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Down To Earth Media, LLC, <http://downtoearthmedia.org>

Contact Rick Vigil @ 303-842-9579 / dtem@comcast.net

La Misión de San Miguel: St. Michael of the Mountain

A Story To Tell Documentary Film Series Part 1 of 5

"If we lose our traditions we lose our identity" - Father Sergio Robles

The San Luis Valley has been referred to as the cultural cradle of Colorado because of its roots in the establishment of Colorado and its long lasting traditions and values. This can be seen in the many communities around the valley that have been established since the mid-1800s. We can definitely see this in Colorado's two oldest communities, San Luis and Conejos. San Luis is credited with being the oldest established town but there were small communities south of the valley that surrounded Conejos and were connected through a church, the oldest standing and active church in Colorado.

Our Lady of Guadalupe church in Conejos, CO was built in 1858, and it provided a communal linch pin for the surrounding sub-communities in the southern part of the San Luis Valley. Our Lady of Guadalupe was the small seed of Gospel that was planted so that it could spread to the rest of the valley. Those who settled in what is now Conejos County were devout Catholics and they would establish mission churches to provide religious services in surrounding areas. The mission chapels that are administered from Our Lady of Guadalupe church are:

San Miguel de Arcángel (San Miguel, NM) Sagrada Familia (Lobatos, CO), San Juan Nepmuceno (Ortiz, CO) St. Antonio de Padua (San Antonio, CO), and San Rafael de Arcángel (San Rafael, CO). These missions and sub-communities would grow and practice within the protective shadow of the main church in Conejos.

The Mission of San Miguel is located in New Mexico but still administered through Conejos. The original mission church was built roughly around the same time as the church in Conejos but in 1926, the church burned down and was rebuilt in 1928. Even though Our Lady of Guadalupe is the per say the “Vatican” for the missions, they provided important services and tied together communities in the vast rural areas. This can be seen through the traditions and practices at the Mission of San Miguel that are still practiced today.

Mass is only celebrated once a year in San Miguel because of lack of ministerial support from the diocese and the parish. The mission is strongly community driven and is managed by the appointed Mayordomo. People from around the Valley and throughout Colorado and New Mexico continue to celebrate the Funcion de San Miguel. People in the valley still come to celebrate mass every year because the importance of this church and its traditions have transcended generations and brings back memories for many people. Father Sergio Robles, the parish priest in Conejos, said, “if we lose our traditions we lose our identity.”

San Miguel provided many important services and created a community when it was heavily active. The strength of the community of San Miguel definitely was prominent when there was a death in the community. Men would make the casket for the deceased and women would then decorate and line the casket. The body would be placed in the church and watched over all night till the funeral the following day. The tradition of the opening of the grave would gather families together to help each other ease the pain of losing a loved one. This comes from the Hispanic tradition and is still practiced today in the Valley.

People in Conejos and in the San Luis Valley still practice and observe the traditions of San Miguel because it preserves the culture and the legacy of the families that settled and established life in the valley. The youth in the community are kept involved in these traditions so that they are not forgotten and that they feel like they are part of it. All of the missions of Our Lady of Guadalupe are separate but yet are still connected even today. The valley is continuously changing yet the traditions, cultural practices, and values have endured. As this documentary series illustrates the traditions and values of the missions of Our Lady of Guadalupe it will layout the story and the legacy of the San Luis Valley in Colorado. [Keith Valdez, M.L.S](#)

For further reading:

- Colorado's Oldest Church. (n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2017, from <http://www.-southern-colorado-guide.com/colorados-oldest-church.html>
- Stauter, P. C. (1997). *Our Lady of Guadalupe Church: Oldest Parish of Colorado*. Alamosa, CO: O&V Printing.
- The Cradle of Colorado. (2017). Retrieved September 10, 2017, from <http://sanluis-valley.org/heritage-guide/>
- The Southern Colorado Register. (2005). *Our Lady of Guadalupe Church*. Papers of Distinction, LLC.
- Our Lady of Guadalupe Conejos Parish website <http://ologp.com>

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