The Spanish Borderlands

Francisco Vázquez de Coronado

Beginning in 1598 in New Mexico, 1700 in Arizona, 1716 in Texas, and 1769 in Alta California, Spain planted permanent missions, military posts, towns, and ranchos in the Far North. As early as the 1700s, Spanish explorers had mapped most of the territory of the Southwest and established over three hundred towns. Today, the American Southwest is a region of enormous geographical and cultural diversity. The small village of northern New Mexico differ radically from the border cities and commercial farms of south Texas or the crowded barrios of Los Angeles. This diversity was apparent during the years of first settlement.

From the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, Spain regarded the northern frontier as a buffer zone between empires. Worry about English and Russian inroads into California and French movements into the lower Mississippi Valley led Spain to dispatch soldiers and missionaries into Mexico's northern frontier. Over time, about 1,600 Hispanic settlers moved into New Mexico, 1,700 to Texas, and 1,750 to Baja and Alta California. A tiny settlement also emerged in Arizona around Tucson.

Spain used three basic institutions to settle the northern frontier: the religious mission, the presidio or military installation, and the pueblo or civil town. In contrast to central Mexico, where the Spanish developed an economy based on agriculture and mining using Indian labor, the northern frontier commonly relied on missions or presidios. In New Mexico, missions were usually built at the edge of Indian villages. In Texas, missionaries succeeded to a greater degree than in New Mexico in drawing in nomadic Indians to new settlements. Missions merged with settlements established around military presidios and new cities emerged. San Antonio arose out of a combination of five missions, a presidio, and a civilian town. In California, a mission was a self-sustaining community where friars and Indian "neophytes" (converts) lived. In California, the mission was the basic institution of settlement. Within mission communities, Native Americans were taught blacksmithing, candle making, leatherworking, and livestock tending, and were forced to work in workshops, orchards, and fields for long hours. At the end of Spanish rule in 1821, there were 21 missions, four presidios, and three pueblos.

New Mexico, the first target of colonization, resembled central Mexico in having fertile lands and distinct Indian settlements. Spanish towns remained separate from the Indian countryside
and intermarriage and interaction were limited. These distinctions continued into the twentieth century, Indian tribes retaining much of their distinctive cultural heritage.

Throughout the Spanish Southwest, a caste society emerged, though it was far less rigid and hierarchical than that of central Mexico. Most colonists were of mixed racial backgrounds. Between 1540 and 1542, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado explored New Mexico, Texas and Kansas, searching for precious metals. His letter provides one of the first detailed European descriptions of the Southwestern environment and the inhabitants' attitudes toward the Spanish newcomers.

The climate of this country and the temperature of the air is almost like that of Mexico, because it is sometimes hot and sometimes it rains. I have not yet seen it rain, however, except once when there fell a little shower with wind, such as often falls in Spain. The snow and the cold are usually very great, according to what the natives of the country all say. This may very probably be so, both because of the nature of the country and the sort of houses they build and the skins and other things which these people have to protect them from the cold. There are no kinds of fruit or fruit trees. The country is all level, & is nowhere shut in by high mountains, although there are some hills and rough passages. There are not many birds, probably because of the cold, and because there are no mountains near. There are no trees fit for firewood here, because they can bring enough for their needs from a clump of very small cedars four leagues distant. Very good grass is found a quarter of a league away, where there is a pasturage for our horses as well as mowing for hay, of which we had great need, because our horses were so weak and feeble when they arrived.

The food which they eat in this country is corn, of which they have a great abundance, & beans & venison, which they probably eat (although they say that they do not), because we found many skins of deer and hares and rabbits. They make the best corn cakes I have ever seen anywhere, and this is what everybody ordinarily eats. They have the very best arrangement and machinery for grinding that was ever seen. One of these Indian women here will grind as much as four of the Mexicans. They have very good salt in crystals, which they bring from a lake a day's journey distant from here. No information can be obtained among them about the North Sea or that on the west, nor do I know how to tell Your Lordship which we are nearest to. I should judge that it is nearer to the western, and 150 leagues is the nearest that it seems to me it can be thither. The North Sea ought to be much farther away. Your Lordship may thus see how very wide the country is. They have many animals-bears, tigers, lions, porcupines, and some sheep as big as a horse, with very large horns and little
tails. I have seen some of their horns the size of which was something to marvel at. There are also wild goats, whose heads I have seen, and the paws of the bears and the skins of the wild boars. For game they have deer, leopards, & very large deer, & everyone thinks that some of them are larger than that animal which Your Lordship favored me with, which belonged to Juan Melaz. They inhabit some plains eight day's journey toward the north. They have some of their skins here very well dressed, & they prepare and paint them where they kill the cows, according to what they tell me....

