

The Lost Mission of El Polvo: Searching for the History of a State Archeological Landmark

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Spanish Captain Commander Joseph de Ydoiaga and his men stood on the southwestern bank of the Rio del Norte on November 30, 1747, looking across the river to the ruins of the abandoned Indian pueblo of Tapacolmes. They saw the adobe walls of a Spanish church or chapel in the pueblo deserted by its Native-American inhabitants who feared encroaching Apaches. By 1870, Tapacolmes had transformed into the Mexican-American settlement of El Polvo, Texas. During the mid-1950s the last remnants of the old Spanish mission walls were leveled by county officials. Part of the old settlement of El Polvo was incorporated by the town of Redford, Texas, and has been designated as a State Archeological Landmark. This paper documents and identifies the mission location through the use of oral history interviews and archival research.

Introduction

The Polvo site (41PS21) is part of the old Mexican-American settlement of El Polvo on the Rio Grande in Presidio County near Redford, Texas. It is the site of the Historic period Indian pueblo of Tapacolmes and contains both historic and prehistoric cultural deposits. It is one of numerous pueblos founded by Spanish explorers, missionaries, and settlers in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries at the junction of the Río Conchos and the Rio Grande, a region known as La Junta de los Ríos in far West Texas. Part of the La Junta Archeological District of West Texas, the Polvo site was listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) on March 25, 1976, and designated a State Archeological Landmark (SAL) on November 7, 1983 (Cloud et al. 1994:xi, 1).

Archeological excavations at the Polvo Site are reported in three sources: "Archeological Notes on Two Excavated House Structures in Western Texas," by J. Charles Kelley (1949); "Excavations at the Polvo Site in Western Texas," by W. J. Shackelford (1951); and *Archeological Testing at the Polvo Site, Presidio County, Texas*, by William A. Cloud et al. (1994). These treatises

detail La Junta phase pithouse village cultures and Native-American occupation into the Historic period.

Tools for the Researcher

Investigating the history of such sites as El Polvo or areas such as La Junta de Los Ríos requires the use of certain tools. These tools include a knowledge of the language, historical research and oral histories, an intimate knowledge of the people and their local customs and beliefs, and first-hand knowledge of the environment. Help in formulating ideas and theories can come from many sources such as books on religion, philosophy, aesthetics and art history. Intuition and creativity, as well as common sense, also assist the researcher. A judicious knowledge of local politics and the international realities of life along the Mexican border are also of significance.

These alternate tools are not foreign to archeologists, however. Robert Redfield writes, "It is fortunate. . . that these two sources of information, the archeological and the ethnological, supplement each other" (Redfield 1968:3). Lewis R. Binford (1983:26) writes:

These, then, are three important areas—the study of contemporary peoples, the creation of experimental situations where we can control causes in order to study effects, and the use of historical documents of various sorts—which contemporary archeology has only just begun to develop to any significant degree.

Colin Renfrew (1974:254) writes:

It is for this reason that non-industrial societies are now of such relevance. Not that any individual society today can really serve as a suitable model for a given prehistoric society, but rather that the more general *processes* at work today in these small, living societies may serve as viable models for such processes in the past.

While contemporary La Junta society no longer can be termed "primitive," but rather, "rural and non-industrial," it shares many characteristics that provide linkages to prehistoric and historic cultures. These include the smallness of the community, its isolation, its state of literacy, its thoughts and beliefs, and its recent

cultural transition. These traits may still reflect in great part the culture of early groups who lived at La Junta (Redfield 1968:2–3).

Edward P. Dozier (1977:202–205) gives parameters within which to analyze past societies from the present:

- inferences are more reliable, the shorter the time gap between a prehistoric and a living site;
- levels of living and prehistoric groups must be matched, bands with bands, clans with clans, etc.;
- groups being compared must have the same type of subsistence economies;
- societies must be close in *space* as well as *time*;
- languages of groups compared have low priority;
- the conservatism of the living group must be understood, i.e., its rate of and acceptance of change.

