



Stories on Film - San Luis Valley

A Story To Tell Documentary Film Series Part 3 of 5

“A Place Of Miracles”

The Restoration Of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Conejos, CO

Almost 90 years to the day, the Our of Lady Guadalupe church experienced an electrical fire on the eve of Ash Wednesday, February 9, 2016. The majority of the church survived, but much of the art and building were heavily damaged by smoke.

The Our of Lady of Guadalupe Church is part of the oldest Catholic parish in the San Luis Valley, located in Southern Colorado. The present church dates to 1927/48. The original structure was an adobe church built in 1863 that partially burned down on February 17, 1926, and was rebuilt and added onto in 1927, using some of the original facades that survived the fire. In 1948, it underwent further renovations and reconstruction of a new front and bell towers. The church serves a heavily Hispano or Neuvomexicano parish that had long-standing ties to the Spanish settlement of the San Luis Valley beginning in the late 1840s-early 1850s. Hispano brought with them traditions that had developed over two centuries of Spanish and Mexican control of the Southwest. These Spanish-speaking settlers primarily resided in New Mexico and the southern part of Colorado. Hispanos identify strongly with their Spanish heritage and varying levels of Native American ancestry.

These traditions included the Spanish language, adobe brick making, Acequias (communal irrigation systems), agricultural and foodways systems, and folk arts such as rug weaving, Santos, bultos, retablos, and other religious iconography. The church is also essential to the social history of the area. It has been a focal point for community events such as weddings, funerals, feast days, community bonfires, and annual summer festivals. Rev. Sergio Robles, C.R., the current parish administrator, understands the importance of this church in Conejos county and the need to preserve it. This church is not just about religion or the Catholic faith. “It is about our culture: the language, traditions, and celebrations. The church is just one aspect. We need to keep it alive cause it is our history. If we lose our traditions, we lose our identity.”

The 2016 fire caused an estimated \$500,000 total loss and fueled much preservation and restoration work on the damaged art and statues. The painting of *Our Lady of Guadalupe* located right above the altar and the statue of the *Immaculate Heart of Mary* located outside in an enclave were two pieces that received significant restoration. The painting had been discolored from the smoke damage and was very brittle due to its age. The statue was also significantly damaged and faded from enduring the elements outside for almost 100 years. In both restoration processes, the conservators from Colorado Art Restoration Services retained most of the original materials and paint. The goal was to restore them as close to the originals as possible, and the conservators also took steps to ensure the permanence of each of the art pieces. A time capsule from 1947 was also found under the *Immaculate Heart of Mary* statue when it was removed for repair. Inside was a tin box about the size of a pack of cigarettes which had letters, medals, and stamps of St. Cajetan celebrating the anniversary of his death in 1547, and a list of names of parishioners that donated towards a project that the church conducted. After the fire in 2016, a crown of smoke appeared over the head of the *Our Lady of Guadalupe* painting, and parishioners labeled it a miracle. Michael Bettman, Proprietor, and Conservator at Colorado Art Restoration Services, said, "There are two parts to the crown appearing. The first part is the scientific reasoning of what caused the crown to appear. On the other side, when you look at the spiritual portion of it, all of the things that had to have happened for this to come all together on that day is no question; you can call it a miracle."

Our Lady of Guadalupe Church was added to the National and State Register of Historic places on December 17, 2018, and continues to be a cultural center to promote Faith and educate people about the culture of the Hispano settlers of Southern Colorado. A "Place of Miracles " is part three of a five-part documentary series on Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and its Missions, featuring the language, faith, traditions, and culture of its Nuevomexicano communities in Southern Colorado.

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