

## Stop 23 – Indian Women During Missionary Times

Franciscans understood that Indian conversion to Spanish citizenship was a gradual process. But the role of Indian women and girls in the mission, perhaps changed less than their male counterpart.

In the hunter-gatherer community men hunted, and women foraged, gathered, and ran the camps, and prepared the food. Once in the mission, everyone helped harvest crops. The wilderness and its familiar food often drew mission women outside the walls in search of dewberries, yucca, pecans, roots and tuna—the fruit of the prickly pear cactus so common in Texas. Sometimes this gathering took place in the evenings and it may have provided social time for Mission women. Women had to get permission from the missionary if they wanted to visit other missions or the presidio during their evening outings.

One of the many jobs of Mission women was to pick cotton alongside the children. Women cleaned the cotton and the men spun and wove it. Women washed the dirty laundry. And although they were not taught to be weavers at the missions, they were seamstresses in both lives. Women sewed rabbit and coyote pelts together for clothing during their nomadic days. Women sewed shirts and pants for their husbands and for the single men from cotton and wool raised at the mission. Indian women, accustomed to wearing only small skirts and beads, were now expected to dress with modesty - a concept possibly hard for them to understand.

What little we know about life prior to the mission suggests that men and women shared responsibility for raising the children. But, once in the mission, women and older girls cared for the children. And, of course, women made the tortillas. Tortillas were used as utensils to scoop up the evening stew out of common pots. While only men cooked for the friar, one woman was assigned to make his weekly tortilla supply. Women also swept the priests' quarters and the church.

But life was not all work. Festivals and feast days, allowed participation in music and dancing and games. Only men could play musical instruments and certain games. You see, it was considered unbecoming for women to run or do strenuous exercise, so women were discouraged from playing *chueca*, a popular hockey or cricket-like game. Women did have their own game called *palillo* and were allowed to play with women from other missions. Both men and women continued to engage in their own ritual celebrations known as *mitotes*. Although some priests may have considered the *mitote* a pagan ritual, others thought *mitotes* were similar to dancing a Spanish *fandango*.

The mission women merged their two, not so different worlds, while never completely abandoning the old, never totally adapting to the new.