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ADINA DE ZAVALA AND
SAN ANTONIO MISSIONS NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

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"Miss Adina" and the Missions of San Antonio

In the spring of 1902, a young Tejana schoolteacher walked through the streets of San Antonio with a horse and cart, gathering donations of building materials for the restoration of San José church. With this small collection of supplies, a handful of women, and enough money to pay workers for fifty-four days, Adina De Zavala and her group, the De Zavala Daughters, began the preservation of San Antonio’s Spanish Colonial missions (Ables 25, 27–28; Fisher 47).

The Missions are the roots of the city of San Antonio. They are the first page of Texas history, the first chapter of our history as a country. The Spanish needed to place missions in this frontier of New Spain to hold the land for Spain from the French.—Ranger Dava McGahee†

At the close of the 17th century, modern-day Texas was the northeastern boundary of New Spain—the vast Spanish colonial empire stretching from South America to California. When the French attempted to build a fort on the Texan coast, Spain swiftly reestablished dominance, constructing missions and presidios throughout south Texas and, in the process, encountering nomadic bands of Native peoples: the Tonkawas, the Karankawas, the Coahuiltecan, and others. “Texas was a howling wilderness before the Spaniards arrived,” historian Félix D. Almaráz, Jr. maintains. “But it was not a vacant land; there were people here” (Viceroyalty).

By the mid-1700s, Catholic friars from Spain had established five missions along the San Antonio River.

The Spaniards decided that the mission system would be the process by which the indigenous people would be settled. If they were nomadic, then the conversion had to be to get them to settle in one place. Conversion did not mean just adopting a European religion. It meant changing their lifestyle.—Félix D. Almaráz, Jr.

Within a few generations, the natives of Texas had been converted and had intermarried with the Spaniards and Mexicans to create a new community, known collectively today as “Tejanos.” But by the early 1820s, the friars had moved on, leaving the missions to fall into disrepair.

The Mexican Government decreed that in 1824 these Missions of Texas would be secularized; terminated. So, what happened? You had ruins. And then it wouldn't be until the end of the 19th Century that there would be a conservation program.—Félix D. Almaráz, Jr.

The combination of neglect, dense vegetation, and urban growth was deadly to the ancient structures. But Miss Adina” never shied away from a challenge, at one point barricading herself inside Mission San Antonio de Valero—better known as the Alamo—to keep it from being demolished. She believed that the preservation of historical structures was critical to our future. “If people—especially children—can actually see the door through which some noble man or woman passed,” she said “they’ll be impressed; they’ll remember; they’ll be inspired to read

† Unless noted otherwise, all interviews were conducted by Roger Sherman at San Antonio Missions, Oct. 31, 2008.
everything they can find. Inevitably, they’ll be filled with high ideals, the desire to emulate” (Howard 332).

In the years ahead Adina would work with other groups—the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Texas Historical Landmarks Association, and the women of the San Antonio Conservation Society—to mark or preserve dozens of historic structures across Texas, including the missions of San Antonio. The first, Mission San Antonio de Valero, the Alamo, is cared for by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas. The remaining four—Concepción, San Jose, San Juan, and Espada—make up San Antonio Missions National Historical Park (Flores xxv; Ables 82, 96; Fisher 153, 501).

**San Antonio Missions National Historical Park**

Today, the missions of San Antonio National Historical Park are thriving centers for San Antonio’s Latino community, hosting Spanish and English language masses throughout the week, celebrating traditional Hispanic festivals year-round, and serving 50-55,000 students annually. It is also a unique property in the National Park Service (Remley).

> The relationship between the Catholic Archdiocese and these four missions does not occur anywhere else in the National Park Service; it’s a unique cooperative agreement where the National Park Service manages and cares for all of the buildings and the grounds around the church and the Archdiocese takes care of the church. — Ranger Dava McGahee

A highlight of the yearly schedule at San Antonio Missions National Historical Park is *Dia de los Muertos*, the traditional Mexican Christian “Day of the Dead” fiesta, celebrated in early November and with its roots in ancient Meso-American celebrations. The events associated with the Day of the Dead illuminate the multiple ways in which the park serves locals and visitors alike. “The missions,” Ranger Dava McGahee says, “are centers of not only religious faith, but festivals and family.”

