
The Rise and Fall of Native Communities At The Old El Paso del Norte Mission

By Terry R. Reynolds

The Story of Two Communities

Communities rise and fall with the pressures of historical and demographic events and the clashing of cultures. Two such communities were attached to the Guadalupe Mission in old colonial El Paso del Norte (now *Ciudad Juárez*). They were composed of people who were on the bottom of Spanish colonial society, that is, natives traditionally living in northern Chihuahua and southern New Mexico. Their communities were comparatively small and insignificant within the larger colonial picture. Yet, their story gives insight into success and failure of adaptive strategies when people from different cultures try to live together.

These two communities arose from the efforts of Franciscan missionaries to bring Christianity and Spanish customs to native peoples living in the El Paso and Mesilla Valleys. The Friars began their work in the mid 1650s. In 1659 they founded the Mission of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe del Paso del Norte. It was for the conversion of the native Manso people living near the Rio Grande where the colonial trail from Mexico City to Santa Fe crossed the river.

One native community at the Mission organized by the Friars was composed of persons from the Manso nation, who traditionally hunted and gathered in the area. The other community organized by the Franciscans contained Puebloan people, Piros, who came to the Mission from their centuries-old agricultural villages farther north in central New Mexico. The different traditional ways of life led by these two native groups had a major effect on the way the two communities adapted to Spanish rule and colonial society within the setting of the Guadalupe Mission. One community, at the beginning strong in numbers, faded and disappeared. The other, at the beginning small in numbers, grew and persisted for over two centuries. This is the story of their rise and fall.¹



Church of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe del Paso del Norte, Dedicated in 1668 and photographed in 1906 (New Mexico State University Library, Archives and Special Collections)

Guadalupe Manso Settlement and Organization²

The Manso for whom the Mission was established spoke an Uto Aztecan language closely related to, if not the same as, that of the Jano and Jocomé nations living further to the west in southern New Mexico and northern Chihuahua. They were hunters and gatherers of the Chihuahuan desert with seasonal moves to scattered rancherías near permanent water sources.³

By the mid-1660s several hundred natives, mostly Manso, had been baptized at the Guadalupe Mission. The Franciscans provided daily food to the Mansos to encourage them to settle at the Mission. Once established

at the Mission, the Mansos were directed by the Friars to construct a village south of the Rio Grande on high ground above the river's floodplain opposite the river's crossing. In 1662 these homes were beside the adobe church constructed under Franciscans supervision. As well, a residence for the Friars was built adjacent to the other side of the church.

Today, the Manso-built Mission Church still stands next to the more recently constructed Cathedral in downtown Juarez. The Cathedral occupies the place where the Friars residence once stood. Just to the other side of the Cathedral complex, the "old" Juarez municipal building occupies some of the land upon which Mansos built their original homes.

The Franciscans attempted to make the Mission self-sustaining. They supervised the planting of fields, vineyards and orchards within walking distance on the river's fertile floodplain to the northeast of the Mission Church. This land eventually would lie in what was to become designated as the old El Paso neighborhood of *Chamisal*. In the mid 1600s the river's course ran north of this land. An irrigation canal, the *Acequia Madre*, also dug with Manso labor in the Mission's first years, watered these Manso lands. Today, this irrigation canal parallels *Avenida 16 de Septiembre* on its north through much of central Juarez east of the Cathedral.

Traditionally, like other Indians living in northern Chihuahua, Mansos organized their relationships with one another in social and economic activities according to kinship. Kinsmen lived together and worked together. Moreover, kin-related families banded together under the leadership of a headman. This leader likely was chosen on the basis of his kin relationships and on his ability to talk with people. He also may have had some knowledge of curing. He led only as long as he was an effective leader. Historically, bands moved about the countryside as activities required. Individuals and families came and went from the band as kin ties were formed or broken by marriage and death.⁴

At the Mission, the Franciscans imposed a much different type of life and organization on Manso families. Spanish colonial life required native people to work within the colonial economy as laborers. Thus, native kinship relations played little role in economic activities. Village organization and structure were primary to the effective operation of the Mission. People were divided into groups on the basis of their economic roles and

social standing, rather than on kin affiliation. Those who provided physical labor were at the bottom of a hierarchy, while those that directed economic activities had higher status. Moreover, within the local Parish and in the village, men's positions organized and provided leadership for all activities involving both families and individuals.

