt.

3. At Santo Domingo they had one of the finest churches in the state, which operated until 1886 when it tipped into the Rio Grande during a flood.

4. San Geronimo de Taos at the Taos Pueblo was erected in 1617. Coronado visited this pueblo in 1540, but it was not until Onate’s appearance a half century later that they saw any other white men.

5. San Buenaventura, located at the Cochiti Pueblo was erected in 1605 and is still in operation.

6. San Diego mission is on the Tesuque Pueblo and was erected in 1625.

7. There was a mission at Pojoaque but the history is not known since it was abandoned later and all records lost.

8. Acoma, which is better known as the City in the Sky was built on a mesa 400 feet high. This Pueblo is located west of what is now Albuquerque.

9. The Santa Clara Mission was built in 1629.

Between 1622 and 1630 there were approximately 24 missions serving 80 pueblos. Also, during this time several missions were built in the Salinas region near Mountainair in the geographic center of New Mexico. Three of these were larger, most substantial, and the most pretentious churches in the state. Today only the ruins remain of their high massive walls built of thin stone. The largest (Guarai) was 202 feet wide and 131 feet deep. Another Tabira, or Gran Quivira, evidently had battlement Walls and thus was a marked departure from usual mission architecture. The ruins of Tabira, Guarai, and Abo are quite impressive. There were also 7 Indian Pueblos in the Salinas region, but these were abandoned in 1671 because of encroaching Apaches. From the time of their foundation the growth of the first missions went slowly until in 1621, Father Alfonso Benavides came to New Mexico as the first custodian and supervisor of the missions. He established his headquarters at Santa Fe because of its central location. This later had a great deal to do with Santa Fe becoming the political and religious capitol of New Mexico. Work was begun on the church in Santa Fe in 1621. There followed a great era of church building until 1630, Benavides returned to Spain. Then for a half a century the work of the missions went on with little to record except local conflicts with hostile Indians and the inevitable friction with civil and military authorities.
Then in 1680 came the Pueblo Rebellion, the most disastrous Indian uprising that ever had been staged within the limits of the United States. The Spanish had treated the Indians badly, and the colonists held a lot of them in virtual slavery. For several years before the great uprising there had been sporadic outbreaks but the Spanish authorities gave no heed to those except to crush them with a ruthless hand. The Indians decided to rebel and chose Pope of the San Juan Pueblo as their leader.

The Spaniards decided to concentrate their defenses in Santa Fe and Isleta. There was a bloody battle and 21 padres were killed the first day. All the Spaniards retreated and not a living one was left in New Mexico. Most of the mission buildings were damaged except the Zuni church, which was preserved by the Indians.

Several attempts were made by the Spanish to re-conquer the Indians, but all in vain until 1692 when Don Diego De Vargas led a small army up the Rio Grande Valley. He returned to Mexico, and then with a larger force, including colonists and Padres, went up the Rio Grande Valley. The climax of this expedition was the re-conquest of Santa Fe, which now furnishes the basis for the annual Fiesta. Soon the entire region was again in the hands of the Spaniard. 19 of the old missions were rebuilt or repaired and a few new ones built.

Some of the original missions still standing and some of the missions, which were built shortly after the re-conquest upon the site of the original missions, are still in use. Many of the earliest churches have been destroyed or are in total ruin, and those, which were built to replace them, have not yet acquired a historic background comparable to these others.

Some of the old churches in New Mexico are not mission churches but do possess great antiquity and historical value in the land of Enchantment.