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**UNTOLD STORIES FROM
AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS**

BY SUSAN SHUMAKER

FEDERICO SISNEROS

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FEDERICO SISNEROS

San Gregorio de Abó

Salinas National Monument consists of three Spanish colonial churches built on the edges of Indian pueblos in the early 1600s. Forty miles of remote New Mexico mesa separate the three missions: the best grouping of sites within the historic “Salinas Province,” the 17th-century Spanish region surrounding the “salinas” or salt lakes in central New Mexico (Carroll 7).

One of the three main sites is San Gregorio de Abó,²⁰ built by natives for colonial missionaries between 1629 and 1659, and, adjoining it, the more ancient Tompiro pueblo, first constructed around 1100. Both were vacated just twenty years after the mission was completed, the victim of Apache raids, epidemics, and drought. Throughout the following centuries, however, the church’s crumbling edifice became a landmark, rising above the rolling landscape outside Mountainair, New Mexico. Soon, San Gregorio would come into the care of a family of ranchers who moved into the area as part of the resettlement period of the eighteenth century (Ivey 2; “New Mexico” 0:02; Ditmer).

The Sisneros Family

For over thirteen generations, the Sisneros family has been in New Mexico. Early ancestors emigrated from Spain to Mexico and then moved northward, arriving in New Mexico in 1792.²¹ Devout Christians, they came to spread the gospel and colonize the land. The family first settled in Casa Colorado; then, in 1854, they attempted to settle in Abó. Their small group was attacked by Apaches and, deciding the area was still too dangerous, gave up on the attempt at settlement (Sisneros; Ivey 36–37).

By 1865, the area had become more peaceful and Juan José Sisneros, remembering its good qualities, decided to try again. By 1869, he had moved his family to Abó, where they began building houses and protective walls. Within a decade, the settlers had built at least eight houses along the west and south sides of the pueblo ruins; a small village was slowly growing around the former mission (Ivey 37).

Abó was blessed with a freshwater spring, attracting travelers to stop and rest and providing water for the Sisneros family to practice limited subsistence farming. The family’s existence, however, depended upon their sheep and, like their few neighbors, they traveled to nearby market towns carrying wool, mutton, and woven goods for sale or trade. The Sisneros ranch was expansive, at one time extending almost 70 square miles, and incorporated the ruins of San Gregorio and the Tompiro pueblo (Ivey 31).

20 Pr. “uh-Bo”

21 Ivey writes that one Alonso Rodriguez Cisneros owned land in nearby Las Humanas in 1662; it’s not clear, however, if Alonso is Federico’s ancestor (Ivey 8).

By 1882, Juan José was dead and his son Ramon had taken his place as head of the Sisneros family. His house, an elaborate U-shaped compound, sat on the east side of the ruins and often welcomed travelers. One such visitor was archaeologist Adolph Bandelier. Bandelier stayed with the Sisneros family over Christmas, 1882, during which time he drew plans of the pueblo, mission compound, and settlement (Ivey 38).

In 1890, when a U.S. government survey indicated that the Sisneros claim was actually many miles further north, the family began homesteading the property in Abó, wanting to remain on the land they loved. “It was the first homestead patent here,” Federico said. In 1892, Ramon was granted title to the quarter-section in which the ruins of Abó were located (Ivey 31, 39; Ditmer).

After Ramon’s death, the family passed into the hands of his brother (or possibly son), Joaquin Sisneros. Joaquin died in 1926, leaving the family to divide his estate. In 1934, Federico Sisneros bought the site of the pueblo and church from the remaining heirs (Ivey 40).

Federico

Federico Sisneros was born in 1894, the fourth of seven children. They were raised in the family home, in the shade of poplar trees about a quarter of a mile down the road from the ruins. Although the house was some 70 miles from the nearest school, Federico’s father arranged that he and his brother would attend, at least for a short time (Fulfer 12/14/05; Ditmer).

When Federico was just five years old, his father gave him responsibility for the ruins of San Gregorio and Tompiro pueblo. His job was to keep the family’s sheep from licking the old stones for salt, an activity that would eventually destroy the ancient walls, for this—his father told him—was holy ground (Powers; “New Mexico”).²²

This has always been considered a holy place to my family. That is the reason my daddy told me to take care of the church. . . . It is a place of prayer, a place of prayer. I always make a little prayer when I go across the altar, because it was a blessed place. —Federico Sisneros (Ditmer)

Federico married Guadalupe—known as Lupe or Tia Lupe²³—from La Joya, New Mexico. Together they ranched and raised pinto beans and six children—four sons and two daughters—living in a four-room house, built as a school in 1933. All the while, Federico continued to care for the ruins at Abó (Sisneros; Ditmer).

