

Mission Refugio Original Site Calhoun County, Texas

Context

When, at the close of the seventeenth century, the French and the Spaniards first attempted to occupy the Gulf coast near Matagorda Bay, that region was the home of a group of native tribes now called Karankawa. The principal tribes of the group were the Cujane, Karankawa, Guapite (or Coapite), Coco, and Copane. They were closely interrelated, and all apparently spoke dialects of the same language, which was different from that of their neighbors farther inland. The Karankawa dwelt most commonly along the coast to the east and the west of Matagorda Bay; the Coco on the mainland east of Matagorda Bay near the lower Colorado River; the Cujane and Guapite on either side of the bay, particularly to the west of it; and the Copane from the mouth of the Guadalupe River to around Copano Bay, to which the tribe has given its name¹. Their total number was estimated at from four to five hundred fighting men.¹

The Spanish Missions in Texas comprise a series of religious outposts established by Spanish Catholic Dominicans, Jesuits, and Franciscans to spread the Christian doctrine among the local Native Americans, but with the added benefit of giving Spain a toehold in the frontier land. The missions introduced European livestock, fruits, vegetables, and industry into the Texas region. In addition to the *presidio* (fort) and *pueblo* (town), the *misión* was one of the three major agencies employed by the Spanish crown to extend its borders and consolidate its colonial territories. In all, twenty-six missions were maintained for different lengths of time within the future boundaries of the state. The East Texas missions were a direct response to fear of French encroachment when the remains of La Salle's Fort Saint Louis were discovered near Matagorda Bay in 1689⁸.

The first attempt of the Spaniards to occupy the territory inhabited by the Karankawa was made in 1722, when the presidio La Bahia and mission Nuestra Señora del Espiritu Santo de Zuniga were established on the former site of La Salle's ill-fated settlement, who had been massacred at the hands of the Karankawa. Spanish dominion over that region was ever hampered by reason of the hostile and barbarous nature of these Indians². Like their French predecessors, the Spanish soon found the Karankawa Indians at this site too hostile and moved the mission and presidio inland first to Victoria on the Guadalupe River in 1726 to minister among the

Xaraname & Tamique, more civilized non-coastal tribes who were enemies of the Karankawa. The formation of the province of Nuevo Santander in 1749 led to a further removal of the mission Espiritu Santo and associated presidio La Bahia to the San Antonio River, near the present town of Goliad. Five years later a new mission called Nuestra Señora del Rosario was founded nearby for work among the coast tribes. The efforts of the priests met at first with some measure of success, but after a few years the mission was entirely abandoned by the neophytes by 1781. For eight years after that date the Indians refused to live at Rosario, until the persistent labors of Captain Manuel de Espadas of the presidio of Espiritu Santo bore fruit, and a number of them again took up their residence at the mission².

By 1790 Nuestra Señora del Rosario was formally re-established, and prospects were bright for further success. Eight Missions were then in existence: the five Missions of San Antonio, one in Nacogdoches, and Missions Espiritu Santo and Rosario in Goliad³. This re-founding of Rosario was the first step in a revival of missionary activity among the coast tribes, which was to have as its main objective the conversion of the Karankawa. Shortly after Rosario been placed back in operation, events unfolded which were to result in the founding of the last of the Texas missions during the Spanish regime, that of Nuestra Señora del Refugio or Our Lady of Refuge².

Overview

Father Manuel de Silva, in August, 1790, was elected Commissary and Prefect of the missions administered by the Zacatecan College, which was given exclusive control of the Texas mission field after 1767. Father Silva had worked for many years in the missions of New Spain, and was one of the most capable of the many sincere and zealous priests who endeavored to spread the doctrines of Christianity among the native tribes. Silva resolved after his election as Prefect to make the Texas mission field his first care. In November, 1790, he set out for Texas to investigate the general conditions of the missions there, and to make plans for their improvement and extension. He was accompanied by Father Joseph Francisco Mariano Garza, a priest who had spent many years in missionary work in the Texas field².

