

Massacre or Victory?

Spain and Mexico viewed the 1758 attack on Mission San Sabá as an atrocity. This is certainly the view that has come down to us through history books, almost all of which refer to the attack as a "massacre." From the standpoint of the Native American groups involved on the winning side of the mission attack, it was one of the few major victories they could claim over the Spanish foreigners who invaded their land.

In addition to being angered by Spanish intrusion, the Comanches and their allies detested the Apache. This animosity was the result of earlier competition for land and resources, at which the aggressive Apache had been very successful. As the Comanche swept into Texas from the northwest, they found willing allies in the Wichita, Tonkawa, and other tribes who had been bullied by the Apache. When the Spaniards chose to establish a mission for the Apache at San Sabá, they automatically became the enemies of the Comanche and other "Norteño" groups who detested the Apache.

The destruction of the mission and subsequent harassment of Spaniards still occupying the Presidio San Sabá were major reasons for the eventual withdrawal of the Spaniards out of Texas, and guaranteed Indian domination of much of the region for another 50 to 100 years. Strategically, the attack on Mission San Sabá was as successful as the Spanish decision to establish the mission was a failure.

"A Triumph For All Who Seek"

Mark Wolf, Kay Hines, and I realize we were very fortunate to have found Mission San Sabá. Many very capable people had previously searched long and hard but had failed to find the mission. We had two advantages going for us. First, Hines had an open mind about what John Warren Hunter had to say. It is a lesson to all of us that "no stone should be left unturned" in the search for elusive sites like San Sabá. Secondly, it was just a plain stroke of good luck that we happened along right after Judge Lyckman had plowed his alfalfa field. There was a window of just a few weeks when the ground was visible and we could see the artifacts that told of the mission's existence. Had we come along the month before, or the month after, we would have joined the long list of searchers who walked right over the mission without knowing it, simply because the ground was covered by alfalfa.

In reviewing what was found at the mission during our various excavations there, it is remarkable there was so little left. The Indians set the place on fire and burned it down in 1758. They carried away with them many desirable items. We can imagine that bead necklaces, religious medallions, knives, hatchets, metal cooking pots, and the like would have been valued by the Indians and probably were hauled off by them after the attack. Then, Spanish soldiers came in shortly after the attack and salvaged what they could from the ruins.

We can only guess how many people visited the site between 1758 and the early 1900's when the site's whereabouts were still generally known. We know from a letter written in 1901 by J. J. Callan, a resident of Menard, that a substantial collection of artifacts from the mission was sent to the State Fair in Dallas. This collection has never been relocated. In view of all these looting, salvage, and collecting activities over the years, it is a wonder that we recovered ANY artifacts from the mission. Yet, with careful recovery, we were able to find, for example, a scatter of musket balls around the church that supported the story of Juan Leal and the other survivors who had sought refuge there during the attack.

The wonderful mural of the attack on Mission San Sabá Mission gave us a good idea of what the little mission looked like. Archeological investigations revealed a pattern of post stains that confirmed the mural depiction. The stories about the attack and its depiction in the mural are very dramatic, and we know that the events that unfolded at the mission were important in Texas history. But the reality is that the mission was a squalid little place where the priests and other residents were living in cramped, primitive quarters. Standing where the church once stood, and thinking about the musketballs scattered all around, one gets a feel for how desperate the situation was for Juan Leal and the others who were trying to survive inside on that March day back in 1758. The archeology makes it real and brings those days back to life.

We also feel lucky to have found the site when we did. An elderly man from the Menard area who came out to visit the 1997 excavations remembered that his grandfather used to farm the field containing the mission. The man said his grandfather, who used a mule-drawn plow, did not like to work in this particular field because he was always hitting "big burned stumps," which he had to stop and remove. We believe that the "stumps" were actually the bases of wooden posts from the mission stockade and other structures.

By 1993, mechanized farming activities had eliminated all but the lowest remnants of the posts that had burned down into the ground—at the most only 2 to 4 inches of the post stains remained. Plows were cutting down into pit features, such as the pit where the sundial was found, and dragging up bones, charcoal, and artifacts. I believe that another 10 or 20 years of farming would have completely destroyed the post stains and the features. Had we found the site in the year 2020, the artifacts would still be there, but we would not be able to trace the footprint of the mission, its size and layout, because the post stains would be gone.

The San Sabá Mission site can be viewed by traveling three miles east on FM 2092 out of Menard. The 1936 Texas Centennial Marker is along the highway immediately beside the alfalfa field. As Robert Weddle wrote in 1996: "The rediscovery of Mission Santa Cruz de San Sabá represents a triumph for all who seek."

Strategically, the attack on Mission San Sabá was as successful as the Spanish decision to establish the mission and its presidio was a failure.