The Franciscans imposed Spanish community organization on the Manso as well as its leadership positions. At the top of the native community hierarchy was the *Governador* or *Governadorcillo*. This person was the leader of the community and was responsible for the community to Church authorities. In Church records as early 1663, Francisco is noted as the Manso *Governador*. Francisco held this position for almost twenty years. Another Manso official appearing rather regularly in early records was the *Fiscal*. He was responsible to the Friars for community members carrying out their duties with regard to the Church. In early Mission records Tomas held this position. There were other imposed administrative positions in the native community dealing with irrigation canal labor, community security and church operations. The men holding all of these positions would have worked closely with the Friars. The Friars, and indeed colonial authorities, held them responsible for Manso activities and behavior.⁵

Francisco and Tomas held their positions for many years before 1680. This was unusual. Spanish custom was to change personnel in official community positions yearly. Officials were selected by the native community with Franciscan approval and were installed at the beginning of each new year. Keeping the same person in a leadership position for a number of years gave stability to Manso-Franciscan interaction.

The Manso population at the Mission was not as stable as Manso community leadership. Many Mansos did not convert to Christianity. They continued to live in bands in northern Chihuahua and southern New Mexico. They were in contact with members of the Guadalupe community as well as people from other native nations. How much outside native influences affected the Guadalupe Manso community is difficult to ascertain from the Mission's early history, but they most likely played a role in the first Guadalupe Manso rebellion. In 1667 Guadalupe Mansos tried to plan and carry out an uprising against the Mission and the few colonists living in the area. When colonial authorities discovered the plan,

they hung two of the rebel planners, thus putting an effective end to the rebellion. How many Mansos left the Mission at this time and rejoined those to the north and west is unknown, but there is a significant decline in new Guadalupe Manso conversions in following years.

As was the Franciscan custom, natives intermarrying with those under the supervision of the Mission were considered to be part of the Mission's native community. Thus, the Manso community population was added to before 1680 by Manso intermarriage with persons belonging to other native nations including Janos, Jocomes, Sumas, Apaches and Piros. By 1680 the community was mixed in heritage and probably consisted of far fewer families than had been converted originally.

In late 1680 the consequences of the Pueblo Revolt in northern New Mexico began to overwhelm the Guadalupe Mission. Almost two thousand refugees, Spanish colonists and Pueblo natives, migrated into the El Paso Valley and settled along the river in a number of places south of the Mission. Needing food and supplies for survival, they soon depleted Mission stores.

The Franciscans desired to keep the colonists spatially segregated from the Guadalupe and refugee natives, but colonial authorities were against this. They felt that spatial separation between colonists and natives had greatly facilitated the Pueblo Revolt. Colonial officials, however, saw merit in keeping people from various native nations separate from each other. Consequently, separate settlements with their own churches were devised for different refugee Pueblo native groups,

but each of these settlements also included Spanish colonists. From this point on natives and colonists intermingled in the El Paso Valley on a daily basis.

Advantageously located above the river's flood plain, the Guadalupe Mission proper and its Manso settlement eventually became the center of Spanish colonial activity. Colonial administration moved into buildings near the Church, and a military presidio was built nearby. Refugee communities were recombined and, in the mid 1680s, moved upriver for security.

