

TOWN RALLIES TO RESTORE CHURCH

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By Jesse Bogan

GUERRERO, Mexico - Thick stone walls have been crumbling here for 300 years, but this time, after a heavy rain, the town's church tower, one of its tallest structures, rumbled to the ground. The collapse one morning last July hurt no one but sent heaps of limestone blocks, mud mortar and two heavy bells slamming onto historic ground.

The old Iglesia San Juan Bautista, now a national monument, has ties to the founding of the Alamo. Its tower once was a place to peer down on streets that have been strolled by Spanish soldiers, Indians, missionaries - even Robert E. Lee, a U.S. Army officer who passed through town during the Mexican-American War.

The bells, one of which weighs as much as a small pickup, called the faithful to Mass and tolled every night at 11 p.m. as a reminder that it was time to turn down the volume on rancho music and for kids to go home. Now the bells sit in a shed near hanging saddles and a pile of gourds.

"When they rang, you could hear them three or four miles away," said Jesus Saucedo Ornelas, the mayor, who was sporting a curled gray mustache and sipping Tecate beer on a recent afternoon.

The town can hear ringing today only figuratively, in fundraisers to restore the tower and mount the bells once more.

Guerrero, originally called Presidio de San Juan Bautista del Rio Grande del Norte, was for generations the main jumping-off point for Spanish expeditions north of the Rio Grande five miles away. It straddled the Camino Real, the Royal Road that was the region's major north-south artery for trade and religion.

With time, however, Guerrero weathered and hardened into a fossil - 2,000 people live here today - as the nearby Mexican towns of Nuevo Laredo and Piedras Negras became the area's main border crossings.

Missionaries left here in 1718 to found what would later be known as the Alamo. Mexican Gen. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna and his troops later passed through on their way to San Antonio on their ultimately unsuccessful campaign to destroy the Texas rebellion in 1836.

Historian Robert Weddle considers San Antonio Guerrero's "most noteworthy offspring."

"While the child has prospered, however, the parent has faded into oblivion," Weddle wrote in his 1968 book, "San Juan Bautista, Gateway to Spanish Texas."

Aware of the destruction of the church tower, Weddle, 83, said by telephone from his home in Bonham that he remembers deeply worn steps leading up to the bells. He said he hopes the tower is rebuilt in its original style.

"It's important to maintain that heritage as much as possible both from a historical and architectural standpoint," Weddle said.

The church was built for the presidio's Spanish soldiers and their families. Construction started in 1701 and took about 60 years, said Enrique Cervera Rodriguez, the town historian. The tower was added later - exactly when is a mystery, he said.

The year 1851, believed to be the town's 150th anniversary, is scratched into the bigger bell.

"Since it fell, the community has come closer to the church," said Zulema Guevara, 17, helping corral a bunch of well-behaved kids during a recent celebration of the Feast of the Three Kings in the church courtyard. "Everyone is coming together to help so that it's built back the way it was as fast as possible."

Townpeople donated goats and horses for a raffle. They've held rodeos. Over the holidays they held a dance for \$30 per couple that was headlined by the band Los Montañeses del Alamo.

It was a night not to be missed. People came in heels, big hats and warm coats, just a block from the tower rubble behind a wire fence.

Antonio Castillon Saucedo, president of a fund-raising committee, said the dance brought in \$5,000, but much more is needed. He said an insurance payment is stalled in bureaucracy.

Insurance should cover the restoration because it's a national monument, said Francisco Martinez, an architect in Saltillo with the National Institute of Anthropology and History who is in charge of the restoration. The restoration will cost about \$70,000, he said.

"This type of work requires artistic skill," he said, adding that construction could begin as soon as February.

Castillon said any extra money would be used for other projects, like fixing a leaky roof and decorating the church interior, which is lit by bare fluorescent bulbs and has little adornment.

jbogan@express-news.net

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