The two priests arrived at San Antonio in January, 1791, and at once began their survey. They found practically all of the missions in the province in a deplorable state and learned of the repeated murders,

robberies, and other atrocities that were being committed by the Karankawa and other tribes along the coast of Matagorda Bay. Although a few of these natives had been induced to live in the missions of Rosario and Espiritu Santo during the previous year, most of them remained uncompromisingly hostile².

In the 1790's, two primary Karankawa chiefs ruled over the Coastal Bend of Texas: Chief Llano Grande (Big Plain) of the Copane tribe controlled the Copano Bay⁵, lower Guadalupe River and San Antonio Bay region, often camping near the junction of the San Antonio & Guadalupe Rivers and along the Guadalupe Bay shoreline; Chief Fresada Pinta (Painted Blanket) controlled the western Matagorda Bay & Lavaca Bay region, often camping along their shorelines and along the lower Garcitas and Lavaca Rivers that flow into those bays⁴.

Knowing of the long-failed efforts of the royal government to pacify the coast region, Father Silva believed that he could not find a more worthy task than the conversion of the unruly Karankawa and resolved to give them preferential attention².

Preparations were soon completed by Father Silva for a personal inspection of the coast region. From San Antonio, still accompanied by Father Garza, he made the journey to the presidio of Espiritu Santo in Goliad. They first sent some of the converted Indians already living at the newly restored mission of Rosario as emissaries to petition on the behalf of the Padres among their heathen kinsmen and assure them that the Spaniards wished to be friends and within a few days the Indians began to visit the presidio. In return for the hospitality they were shown, they invited the priests to return with them to their own camps, promising to honor the truce that had been established. One of these was Chief Fresada Pinta himself, who appeared at Rosario on the last day of March, 1791. Father Silva accepted the invitation, and on April 10, he and Father Garza accompanied by two Christian Indians of Rosario, Sergeant Trevino and his troops, and a company of 24 Karankawa braves who were assigned by Chief Fresada Pinta to protect the Padres from a hostile neighboring tribe during the journey into the very heart of Karankawa country along Matagorda Bay. On the third day of travel, they reached Fresada Pinta's camp on the Lavaca River and remained there for two days. They then traveled 5 days to the southwest to visit the Copane Karankawa tribe on Copano Bay, as its now named in their honor. At the Copane camp, were several fugitives from Rosario².

The Padres returned to Rosario where Father Silva was surprised by orders to return to Zacatecas. He left Father Garza in charge on April 29, 1791, with orders to continue the work with the coastal Indians. Father Garza soon returned to the Copane encampment to try to induce some to return to Rosario, however, he was told by Chief Llano Grande:

*"Father, do not think that we do not want to go to a mission... let Spaniards come to live in our land and be sure that we will receive them as friends. But we do not want to leave our land. If you would put a mission for us here on the coast, we will gather in it all the Christian [apostates] and we will bring with us all the infidels from this coast from the mouth of the Nueces to the Colorado River."*⁷

Father Garza then asked them which place along the coast would suit them best to congregate in a mission. The Indians all replied that the mission should be put at the mouth of the Guadalupe River, in the heart of Karankawa country and further assured the Padre:

*"Father, if you put the mission there for us, then you can say that the whole coast is yours. Go and see if it pleases you, so that you may put a mission there for us, and send us word when we may gather there."*²

Father Garza was elated with the success of the expedition and with the idea of a new mission for the Karankawa as was Father Silva when he heard the news. Soon, Father Garza made plans to visit the site, which had been terra incognita to the Spanish in the heart of the Karankawa stronghold, when Fresada Pinta requested that he visit his people along Matagorda Bay. On June 17, 1791, Father Garza at last visited the mouth of the Guadalupe and along the edges of the lagoons, and up the Guadalupe River to its junction with the San Antonio River. While the Father was waiting on permission to install the new mission, the Karankawa Indians began pleading for the new mission and over 280 of them from the camps of Llano Grande & Fresada Pinta began gathering at a place called the Muelle Viejo (Old Wharf), believed to be just south of the confluence of the San Antonio & Guadalupe Rivers, with the expectation that it would soon be built. On a second trip in late October, 1791, he returned and carefully inspected the site at the mouth of the Guadalupe River on the Laguna de Agua Dulce (Mission Bay & Guadalupe Bay now) chosen by the Indians, which was an islet formed by the mouths of the Guadalupe River. This was a favorite camp of the Karankawas and was a place of protection or refuge when they were too closely pressed by their enemies. The site was already known as El Paraje del