Ignacio Bernal (1973:6) warns of making inferences from modern rural to prehistoric aristocratic cultures in Mesoamerica. Mircea Eliade (1978:8 ff) points out that a methodology that omits an analysis of beliefs and ideas of prehistoric groups is dangerous as they are then seen to be simple preservers and transmitters of technology. Religious ideas may be indirectly explained through the use of analogies from modern groups.

The most useful research tool, however, is found in adopting the hypothesis of a non-genetic cultural transmitter known as a "meme, a unit of cultural inheritance." Memes are transmitted among communicating beings and their effects manifest in works, music, images, gestures, behaviors, skills, ideas, etc. (Dawkins 1989:109, 290). For example, at El Polvo and La Junta, the good and *memorable* ideas of planting certain varieties of white corn for tortillas or a *cuaresmera*, a thick-skinned pumpkin that will keep many months until used in Lenten feasts, are ideas or memes that may date from prehistory. Transmitted from person to person, from farmer who plants to mother who cooks to child who eats and grows to become a farmer, these cultural inheritance units may be tracked by ethnologists in the social conduct, by historians in the written record, and by archeologists in the material remains (see Dennett 1995:342–345, especially Chapter 12).

The historical processes at La Junta of *mestizaje* and acculturation among Spanish soldiers, citizens, and Native Americans that gave rise to the present-day mestizo culture (Jones 1991:53–54, 57–58) make it an excellent medium in which to search for the presence of such memes. Identifying and retrieving these units will permit powerful glimpses into past cultural processes, the remnants of which still reside in the consciousness of the people there.

Preserving and Studying the Polvo Site

All of the above ideas, attitudes, skills, and tools have been employed in my research and preservation work. Studying, locating, and identifying a Spanish mission on the Polvo site began with interviews, taking oral histories, and conducting research. Work began with local landowners in the late 1970s and with State Representative Mary Polk to protect the archeological site through an SAL designation. After dealing with as many as 32 heirs to the land, legal protection for the site was achieved in 1983.

My family has lived in the El Polvo-Redford area since the early 1870s (Elam 1993:79 ff). I grew up hearing stories of Indian villages and Spanish missions, of ghostly apparitions of women in white and spotted cows, of rattling chains, and balls of fire—all indications of fabulous Spanish treasures, and all phenomena associated with the old town of El Polvo.

The landowners and old-time residents also told of the existence of the mission ruin on the site. The last crumbling walls had been leveled by county officials at the landowner's request about 1956. At that time, many manos and metates were recovered from the site. Three Redford residents still remembered the building at various stages of disrepair throughout their lives in Redford. Their combined memories of the architectural details of the building were put into a conceptualized drawing of the mission's interior and exterior. To the best of their memories, all agreed on the final drawing. An architect finalized and completed a building schematic to approximate scale. One informant had played within the ruins as a young boy and remembered clearly the existence of two adobe altars at the rear of the main chapel and he recalled jumping from one to the other.

These first informants spoke of a large adobe building approximately 4.6 m high consisting of a main chapel section 6 m wide, and a smaller room, a sacristy, 4.3 m wide. The building was 15 m long and with a large double door entrance to the main chapel. The two large interior altars were separated and constructed of adobe—each being about 2.0 m long. Other details such as roof beams, wall plaster, cottonwood rain gutters, window and door dimensions and placement were still clear in their memories. Some remembered the building completely intact, others with portions of the roof collapsed (Madrid 1993:19 ff). One informant remembered the exact location which now has been recorded and confirmed by archeologists. A fourth informant remembered the site atop the river terrace as the location of his baptism though he recalled only a mound of rubble (Madrid 1984:241).

The existence of the double altars was problematic for some 15 years as Spanish churches normally have one large main altar. This was resolved by interviewing the local Franciscan priest. Knowledgeable in the ecclesiastical traditions of his order, he immediately recognized that the altar might have originally been constructed with a wooden cabinet component that integrated the two adobe sections, and he was able to provide many details about its probable original design and configuration (Cloud et al. 1994: 133–134).

