

Stop 22 – A Man’s Life at the Missions

Regions we call Texas and Northern Mexico today once supported hundreds of distinct hunter-gatherer groups. They moved with the seasons. Wildlife and water were the key to their survival. The man was a hunter and a warrior. When wildlife was plentiful his family enjoyed bison, deer, javelina, turkey, opossum, and rabbit. And he was skilled with bow and arrow. He also protected his people from Apache and Comanche raiders, and from other clans trying to claim better hunting grounds. An Indian man rarely had leisure time.

When they entered the mission, their lives became regimented. Men and boys, no longer hunters and warriors, learned new skills—skills a productive Spanish citizen needed. They were taught to be farmers and ranchers and raise their food. They became carpenters, blacksmiths, and masons and built their new community. They spun and wove cotton and wool into blankets and cloth, and learned to mill wheat into flour. As you explore the compound, imagine Indian sentries on the walls defending their community against raiding Indians. Still using bow and arrow, they also became skilled with European weapons.

And they learned a new religion. This was most likely the hardest remnant of their nomadic lives to overcome. But it was a requirement on the path to Spanish citizenship.

Missionaries appointed the most competent Indians as *mayordomos*, *fiscals*, and *caporales*, today’s superintendents, foremen, and public officials. They managed the mission community under the direction of the missionary, and in turn taught skills to the other men. Judges, called *gubernadores* and *alcaldes*, however, were elected by the adult men in the mission community. Governors and mayors were often chiefs prior to mission life where the custom elevated the best hunters or warriors to chief position.

For a people following the rhythm of nature the choice to enter was probably difficult, but one many historians believe was made voluntarily. The freedom and dangers of the hunter-gatherers were replaced with great changes, but also with increased security, structure, and a reliable supply of food. Perhaps we too trade some personal freedoms for the security and safety of our families.