

*The Magdalena story is exciting proof
that human events--the river of history--
flow in an infinite stream*



COURTESY, ARIZONA STATE MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

J. Ross Brown's sketch of the mission at Magdalena, 1864, offers another perspective on this important Sonoran landmark. John Russell Bartlett, an American visitor to Magdalena in 1851, was much impressed by the church which he described as "an imposing edifice, with two fine towers and a large dome."

pea. There are Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds and sideshow freaks and spook houses. There are dart boards and lottery games and shooting galleries, as well as booths where Mexican foods of every description are sold.

In spite of appearances, however, it is more than penitence, the need to petition, or the longing for mere entertainment that brings the multitudes from afar by foot, train, car, bus, and truck. It is hope—hope that a visit to San Francisco will bring good health and healing through the saint's miraculous powers. Pilgrims can even borrow some of this power by holding personal religious images—holy pictures or other statues—against the reclining figure of the saint. These are taken home and placed in household shrines or village chapels, reminders of the journey to Magdalena, rein-

forcements of belief.

The modern pilgrimage to Magdalena continues to combine virtually all of the features of an eleventh-century pilgrimage to some European shrine. There are piety and pleasure, priest and panderer, hope and hostility, miracle and malediction. The Magdalena story is exciting proof that human events, which are the river of history, flow in an infinite stream! Habits of mankind are not easily broken. ✱

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

By far the most detailed study of the Magdalena pilgrimage and fiesta is in "The Religious Festival," an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Henry F. Dobyns (Cornell University, 1960). Perhaps somewhat more accessible is a series of five articles in "The Fiesta of St. Francis Xavier, Magdalena, Sonora, Mexico," published in a special issue of *The Kiva*, the quarterly journal of the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society, in 1950 (Volume 16, numbers 1 and 2). A useful book about the history and modern function of Christian pilgrimages is Victor W. Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978).

Bernard L. Fontana is Field Historian for the University of Arizona Library. His most recent book, with photographs by John P. Schaefer, is *Of Earth and Little Rain: The Papago Indians* (1981).

WHEN THE HOT SUN OF SULTRY SEPTEMBER has dried the fields of Sonora in northern Mexico, when corn stalks turn the color of fodder and pumpkins and squashes lie amid withered vines, then pilgrims wend their way to the small town of Magdalena de Kino to pay homage to the sainted Francisco Xavier. To be on the road to Magdalena in early October is to take part in the richest kind of living history, to participate in the weaving together of past, present, and future. Like religious pilgrims of old, these travelers leave their homes by the thousands to join with friend and stranger in a journey representing piety, hope, adventure, exploration, and personal gain. Just as Chaucer's motley group of medieval England sought out Canterbury Cathedral to worship at the tomb of Saint Thomas à Becket, so do these twentieth-century pilgrims repair to Magdalena's mission church "There to the holy sainted martyr kneeling/That in their sickness sent them help and healing."

The focus of attention in Magdalena is a gessoed wooden statue of Saint Francis of Xavier, or San Francisco Xavier. Why San Francisco Xavier became important in northern Sonora is clear. Xavier was the patron saint of Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, the pioneer Jesuit missionary to the region. Father Kino crossed the invisible rim of Christendom in 1687, stepping beyond the northwestern perimeter of New Spain to establish more than two dozen missions and mission visiting-stations among the Pima and Papago Indians. In 1711 Kino died in Magdalena where he had come to dedicate a new chapel in honor of San Francisco Xavier. Kino was buried in that chapel, on the gospel side of the altar, and where his skeletal remains were uncovered by archaeologists in 1966.

Father Kino's patron saint was born in Navarra in 1506. As a Jesuit missionary Xavier went to Asia, where he became the renowned "Apostle to the Indies." He died December 3, 1552, on a desolate island just off the Chinese coast, about a hundred miles southwest of Hong Kong. His body was placed in a coffin, packed in lime, and ultimately shipped to Por-

Darkness provides a dramatic background for the mission church in Magdalena, built between 1830 and 1832 by Father José María Pérez Llera. Lights along the church's elegant arcade illuminate a crowd of pilgrims gathered to honor San Francisco Xavier, the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary whose holy statue rests beneath the church's dome.

tuguese Goa in India. Removed from the lime, the body remained incorrupt, a miracle that played a role in Xavier's canonization in 1622. The most frequent depiction of the saint, either in paintings or statuary, shows him reclining on his back in a symbolic model of the actual corpse. It is such a reclining statue, lodged in a chapel in Magdalena's mission church, that draws thousands of pilgrims each year.