Earlier in that decade, general native discontent with colonial rule intensified throughout the region. With the Mission as focal point for El Paso colonial activity, the Guadalupe Manso, influenced by other natives and still embittered by the hanging of Manso rebel leaders in 1667, became increasingly resentful of colonial and church rule in their lives. Moreover, living in band rancherías without the indignity of having to engage in field labor contributed, in 1684, to renewed Manso schemes to kill all the colonists and Friars at El Paso. However, before they could organize their attack, Manso rebel leaders were apprehended by colonial authorities. As a result, many Mansos left the Mission to join unconverted Mansos living in the Mesilla Valley. After a colonial investigation of the rebellion, the Colonial Governor in El Paso executed the rebel leaders. While some Manso rebel families then returned to the Mission in the next couple of years and joined the few remaining Manso families, they no longer had homes near the Church.

With most Mansos gone from the Mission, colonial authorities "purchased" several Manso homes next to the Guadalupe Church in which to house the colonial government and officials. Spanish colonists also preempted abandoned Manso homes and fields. Thus, Mansos still at the Mission in the late 1600s resettled near their fields in Chamisal. By 1700 with probably no more than twenty families, these Mansos existed as an organized community with community leaders. Throughout the first half of the 1700s, the Guadalupe Manso community was referred to as *Pueblo de los Mansos* or as *Pueblo Arriba*, but the name masks population instability and decline. For example, in 1711 fearing that colonists and military were plotting to kill them, most Guadalupe Mansos once again left old El Paso,



Center of Town of Old El Paso with Mission Church 1854 Lithograph (New Mexico State University Library, Archives and Special Collections)

but negotiations with the Capitan of the Presidio encouraged the return of at least some of the Manso families to El Paso. By 1715, after three rebellions, how many people of Manso descent were left at the Mission is difficult to determine. Whatever the community's population, it had to be hundreds less than during the early years of conversion and settlement, and by the early 1740s there were only ten Manso families still supervised by the Mission.

Church records from 1748 show that the Manso community had collapsed as an organizational entity with the disappearance of community officials. This collapse preceded the demise of the Manso community's spatial organization by only three years. In 1751 the Provincial Governor ordered the colonial head of El Paso to provide land for farming and homes to remaining Guadalupe natives southeast of the Church. This land was to compensate for the loss of homes and fields that Mansos once possessed.

Whether or not the few remaining Guadalupe Manso families in Chamisal, moved to these lands, it is clear that the Manso community was no longer. Their small population further declined with epidemics in the late 1700s. The remaining Guadalupe Manso families were part of another Guadalupe Mission community that had coexisted with the Manso one for some fifty to sixty years. The Guadalupe Manso community had ex-

isted for almost a century. The other Guadalupe native community to which they now belonged would survive for over another century.

Guadalupe Piro Settlement and Organization

At the founding of the Guadalupe Mission, ten Tanoan-speaking Christian Piro families from the Pueblo of Senecu in central New Mexico came to old El Paso. They were directed by the Mission's founder, Fray Garcia de San Francisco, to assist in its establishment. Unlike the Manso, they were traditionally agricultural people living in settled villages and had been converted by the Franciscan missionaries for several decades before they came south to help the Friars.

Recognizing the cultural differences between Mansos and Piros, the Franciscans may have settled Piros separately from the Manso during the Mission's early years, but there is no indication of this in the early Mission records. Similarly, there is no documentation that Guadalupe Piros had their own separate set of community officials. The two native groups did not have similar ways of life nor speak similar languages. Consequently, it would seem that although they had no organized community recognized by Church authorities, the small number of Piros might have been informally separated from Mansos in terms of homes and fields.

The Guadalupe Piro population began to increase within a few years. In the 1660s and 1670s Piro



El Paso Valley Settlements , Early 1700s (Drawn by Terry Reynolds assisted by T. L. Corbett)



Abo Ruin

Pueblo from which refugees fled to Guadalupe Mission In the 1660s and 1670s (New Mexico State University Library, Archives and Special Collections)

and Tompiro Pueblos in New Mexico were raided by Apaches and ravaged by drought and disease. Some families escaped to the Guadalupe Mission. Moreover, there were several hundred Piros that came to El Paso with Spanish colonists after the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. Most refugee Piros were settled in two El Paso Valley communities, Senecu and Socorro, with their own churches. But some of the refugees may have been kinsmen of Guadalupe Piros and hence settled with them.