Refugio (The Place of Refuge) and inspired by this, Father Silva gave the future mission the title of Nuestra Señora del Refugio (Our Lady of Refuge).

Several of the higher clergy & civil officers urged Silva in the beginning to establish his mission farther west, even as far west as the Nueces River, but the old padre was adamant to build the mission in the heart of the real Karankawa country. It is not clear whether or not the mission was originally actually built on the delta or *El Paraje del Refugio*; but, regardless, it was immediately apparent that the place was totally unsuitable, being low and swampy and a breeding place of mosquitoes. It is possible that an attempt was made to begin the buildings there, but if so, the idea was almost immediately abandoned, as on **February 4, 1793**, the mission was formally dedicated at a point on a high bluff on the north side of the Laguna de Agua Dulce and overlooking the mouth of the Guadalupe River, in Calhoun County. Governor Muñoz came down from Bexar to participate in the ceremonies and see that construction work was gotten under way. He described the terrain around the mission site⁵:

On the 3rd, they used their canoes to bring across the troops and their equipment to the north side of the lagoon. This area sheds rain water to the said [Guadalupe] River, and its currents restrain the waters of the sea, but I found the water to be brackish when the wind blew from the south. Together with Fr. José Garza and four soldiers, I was taken [in a canoe] from the confluence of the Rivers to where it empties in the said lagoon. In its course I noted that River's waters divide into two branches, almost equal, one of which turns north and the other to the south.

From this [last] branch a small stream branches to the right but at a short distance rejoins it. The two others flow for about a half a league and then divide into four branches with an equal number of outlets that empty in the south side of the said lagoon. And on the opposite [side], to the north, on the rim of a plain that forms its margins, [the Indians] pointed out the place for the mission they had requested.

Unfortunately, no map was made of the location of this first site of Mission Refugio⁵. However, Stephen F. Austin explored the area in 1821, visited the old mission site, and placed it just northwest of Seadrift on Guadalupe Bayou on his map of the venture. Another document states the mission was located near the desembochadura (mouth) of the San Antonio (Guadalupe) River, closely matching Austin's map. Likely the mission is either across from the current Lower Guadalupe mouth near Sonneman Road or perhaps near the mouth of what is known as Big Bayou, an abandoned channel of the Guadalupe that looks like the channel shown on Austin's map and continues south from where it joins the modern river and splits into four channels as in Gov. Muñoz's description above. The current channels that turn north never split into four

channels. This Big Bayou channel is shown to be abandoned by the river by 1863 (70 years later) on coastal charts, but river channels can shift very quickly through avulsion. The Upper Guadalupe mouth shown to be active in the past as late as 1953 is now similarly abandoned. If the Big Bayou channel is the one described the mission would be located across from its mouth a little further south on the edge of the bluff somewhere just south of Louis Walker Road. This appears to be the best fit with the above descriptions and the Austin map. As a part of the ceremonies, the Governor invested the mission and its inhabitants with the right to use and receive income from a vast area of land. Some of the lands were located north of the Guadalupe, but most of the assigned lands lay south of that river and extended to the Nueces River. Among the ranches located on the mission lands were the *Rancho de Refugio*, with headquarters near Green Lake; the *Rancho de los Mosquitos*, with headquarters at or near Mesquite Landing, below the juncture of the Guadalupe and San Antonio Rivers (the ranch being on the south side of the river); the *Rancho de Santa Gertrudis*, with headquarters at or near the present town of Refugio; *El Rancho de el Diesmera* (ranch of the tithesman), the headquarters of which were near Copano Bay (probably at Hynes Spring); and a rancho on the Nueces River⁵. At the end of its first year, the mission in modern Calhoun County consisted of only six small wooden buildings (jacales) with tule roofs, a corral for the cattle, a large frame shed, and a surrounding stockade⁶, protected by a small but permanent garrison of soldiers.