Although the origin of a devotion in northern Sonora focused on San Francisco Xavier is not a mystery, what remains unknown is when the change was made in the month and day of the celebration in his honor. After the Jesuits were expelled from New Spain by an edict of the Spanish King in 1767, they were replaced in their northern Sonora mission stations by Franciscans. Just as San Francisco Xavier was a great Jesuit saint, another Francis, the gentle saint of Assisi, was the founder of the Order of Friars Minor, the Franciscans. Thus the natives of Sonora were introduced to two saints Francis, one whose feast day was December 3 (Xavier) and one whose feast day was October 4 (Assisi). Although records on the subject are scant, it appears that certainly as late as 1813 the San Francisco fiesta was customarily celebrated in early December. By 1828, however, the occasion seems to have shifted from December 3 to October 4. The Franciscans had won the battle if not the war.

The result is a modern feast in honor of San Francisco Xavier celebrated on the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi, the focus of which is a statue of San Xavier. To complete the fusion, or confusion, the replicas of the reclining Xavier that are sold in religious shops in Magdalena are garbed in the brown habit adopted by Franciscans in the last quarter of the nineteenth century—a Jesuit saint in brown Franciscan clothing! It is an ecumenical phenomenon within the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church.

While the matter of Xavier versus Assisi may be of interest to historians and of concern to liturgists, it appears to be of no importance to Magdalena pilgrims. San Francisco is San Francisco, and his blessings of good health and welfare are bestowed upon the faithful who make their way to his wooden and plaster representation.

ALL PREVIOUSLY EXISTING MISSION CHURCHES in Magdalena were supplanted by one built between 1830 and 1832 by Father José María Pérez Llera, among the last of the Franciscans to serve in Magdalena before its church was turned over to secular clergy by the middle of the century.

This is the church which exists today in remodeled form. It was in use when John Russell Bartlett visited Magdalena in October of 1851. Bartlett was then United States Commissioner on the United States and Mexico Boundary Commission charged with laying out the line between the two countries as provided by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1848. His account of the feast of San Francisco, written more than a hundred years ago, still serves to describe the event as it occurs in modern times:

Although San Franciscos are as common in Mexico as Washingtons, Jeffersons, and Franklins are with us, and churches dedicated to that saint are to be found all over the country; yet this of La Magdalena is the most celebrated and potent of all, inasmuch as it contains a celebrated figure of San Francisco. . . . The original [church], with the exception of the tower, is in ruins; but a new one has been erected within a few years, which is quite an imposing edifice, with two fine towers and a large dome, beneath which the Saint reposes.

For several days previous to the 4th of October, which is the Saint's day, preparations for its celebration begin; so that the devotions and offerings, with their accompanying festivities, are in full blast a day or two in advance. La Magdalena and the Church of San Francisco are the Mecca of devout Mexican Catholics. From the borders of Sinaloa on the south to the furthest outpost near the Gila, and from the Gulf of California to the Sierra Madre, they flock in by thousands, to offer their devotions at this shrine. It is not unusual for very great sinners to bring their burden of guilt a distance of four or five hundred miles; a journey in this country of greater difficulty, and requiring more time, than one from New Orleans to Quebec. The poorer classes often come a hundred miles on foot, begging by the way. The more penitent, like the idolaters before the temple of Juggernaut, or the devout Mohammedan at the shrine of his prophet, prostrate themselves, and, with their hands crossed on their breasts, advance on their knees a hundred feet or more to the church. Both men and women are thus seen toiling over the dusty street and brick pavement of the church to the presence of the Saint, who is laid out beneath the dome and in front of the altar. When the votaries reach the bier, they cross

themselves, and with outstretched arms repeat their prayers. They then rise to their feet and, drawing nearer, present their offerings.

The body of San Francisco, or rather its image, lies upon a platform or bier clothed in rich vestments, and covered with a piece of satin damask of the most gorgeous colors. The head, hands, and feet are alone exposed. These are made of wood, colored to represent flesh. . . . The offerings consist of money and candles; and as wax is quite expensive here, the poorer class present candles of tallow. There was a continual jingling of money; in fact, so constant was the dropping of silver dollars into the receptacle placed for them, that no other sound was heard. . . . To the question of what became of all this money, I received the usual reply of '*Quien sabe?*'

In the evening we walked about the town, and among the booths, which were arranged on every side of the plaza, and along the principal streets. . . . Cakes of various kinds, tortillas, fruits, and aguardiente, were the staple articles; but while there were booths entirely appropriated to the sale of this intoxicating liquor, I do not remember to have seen a single drunken man. In the midst of these booths was a large inclosure, covered with boughs of trees, beneath which some hundreds were assembled, and engaged in dancing. An enormous bass drum, which was heard above all other sounds, a couple of violins, and a clarinet ground out waltzes and polkas, while the beaux were swinging round the señoritas in a manner that would astonish our dancing

