

The Mission Trail

A Springboard for Heritage Tourism

Alfonso Tellez

In 1680, the Pueblo Indians mounted the only successful aboriginal revolt against European colonists and drove the Spaniards out of Santa Fe and beyond the frontier of New Mexico. The Spanish refugees, together with several hundred Christianized Indians belonging to the Tigua and Piro Tribes, retreated to El Paso del Norte along the Camino Real (a Spanish trail running from Mexico City to Santa Fe).

In 1682, the Franciscan Friars established the Missions of Ysleta and Socorro to provide for these refugees. The Mission churches were constructed of adobe brick in the Pueblo tradition. Almost a century later, the Spaniards built a presidio (military fort) at the eastern end of the Camino Real to protect the villagers from the raids of the Comanche and Apache. The chapel of San Elizario was part of the presidio and provided for the spiritual needs of the soldiers.

In 1829, a 500-year flood damaged the churches and destroyed the presidio chapel, which was subsequently rebuilt as the present Church of San Elizario. When the waters subsided, the Rio Grande had cut a new channel to the southwest, leaving the ruined Missions in territory that later became the Republic of Texas.

The Missions and the isolated river valley were a closely-knit self-sustaining community that had survived the Mexican-American War, the American Civil War, and the arrival of Anglo settlers with relatively little change. However, all that ended with the beginning of the 20th century. The Franciscan Friars, who had administered these churches for over 200 years, were replaced with Jesuit priests. These priests were determined to modernize these historic churches. Their first well-intentioned action was to

remove the original mud-plaster, which required yearly maintenance, and replace it with a Portland Cement stucco, a newly developed product. This coating covered the churches with a water-tight skin, and when the roofs began to leak, the water could not evaporate and slowly began to dissolve the adobe bricks.

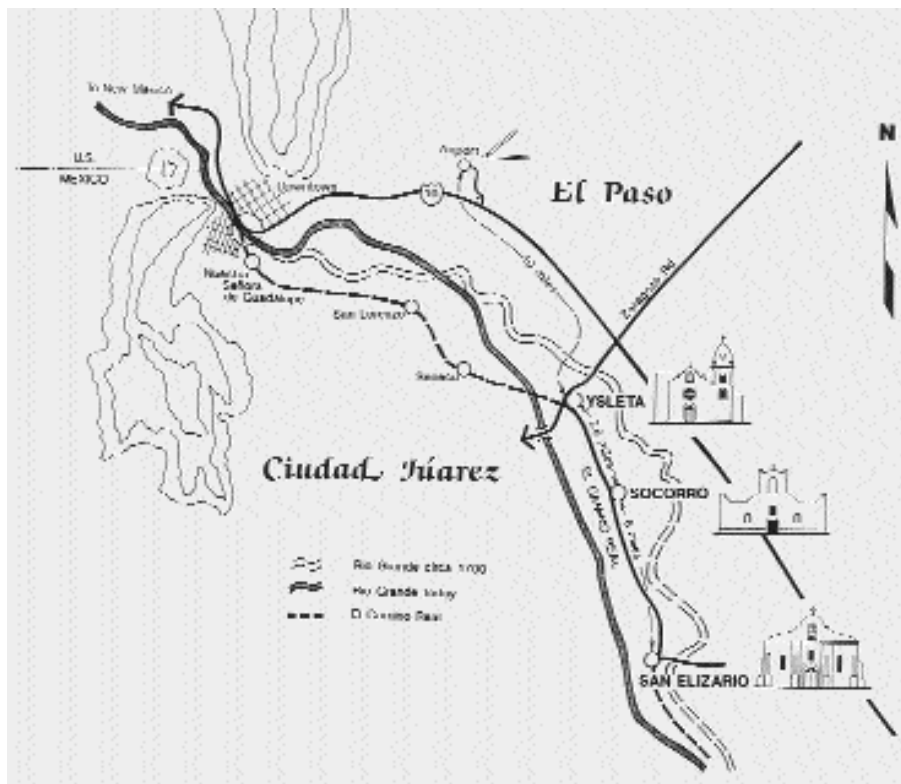
During the following decades, other nonhistorical modifications were made to the Missions: the Bishop did not recognize the historical importance of these churches and gave the local pastors complete autonomy over maintenance and remodeling. These changes included the introduction of concrete arches and window sills, vinyl flooring, heating ducts suspended from the clerestory, metal entrance doors, fiber-board siding, and Celotex ceiling tiles.

Although the Ysleta and Socorro Missions and the San Elizario Chapel were placed in the National Register of Historical Places in 1972, years of improvised remodeling and lack of maintenance had left these buildings in a serious state of disrepair. It was not until 1990 that the community committed itself to begin the work to restore these landmarks. In that year, the City of El Paso and the County of El Paso created the Office of Heritage Tourism, and received technical support with a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The new director appointed a board made up of representatives from the city, the county, the Catholic Diocese, and various private organizations that had been working separately on the missions. The Office of Heritage Tourism was also able to obtain a grant from the National Park Service for the use of two Mexican architects who were experts in the restoration of adobe buildings. They completed a survey of the three churches and

wrote a comprehensive plan for restoration. Using this plan as a base, the Bishop began a well-publicized fund-raising campaign to pay for the restoration. An architect was hired to direct the restoration work.

