

Tulane University - The Latin American Library

The Lost Churches of Sonora

Philip S. MacLeod, Curator, January 15-March 1, 2000

This is the first in a series of presentations which will showcase the Pál and Elisabeth Kelemen Collection, a recent addition to the Latin American Library's Photographic Archive. Pál Kelemen was a noted Latin American art historian. Many of the photos in the collection were taken by Elisabeth Kelemen, on the couple's many trips throughout Latin America. Other images were gifts or purchases. The Kelemen collection consists of over 2500 prints, negatives, slides and contact sheets which principally document church architecture and religious art in Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Central America. This exhibit solely focuses on a small region of the Mexican State of Sonora. The photographs document five churches which no longer exist because of natural disaster or human intervention in nature. These pictures are rare and some are one-of-a-kind images, which shows the unique value of the Pál and Elisabeth Kelemen Collection. See below for links to five selected images from the exhibit.

BAVISPE

Where the River Turns

The first missionaries appeared in San Miguel de Bavispe as early as 1610. Mission activity began in earnest in the late 1640s. The church was described as large, satisfactorily equipped and well decorated in both 1678 and 1730. The church appears to have suffered little damage until the 19th century. On May 8, 1887, a strong earthquake, felt as far north as Central Arizona, destroyed the church of San Miguel de Bavispe to a crumbled wreck and left every home in the village uninhabitable. A new modern church was built on the same site.

- Façade of the Church of San Miguel de Bavispe after the 1887 Earthquake.
- Interior of the Church of San Miguel de Bavispe, 1887.
- The Village of Bavispe and the Church of San Miguel de Bavispe from a Distance, 1887.

BATUC

Dead River, Where the Water Dies

San Francisco Xavier de Batuc

Jesuit Father Martín de Azpilcueta began mission work here in 1629. He started construction on a mission church known as San Francisco Xavier de Batuc. In 1678 San Francisco Xavier was described as large and adequate with beautiful altars, paintings and equipment. By 1730 the Church had markedly deteriorated. In 1741 Father Alejandro Rapicani assumed charged over San Francisco Xavier de Batuc. A geographic account of Sonora at the time stated "Rapicani ventured to summon from Mexico (City) an architect who was at the same time an excellent stone-mason. This man in a short time, but with astonishing patience, instructed some Indians and with their help built entirely of hewn stone a beautiful, nicely vaulted church and house in the village of Batuc." The church was completed around 1758. In 1764 San Francisco Xavier was said to be "a beautiful church of hewn stone with a vaulted roof." The same report noted that all the other churches in Sonora, with the exception of Batuc, required continual repair because of their adobe construction. One modern writer labeled San Francisco Xavier de Batuc the most beautiful church in all Sonora. The building had an intricately carved keystone above the arched doorway. There was a pillared façade that had three tiers which rose to a bell tower. The church was flanked by two exterior staircases which led to the choir loft. There was a simple stone altar. The nave was dominated by a stone confessional on one side and at the other side was a pulpit that had been built above the baptistry.

- Façade of San Francisco Xavier de Batuc, 1963.



Lee Fuller. Façade of San Francisco Xavier de Batuc, 1957. Pál and Elisabeth Kelemen Collection.

- Masonry Confessional in the Church, 1963.
- Side Altar and Painting, 1958.
- Main Altar, 1958.
- Baptistry and Pulpit, 1963.

- Plan of San Francisco Xavier de Batuc, n.d.
- Exterior Stairway to Choir Loft, 1958.
- Arch at the Side of the Church, 1963.
- Bricked-In Side Portal, 1963.

Keystone Located Over the Doorway, 1963



James Griffith. Keystone Located Over the Doorway. San Francisco Xavier de Batuc, 1963. Pál and Elisabeth Kelemen Collection.

