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southwestern

V I G N E T T E S
P U S H I N G O N T O P E C O S

AFTER SAMPLING THE LOCAL WINE AND WALTZING THE NIGHT AWAY IN THE VILLAGE OF SAN MIGUEL DEL VADO, NEW MEXICO, EMIGRANTS PACKED UP AND PLODDED WEST ALONG THE RED ADOBE ROAD WITH THE

Sangre de Christo Mountains coming into view. They avoided deep, dry arroyos in the Pecos River Valley, dotted with juniper and piñon. At about twenty-five miles, emigrants began to see an enormous adobe structure looming up ahead. Here was the decaying ruin of an eighteenth-century church built over the foundation of the earlier seventeenth-century Franciscan Misión de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles de Porciúncula Pecos. To the north of the church were the remains of a multi-storied, terraced pueblo complex dating to about A.D. 1300 that had housed the families of sedentary Pecos farmers. The population, estimated at some 1,500 to 2,000 Towa-speaking people, peaked about 1620. By this time, the Puebloans had received such illustrious visitors as Don Juan de Oñate, Hernando de Alvarado, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, and Castaño de Sosa. The Pecos population declined steadily following Spanish intrusion and was further decimated by disease and repeated invasions by the Comanche of the plains. Finally, the last seventeen residents

moved out of the decaying pueblo in 1838 to join relatives at Jemez Pueblo, some eighteen miles south of Santa Fe. Augustín Pecos (ca. 1823–1912) became the last survivor of the exodus to Jemez.

Santa Fe trader Josiah Gregg passed through Pecos in 1839/1840 and recounted the legend of Montezuma, who kindled a holy fire and enjoined residents to keep it burning until he should return to deliver the people from Spanish domination. Gregg climbed into an *estufa* or kiva (a chamber used by male Puebloans for religious rites), where he saw the smoldering ashes of the eternal fire that residents were to tend. A year later, Governor Manuel Armijo rounded up and jailed members of the ill-fated Texan–Santa Fe Expedition, in the plaza of the north building. The building had begun to seriously deteriorate when Lt. William Hemsley Emory arrived with the Army of the West in 1846. He penned a brief description of the church remains and repeated the legend of the eternal fire in the *estufa*. A number of gold-seekers had Emory's diary along and, not



Nuestra Señora de los Angeles de Porciúncula, 1989.
Courtesy of Patricia Etter.

surprisingly, one of Emory’s sentences found its way into emigrant diaries: “The cornices and drops of the architrave in the modern church are elaborately carved with a knife.” But thanks to curious forty-niners who took lengthy notes, we have a good idea of the ruins’s appearance before time took its toll and the church and pueblo were buried under mounds of earth. These would rest undisturbed until 1915, when archaeologist Alfred Vincent Kidder began to uncover Pecos’s mysteries.

Emigrants were observant. Charles Edward Pancoast described a number of adobe buildings enclosed by a high wall. He said the church had been built of bricks and rough-casted with plaster. But he also noticed that the “buildings had been burned, and the wall thrown down by Indians.” Would he not have been surprised to know that the first church had indeed been trashed and burned in 1680 during the Pueblo Revolt? The National Park Service discovered this fact in 1967 during archaeological excavations. On August 8, 1849, John Robert Forsythe recalled that “at night a few of the men explored the ruins with torches & dug up a part of the floor which was found full of Human bones. One of the Mum-

mys was in a perfect state of preservation. Money was the object of the digging but none was found.”

On May 28, 1849, Phineas Blunt penned a lengthy description, which could be of interest to Pecos archaeologists, since the details he describes would have long disappeared by the time of Kidder’s excavations:

The ruins are extensive covering an area of many acres. The church inside is at least 100 feet long, 50 feet wide, and 50 feet high with several niches at the sides for images. Where stood the alter is about 20 feet wide in front, 10 feet in rear, 20 feet deep, and at least 40 feet high with wooden pins in the walls where once hung the pictures. The top is covered with timbers about 10 inches square, carved and painted. [The] cornices all around carved and painted with all sorts of images etc. On top of the boards is grass and bushes then a thick coat of mud. The whole size of the building is about 50 feet high, 125 feet from east to west, [and] 100 feet wide.

A hall runs through the whole length between the church and side rooms, probably the residences of the Priest as an oven remains in one of the rooms in perfect order. The hall is about 10 feet wide in the church. On the left is a small room with a fireplace, the entrance to the church was on the left side with a large Portico made of cedar wood. The floor is hard mud. The halls inside have several coats of white-wash. The whole building is built of brick 13 inches long, 12 inches wide, and 3 inches thick. These bricks are made with mud mixed with straw and baked in the sun. The mortar between them is mud. Top ceilings and timbers are painted with images of various sorts, principally in black and white colors.

The whole is in a state of decay. The roof in one place has fallen in. Over the alter is these characters: F C A R O E U S with letters recessed, being more easily read by standing at the back of the alter. Underneath seems to be hollow but there is no way to get under. Some of the arches are Gothic, others are half circles. All the doors once hung with wooden [word unreadable] projecting up and down and entering sockets at top and bottom. The sockets for front door are about 5 inches in diameter on both sides. All the



Augustín Pecos at masonry wall, 1899.
Adam Clark Vroman, *National Anthropological Archives,*
Smithsonian Institution.

doors closed in the center. The other doors had smaller sockets but all of them very large door frames still there and of carved work. On each side is a tower about 8 feet square at base and rising about 10 or 15 feet above the top of building. In the rear over the alter seems to have been another tower, two galleries both on one side. They are about 6 feet to 10 feet wide. What was their use I cannot guess. I examined this church as much as I could in 2 hours time. Was loth to leave it being the greatest curiosity I ever saw.

I then left the church to examine the ruins of the town. Everything is in a perfect state of ruin. The wall around was built of small stones laid in mud. Most of the houses were built of stone. The houses seemed to contain an innumerable number of small rooms. Most of them are like the cells in a prison 3 stories high. In some cases the entrance from one room to another is by crawling through a hole about



House ruins, Pecos, 1989.
Courtesy of Patricia Etter.

as high as the back of a sheep. At the side of the small doors is a hole made through the wall about as large as a man's hand. I examined as many of these rooms as I could in half hour. A fireplace was in most of them. I dropped myself down a small hole to examine a lower room which I found to have been a cellar as the strings are still there on which the people hung their provisions. In the place is three large cisterns [probably kivas] which once contained water. In one part of the town is immense quantities of broken pottery indicates that this is a place where it was

manufactured. The whole place is on solid rock surrounded by a desert, hardly grass enough for feed even for goats. . . . Reluctantly I left this place.

At this point in the overland journey, emigrants had blazed many new trails, suffered from the vagaries of the weather, hunted buffalo with or without accident, met with varied Indian tribes, observed unimaginable scenes, described unique flora and fauna, and overcame innumerable hardships. The enigma of Pecos gave them even more to think about, and there was more to come as they continued westward. For sure, the men who made this trip would be changed forever.

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PATRICIA ETTER's most recent work is *California Odyssey: An Overland Journey on the Southern Trails, 1849* (Norman: The Arthur H. Clark Company, An Imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), the holograph journal of William R. Goulding, which covers his journey to California over the Fort Smith–Santa Fe Trail and through New Mexico and Arizona. Retired from Arizona State University as Curator of the Labriola Center, she is a member of ASU's Emeritus College, serves on the Advisory Board of the ASU University Club, and continues her affiliation with *Southwest Books of the Year*, Tucson. She is on OCTA's board of directors and on the editorial board of *Western Historical Quarterly*.

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