

A LINE IN THE SAND: RELIGIOSITY, BELIEF SYSTEMS, AND THE RISE OF FOLK SAINTS ALONG THE US AND MEXICO BORDER

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“[The] U.S.-Mexican Border is dotted with miracle-working sites, all of them in what were, at the time their devotions originated, tiny outpost communities” (Vanderwood 2004:76). This paper will discuss the historic development of a pantheon of popular, uncanonized folk saints and their shrines located on both side of the Mexico and U.S. international border. It will also address the issue of the function of the shrines as an example of the history and cultural development unique to the border region.

Established in 1848 by the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the U.S./Mexico Border (or “The Line,” as the US Border Patrol refers to it), is quite literally a physical place scratched into the earth (Figure 1). It is marked by one or two well-traveled patrol roads on both sides of the political boundary that is generally marked by cement and brass-capped monuments about every 1.5 km (Caffey et al. 2004:317-318). Fence segments along the border range in types from steel grates recycled from U.S. military ships, erected by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and designed to keep people and cars out, to wooden or metal t-posts and barbed wire to keep cattle from roaming across.

Also found along the border are remnants of customs houses, dating from before the end of the nineteenth century. These include the adobe building located south of the current metal fence southeast of Camp Lockett in Campo, California; ornate but very official customs houses, such as the one located in Calexico, California and listed on the National Register of Historic Places; and ports of entry that vary in size and design, within historic border communities such as El Paso, Nogales, Tecate, Calexico/Mexicali, and San Diego/Tijuana.

Soon after the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, small communities were established along the border to support economic trade between the two countries. The first official U.S. government border workers were employed by the U.S. Treasury to collect customs taxes from Mexican ranchers who were seeking to drive cattle and horses north to the U.S. markets, for example. During times of perceived lawlessness or threat from events occurring in Mexico, like revolts or the 1910 revolution, the U.S. would send military troops (like the famed Buffalo Soldiers, who were stationed in Campo at the beginning of World War II to patrol the border) until the threat was ended. However, it was a series of U.S. congressional acts starting in the 1880s to control immigration and to exclude certain classes of immigrants, the prohibition of alcohol in the U.S., and the U.S. economic depression of the 1930s that were the largest boosters for the growth of communities along both sides of the U.S./ Mexico border.

Illegal Immigration, Prohibition, and the U.S. Depression

Beginning in 1882, the U.S. passed a series of regulations and laws designed specifically to “exert control over immigrants at its gates and within its borders, thereby setting standards, by race, class and gender, for who was to be welcomed into the country” (Lee 2003:6). Though these new policies affected several immigrant classes, many of the legal acts were enacted specifically invoked to exclude the Chinese and other Asians, such as east Indians.

While the U.S. was trying to control who crossed into the north, Americans were going south to take advantage of the growing entertainment facilities like European-style hotels, casinos, and race tracks that catered to European and American tastes in border towns. By the early 1920s, the reform movement in the U.S. was pushing toward temperance and the illegalization of alcohol. This brought an economic boom to many border communities that became destination locations for Americans who wanted to imbibe alcohol or purchase alcohol and then smuggle it back across the border. This tourism also became a

Figure 1: The international border between Imperial Valley (upper right) and Mexicali Valley (lower left). U.S. Geological Survey aerial photograph.



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source of business for Chinese merchants and employment for Mexican workers in the hotels and casinos (Vanderwood 2004:92). Moreover, established smuggling operations added alcohol to their inventory, spawning the term “wetback” to describe human mules who smuggled alcohol in containers located on their backs.

The “Great Depression” began in the U.S. in the late 1920s and lasted until the start of World War II in 1940. This had an effect on Mexican nationals living in the U.S. because they were viewed as competition for scarce jobs; thus they were rounded up and deported out of the U.S. in large numbers (Vanderwood 2004:143). Finally, in the late 1970s foreign investors began constructing small assembly plants known as *maquiladoras* in Mexican border areas. These plants succeeded in attracting potential workers, particularly women, to the border region in large numbers and increased the economies of border communities (Quinones 2001:139).

LOCALLY CANONIZED PATRON SAINTS AND THEIR SHRINES

The form of Catholicism that developed in Mexico is different from its counterparts in other parts of the world due to a strong devotion to the Virgin Mary or the Virgin of Guadalupe (otherwise known as the *Virgen de Guadalupe* or *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*). This devotion is due to the belief that the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to a young Indian named Juan Diego (who has been recently canonized) in 1531 on a hill just outside of Mexico City. Another aspect of Mexican Catholicism is the habit of adopting and transforming Catholic symbols by indigenous peoples. Conversion of the native peoples to Christianity was a tactic used by the Spanish. Many of the indigenous groups retained portions of their traditional culture and belief systems, but often disguised this from imposing missionaries by selectively adopting Christian symbols or beliefs that mirrored their own (Griffith 2003:8).