Work began at once on the San Elizario Chapel, which was in the most deteriorated condition. The Portland Cement stucco was completely removed and the adobe walls were allowed to dry out. The bells were temporarily taken down from the belfry, cleaned, and placed in working order. The damaged



This map (not to scale) illustrates the location of the three mission churches connected by the Mission Trail, a section of El Camino Real, which the Office of Heritage Tourism in the City of El Paso expects will draw tourists to the area. Courtesy City of El Paso.



Work is presently underway to restore the Ysleta Mission, starting with the bell tower. Photo courtesy Texas Historical Commission.

adobe walls were repaired using new adobe and mud mortar. Then two coats of mud plaster mixed with straw and cactus juice were applied. The result was a restoration that closely resembled the original church.

Work has begun on the Ysleta Mission with the construction of a masonry fence around the mission grounds and the complete restoration of the bell tower including the replacement of all exterior wood cornices, eaves, louvers, and doors. Interior restoration will progress as funds become available, and landscaping, walkway, and parking improvements are also anticipated.

The Tigua Indian Tribe has just opened a new 900-seat high-stake bingo parlor on their reservation at the opposite corner from the Ysleta Mission. Although this business operation seems to be a strange juxtaposition, the influx of so many people may generate a new interest in the missions.

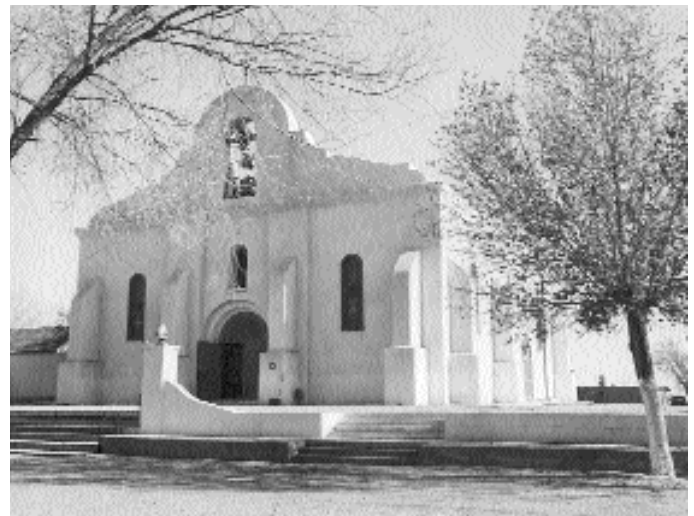
The National Register status of the missions is central to recent initiatives by the Office of Heritage Tourism. Renewed appreciation of the buildings has encouraged three municipal governments to sponsor preservation and interpretation along the Mission Trail, an 8.6 mile section of the Camino Real. The Mission Trail links the Ysleta, Socorro, and San Elizario churches and lies within three governmental jurisdictions: the City of El Paso, the City of Socorro, and the County of El Paso. In 1992, the City of Socorro created a historic district along the central section of the Mission Trail and last summer the City of El Paso did the same with the western section. The eastern third of the trail that lies in the county presented special problems, since counties in Texas do not have zoning powers. A state bill was introduced and passed by the legislature giving the County of El Paso special zoning authority only within the boundaries of the proposed district. This last part of the Mission Trail is expected to be approved by the County Commissioners, completing the

designation of the entire Mission Trail and ensuring that all future construction will be compatible with the missions and other historic buildings.

The cities of El Paso and Socorro and the county have just submitted a joint grant proposal to the Texas Department of Transportation for \$3.5 million in ISTEAF funds to be spent in the development of the Mission Trail. If approved, this grant will be used to create a Tourist Information Center across the street from the Ysleta Mission, an adobe fence around the Socorro Mission cemetery, and the landscaping of the Mission Trail with shade trees.

This year U.S. Representative Ronald Coleman has successfully sponsored a bill that will provide \$300,000 for a National Park Service study to determine if the Mission Trail and the Missions can be maintained and administered as a National Historic Park.

The newly-established Office of Heritage Tourism has made all these recent preservation activities possible, much to the benefit of the missions and the Mission Trail. This office was the point of contact for city and county officials, and for all private organizations. It provided the leadership and the planning to direct and focus the funds and energies of these various groups. The result of these activities has been the beginning of the restoration and protection of



The Presidio Chapel of San Elizario, El Paso County, Texas, is the southernmost stop along the Mission Trail. Photo courtesy Texas Historical Commission.

the missions and the Mission Trail, the development of the Mission Trail for tourism, and a public awareness of the importance of these National Register buildings and their historic environment.

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