

Guadalupe: Last Mission of the Californias

Peveril Meigs, III

(Editor's note: Peveril Meigs III wrote this article in 1934. We thank his son, Willard Meigs, for making this manuscript available for publication.)

One hundred years ago, in June 1834, the Dominican Mission of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe was founded 30 miles south of what is now the international border, in Baja California. It has been commonly supposed that Sonoma Mission, north of San Francisco Bay, was the last mission ever founded in the West, but recent investigations of documentary evidence show that Guadalupe post-dated Sonoma by eleven years. The establishment of Guadalupe Mission constituted, in fact, the last act in the great colonizing scheme started by Spain centuries before.

Yet even the simplest facts concerning this mission have remained shrouded in mystery and dispute, and there is no civic organization in Guadalupe Valley to stage a centennial celebration this year. The very date of establishment of the mission has been stated variously at from 1795 to 1820 (demonstrably wrong). There are those who say that Guadalupe was never a mission at all, but simply an "asistencia" of the neighboring mission of San Miguel. For these latter doubters, however, there is irrefutable evidence in the form of a letter in the Bancroft Library dated 1839 (Archivo de California, Archivo de las Misiones. Papeles Originales. 1826-1856. Vol. II, p. 903. Caballero. June 25, 1839.), written with his own hand by Fray Félix Caballero, and inscribed by him "Mn. de Ntra. Sa. de Guadalupe."

Fray Félix Caballero came to Baja California about 1822 and served as President of the Dominican missions of that Mexican peninsula. The Jesuits, who had

started the mission system in the Peninsula, had long since been expelled; the Franciscans, after establishing one mission in the south, had confined their activities to Alta California; and the Dominicans for over fifty years had ruled the Baja California missions. When Fray Félix reached the field of action, the existing missions, all the way from Cape San Lucas to San Diego, were decadent. The only fresh harvests of Heathen remaining were back from the coast in the northern part of the Peninsula, too far from any mission to have been subdued. After reorganizing as well as he could the existing missions of the northern frontier area, Caballero started an advance into this unsubdued territory: an advance that began and ended with Guadalupe Mission. Guadalupe existed for only six years, but during this brief life it was a great and prosperous mission, a fitting monument to the most beloved Virgin of the Mexicans: Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Caballero selected for the mission site a large smooth-floored valley some twenty miles in from the coast and a thousand feet above sea level, surrounded on all sides by rugged mountains (Fig. 1). Through the middle of the valley meandered the river which, after passing through a rocky gorge, ultimately reached the coast near San Miguel Mission (now known as 'Misión Vieja'). Rich in natural grasses, the valley had been used for a cattle ranch by San Miguel. Indians now living say that when the cattle first appeared at the lower end of the valley the wild Indians, who had never seen such beasts, called them "Kwak-ipa-nurr" ("tame painted deer"). This title, corrupted by the Spaniards to "Toros Pintados" ("painted bulls"), has been perpetuated as the name of a cañon near the outlet of the valley. In the early records the

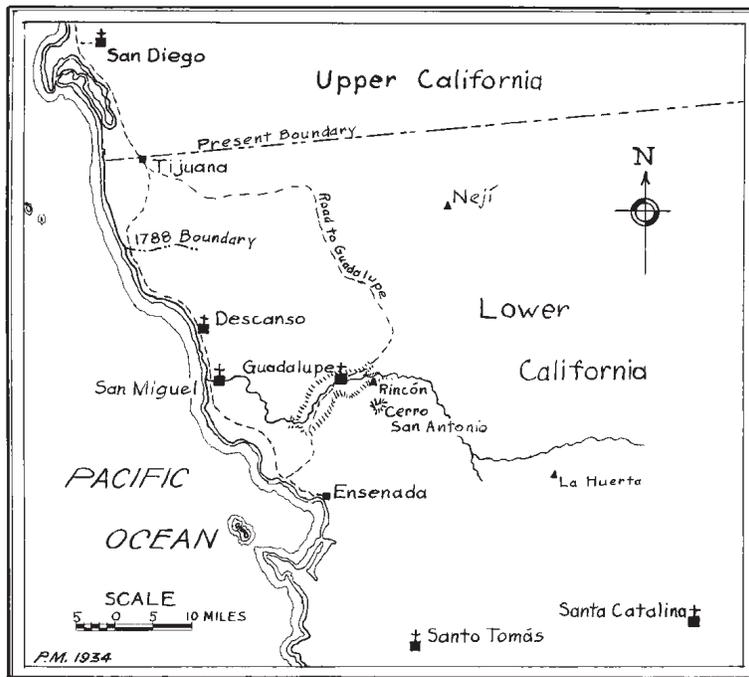


Fig. 1. Sketch map for orientation of Guadalupe (Peveril Meigs, 1934).

valley had been known as San Marcos, but since the establishment of the mission it has been known as Guadalupe Valley, though the lower end is still called San Marcos.