It is very possible that by the mid 1680s the Piros were numerous enough that the Friars decided to organize a separate Guadalupe Piro community. More probable in the establishment of this community was the fact that the area around the Mission was taken over by the colonial government. Resident Guadalupe natives such as the Piro would have been an impediment to colonial plans. Establishing Piros in their own community on the periphery of old El Paso would have been beneficial to colonial activities.

However it actually began, a Guadalupe Piro community was well established and organized by the early 1700s. Given that Guadalupe Piros had been converted for years and were village-dwelling farmers, the Friars and colonial authorities apparently felt little need to have them close-by the Mission. The Guadalupe Piros also had not participated to any significant degree in Manso Rebellions. Thus, they were settled some distance southeast of the Church in what was to become the old El Paso neighborhood of *Barrial*. Their community was referred to as *Pueblo de los Piros* or as *Pueblo Abajo*. Their homes were near or on the land they planted. Generally, this area of El Paso had sandy soil, which was less fertile than that in the river's floodplain, but decent crops would grow with the addition of water.

The Guadalupe Piros likely settled not far from the *Arroyo de los Indios*, which in the beginning would have provided occasional floodwater for their fields. Eventually, Mission natives, perhaps assisted by colonists, dug another irrigation canal, the *Acequia de los Indios del Pueblo*, which took water from the *Acequia Madre* at a point directly north of the Church and brought it southeast to Piro fields. Today, this canal parallels the railroad tracks running southeast through Juarez.

Traditional Pueblo village life, including some social divisions among people based on ritual knowledge, was vaguely similar to Spanish town and social organization. Pueblo relations were kin-based, but a town chief,

through his sacred and privileged knowledge of ritual and the natural world, was responsible, throughout his lifetime, for the well being of the entire community. Others in the community also held positions or belonged to groups, often with privileged sacred knowledge not available to everyone.⁶

Among northern Pueblos, the traditional town chief appointed men yearly to fill the community positions imposed by the Spanish colonial system. Colonial Church and civil authorities dealt with men in these positions and held them responsible for the community. In a sense, the Spanish colonial way of life was overlaid on a basic Pueblo pattern that, to some degree, could accommodate the colonial social divisions and leadership hierarchy. Under Spanish rule, Pueblo communities to a large degree kept their own traditional organization and functioning, although with some secrecy involved. Of course, spatial separation helped to maintain this secrecy. Colonists did not live within northern Pueblo towns *per se*, but were on their peripheries; consequently, they did not have access to all going on in the Pueblo towns. There is little reason to think that the Guadalupe Piro differed significantly in the Pueblo orientation from other Pueblo peoples. They probably maintained some of their traditional community organization and adapted an overlay of Spanish community organization.

The Guadalupe Piro population grew from the original ten families to at least thirty families in the early 1740s and was at least two-thirds larger than the Manso population. The larger population size made the Guadalupe Piro more viable than the Manso and better able to survive the epidemics of the 1700s.

Piro community organization existed separately from the Manso one for some fifty to sixty years. Each had its own settlement as well. But in the late 1740s, it is evident that the Manso organized community disappeared, and only the organized Piro endured. At the same time, there is only one set of officials—those of the Guadalupe Piro community—for both Pueblo Arriba and Pueblo Abajo. Both a town chief (*Casique*) and a governor maintained the Puebloan double-layered community organizational features.

This remaining community is the one to which the Provincial Governor in 1751 directs land to be given. The land is near where the Guadalupe Piros have been settled for some years. The colonial head of

El Paso was directed to prevent the alienation of this land in *Barrial* from the Guadalupe native community.

Another Century's Toll⁷

By 1800 the surviving Guadalupe native community in Barrial is composed of families descended from a wide variety of Puebloan and non-Puebloan nations as well as from Spanish colonists. Spanish is the language spoken among members of the community—a relatively small one, with only fifty to sixty families living side by side with descendants of Spanish colonists.

