

Lemitar y La Sagrada Familia Church

History of the village of Lemitar, NM and her historic church

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For El Defensor Chieftain

On June 29, 2010, the west wall of the Lemitar La Sagrada Familia church collapsed. Built in the 1830s, it is the second oldest active mission church in the area, next only to San Miguel mission in Socorro, rebuilt in the 1820s.

To many, Lemitar is just a handful of homes and old buildings at exit 156 on Interstate 25. This month's history article is a thumbnail sketch showing the village – and her church – is rich with history, and why repairing the Lemitar church is vital to preserving the history of Socorro County.

Resettlement of Socorro

Following the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, the Socorro area remained uninhabited for over 100 years. The Spanish military simply could not protect the people along the Rio Abajo south of Belen from the Apache, and hence, settlement was prohibited. In 1800, Governor Fernando Chacon lifted the ban and opened the Socorro area.

Resettlement was slow at first, but by 1816, a Spanish Socorro Land Grant was awarded to the first 21 pioneer families. This opened the doors for others to follow, settling in Socorro and other nearby areas along the Rio Grande.

A few years later, in 1821, over 200 years of Spanish reign came to an end and New Mexico became part of Mexico. While New Mexico was virtually closed to the rest of the world under Spain, Mexico opened her doors to unrestricted travel and commerce with Mexico, and for the first time, the United States. Regular supply caravans from Chihuahua began rolling along the



Photo by Paul Harden

Lemitar contains many old historic buildings from the early 1800s. This old adobe complex on NM-408 was the Pablo Sanchez dancehall, saloon, and pool hall.

Camino Real. The Santa Fe trail was quickly established, bringing new access to tools and provisions to New Mexico.

The new availability to tools, building supplies, clothing and other items from these supply wagons improved life along the Rio Grande and encouraged settlement in and around Socorro.

Many settlers ventured along the river north and south of Socorro looking for good farm land. The area north of Socorro appealed to many. The meanderers along the river provided good irrigation water and the building of acequias. By the mid 1820s, farming settlements were cropping up along both sides of the river.

Plaza Limitar

Some of these settlers established farms about six miles north of Socorro. Word of the good farm land must have gotten out, as by 1831, additional families moved to the area. These families came from Atrisco, Albuquerque, Belen and Tomé. Some of these pioneers were the families of Armijo, Chavez, Gonzales, Vigil, Lopez, Sanchez, Romero, and the Santillañes. The

descendents of these families remain today's Lemitar's residences.

These early settlers named their growing village "Plaza Limitar," derived from "lemita," the berried squashbush abundant in the area at the time. Others say Lemitar is slang for "sticks" or "twigs." Just as curious as the exact meaning is the spelling of the village. Over the years, the spelling has changed from Limitar, Lemitarcito, to the present form, Lemitar.

Regardless of the spelling, historical sources, such as Fray Angelico Chavez, cite 1831 as the establishment of Lemitar as a village.

In 1833, Mexico conducted a census of sorts, counting about 400 persons in Socorro and another 1,300 people from San Acacia Butte to south of Luis Lopez. In this census, Sabino, opposite the river from Lemitar, is listed, but Lemitar is not. Lemitar is included in the 1845 census and the 1846 Military Survey map.

Historic Lemitar

Lemitar's population was about 400 people in 1850 to 1860. Between 1870 and 1885, the population grew to around 800. During these years, several events put Lemitar into the history books.

First is probably her most famous resident ? Governor Manuel Armijo. He served as the last governor of New Mexico under Mexican rule. After surrendering New Mexico to Gen. Kearny in 1846 during the Mexican-American war, he was arrested and sent to Mexico City for cowardice and deserting in the face of the enemy. He was acquitted of these charges after proving his 400 Mexican soldiers was no match against the 1,500 Americans that entered Santa Fe. His surrender was to spare bloodshed of his countrymen.



Photo by Paul Harden

One of the old territorial style homes in Lemitar.