In the midst of this fertile valley a natural platform covering half a dozen acres rises abruptly twenty feet above the general level of the valley floors as though intended as the pediment for some architectural display (Fig. 2). Upon this platform, out of reach of the winter floods of Guadalupe River, Fray Félix constructed the mission buildings. Concerning the appearance of the buildings we can only guess. No picture, no plan of the mission is known to exist. The adobe walls have been utterly destroyed by treasure seekers and cultivators. Of the stone foundations, however, one angle is still pointed out by old timers and shows by its location that the mission must have been built at the very edge of the natural platform, overlooking the valley. A dense cactus hedge along the embankment outside of what had been the walls, and scattered pieces of red floor tiles on the ground within the angle,

are the only other remaining clues as to the character of the buildings. It is said that a broad flight of steps led down from the mission to the plain below, flanked at the base by two large cement *tinajas* into which water from a little spring flowed for domestic use. The spring still flows at the present day.

Water for irrigating the mission fields was obtained from the river (Fig. 3). Fragments of the old irrigation canals can still be detected on both sides of the valley. By mapping the location of the canals it can be estimated that between 400 and 500 acres of land were under irrigation in mission days: more than at most of the Dominican missions. According to Juan Silva, an old inhabitant of the valley, all the crops were raised by means of irrigation. If so, this must have been due mostly to custom inherited from the desert south. Guadalupe is far enough north to get adequate winter rains, and a Russian colony that now occupies the valley produces in normal years 125,000 bushels of wheat without a drop of irrigation. Figures for crops of mission days are totally lacking. If Caballero ever

made annual reports, we have no record of them. We do know, however, that there was a *huerta* with at least grapes, pears, and apricots, and that the traditional staples of corn, wheat, and barley were raised. The chief product of the valley under the mission probably continued to be cattle, as in the pre-mission days. In 1840 a count of Caballero's cattle showed 4,915 head, not counting horses and *ganado menor*. The ruins of the old ranch-house, two and a half miles west of the mission, can be seen yet.

Even more important for a mission than its food production was its crop of Indians. Guadalupe was well-supplied. Nooks and corners of the valley margins, filled with shady groves of liveoaks, swarmed with Indian *rancherías* (Fig. 4). The largest *ranchería*, at Rincón de los Encinos near the east end of the valley, is credibly reported to have had 150 huts (Fig. 5). A conservative estimate places the total original number of Indians in and around the margins of the valley at about 400. Most of these probably joined the mission, but beyond the vicinity of the valley conversion does not seem to have been very successful. The northeastern Indians farther inland apparently were similar in spirit to the notoriously recalcitrant and independent Diegueños who once slew the missionary at San Diego.

In the first few years of their relations with Guadalupe Mission the interior Indians cooperated heartily. The Indians of Nejí, thirty miles northeast of Guadalupe, led by their powerful captain Jatñil, aided in building the mission and harvesting the crops. It is related that Jatñil helped the *escolta* (mission troop of 25 men, kept at Guadalupe as protection from the exposed frontier) more than once against unfriendly Indians. Once he joined the *escolta* in subduing the rebellious Indians of San Diego Mission. Again, he led a campaign against an uprising of the Indians of the Sierra Mission of Santa Catalina. Hardly a year passed without a new Indian war against one of the northern

missions. Guadalupe Mission itself was attacked at least twice.

The Yuma Indians from the Colorado River lowlands were especially dreaded at the frontier missions. In 1837, according to one account, two captive Colorado Indians at San Miguel Mission killed their guard and escaped. Later the same year they raised an army of 400 Yumas and attacked Guadalupe. At the time of the attack all but five members of the *escolta* were away, but these five were prepared, having overheard the plan of attack. At dawn the Indians attacked, yelling and springing about. The soldiers behind the mission walls waited until the Indians had gotten up onto the mission platform, then fired an unexpected volley at close range. Taking advantage of the resulting confusion, the troops galloped out and drove the enemy away with great slaughter by swords. Two years of peace ensued.

According to statements of soldiers and Indians, the Indian animosity was the result of harsh treatment at the missions. A picture (let us hope exceptional) of the process of Christianization from the viewpoint of an Indian is given in the following statement by Janatin, a Nejí Indian, as recorded by Manuel Rojo.

I was gathering clams at the beach at Rosarito when the horsemen galloped up and lassoed me, then tied me and made me run ahead of them to the Mission of San Miguel, beating me now and then. There they shut me up for a week and the padre, through an interpreter, talked to me about things I did not understand. The interpreter advised me to do as I was told. They fed me *atole* of maize, which I did not like but ate because there was nothing else. One day they threw water on my head, gave me salt to eat, and told me my name was 'Jesus' and I was a Christian. Then they made me work in a field and punished me for not doing what I did not know how to do. When I tried to flee they caught me and

beat me so hard with the *picota* that I could not rise from the ground for several days.

I still have the scars. I finally succeeded in escaping to the Sierras, and did not return to the coast until the missions had ended.