While theoretically the new mission got off to a good start with 138 neophytes in 1793, realistically it was a failure from the beginning. The neophytes were not over-willing, and those who remained out of the mission, particularly the tribe of Fresada Pinta, were antagonistic and often hostile and dangerous. The Indians shrewdly perceived that it was the policy of someone, the priests or the government, to feed and clothe them in order to keep them peaceful and the Indians had no scruples at taking advantage when it suited them. When the mission was well stocked with food, sweets, and clothing, they remained but when supplies got low they left for their old lifestyle and would not return until assured that the supplies had been replenished⁵. Although the Karankawas numbered over 1500 in the latter part of the eighteenth century, there were hardly ever more than 150 of them in the mission at any time and usually less. The record reveals that many thousands of *pesos*, besides individual donations, were lavished by the government upon the mission and goods for its neophytes⁵.

The Mission of Refugio remained at its location at Cayo del Refugio until April, 1794. During that month Chief Fresada Pinto and his followers raided and virtually wrecked the establishment. They then went to the *Rancho de Refugio* near Green Lake and damaged it as well; stealing, killing and driving away cattle, and wreaking havoc. Father Silva was in Mexico and Fathers Texada and Pirellos were in charge. Without consulting any authority, they moved for safety reasons, the mission, its buildings and physical properties, to the *Rancho de los Mosquitoes*, on the southwest side of the Guadalupe River in what is now Refugio County⁵.

The building site selected by them was at the juncture of Mosquito Creek with the Guadalupe. This creek almost parallels the course of the river, the juncture being just above the famed Mesquite Landing. After this, the mission may have been moved to El Copano, near Mission Lake, in Refugio County⁵. Finally, possibly in January, 1795, or within a few years of it, it was moved further up the Mission River to the current townsite of Refugio, which is named for the mission. The mission was in use until 1830 when it was secularized and abandoned⁵.

Significance

Mission Refugio marks the end of an era: the last Spanish mission built in Texas. If only in name, the mission still lives on in the names given the geographic features around its former locations: Mission Bay in Calhoun County from its first site and Mission Bay, Mission Lake, Mission River, and the town & county of Refugio in that county from the subsequent sites.

Documentation

¹Bolton, Herbert E.. *Texas In the Middle Eighteenth Century*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1915).

² Dunn William E.. "The Founding of Nuestra Señora del Refugio, the Last Spanish Mission in Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 25 (January 1922).

³ Oberste, William H.. *History of Refugio Mission* (Refugio, Texas: Refugio Timely Remarks, 1942).

⁴Shook, Robert W.. *Caminos Y Entradas; Spanish Legacy of Victoria County and the Coastal Bend 1689-1890*. (Victoria, Texas: Victoria County Heritage, 2007).

⁵Huson, Hobart. *Refugio, A Comprehensive History of Refugio County from Aboriginal Times to 1953. Volume 1, Aboriginal to 1861*. (Woodsboro, Texas: The Rooke Foundation, 1953).

⁶Benowitz, June Melby. "NUESTRA SEÑORA DEL REFUGIO MISSION," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/uqn18>), accessed November 11, 2014. Uploaded on June 15, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

- ⁷Tennis, Cynthia L. *Archaeological investigations at the Last Spanish Colonial Mission Established on the Texas Frontier: Nuestra Señora del Refugio (41RF1), Refugio County, Texas*. (Center for Archaeological Research, The university of Texas at San Antonio, 2002).
- 8 Wikipedia. **Spanish missions in Texas**. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_missions_in_Texas). Accessed Nov. 11, 2014.