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The First Christian Martyr of the Southwest

By MIGUEL H. TRUJILLO

SOME MOST interesting and mysterious traditions have been built up around the martyrdom of Father Juan Francisco Padilla. Nearly every Indian at Isleta has more or less some knowledge through tradition about Father Padilla.

The statement that a coffin containing the corpse of a long departed person rose to the surface of the ground from its grave is cause enough for anyone to become inquisitive; but when hundreds affirm, through tradition, that it is a fact, the subject becomes tremendously fascinating.

Historical data, referring to Father Juan Francisco Padilla, is very limited and the authors conflict on many points; however, without any pretense of knowing the certainty of the statements and traditions, I will relate them again as some of them have been told hundreds of times before.

Father Juan Francisco Padilla was a native of Andalucía. The first we hear of him is when he was the guardian of the Convento of Tulancingo, a short distance northeast of the city of Mexico, east of Pachuca, in the present state of Hidalgo. That convent was one of the earliest founded in Mexico and Father Padilla was its first guardian. This places his arrival in the New World between 1525 and 1535. Then from Tulancingo he was transferred as guardian of the convent of Tzapotlan in the state of Jalisco, south of Guadalajara. He remained at Tzapotlan till the year when in company with the celebrated Marcos De Niza, he joined the expedition of Coronado.

Several historians¹ relate that Father Padilla accompanied Coronado on his famous expedition in to the great American Southwest, and that he traveled with the explorer until the spring of 1542, at which time Coronado decided to return to Mexico. On that occasion he made known his desire to remain among the Indians to teach them the Christian faith. Coronado's expedition left for Mexico, while Father Padilla found his way back to the Quivirans,² whom he had met before. The original home of these Indians was in that portion of the country which is now the southern part of Kansas. While there he decided to carry the message of the Christian faith to the bitter and traditional enemies of the Quivirans.³

It was on that expedition that the zealous Franciscan met his death.⁴ Conflicting theories make it impossible to name the exact location where he met his death and where he was buried. One version tells that after the Indians had killed him they piled stones upon him and left him on the plains. Another version indicates that the lay brothers who accompanied the priest were permitted to bury the body and then were forced to leave the country. Why Father Padilla was killed and how the supposed remains of his body found their way to Isleta is a matter of conjecture. A tradition tells that some Indians, remembering Father Padilla's fondness for Isleta, brought his body to the village so that his spirit would not haunt them and the place where he was

1. Bandelier, A. F. "Papers of the School of American Archaeology," 1910. No. 13. p. 6.

Castaneda. Translation of the Narrative, by J. W. Powell. Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, 1893. Part 1, p. 400.

Twitchell, R. E. "Leading Facts of New Mexico History," 1917. Vol. 1, p. 226.

2. Castaneda in his narrative of the expedition of Coronado states that the Quivirans were first encountered on the great plains. He indicated that Father Padilla was left with other companions at Tiquex, which was an Indian village on the west bank of the Rio Grande, opposite the present town of Bernalillo.

3. The Indians were called by Castaneda, "Gaus." It is likely that they were the Kaws.

4. No historian has attempted to indicate the exact location where Father Padilla met his death. An Indian tradition tells that some Indians brought his body to Isleta.

killed. Another version declares that several years later a party of Franciscan Fathers went into the plains and brought his body back to Isleta. Still another tradition declared by Spanish-Americans is that Father Padilla was never buried in Isleta and that the body supposed to be that of Father Padilla is that of another priest, murdered by Indians, and brought to Isleta for burial. Be as it may, the traditions of the Indians declare that the remains in question are those of Father Francisco Padilla and no other. Their traditions go further; that every twenty years the coffin containing the remains of Father Padilla works its way to the surface of the floor of the church in their village, and that the miracle has happened five times within the last hundred years.

Because of the many traditions concerning the strange phenomenon, the church conducted a careful investigation. It must be understood that the church is very careful in accepting any happening that people declare a fact unless it makes an extensive and complete investigation.⁵ Accordingly on the 25th of April, 1895, such an investigation was conducted by a committee of Catholic clergymen and Dr. W. R. Tipton. However, no definite and conclusive statement was made by the committee except for the actual condition in which the supposed remains of Father Padilla were found. No attempt was made by them to explain the causes of the rising of the coffin.

The committee found the body in the exact location tradition had pointed out; they found the remains in a hollowed out cottonwood coffin, close to the surface of the ground. The body was found in a mummified condition. The measurements of the corpse were given as follows: length, five feet; a portion of one leg missing; measurement of the coffin, length, six feet seven inches; and the depth,

5. The report of the committee that conducted the investigation was written by Rev. M. A. Rivera. The original manuscript was, perhaps, placed in the coffin when the body was buried after the investigation was completed. A copy of the original report is at the Isleta Mission. (The report is written in Spanish.)

sixteen inches. The body was covered by a small portion of a habit of the Franciscan order. That garment was in a good state of preservation.