After his acquittal, Manuel Armijo returned to his family home in Lemitar in 1850. He farmed and ranched on his property east of the Lemitar church. Armijo died in 1854 at 60 years of age. Per his last will and testament, Governor Armijo was buried in Socorro in the northwest corner of the San Miguel courtyard (not the Lemitar church). His burial was recorded in church records as, "20th of January, 1854, I, Father Don Nicholas Valencia, hereby record in the death register the burial of the corpse of Manuel Armijo – I buried him in the church."

Manuel Armijo's brother, Juan, lived across the river in Sabino. There is a strong local legend of buried treasure related to the governor.

One version states that upon his return from Mexico, Manuel Armijo buried a chest of gold coins somewhere on his property. After a couple of years of the location being trampled by his sheep, he was unable to find the buried gold before

he died. The buried Mexican gold coins are still buried somewhere east of the church.

Another version states he buried the gold behind his Lemitar home. Upon his death, his brother, Juan, hired a Navajo to dig up the chest of coins and had it reburied near his home in Sabino. After the treasure was reburied, Juan Armijo killed the Navajo to leave no witnesses. With this version, the treasure chest remains buried somewhere on the east side of the river from Lemitar.

As far as anybody knows, the treasure has never been found. However, the author interviewed several people who admitted they tried finding it in earlier years!

Lemitar – County Seat

In 1854, shortly after the death of Manuel Armijo, the county seat for Socorro County was transferred from Socorro to Lemitar for undocumented reasons. Perhaps it was to honor the late Manuel Armijo. However, census records may be a clue. The 1850 census counted



Office of the State Historian
Manuel Armijo, the last governor of New Mexico under Mexico, lived his last days and died in Lemitar.



Photo by Paul Harden

The first Lemitar Post Office was established in 1866. Since that time, many of Lemitar's prominent citizens have served as Postmasters.

565 persons in Socorro and 420 in Lemitar. By the 1860 census, Lemitar's 780 persons outnumbered Socorro's 523 residents, making Lemitar the largest town in Socorro County.

Also during this time, Lemitar was a post for the New Mexico Militia – volunteers under the approval of the American government for protecting the villages in Socorro County against the Apaches. The post in Lemitar was located east of the present day Post Office. The first U.S. Dragoons also quartered at Lemitar and Socorro to protect travelers along the Camino Real. There are written documents by travelers, soldiers and the Mormon Battalion in the 1840-50s reporting both Lemitar and Polvadera being the victims of Apache attacks.

Civil War

Lemitar has an interesting place in history with the Civil War in New Mexico. In October 1861, Captain Paddy Graydon was commissioned to form a company of New Mexico Mounted Volunteers for a special "Spy Company." He needed men who knew the country around Socorro and Fort Craig, with some of them capable of speaking both Spanish and English.

He recruited all 84 of his men at Lemitar. They were paid 40 cents per day for their service, though they provided their own horses. In 1860s Lemitar, \$12 per month was a good wage.

Paddy Graydon's Spy Company roamed the Rio Grande and the Jornada del Muerto looking for the approaching Confederate and Texan soldiers. Once spotted on the march up the Rio Grande in February

1862, the "spies" from Lemitar went into action. Many followed the enemy army from a distance, sending daily reports to Graydon, and Col. Edward Canby at Fort Craig, as to their whereabouts. Graydon sent other Lemitar men into the enemy camps with the instructions, "Talk only in Spanish, listen only in English." These men entered the camps dressed as poor Mexicans selling apples to the hungry Confederates. Of course, while there, they counted the men, the wagons, the number of arms and canons, and overheard military strategy. This was extremely heroic service. One slip in this dangerous role, they would have certainly been killed on the spot by the enemy.

The information they gained was of extreme value to Col. Canby. They were ready when the enemy arrived. The Confederate surprise attack on the fort was spoiled. Two days later, they battled instead at Valverde.