On April 14, 1995, at the Barton Warnock Environmental Center in Lajitas, Texas, there hung a large photograph on exhibition of Mexicans gambling in old El Polvo (Figure 1). In the photo's background was the almost-two-story-high mission building still intact and with a cross above its front entrance, looking exactly as it had been described by the informants and in the exact place they had indicated. The photo is tentatively dated ca. 1916 based on the identification of the persons in it as probable refugees from the Mexican Revolution and of the *jacals* as temporary shelters. By then, most native Polvo dwellers would have constructed sturdy adobe homes (Resendo Evaro, personal communication, 1996).

Identifying the Mission

The lost mission of El Polvo is lost not in space, for we know what it looked like and its exact location, but rather it is lost in time as we do not know when it was built or even what its name

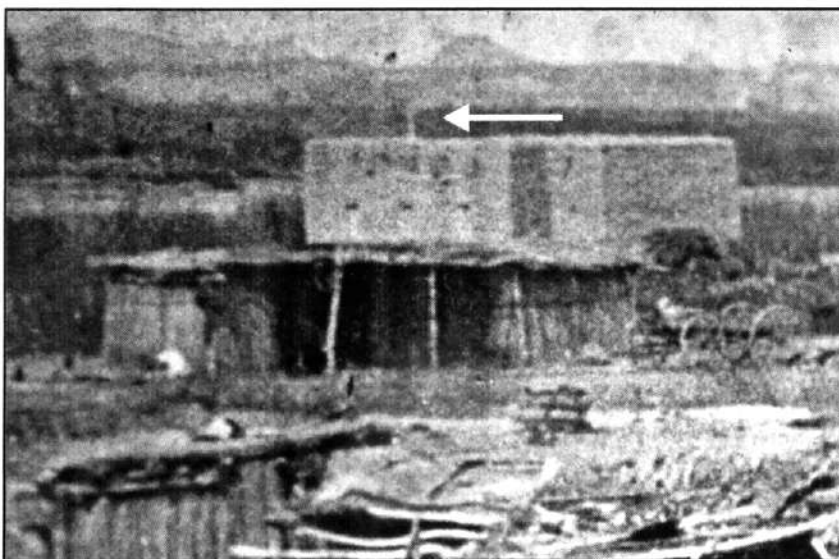
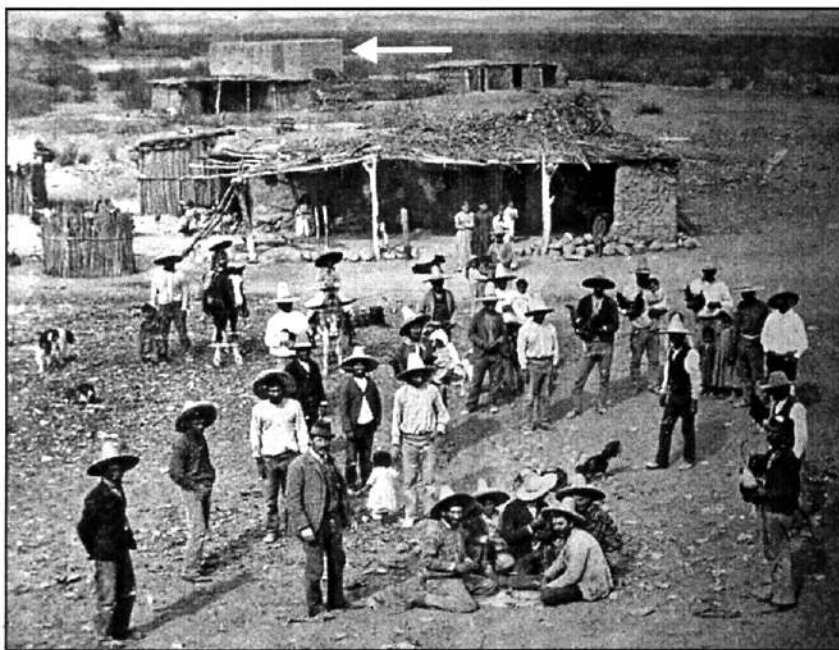


Figure 1. (Top) Gambling in El Polvo, ca. 1916. Arrow indicates possible remains of the mission. (Bottom) Close-up of remains, arrow points to possible cross on the roof. (Photos taken by Enrique Madrid of a W. D. Smither's photograph on exhibit in Lajitas, Texas, 1995.)

was. This problem is the reverse of what archeologists normally face. In lieu of archeological dates, one must search the Spanish archives for the date of construction of the Polvo mission and for its name.