Inside the quiet sanctuary of Magdalena's mission, pilgrims draw near the reclining wooden figure of San Francisco Xavier—the focus of their quest (top right). The form of the statue symbolizes the incorruptible body of the saint, who died in 1552 on an island off the Chinese coast. His homage has continued for centuries in Mexico despite religious controversy and political upheaval. Another site of historic importance in Magdalena is the tomb of the famous Jesuit mission builder, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino (bottom left). The church which he dedicated to San Francisco in 1711 is no longer standing, but another has taken its place; today's pilgrims honor San Francisco at the nineteenth-century mission (bottom right).

community. . . . But gambling, after all, seemed to predominate. Whole ranges of booths were devoted to this exciting amusement; and crowds of every age, sex, and class were assembled about them. . . . Some of the tables were attended by women, selected, not on account of their personal beauty, but for their expertness in shuffling the cards.

La Magdalena is the best built town we had yet seen; the houses are chiefly of adobe, though some are of brick, and nearly all are stuccoed and white-washed. . . . The permanent population does not exceed fifteen hundred souls, which number, during the days of the festival of San Francisco, is swelled to ten or twelve thousand.

IN LATE SEPTEMBER OF 1877 a Tucson newspaper noted: "The stampede for Magdalena, Mexico, from Tucson, during the past few days to be in attendance at the feast. . . is simply immense. The wagons loaded with men, women and children, number into the hundreds. If the Mexican people turn out in the same proportion in other towns, poor Magdalena will have to shut down her flood gates or enlarge her borders. Monte, Faro, Roulette, and other distinguished individuals are also Magdalenaward."

The conflict between church and state which raged throughout Mexico between 1926 and 1934 reached a crisis in northern Sonora in September, 1934, when Governor Rodolfo Elías Calles and other state officials presided over a public burning of the statue of San Francisco Xavier. As a signal to the world of their intention of bringing the San Francisco cult in Magdalena to an end, they burned the sacred image in the ovens of the *Cervecería de Sonora*, or Sonora Brewery. But cults and pilgrimages die hard. A new reclining statue replaced the old one, and a grand Sonoran

On the feast day of San Francisco Xavier, Magdalena becomes the scene of merrymaking as well as spiritual renewal. Entertainment is offered in a myriad of forms. A Yaqui deer dancer (top left) taps out ancient rhythms on the plaza stones. Excitement of a different kind is offered at the Castillo del Terror (top right) where pesos buy a variety of thrills. Booths sell fresh produce (bottom left) and showcase artistic skill (bottom right), heightening the charm of this Sonoran town during the colorful fiesta of San Francisco.

tradition survives.

The thousands of modern pilgrims who make their way to Magdalena are a cosmopolitan lot. Most are Mexican from varying walks of life, but many are Indian, with Papagos, Yaquis, and Mayos leading the way. There are always a few *turistas*, including some from north of the border, and there are the inevitable anthropology students. The latter groups are lost in the crowd.

Most pilgrimages are penitential in character, and most pilgrims are inspired to make their long journeys out of a sense of guilt, anxiety, or stress in the hope that their undertaking—a form of personal sacrifice—will relieve the symptoms of these maladies. There is always hope of a miraculous cure. Miracles have happened in the past at pilgrimage sites such as Magdalena and are expected to happen in the future. It is the unseen presence of San Francisco, mediated through the reclining statue, that strengthens faith and ensures salvation.

Pilgrims may also be moved by sentiments of thanksgiving or petition. Many arrive in Magdalena seeking help; others make the trip because they had promised to do so should earlier petitions be granted. One of the better known Sonoran stories tells of a wealthy businessman who lived in Cananea, some forty-seven miles from Magdalena via a mountainous highway. This man had borrowed beyond his ability to pay; so, he promised San Francisco that should the debt be settled he would travel to the Magdalena shrine on his knees. After his creditors were paid off, the shrewd suppliant made the promised pilgrimage on his knees, comfortably settled on a mattress in the back of a pickup truck.

A French observer who saw the Magdalena fiesta in the mid-nineteenth century said of those who attended, "Piety was the pretext, but pleasure was the goal." One might have the same impression today. Beer and hard liquor are consumed in prodigious quantities. Bowlegged Sonoran cowboys dance their solo jigs in El Oasis bar to the accompaniment of polkas and schottisches played by three-piece bands, Sonoran style. Traveling salesmen hawk their wares of blankets, balloons, pots, pans, and glazed ceramics. Others peddle healing herbs and dried animals, particularly invertebrate sea creatures, as remedies. Photographers with Polaroids sell instant pictures. Fortune tellers wander the streets while small crowds cluster around shell-game artists, losing their pesos and dollars as the operator palms the

(Continued on page 60)