At least three of Graydon's spies are buried in the Lemitar Cemetery: Juan Luna, Jose Castillo, and Gumesindo Benavides. They have official military head stones – proud members of "Graydon's N.M.MTD. VOLLS."



The day following the Battle at Valverde, several companies of New Mexico Volunteers returned to the post at Lemitar to await further instructions. Later that night, a company of Confederates demanded Socorro's surrender. Col. Nicholas Pino, in charge of the small detachment in Socorro, sent an express messenger to Lemitar for the N.M. Volunteers to respond. Unfortunately, Col. Pino was forced to surrender Socorro before the soldiers at Lemitar could arrive.

The Santa Fe Railroad

The railroad arrived in the Socorro area in 1880. This completely changed the face of Socorro and the villages along the Rio Grande – including Lemitar. Building supplies, tools, glass windows and other large and heavy items could now be shipped from virtually anywhere in the country to a humble adobe home in Lemitar.

This also meant Lemitar farmers could quickly ship their goods to market. This created an unexpected market in Lemitar – grapes. Lemitar quickly became one of the largest vineyards in New Mexico. By 1890, over 100,000 grapevines were producing grapes for distant markets and local wineries. Unfortunately, this lucrative industry came to an end in 1895 as a Rio Grande flood devastated Lemitar and Polvadera. Today, there are a few remnants of these historic vineyards in Lemitar and Polvadera.

When the mining “boom years” ended, Socorro's population dwindled from over 4,000 persons in 1885 to barely 1,500 by the turn of century. Lemitar's population likewise fell from 793 to 428 during the same period. The farmers of Lemitar toiled hard to restore their fields, only to be wiped out again by flood waters. Major floods hit Lemitar in 1903, 1921, 1929, 1937, 1941, and 1948.

It should be noted that the devastating flood of 1929 destroyed the mission churches at San Acacia, Polvadera, Luis Lopez, San Antonito, and San Marcial. This is why many of the mission churches from Alamillo to San Antonio were built in the early 1930s, to replace those destroyed in the 1929 flood. The Lemitar church managed to escape these flood waters.



Photo courtesy Delores Romero

The Romero family grew cotton in the 1950s-60s on their land west of the Lemitar church. Santiago Romero (center) stands with his son Jim (left) and daughter Delores (right) in 1960.

By the 1950s, farmers discovered cotton grew quite well in their silt covered fields. Lemitar became somewhat famous for its pure white cotton. This ended when the Lemitar cotton gin went out of business. The old cotton mill still stands north of the Lemitar Roadrunner Truck Stop.



Photo by Paul Harden

The La Sagrada Familia de Lemitar Catholic church, built in the early 1830s. The corner bell towers were added in 1963.

Lemitar Builds A Church

Like most of the new villages along the Rio Abajo, the townspeople wanted a church. Lemitar was no exception. Documentation suggests Lemitar began building her church in 1831, the year the village was established. The land for the church was donated by Juan Platero. According to the history of the San Miguel parish, mass was held in the home of Jos? Chavez while the church was being built.

It is believed José Chavez was the first mayordomo. Selected every year or two, the mayordomo represents the people to the Parish priest for maintenance and operation of the church. La Sagrada Familia has had a continuous line of mayordomos from at least 1835 to the present day – 175 years. The current mayordomos are Bill and Lorella Chavez.

The church was completed around 1833; the first recorded burial was in 1835, and the first baptism in 1837. The people called their new church “Los Dulces Nombres de Jesús, Maria y José de Lemitar” (The Holy Name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph of Lemitar) with San Jose the patron saint. Over the years, the Lemitar Catholic church also became known as “La Sagrada Familia de Lemitar” (The Sacred Family of Lemitar) – the name it is known by today.

The west branch of El Camino Real ran through

Socorro and entered Lemitar from the south. At Lemitar, the trail turned to cross to the east side of the river to join the main trail. Lemitar was a popular river crossing due to the shallow water and hard river bottom. Lemitar's sister town of Sabino was on the east side of the river. During this time, a ferry also operated between Lemitar and Sabino.