The Joseph de Ydoiaga *entrada* to La Junta de Los Ríos in 1747 included a visit on November 30 to the abandoned Pueblo of Tapacolmes. The ruined walls of a church or chapel were recorded. They noted that the Pescados Indians had lived there but had moved upriver for fear of the Apaches (Madrid 1992:57). On December 19, 1747, it was revisited by Pedro de Rábago y Terán, Governor of Coahuila, who recorded seeing "the ruins of demolished houses said to be the ancient mission named San Antonio de los Púliques inhabited years before by the nation of the Tapalcomes Indians." He gives the distance from La Junta to Polvo as inside of nine leagues, more or less (Rábago y Terán 1748:171 [author's translation])

These two records confirm the existence of the mission building on the Polvo Site. The identification of the site as San Antonio de los Púliques is dubious, however, as at that time that pueblo was about 16 km upriver and probably had no permanent mission structure (Madrid 1993:20). Rábago y Terán's confusion and misidentification of the site may rest in the fact that the Tapacolmes, that is, the Pescados Indians from Polvo, had moved upriver and were living in the Pueblo of San Antonio de Púliques in 1747 (Madrid 1992:56). But when was the mission built and what was it named?

A brief chronology of the missionizing activity in La Junta de los Ríos follows:

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| 1581–82 | Friar Agustín Rodríguez accompanies the Chamuscado <i>entrada</i> (Jones 1991:46) |
| 1582–83 | Friars Bernardino Beltrán and Pedro de Heredia accompany the Espejo <i>entrada</i> (Jordán 1978:51) |
| 1629 | Priests visit Jumano country (Jordán 1978:71) |
| 1632 | Priests revisit but no missions are established (Jordán 1978:71) |
| 1660 | Missions established at La Junta (Jones 1991:46) |

- 1670 Temporary missions established (Jordán 1978:120)
- 1671 Missionary visits (Jones 1991:46)
- 1683 López-Mendoza *entrada* (Jones 1991:47)
- 1680s (late) Renewed missionary activity (Jones 1991:47)
- 1714–15 Five missions set up (Gerhard 1982:199)
- 1715 Trasviña y Retis brings missionaries to set up six missions (Jones 1991:48)
- 1715 The mission San Pedro de Alcántara de los Tapalcomes is set up in La Junta probably at Redford (Mason 1974:32; Madrid 1993: 20–21)
- 1715–50 Sporadic missionization (Jones 1991:48)
- 1716 Six priests found five missions (Jones 1991:48)
- 1717 Sixth mission established (Jones 1991:48)
- 1720s (mid) Returned missionaries forced to flee revolt (Jones 1991:48)
- 1732–33 Missions re-established (Jones 1991:48)
- 1746 Missions still functioning (Jones 1991:49)
- 1747 Ydoiaga to re-establish missions (Jones 1991:49)
- 1750 Two to four religious are working at La Junta (Jones 1991:49)
- 1750s (mid) Three missions still functioning (Jones 1991:49)
- 1759–60 There are six missions and five missionaries at the Spanish presidio (Jones 1991:49)
- 1794 Six missions at La Junta (Jones 1991:53)

Of all the opportunities that the Spanish had to establish a mission at the Polvo site, the most probable times when a substantial building was constructed are two: 1683 and 1715. One scholar, J. Charles Kelley, has concluded that a mission was established at El Polvo as early as 1683 (Kelley 1949). The first opportunity may have been during the López-Mendoza expedition to La Junta de los Ríos and the Río de las Nueces in 1683. The Indians of La Junta had requested missionaries from El Paso and had promised to build the churches for them (Hickerson 1994: 130–134).

We must remember that La Junta is a 20-square-mile region of rivers, valleys, and mountains, as well as the geographical meeting point of two rivers. Depending on the interpretation given the Spanish records, Father Nicolás López reached either the *area* or the *point* of the river junction in December of 1683.