Folk saints or *ánimas* (spirits) are individuals who, while alive, exhibited special abilities, such as curing the sick using methods that are believed to have been communicated to them by some spirit of God. Or, in other cases, the individuals are believed to have done great deeds while they lived, and or were wrongly put to death, thus reaching a martyred status (Griffith 2003:7; Vanderwood 2004:76). Vanderwood (2004:76) has coined the phrase “popular canonization” to describe the process by which these individuals reach an almost mythical status. Folk saints are common in the U.S./Mexico border region (Figure 2). There appears to be no one way to be “popularly canonized,” as will be noted below. Yet key to all of them is the belief that, because they are of the border, these saints or individuals will aid people in need because they understand the issues that the people face living within the border region.

Curanderismo and Curanderos

According to Griffith (2003:122), *curanderismo*, or the ability to cure, is extremely important all over Mexico as well as on the border. Probably the best known of the *curanderos* along the U.S./Mexico Border were Teresita, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, and El Niño Fidencio. The



Figure 2: Map showing the locations of the various saint's shrines. From Vanderwood 2003:320.

stories of Teresita, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, and El Niño Fidencio are very similar. Don Pedrito was born in 1829, Teresita was born in the 1870s, while El Niño was born around the late 1890s. All three claimed that divine providence, through visions or dreams, directed them to heal and counsel the sick. Teresita died in exile in Clifton, Arizona. Don Pedrito, born in Mexico, eventually set up his free practice in southern Texas and remained in the area until he died in 1907. El Niño was based out of a hacienda at Espinoza, Nuevo León. He conducted healings while at Espinoza and traveled the countryside holding large public meetings that were often attended by thousands. El Niño died in 1938 at just 40 years old.

There is a small shrine dedicated to Teresita, created in natural cave or *nicho*, located outside of Clifton. This shrine is believed to have been at that this location since the 1950s (Griffith 2003:63). There is also a small chapel dedicated to her that was built by a man who claimed that his prayers to her resulted in his being cured of valley fever (Griffith 2003:63).

The shrine for Don Pedrito is located in Falfurrias, Texas. This shrine consists of a small brick building that contains benches, a small altar with a cross and images of the Virgin and Christ, and Don Pedrito's grave and headstone (Griffith 2003:119).

El Niño's life and death inspired the creation of a movement known as *Fidencismo*, which has been “established as a separate religion and is officially registered as such in Mexico” (Griffith 2003:139). According to Griffith (2003:139), who visited Espinoza during a festival in March 2002, there were a variety of monuments at this location extolling El Niño, including a chapel, a column painted lavender and topped with a bust of El Niño, and *nichos*, some dedicated to El Niño and to conventional saints like Guadalupe, along a road leading to Espinoza. The latter *nichos* bear dedicatory plaques from a specific mission or deed undertaken by a believer in El Niño (Griffith 2003:140).

Heroes and Martyrs

This class of patron saints embodies both martyrs and very colorful and vivacious characters akin to movie stars, including Jesús Malverde and Juan Soldado. The latter's name was Juan Castillo Morales, and he is often referred to, in his saint statues, as Juan

Soldado or Soldier Juan (Figures 3 A and B). Vanderwood (2004) outlines the story and the conversion of Juan Castillo Morales into a saint in great detail. The main points are that in 1938 Juan Castillo Morales was a Mexican soldier who was accused of raping and mutilating an 8-year-old girl named Olga Camacho. A riot ensued in Tijuana, and the Mexican government opted to punish him by performing a method of public execution called *ley fuga*. This means that the accused is placed in front of a firing squad, than allowed to run for his life. If he lived it was God's will. Castillo Morales was executed and buried in the Tijuana cemetery Panteón 1, located just south of the U.S. Border.

According to Vanderwood (2004:173), the public execution was witnessed by many Tijuaneños who, following the event, debated the merits of the claim of guilt. This soon created an "atmosphere of uncertainty and conjecture" surrounding the event which helped to foster a devotion to Juan Soldado. Soon Juan Soldado was considered a wronged victim of authority and thus a special case in the eyes of God.

