



The Borderlands Photographer

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The Other Missions

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Tsunamis are not too common in Tubac, and neither, thank goodness, are earthquakes. The latter are truly at fault for having a nasty habit of bringing the future of brick and mortar structures to a grinding halt.

Neglect and abandonment have done their gradual damage to the Spanish missionary structures of Eusebio Kino's

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Mission La Purisima Concepción, in a blissful rural setting near Lompoc, was entirely rebuilt by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Since then, enough time has passed to add the charm of age.

Sonoran Desert, but the California missions of Junipero Serra came to a more sudden conclusion. And more than once, at that.

Throughout the centuries of their existence, many of the missions of California Alta have tumbled to dust and were repeatedly repaired, strengthened, or replaced. The continual resources devoted to salvaging these structures attest to their value as part of our heritage. Today, the Catholic Church owns nineteen California missions, and the state of California owns two. Responsibility for upkeep is more complicated.

Since heritage photography is that thing I do, the California missions draw my attention, along with those in southern Arizona. A heritage photographer worth his salt doesn't stop at the skin-deep beauty of the structures, but will delve into the past to understand their provenance.

Coincidentally, now, the April 2012 issue of "Noticias de Anza", the bulletin of the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, features the "parallel lives" of the two men behind the missions.

Reaching from today's Mexico into the entire southern part of today's United States, the Viceroyalty of New Spain wanted assimilation: command and control of its new territories, and along with the military, missionaries such as Kino and Serra entered this grand stage as a fundamental part of that effort. Their goal was of course to convert zealously the locals to Christianity.

The two chains of self-sustaining mission villages created first by Kino, then Serra, are the focus of my attention. A few comparative facts of these missionaries are offered as follows:



Mission San Juan Capistrano. Between Long Beach and San Diego, the still-standing chapel of this mission is the only extant building in which Serra said Mass. From time to time today, swallows call this place home.

Father Eusebio Francisco Kino	~	Father Junipero Serra
Pimeria Alta (Sonora/Arizona)	~	Alta California
lived 1645-1711	~	lived 1713-1784
Jesuit order	~	Franciscan order
died age 66	~	died age 71
buried at Magdalena, Sonora	~	buried at Carmel, Ca.
indomitable energy	~	indomitable energy

Even though they lived at different times, as the “Noticias de Anza” informs, the lives of these two great men intersected, in a way, at Tucson’s Mission San Xavier del Bac. It was Kino, a Jesuit, who initiated the first missionary activities there, but it was Franciscans later who oversaw the final construction of the main structure we enjoy today.

By policy, California’s missions were built close to the mighty Pacific ocean. Just imagine that magnificent country in the pristine splendor of those times!

But this was also earthquake country. The inevitable damage or destruction of the California missions by earthquakes spared the two examples extant here in southern Arizona. This benefits current pilgrims in the sense that our structures, not having been rebuilt, may be somewhat more original. Even so, the current, local Tumacácori structure is a second rendition of that mission, having been moved from the east side of the Santa Cruz River and itself having fallen into severe disrepair from neglect.

In southern Arizona there are, as far as I can tell, three other mission structures with bits and pieces still above ground, but their remains can’t approach the photogenic charm of Tumacácori or the magnificence of San Xavier. It’s hard to go wrong photographing these precious relics of our heritage. Photographer Ansel Adams, my “mentor,” famously captured San Xavier’s exterior on film from the 1940s through the 1960s. For exterior pictures of the White Dove of the Desert, (not to mention most landscapes in the



Mission Santa Barbara. This structure, the first built after the death of Father Serra, is graced by the Mediterranean climate of California's central coast. As are we all.

great American West), you can probably start and stop with Ansel.

But, if you insist on making your own pictures, the Spanish missions of either Arizona or California offer a perfect destination for travel and heritage photography. A trip for a week or two visiting most of the California missions is a dandy notion. Only a few no longer exist. When photographing them, a few hints: use a tripod indoors without flash, since flash is no good due to "hot spots." Any tourists in the way will probably blur out due to the time exposure. For outdoors, move backward and take maximum advantage of the (sometimes rural) settings of these precious structures. Plan your day for just the right angle of sunlight.

As part of their reward, Father Kino is now approaching beatification in the Roman Catholic Church, and Friar Serra is headed toward sainthood. You, the borderlands photographer, may or may not be saintly, but immersing yourself thoroughly in the sepia-toned history of Old California and Old Arizona is itself a very fine reward.