They say that they will bring their children so that our priests may instruct them, & that they desire to know our law. They declare that it was foretold among them more than fifty years ago that a people such as we are should come, and the direction they should come from, and that the whole country would be conquered. So far as I can find out, the water is what these Indians worship, because they say that it makes the corn grow and sustains their life, and that the only other reason they know is because their ancestors did so.

Junípero Serra: Saint or Emissary of Empire?

Junípero Serra

Junípero Serra, a legendary figure in California's early history and under consideration for sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church, founded and headed California's mission system. After arriving in San Diego in 1768, he led a group of Franciscan friars who established a 600-mile chain of twenty-one religious missions that stretched from San Diego to Sonoma, north of San Francisco. Many of California's most important cities later grew up around the missions. Serra is called the father of California because he was the first to envision it as a whole. No candidate for sainthood has aroused more controversy than Fray Serra.

Serra's defenders say that he risked his own health and safety to ensure the salvation of California's Indians and toiled at their side. In their view, he represents a model of perseverance and self-sacrifice, abandoning a comfortable position of college professor on the island of Majorca to bring Catholicism to Mexico's northern frontier. His supporters claim that he opposed lengthy imprisonment and capital punishment for Indians and sought to protect converts from Spanish soldiers.

Serra's detractors, who include many American Indian scholars and activists, revile him as an emissary of Spanish colonial rule, the architect of a system of forced labor and confinement, that regarded Indian cultures as inferior and sought to eradicate them. They argue that California Indians were forced against their will to live at Serra's missions, where they were subject to slave-like labor and whipped if they disputed Church teachings or tried to escape. As part of the missions' civilizing project, Indians were denied traditional sources of food and were required to eat only cultivated products. Even during his lifetime, Serra was criticized for mistreating Indian converts and using whips, chains, and stocks to enforce religious obedience.

Serra's defenders say that it is unfair to judge an eighteenth-century missionary by present-day standards. They ask that Fray Serra be judged in the context of the eighteenth century, when many European colonizers assumed a paternalistic superiority over native populations, when corporal punishment was widespread, and when many missionaries felt a divine imperative to Christianize and civilize non-western people. Vatican researchers argued that Serra was more a champion of the Indians than he was their oppressor and that there is no evidence that he ever personally beat Indians. Pope John Paul II acknowledged in 1987 that the Indian encounter with Spanish culture was "a harsh and painful reality" that entailed "cultural oppression" and injustices. But he went on to praise
Serra who, he said, "had frequent clashes with the civil authorities over the treatment of Indians" and that Fray Serra "admonish[ed] the powerful not to abuse and exploit the poor and weak."

These selections reveal Junípero Serró's ideas about California's missions.

It is of the utmost importance that the missions be provided with laborers, to till the land, and so raise the crops for their maintenance and progress. We would already have made a start in so doing, were it not for the opposition of the Officer at the presidio....

Along with the sailors aboard ship, there should be a number of young men from the vicinity of San Blas [a Spanish naval depot near present-day Puerto Vallarta, Mexico]. I should think that it would not be hard to find among them day laborers, cowboys and mule drivers....

It is of no less importance that, when the livestock arrives, which Your Excellency, in virtue of your decree, orders to be forwarded from California for the equipment of the Monterey missions, some Indian families from the said California should come, of their own free will, with the expedition, and that they should receive every consideration from the officials. They should be distributed, at least two or three being placed in each mission. By taking such measures two purposes will be accomplished. The first will be that there will be an additional two or three Indians for work. The second, and the one I have most in mind, is that the Indians may realize that, till now, they have been much mistaken when they saw all men, and no women, among us; that there are marriages, also, among Christians. Last year, when one of the San Diego Fathers went to California to get provisions, which had run short in that mission, he brought back with him, along with the rest of his company, two of the said families. At his arrival, there was quite a commotion among the new Christians, and even among the gentiles; they did not know what to make of these families, so great was their delight. Just to see these families was a lesson as useful to them as was their happiness at their arrival. So if families other than Indian come from there, it will serve the same purpose very well--that is, if we can provide for them.... Source: Antonine Tibspear, ed., Writings of Junípero Serra (Washington, 1955, I, 295-327).
California's Mission System

Pablo Tac

The missions constituted one basis of the Spanish plan to settle Alta California; the others were the presidios, or military garrisons, and the pueblos, or civil towns. The missions were the most important, for they became the granaries and the educational, religious, and cultural centers for the Indians who lived in areas surrounding them. Several cities grew up around the missions.