Apparently the gentle methods of persuasion that were effective in the early days when Indians were numerous no longer sufficed in the time of Caballero. To his sorrow, the *Fray Presidente* was to learn that conversion by force is not true conversion. Eventually even Jatñil, “friend of the white man,” became enraged at the forced baptism and “enslavement” of his tribesmen and turned against his former allies. Jatñil has become an almost legendary figure of evil to descendants of mission Indians. They say he was surpassingly ugly and ferocious-looking. His early alliance with the whites, they think, was due mostly to his enmity with the Yuma Indians. In any event, it was Jatñil who struck the blow that brought Guadalupe Mission to an end.

According to eyewitnesses, the revenge of Jatñil came in February 1840. With a group of armed Indians, Jatñil one day came to the valley. On his way to the mission he greeted the unsuspecting lieutenant who was drilling the *escolta* on a little field half a league from the church. Upon reaching the mission courtyard, the Nejí Indians without warning killed the corporal and two “tame” Indians, and called for Fray Félix to appear and be killed also. Realizing his danger, Caballero fled to the church and, with María, a loyal and corpulent squaw, climbed to the choir loft where he might escape the notice of anyone entering the building. Jatñil entered the church and approached the stairs leading to the choir. Caballero hid behind the ample skirts of María. As she stood there, transfixed with terror, Jatñil climbed the steps, glanced about, and said: “How are you, woman? Whom I am looking for is the Padre, because he is baptizing the people of my tribe by force, to enslave them in the mission, like you, without enjoying your liberty and living like

horses.” The feelings of the Padre, cowering a few feet away, and his relief as he heard the footsteps of Jatñil descending the stairs, can well be imagined.

Though Jatñil gave up his search and left the mission, Caballero never quite recovered from the fright of his narrow escape. Fearing another attempt upon his life, and finding many of his friends cold towards him for having antagonized Jatñil, the President of the Dominican Missions hastily withdrew to the southern part of the Peninsula without even waiting to collect his cattle. Later the same year (July 11) he died at San Ignacio: of poison, according to some rumors.

The inglorious termination of his career should not blind us to the zealous labors of this last active frontier missionary of the Californias. Though not a builder of a new system, Fray Félix did bring about a brief brilliant revival of the dying mission system. His reputation as one of the most active missionaries ever known in Baja California is amply borne out by a review of his deeds. In addition to performing the work of President for the whole Peninsula, he founded two missions (Descanso and Guadalupe), and simultaneously served as the minister of the mountain mission of Santa Catalina, the intermediate mission of Guadalupe, and the coastal missions of San Miguel and Descanso. He made frequent visits to all of these missions and, occasionally, even to San Diego, though after 1834 he was kept pretty closely tied down to the newly-developing frontier at Guadalupe. Besides his other activities, he maintained a fleet of boats under the command of Don José Luciano Espinosa of Santo Domingo for the catching of sea-otters. In the midst of his work, it is said he found time to write describing his labors and trips. Unfortunately, these writings are believed to have been burned.

Perhaps some day a lucky investigator will find some of these papers still in existence. Further light upon the career of this remarkable man and upon the missions that he founded would be welcome.

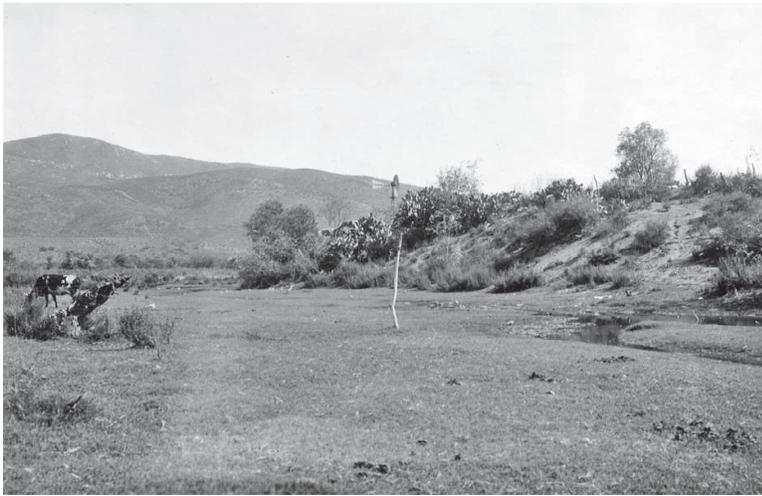


Fig. 2. The site of Guadalupe Mission. The mission walls were just back of the prickly pear hedge at the top of the embankment. Water from the mission spring can be seen flowing along the foot of the embankment. (Peveril Meigs, 1934)



Fig. 3. Permanent lagoon in old channel of Guadalupe River. The main irrigation canal of the mission took out at this point. Today one of the main roads of the valley runs through the pool. (Peveril Meigs, 1934)



Fig. 4. Primitive huts near Guadalupe still occupied by Indians, some of whom are descendants of Jatñil. Stewart Meigs (brother) is standing at left. (Peveril Meigs, 1934)



Fig. 5. Looking south across the east end of fertile Guadalupe Valley towards Rincón de los Encinos, oak grove where the principal *ranchería* of the mission was situated. In the background Cerro San Antonio rises 3,400 feet above the valley and 4,442 feet above sea level. A relic grove of Bishop Pines covers the hill summits near San Antonio. (Peveril Meigs, 1934)