This is a sentiment that also describes the devotion to Jesús Malverde. In short, Malverde is believed to have been a bandit who would take from the rich to help those in need. Some think that he was a single person, while others believe that he is a composite of three individuals. Either way, it was believed that Malverde was caught by the authorities after being wounded while trying to help a friend. His was hung from a local tree, where his body was left for several days (Griffith 2003:67; Quinones 2001:227). He was buried in the town of Culiacán, in the state of Sinaloa, which is known as the center of poppy and marijuana production and for its smugglers. His legend grew, and eventually the press named him the *Narcosaint* and spawned a series of popular *corridos* – epic stories or poems of bravery and violence set to music. One of the earliest practitioners of Malverdesque *corridos* was Chalino Sánchez, who helped to usher in a new form called the *narcocorrido*, which is the Mexican equivalent of gangster rap and focused on the exploits of drug smugglers (Quinones 2001:12). Soon a popular underground culture emerged, complete with its own distinct fashion line that included cowboy boots, belt buckles, wide belts, images of Malverde worn as medallions, scapulars, hats, scarves, etc.

One of the main chapels or shrines dedicated to Malverde is located in Culiacán. It was built in the 1990s as part of a *monda* or promise in return for a favor asked of the saint (Griffith 2003:81) (Figure 4 A). There are also numerous shrines and *nichos* located along the main roads in Sonora (Griffin 2003:81). Juan Soldado has two shrines or chapels dedicated to him at the cemetery where he is buried. The first is located where he is believed to be buried (Figure 4B); the second was erected at the location where his body fell after being shot.

Immigrant Shrines

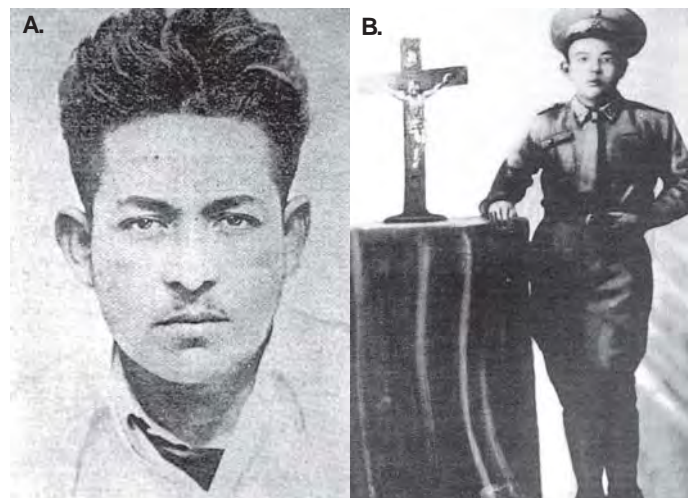
Opportunistic shrines, generally located along known smuggling routes, are found on both side of the U.S./Mexico border. To date, six of these shrines have been discovered between Yuma,

Arizona, and Thing Mountain, California. The majority of the shrines are erected in natural *nichos* or in *nichos* created using local stone (Figure 4C). Most have a series of personal items like money, photos, jewelry, rosaries, images of patron saints, and other offerings. Two of the shrines contained images of Juan Soldado (note the small figure below and to the left of the Virgin in the Thing Mountain shrine in Figure 4D), which were probably purchased from the cart selling his images outside of the cemetery in Tijuana. The age of these shrines is difficult to gauge. However, according to a Richard Gordon (personal communication 2004), a second-generation U.S. Border Patrol agent, his father photographed the Thing Mountain shrine in the early 1970s, and when Gordon compared the modern and old photos of the shrines, there had been little change to it in over 30 years. Though more study is needed, it is likely that these shrines are located along the whole length of the border and that some of these immigrant-related shrines are well over 50 years old.

The U.S. Border Patrol agents who come across these shrines generally believe that they are being erected for those who die in the area. However, Richard Gordon (personal communication 2004) related a story about a group of undocumented people who were detained by the Border Patrol agents after leaving offerings at the Thing Mountain shrine. They became agitated when the one of the agents began to walk back to the shrine. Apparently they believed that he was going to disturb it in some manner. This suggests that the shrine on Thing Mountain may have more meaning than just a place to honor the dead. In fact, it may be less about the dead and more about protection while entering the U.S. illegally.

The history of the border and the cultural systems related to it was created through a mix of changing international economics and politics. The folk saints and the shrines on both side of the border are a special, fragile aspect of the overall history and archaeology of this unique region.

Figure 3: (A) Juan Castillo Morales in 1938. From Vanderwood 2003:37; (B) Image of Juan Castillo Morales as the saint, Juan Soldado. From Vanderwood 2003:37.





A.

Figure 5: Modern border shrines.

*A - Jesús Malverde's shrine.
From Quinones 2001.*



B.

B - Interior of Juan Soldado's shrine in Tijuana. Photo by the author.

C - Shrine in the Jacumba Wilderness, Imperial County. Photo courtesy of Jason Caffey.

D - Shrine on Thing Mountain, San Diego County. Photo courtesy of Richard Gordon.



C.



D.

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