Nuestra Señora de la Asunción de Batuc

There is very little information about this church. Juanita Ruiz in "Farewell, Batuc - A Lost Historic Site," stated that Nuestra Señora de la Asunción de Batuc was the name given one of two converted villages of Batuco Indians in 1629. Charles Polzer in Rules and Precepts of the Jesuit Missions of Northwestern New Spain cited Nuestra Señora de la Asunción as one of the cabeceras, head villages, in the Rectorate of Los

Santos Mártires del Japón, in 1629. The 2nd Diccionario Porrúa de historia, biografía y geografía de México listed Nuestra Señora de la Asunción de Batuc as one name by which the town was identified. Paul Roca in Paths of the Padres Through Sonora, mentioned a church which might be Nuestra Señora de la Asunción. "In Batuc, a few blocks north of the massive church stands the ruins of an apparently ancient stone chapel which is in fact newer than the big church." Nuestra Señora de la Asunción was also apparently known as "La Capillita," the little chapel.

- Façade of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción de Batuc, n.d.

TEPUPA

Place of Ferrous Stone or Place of the Flea Tepupa was a dependent mission of San Francisco Xavier de Batuc. Missionary activity may have begun here in 1622, earlier than Batuc. The first church was started around 1629 by Father Azpilcueta. The original church was described as having three naves and two towers. By the 18th century Tepupa's first church fell into disrepair. It seems that Father Rapicani built a new church at Tepupa in the 1760s or at least what was described as "an almost complete parsonage of hewn stone." The modern church of Santa María de Tepupa had a vaulted metal roof and was an extremely long and narrow stone building on top of a hill with a small belfry on the west side. On the east side were a house and ancillary buildings attached to the church wall around a courtyard. The church was reached by a stone walkway leading up the hill.

- Entry Portal and Belfry of the Church of Santa María de Tepupa, 1963.
- Entire Length of the Church, 1958.
- Young Girl Walking in Front of the Church.
- The Church of Santa María de Tepupa on the Hill in the Background, 1963.
- Two Sections of the Church, 1958.



View of Tepupa from the Church, 1963.

SHUAQUI

Interior or Heart of the Pitahaya Commonly called Suaqui Chico, or at times Suaqui de Batuc, to differentiate it from another village of the same name. It was the last of the three neighboring towns to be founded. Suaqui was not a mision village, but may have been one of three settlements of Spaniards and gente de razón located south of Tepupa referred to in 1765. The Diccionario de geografía, historia y biografía mexicanas described Suaqui as a mineral, mining center, of some importance. Suaqui had a zone named Las Palomas, which had been famous for its production of gold from placer mines in the 1840s. The church of San Ignacio de Suaqui de Batuc was made of stone and a great deal of mortar. The structure had a pair of two-story bell towers topped by domes.

- View of the Village of Suaqui, 1962.
- View of the Church of San Ignacio de Suaqui de Batuc from the Left, n.d.
- View of the Church of San Ignacio de Suaqui de Batuc from the Right, n.d.

THE PLUTARCO ELIAS CALLES DAM AND LAKE NOVILLO

The population of Sonora grew rapidly in the 20th century. The growing number of people increased the need for electricity in the state. In 1958 construction began on the Plutarco Elías Calles Dam at the confluence of Río Moctezume and the Río Yaqui. The resulting Lake Novillo destroyed 4 churches in the villages of Batuc, Tepupa and Suaqui. Lake Novillo is now noted as a sport and commercial fishing destination. Prior to Batuc's inundation by Lake Novillo, the University of Sonora organized a group of

students who dismantled the façade of San Francisco Xavier de Batuc and moved it to Hermosillo, the capital of Sonora, where it was rebuilt as a monument to the lost villages. San Francisco Xavier's gates were moved to the church of the village of Caborca. As of 1993, the bell tower and nave of one of Batuc's churches were still visible when Lake Novillo receded in the dry season.

- Plutarco Elías Calles Dam and Lake Novillo, 1964.
- Two Sections of the Flooded Church of San Francisco Xavier de Batuc, 1968.
- Main section of the Flooded Church of San Francisco Xavier de Batuc, 1968.
- Bell Tower of the Flooded Church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, 1968.

Bell Tower



Yolanda Moreno. Bell tower of the flooded church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, 1968.

- San Francisco Xavier Sans Façade, 1964.
- Transplanted Façade of San Francisco Xavier in Hermosillo, n.d.
- Transplanted Gates of San Francisco Xavier in Caborca, n.d.