For the weeks surrounding the Day of the Dead, school groups participate in activities on-site. Younger students cut out traditional papel picado designs of skeletons and form small skull amulets from clay, reminders that, according to tradition, death is nothing to fear and that those who die should not be mourned, but celebrated. Older students and park visitors gather at the park’s sample altar and learn from interpretive rangers about what each of the items placed there—sugar skulls, marigolds, family photographs, and so on—represent (McGahhe).

Concurrent with the Day of the Dead activities, the San Antonio Missions friends’ group—Los Compadres—holds its annual “Artesanos del Pueblo” art show, featuring the art and crafts of San Antonio artisans. The show serves not only as a fundraiser for the park, but a way for people of the area to see and celebrate local artwork, the majority of which is rooted in artistic traditions of Central America (Chandoha).

> Each of the missions was its own little outpost on the frontier. So everything they ate, everything they wore, every implement they used had to be produced in the missions. That’s really a tradition that we’ve continued here. We have ceramics; we have woodcutters; we have painters; we have weavers. This is sort of a mini-San Antonio
reflected here, from the very traditional to the avant garde. —Pamela Bain, Los Compadres

At the heart of the Day of the Dead celebrations are the religious events that take place in the mission’s churches and cemeteries, traditions which link the missions through generations of families who have worshipped there.

The Day of the Dead is a wonderful celebration of remembering all those who have gone before us. The people come together in the cemetery; they clean up the graves; they light candles; they bring food, even. And they spend the day meeting relatives they haven’t seen the whole year and they talk about their loved ones whose remains were buried there. It’s a very joyful day. It’s a celebration that the person has gone home to God. —Father James Galvin, Mission San Juan

With the celebration of traditional holidays and regular masses throughout the week—in English and Spanish—the churches of San Antonio Missions continue to function in the way they have for centuries. “There’s a sense of the Missions being permeated with the prayers of people for centuries,” Says Father James Galvin, the priest at Mission San Juan church. “A sense of the sacredness of everyone who lived here, and the things that they have handed down to us.”

About thirty miles outside of San Antonio is Rancho de las Cabras, “the ranch of the goats.” Established in the mid-1870s, the ranch served as a grazing ground for Mission Espada and supplied the community with much-needed food, wool, and other supplies. Today the site is an important part of San Antonio Missions National Historical Park and is the site of an on-going archaeological dig. College students at University of Texas San Antonio—under the direction of park archaeologist Susan Snow and MaryBeth Tomka, Curator at UTSA’s Center for Archaeological Research—unearth relics that will, ultimately, provide a clearer picture of the lives of the Tejano cowboys who lived and worked there. “People talk about the West and the cowboy, but they don’t think of it as starting here,” Tomka elaborates. “It was the Indians that really are the roots of the cowboys” (Tomka).

Once a month, the park hosts “community dig days” at the site, offering descendents of those early cowboys an opportunity to learn first-hand about their ancestors. “The great thing about this,” descendent Susanna Irbin says, “is that we are rediscovering our roots.”

We want to pass on our heritage. We would like to tell the stories of individual families that descended from these peoples and let people know that we are still here. This is where we’re from. We never left the area. We’ve been here forever and ever and ever. —Susanna Irbin

Through the work at Rancho de las Cabras, annual exhibits featuring Tejano artisans, educational activities for local school children, and the spiritual life of the mission churches, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park provides an ongoing link between past and present. And it all started with the vision and effort of one woman.

Miss Adina put passion behind her conviction. She put her heart and her mind into it and she convinced a lot of people. She was able to put to shame public officials if they
came up with some notion that they were gonna destroy buildings, history sites. She would say something like, "If this were Virginia, you wouldn't even think about that!"—Félix D. Almaráz, Jr., Historian

At a time when historical preservation was focused exclusively on European and white history, Adina De Zavala brought attention to the multiple ethnic heritages of our nation and, ultimately, saved a community and religious center for generations of Americans.

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Works Cited and Consulted