The 1800s are not kind to the Guadalupe native community. Their rights to communal land, to participate in Church festivities through street processions and dancing, to form their own military unit, to organize a communal hunt, to receive church and government economic assistance, to have a separate government and to hold council with other native El Paso Valley communities were gradually abolished by the liberalization of Mexican laws after Mexico's independence from Spain. By the last quarter of this century, these activities that bound people together, no longer supported the Guadalupe native community's functioning.

At the same time arable land in old El Paso became scarce. By the 1820s and 1830s there was little unclaimed land, and holdings were ever smaller through inheritance. Native families had more and more difficulty in maintaining their land holdings. Many native families depended to some degree on menial wage-labor jobs. Both Spanish and native descended families looked to migrate out of the El Paso Valley to places with unclaimed land. By the 1840s Guadalupe natives began to migrate family by family to various colonies being established in the Mesilla Valley. There they would be able to receive land for agricultural pursuits. The final dissolution of the Guadalupe native community came with the Mexican Revolution in the early years of the 1900s.

The story of these two native communities' rise and fall illustrates how differences and similarities in ways of life played a role in adaptation to Spanish colonial rule in old El Paso. Mansos struggled to leave the old ways and to adapt to new ones. Piro kept old ways and adopted a second tier of ways. Thus, a seemingly large Manso community disappears within a century and a seemingly small Piro community grows and survives for over two centuries. But a native community, based on Mission supervision in the beginning, cannot survive as Mexican

modernization and liberalism removed natives' distinctive status and protection. Guadalupe native descendants become part of the larger mestizo population in Juarez. The fabric of their indigenous community disintegrates and the community dies.



**Mission Church and Cathedral
Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe
Juarez, 1981
(Mary D. Taylor, photographer)**

(Endnotes)

- 1 This story is compiled from primary research I began in 1980 and presented in a 1981 public-accessible report I authored with Mary D. Taylor. It is housed in Archives and Special Collections Department, University Library, New Mexico State University. I also gave two papers, at the 1981 American Society for Ethnohistory Annual Meeting and at the 1985 Historical Society of New Mexico Annual Meeting based on this research. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance in document research by Mary D. Taylor and in genealogical research by Terry L. Corbett. I received valuable guidance in my research and analysis from William B. Griffin, Henry F. Dobyns, and Bud Newman. I, however, am responsible alone for the conclusions presented here.
- 2 Detailed accounts of the Mission's early history can be found in Anne E. Hughes, *The Beginning of Spanish Settlement in the El Paso District*, University of California Publications in History, 1914; Walter V. McLaughlin, Jr., *First Book of Baptisms of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe del Paso del Norte*, M.A. Thesis, El Paso, Texas Western College, 1962; and Vina Walz, *History of the El Paso Area, 1680-1692*, Doctoral Dissertation, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico, 1951.

- 3 For a short history of the Manso, see Patrick H. Beckett and Terry L. Corbett, *The Manso Indians*, Las Cruces, COAS Publishing, 1992.
- 4 William Griffin, *Indian Assimilation in the Franciscan Area of Nueva Vizcaya*, Tucson, University of Arizona Anthropological Paper No. 33, 1979.
- 5 All specific information about native officials, population and organization as well as colonial interaction with Guadalupe natives is derived from documents in the Juarez Cathedral Archives and in the Juarez Municipal Archives.
- 6 For a study of a surviving northern Pueblo with some similarities to Piro ones, see Elsie Clews Parsons, *Isleta*, New Mexico, Washington, D.C., 47th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution. 1932.
- 7 For information on the 1800s in El Paso and the Guadalupe community, see Charles H. Lange and Carroll L. Riley, *The Southwestern Journals of Adolph F. Bandelier, 1883-1884*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1970; Charles H. Lange and Carroll L. Riley, *The Southwestern Journals of Adolph F. Bandelier, 1885-1888*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1975; Frank Louis Halla, *El Paso Texas and Juarez Mexico: A Study of a BiEthnic Community 1846-1881*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1978.