Recently, three artists and a historian produced a multimedia exhibition on California's mission system. A book accompanying the exhibition included a multiple choice quiz, which posed these questions:

The mission system is characterized by its:
- a. "benevolence"
- b. "civilizing influence"
- c. "social efficiency"
- d. "forced-labor system"

Before the arrival of the missionaries, in what is now the state of California, there lived:
- a. a larger number of Indians than anywhere else in what is now the United States
- b. Indians whose detailed knowledge of the ecology enabled them to meet the nutritional needs of this large population
- c. Indians with civilizations based on complex religions and ethical values
- d. all of the above

To appreciate the missions today, you must view them:
- a. in the gentle gold of predawn
- b. in the fiery afterglow of sundown
- c. under the silvery cast of the moon
- d. through rose-colored glasses

Aside from conversion of the Indians, the missions' purpose was to turn them into productive citizens who could hold the land for Spain. Some missions, notably San Fernando, San Luis Rey, and San Gabriel, became centers of agricultural production, where armies of Indians provided unpaid labor. Others, such as San Francisco and Soledad, struggled against bad weather and Indian resistance to regimentation and Christianization.

The Franciscans lured Indians into the missions with various trinkets and ornaments. When food was scarce, Indians came
to the missions for food. Once they were baptized the friars did not allow them to leave. Within the missions, the Indians were lodged separately by sex and were required to work growing crops, tending livestock, and constructing mission buildings. Indian laborers formed sand, clay, straw, and manure into bricks and covered the exteriors with plain stucco or plaster. Indian women scrubbed clothes. Indians who tried to escape were flogged. To ensure that they remained, some Franciscans prohibited them from growing crops outside of mission lands and forbade them from learning to ride horses.

Prior to the arrival of the Spanish California's Indians had not been a "primitive" people. They had complex systems of social and political organization and an elaborate system of religion, and had adjusted successfully to a wide variety of geographic and climatic conditions. But the missions were built under the assumption that their "pagan" cultural and religious practices had to be eradicated.

Smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, dysentery, and other diseases introduced by the Spaniards cut through the Indian populations. From approximately 300,000 in 1769, the number of California Indians fell to just 100,000 in 1834, when the mission system ended, largely as a result of disease, malnutrition, and a reduction in the birth rate.

In this selection, Pablo Tac, a Christianized Indian, describes life on a California mission in 1835, when the missions were being closed.

In the Mission of San Luis Rey de Francia, the Fernandino Father is like a king. He has his pages, alcaldes, major domos, musicians, soldiers, gardens, ranchos, livestock, horses by the thousand, cows, bulls by the thousand, oxen, mules, asses, 12,000 lambs, 200 goats, etc. The pages are for him and for the Spanish and Mexican, English and Anglo-American travelers.... The musicians of the Mission for the holy days and all the Sundays and holidays of the year, with them the singers, all Indian neophytes. Soldiers so that nobody does injury to Spaniard or to Indian; there are ten of them and they go on horseback. There are five gardens that are...very large. The Fernandino Father drinks little, and as almost all the gardens produce wine, he who knows the custom of the neophytes well does not wish to given any wine to any of them, but sells it to the English or Anglo-Americans, not for money but for clothing for the neophytes, linen for the church, hats, muskets, plates, coffee, tea, sugar and other things. The products of the Mission are butter, tallow, hides, chamois leather, bear skins, wine, white wine, brandy, oil, maize, wheat, beans and also bull horns which the English take by the thousand to Boston....
When the sun rises and the stars and the moon go down...the old man of the house wakens everyone and behind with breakfast which is to eat junis heated and meat and tortillas, for we do not have bread. This done, he takes his bow and arrows and leaves the house with vigorous and quick step. (This is if he is going to hunt.). He goes off to the distant woods which are full of bears and hares, deer and thousands of birds.... His old woman staying at home makes the meal. The son, if he is man, works with the men. His daughter stays with the women making shirts, and if these also have sons and daughters, they stay in the mission, the sons at school to learn the alphabet, and if they already know it, they learn the catechism, and if this also, to the choir of singers.... The daughter joins with the single girls who all spin for blankets for the San Luiseños and for the robe of the Fernandino Father. At twelve o’clock they eat together.... The meal finished they return to their work.... Before going to bed again they eat what the old woman and old man have made in that time, and then they sleep.... Source: Pablo Tac, Indian Life and Customs at the Mission San Luis Rey, ed. by Minna Hews and Gordon Hews (San Luis Rey, Calif., 1958).
The Fantasy Image of the Southwest