He continued in this manner until arriving at La Junta de los Ríos. Having reached the first nations, [López] found erected a large church of grass. . . . Passing *on six leagues farther* [about 18 miles], he found another church much larger and more carefully built, where he halted. There was also a house which the said Indians had built for the minister to live in. [he adds:] Seven other nations built Churches of their own in order that the missionaries might say mass for them (Hackett 1934:351).

If this passage means La Junta is a geographical point, that would place the larger and more carefully built church in the Redford region, i.e., at El Polvo. And was it more carefully built because it was constructed of adobe rather than grass? And the room for the priest to live in, could that mean a “sacristy” attached to the main church room as the informants described the mission ruins at El Polvo? Or was one of the other churches built by those seven nations constructed at El Polvo?

The next indication of a Polvo mission building is found in a map of La Junta missions in the book, *Missions of Texas*, by Herbert Molloy Mason Jr. (1974). One of the missions listed in 1715 is San Pedro de Alcántara de los Tapalcomes. The Tapalcomes Indians (also known as the Pescados Indians) were the inhabitants of the Polvo site in the Historic period.

Tapacolmes lay abandoned for the last two-thirds of the Apache Inursion Period (A.D. 1650–1880). Two bands of Chisos Indians, 300 people, were resettled there in 1693, but they and the Pescados were gone probably by 1725 (Griffen 1979:15, 1969:68) Except for small rancherías as reported by Ydoiaga and Rábago y Terán, Tapacolmes had to await resettlement by Mexican-American colonists from La Junta who were recruited by Texas officials in the 1870s—each family receiving 160 acres of land and American citizenship by 1876. The colonists fought the last of the Apaches; cleared the floodplains, put in farms, dams, and canals (see Madrid 1994 and 1995); and brought in goats and cattle.

Did these new settlers find the old ruins of the Spanish mission and take them over and, perhaps, reconstruct them? One Redford resident interviewed (Cruz Morales, personal communication, 1996) recounted how her mother still kept the old building repaired, swept clean, and decorated with flowers for religious services at the turn of the century. When asked who had built that mission building, she believed that the more recent Polvo settlers had done it. This, however, would mean that there are *two* lost missions at the Polvo Site. Another informant believes that those settlers simply took over the ruins and repaired them for use by new missionaries.¹ The new settlement in the 1870s was simply too small and overburdened to build an adobe church of that size. The Church of San José del Polvo, in fact, was not built until 1914 when the manpower and resources could be marshalled for the purpose. This church site is also a State Archeological Landmark.

Continuing Research at La Junta

The preceding is the type of research and preservation work that an Archeological Steward can do along the Texas-Mexico border and in Hispanic areas of Texas. The archeological investigations and research will, of course, continue. Very little is known about the prehistory, the history, the culture, and the religion of the Native Americans of La Junta de Los Ríos (see Madrid 1996). The Spanish found as many as 14 historic Indian pueblos there at various times (Applegate and Hanselka 1974:16). They frequently established missions and constructed churches. The same techniques used at Redford to search for the history of one particular site may easily be used in each of the towns and villages of La Junta today as they remain in the same locations. The long-time residents of those places still remember many secrets and they are patiently waiting for us to interview them.

Note

1. Personal communication between Rosendo M. Evaro and Enrique R. Madrid, November 2, 1996, Redford, Texas

Mr. Rosendo Evaro stated that the Evaro family took him in as a small child upon the death of his mother. At the turn of the century, Doña Bitar was, for many years, the person in charge of keeping the old El Polvo mission building clean and in repair for the visits of the priest to Redford for church services. She was in charge of whitewashing the interior walls every six

months or once a year as the leaky building roof caused wall stains. She kept the floors swept, the interior clean, and brought flowers for the services.

Mr. Evaro believes that the early Mexican-American settlers of El Polvo took over the abandoned Spanish mission ruins, repaired them and used the building for church services until the Church of San José de El Polvo was built in October 1914. He feels that the mission could not have been built by them in the 1870s or later as by 1900 to 1913 it was in such a bad state of disrepair that it was abandoned and replaced with a new church in 1914. He does not feel that a building constructed even in the 1870s would have deteriorated to the extent that his mother described to him in that relatively short period (30–40 years).

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