New Mexico State Monument

In the early 1930s, the University of New Mexico approached the Sisneros family about buying the mission and pueblo site. Having acquired the ruins from his relatives, Federico sold Abó to UNM in 1937, with the understanding that the site would be better preserved and cared for under the protection of the state. In 1938, the ruins came under the administrative umbrella of

²² Ernestine Sisneros says Federico was twelve when his father entrusted him with the safety of the ruins; Fred himself says he was five (Sisneros; “New Mexico” 0:03).

²³ Tr. “Aunt Lupe.”

the Museum of New Mexico, where they remained for nearly fifty years. Federico and his family continued to live on the property adjoining the site (Ivey 3).²⁴

Work began at the site almost immediately. Works Progress Administration employees, and later the Civilian Conservation Corps, excavated the ruins and rebuilt portions of the church. With the outbreak of World War II and the discontinuation of New Deal programs, the workers abandoned the site and vandalism became a serious problem. Although he was working in a defense plant, Federico began patrolling the ruins himself, without pay. In 1944, he became a paid caretaker, earning \$10 a month at first, then \$20 a month, and—in the 1960s—the minimum hourly wage, based on part-time work. Later, Federico said that he would have done it for free all along (Ditmer; Powers; Kuralt).

I love it. I was raised here and I sure love it. I [wouldn't trade] it even for the whole United States.
—Federico Sisneros (“New Mexico” 0:03)

Federico and Guadalupe continued to live in their small home next to the monument. Each day, Federico would walk over to the ruins to ascertain that all was well. When archaeologists began to dig at the site, he helped with the sifting and rebuilding—this was, after all, his responsibility. Whenever people visited the site, he led the tours, serving as cultural interpreter for the handful of tourists who arrived each week (Ditmer).

National Park Service

In 1980, the state turned Abó and Quari, another state monument, over to the National Park Service. The sites were combined with Gran Quivara National Monument to form the new Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument. Federico—or Fred, as he was known to Park Service employees—stayed on as an NPS ranger, living next to the Mission ruins, as always.

I belong here. It would be nice, of course, to be buried here, too. You see that tree over there? I like to be buried over there. —Federico Sisneros (“New Mexico” 0:04)

As caretaker, Federico worked four or five days a week at the site. He took his first “vacation” in the winter of 1986-87, at the age of 92. Before starting the two-month leave, he told his supervisor that he would go over each day to open and close the monument; there would be no need to hire a replacement (Ditmer).

Federico’s lifetime of devotion didn’t go unnoticed. In 1981, the National Park Service bestowed the coveted Superior Service Award upon him, in honor of his decades of work, spanning most of the twentieth century. In October of 1986, he received a prestigious National Trust for Historic Preservation “Honor award” for being the oldest living park ranger and for his dedicated service (Ditmer).

²⁴ Ditmer tells a different story of the sale. According to her article, Federico was angered by the small sum of money offered by the University of New Mexico for the site. Refusing the offer, he instead donated the ruins to the state in 1938, saying he’d give the land away before anyone took it from him (Ditmer).

In September 1984, Federico experienced what was, for him, the highlight of his stewardship. Mass was celebrated in the ruins of San Gregorio de Abó, the first formal services to be held in the mission in almost 300 years. “It was,” Sisneros said, “a dream come true.” (Ditmer; Powers).

During the eight years that Federico served as a ranger, his fellow NPS employees took to calling Abó “Fred’s place,” a reflection of the man’s devotion for the site. “It will always be Abó on paper,” said superintendent Glenn Fulfer, “but to the ones who worked with him, it will always be ‘Fred’s Place.’”

It was more or less a legacy given down to Fred to take care of Abó. [He worked] for hardly any wages at all. Fred was the type of fellow that the love of the site outweighed the importance of money.
—Superintendent Glenn Fulfer (“Honored Caretaker”)

When the property was transferred in 1980, Fred—then in his late eighties—was still rebuilding walls and climbing into places where most young people wouldn’t dare venture (Ditmer).

I won’t retire. This is my place. My retirement is going to be when I go to the other world. —Federico Sisneros (Ditmer)

True to his word, Fred worked until the day he died, March 12, 1988—just four days shy of his 94th birthday. His wish was to be buried on the north side of the ruins of San Gregorio de Abó. The Park Service honored Federico’s devotion by granting his request. At 11 a.m. on Tuesday, March 15, Sisneros’s body was laid to rest in the shade of a juniper tree, overlooking the ruins to which he had devoted his life. Even in death, Federico kept his promise to his father, made so many years before (“Honored Caretaker;” Sisneros).

The location of Federico’s grave, along the interpretive trail, is marked with a wayside exhibit. Today, his niece, Ernestine, is the lead ranger at Abó (Fulfer).

Before he died, Charles Kuralt, legendary journalist “on the road” for the *CBS Evening News*, interviewed Federico and thanked him for his devotion to the site.

One small part of the national legacy is in good hands—[Federico Sisneros’s] hands. There wouldn’t be anything left here, if it weren’t for his life and work. Makes you want to say, “thank you.”

Gracias, Don Federico. —Charles Kuralt (“New Mexico” 0:05)

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