Pedro Bautista Pino

From film and television the images are deeply imprinted in our imagination: of haciendas with red tile roofs and pasteltinted walls; of romantic, moss-covered missions. Of the Old Spanish Southwest—we think of dons, senioritas, friars, and mission Indians.

These images are a relatively recent invention. In the 1880s, a group of California novelists, journalists, and business boosters began a movement to revive interest in California's Spanish and Mexican past. The best known of these popularizers was Charles Fletcher Lummis, the city editor of The Los Angeles Times. In order to sell southern California to prospective homeowners, he created an evocative mythology designed to lend romance to the land. He celebrated the days of the don and provided California with a distinctive architectural style. In the twentieth century, much of California's Spanish colonial heritage was reinvented through architecture, place names, food and other cultural elements that had never existed in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.

At the time, California's missions were falling into ruins. Anglo settlers had carried off the roof tiles and scraped the gold leaf from the altars. Missions became taverns, stables, hog barns. Lummis helped restore the missions in a way that was historically inaccurate but has appealed to future generations. The missions became associated not with dusty agricultural tedium, religious asceticism, or sick Indians, but with a slower, more spiritual and sensuous pace of life—a Mediterranean way more in harmony with the climate and geography than were the traditions the Anglos brought with them from the east.

In the selection here, Pedro Bautista Pino, New Mexico's representative in the Spanish parliament, offers a vivid description of the province in 1812—a portrait that clashes sharply with later romanticized images of the past.

_Ecclesiastical government._—The twenty-six Indian pueblos and the 102 settlements of Spaniards, which constitute the population of the province of New Mexico, are...served by twenty-two missionaries of the order of Saint Francis from the province of Mexico....

For more than fifty years no one has known that there was a bishop.... The misfortunes suffered by those settlers are
infinite because of the lack of a primate. The people who wish, by means of a dispensation, to get married to relatives cannot do so because of the great cost of traveling a distance of more than 400 leagues to Durango. Consequently, many people, compelled by love, live and rear families in adultery...

General means of making the provinces prosper.--Agriculture, industry, and commerce are the three bases of all prosperity. The province of New Mexico has none of these because of its location, because of the neglect with which the government has looked upon it up to the present time, and because of the annual withdrawal of the small income that it is able to derive from its products and manufactures. It has already been stated that the annual importation into the province of products for its consumption amounts to 112,000 pesos, and that its annual income is only 60,000 pesos. Therefore, there is an annual deficit of 52,000 pesos. The salaries paid by the treasury to the governor of the province, to his assistants, and to the 121 soldiers may be said to be the only income that keeps money in circulation. This income is so small, as we have previously stated, that until recently the majority of its inhabitants had never seen money.

One can resort to those resources that nature has placed at the province's disposal: the great abundance of furs and their low cost is undeniable. There are, however, no present means of exporting them without great freighting costs.

The scarcity of professional men.--The province of New Mexico does not have among its public institutions any of those found in other provinces of Spain.... The benefit of primary letters [a basic education] is given only to the children of those who are able to contribute to the salary of the school teacher. Even in the capital it has been impossible to engage a teacher and to furnish education for everyone. Of course there are no colleges of any kind.... For a period of more than two hundred years since the conquest, the province has made no provision for any of the literary careers, or as a priest, something which is ordinarily done in other provinces of America.

There are no physicians, no surgeons, and no pharmacies....

Source: H. Bailey Carrol and J. Villansana Haggard, Three New Mexico Chronicles (Albuquerque, 1942).