After further examination the committee wrote the description of the condition in which the body was found.⁶ They placed their description and other notes in a metal box and put it in the coffin. The body was then buried in the same coffin and on the same site where it was found, at the depth of one foot.

Some interesting testimonies were given by some Indians to the committee at that time regarding the supposed remains of Father Juan Francisco Padilla.

Diego Abeita, who appeared to be ninety years of age,⁷ stated that he was the sacristan of the parish church for sixty-four years. According to his testimony, near the period when the Indians drove out the Spanish Missionaries, and when Father Sanchez was the parish priest, and when Diego was yet a boy, he heard that the body of Father Padilla appeared in the church. Diego said that a wake was held for Father Padilla, as his body remained one night on the surface before it was buried again. Five priests were at the wake, one of whom was Father Sanchez. The body was buried the next day at an ordinary depth (six to seven feet), on the same site where it previously rested on the Gospel side of the altar. Diego stated further that the corpse was then complete. He also heard that the corpse held a book in one of its hands and that one of the Fathers read the book, shedding many tears on the altar. At that time Andres, an Indian of Isleta, was the sacristan of the parish.

Juan Andres Zuñi, who gave sixty years as his approximate age,⁸ stated that the second time the body of Father

6. The report of the committee stated that Dr. W. R. Tipton was to give a scientific report regarding the condition of the body. This report has not been located.

7. It is seldom that an old Indian will know his exact age. The date of birth and baptism is kept by the parish priest in the village.

Padilla was seen on the surface, Juan Andres was about twenty years of age. He told that the corpse was complete and all dried up. It held a book in its hands. They buried the corpse in the same cottonwood coffin on the same site where it was found; but he did not know at what depth the coffin was buried.

Jose Chewiwi, whose age appeared to be fifty, stated that when he was a boy he heard of the rising of the body of Father Padilla. He saw the corpse. It was complete and dried up. The grave in which the body was reburied was of a common depth. Shortly after that time the first flooring was placed in the church.

Marcelina Abeita, who appeared to be about fifty years of age, declared that when she was a child there appeared on the surface of the floor of the church, the coffin containing the remains of Father Padilla.

Thus far are the testimonies regarding the first and second appearances of the coffin of Father Padilla.

The following statements are regarding strange noises heard in the church on the night of December 24th, 1889.⁸

Marcelina Abeita stated that the noise was like some one stamping on the floor; that the altar moved and the Indians, frightened, ran out hurriedly from the church.

Pablo Abeita, who was about twenty-nine years of age, stated that the noise was audible while the Indians danced in the church, and that the altar moved visibly.

"I was," said Pablo, "at the door of the railing to stop the Indians from entering to profane the sanctuary. I went with several Indians to see if some one was moving the altar, but we found no one. The Indians started to dance that night about 8:00 o'clock. They danced in the church against the authority and without the consent of the parish priest."

8. Taken from the report written by the secretary of the committee that conducted the exhumation of the supposed remains of Father Padilla.

It is said that the last time the coffin containing the supposed remains of Father Padilla came to the surface was in 1914. A recurrence of the phenomenon is due this year.

I relate here the testimony given me by Mrs. Lena Padilla, of Isleta, on July 22nd, 1933. Mrs. Padilla was a witness to the exhumation of the supposed remains of Father Padilla in 1895. She and her grandmother served as maids at the convento of the parish. She gave her age as sixty-three years.

"My grandmother and I were working at the convento at that time. Father Docher was then the parish priest. I remember one morning Father Docher called grandmother and me to see the body of Father Padilla. In the church were many priests, a doctor, and several Indians from here. The corpse was found buried in a cottonwood coffin on the left side of the altar. We noticed that the body had only one leg. There still remained a piece of the missing leg. Father Docher said that he found the hole where the priest was shot. He felt into the hole and found some little white worms. He showed the worms to us. Some of the priests told Father Docher to be careful. After the examination they put a little box in the coffin. In the little box was a note and the names of the priests who were there. They buried the body in the same cottonwood coffin, and in the same grave where it was found. Later Father Docher told us that his arm became very painful. He went to see a doctor who told him that he was poisoned and that it was necessary to cut off his arm to save his life. But Father Docher came back to Isleta and prayed that he would get well; he said that if he got well he would say a mass for Father Padilla. Father Docher got well and I guess he said the mass he had promised for Father Padilla."

Several persons have told me about the critical condition in which Father Docher found himself. Several claimed that Father Docher told them; others said some one told them about it. It is evident, however, that Father Docher

had made known his affliction to others. However, even that information, though given not so long ago, is also becoming a tradition.

In conclusion, I must say that I have merely related some of the many traditions regarding the supposed remains of Father Juan Francisco Padilla. I have endeavored to use only such information and traditions that seemed important and reliable. Realistic explanations have been offered for the rising of the coffin: the lifting force of the water level in the river valley; the presence of an old arroyo bed beneath the church. These, however, have assumed a shadowy factual existence insufficient to destroy the reality of legend, legend which has behind it the conviction of Fr. Juan Padilla's hallowed missionary zeal and his lasting devotion to the pueblo people.