

Stop 13 – Conversion or coercion

The mission church at San Francisco de la Espada was a portal to a new way of life for natives. Imagine being thrust into a foreign environment. The language, the customs, the religion, the entire world view is completely different from your own. What could lure you to give up everything you knew and believed?

Imagine you are REQUIRED to go by a different name. You must give up familiar songs, dances, traditional stories, and perhaps family members to live as a Spanish citizen. If you were an Indian native you sometimes did not clothe your body in the hot summer months. Now that practice is condemned. Your nomadic habits are traded for a sedentary, highly regimented life. As a hunter-gatherer your search for food takes a little over three hours per day. As a mission resident your obligations stretch from sunrise to sunset. Routines, schedules, and time are artificial concepts to you and your native band. Freedom, not a part of mission life, was ingrained in the nomad.

Natives entered the missions for different reasons. Some came for protection from their enemies. Some came for the regular supply of food. Some came for covered shelter during harsh winters. Others were coerced into mission life. For most natives the transition to Spanish society was difficult. Running away from mission life was so widespread that excursions to recapture and collect new potential converts were common.

Despite the dedication of the Franciscan missionaries to work with and bring in new converts, births never balanced deaths during the mission period.