La Sagrada Familia church was built to face the Camino Real trail – the reason the church faces south instead of the traditional east. Today, NM-408 from Interstate 25 to past the railroad tracks traces the Camino Real through Lemitar.

La Sagrada Familia de Lemitar church has never had its own priest. In much of her early days, the Padre from San Miguel would visit about every four months and stayed for several days to hold mass, conduct baptisms, and other church duties. The people across the river in Sabino would travel to Lemitar, often staying with family and friends, while the priest was in town.

Due to the close proximity to Socorro, most Lemitar weddings were held at the San Miguel Church. There have only been a few marriages at the Sagrada Familia church in Lemitar. The first known wedding was that of Delores Romero of Lemitar to Rosalio Romero of San Antonio on December 27, 1965. After 45 years of marriage, the Romeros remain happily married, now living in Albuquerque. Two other couples are known to have been married in the Lemitar church.

Camposanto Viejo

The Lemitar church built a cemetery on the west side of the village on the Camino Real. It served the church from the 1830s to about 1900, when a new cemetery



Photo by Paul Harden

Camposanto Viejo – the old cemetery – goes back to Lemitar's founding in the 1830s, when New Mexico was still ruled by Mexico.

was built. This old cemetery, or “camposanto viejo,” is located on the north side of NM-406 and west of Chambon Road.

The first recorded burial in the cemetery was in 1835. The last burial may be that of Adela Chavez y Chavez in 1896. After over 100 years of non-use, this old cemetery has gone unnoticed and nearly forgotten. For years, it has been a field of weeds with only about a dozen head stones still standing.

There are several old cemeteries in Socorro County in similar condition. Father Andrew Pavlak, Pastor at San Miguel Parish, has launched a program to restore honor to these old cemeteries and those who lie in peace. In Lemitar, a new gate and sign to mark the cemetery has been installed. Under the direction of the current mayordomos, church members have fixed the fence, pulled weeds, and restored some of the graves. A job well done to all.

In searching church records, investigator Dan Scurlock believes about 170 of Lemitar's first residents are buried at camposanto viejo.

Camposanto Iglesia

Like many churches in New Mexico, Lemitar also has a camposanto iglesia ? a small cemetery located immediately in front of the church. Many of Lemitar's early mayordomos are buried here to honor their service to the church.



Photo courtesy Delores Romero

An inside view of the altar area of the Lemitar church during the 50th wedding anniversary of Antonio and Rufina Gonzales.

Aside from mayordomos, it is known that Juan Sanchez, Juan Armijo, and Magdalena Sanchez, an



Photo by Paul Harden

Interstate 25 barely misses the Lemitar cemetery. This is the Camposanto nuevo – the new cemetery – built about 1900, and the cemetery used today.

Indian servant of the Sanchez family, are also buried at the Lemitar camposanto iglesia. Juan Sanchez was later re-interred in the camposanto nuevo (new cemetery) in 1920.

Camposanto Nuevo

The new cemetery, the camposanto nuevo, was built further to the west around 1900. It is located east of the I-25 Lemitar interchange. This is the active Lemitar cemetery in use today.

Documentation and oral history states there are three persons buried under the altar of the Lemitar church: Patrick Fortune, Juan Sanchez, and Leonor Sanchez. Actually, they are buried in front of the altar under the floor, which was a packed dirt floor at the time.

Patrick Fortune

One of the early supporters of the Lemitar church was Patrick Fortune, an emigrant from Ireland. In 1849, he enlisted in the U.S. Army in New York with the expectation of traveling to the gold fields in California. Instead, his regiment of dragoons ended up stationed from Albuquerque to Doña Ana. For five years, he spent much of his time on various garrison duties in Lemitar and Socorro.

Upon his discharge, he remained in the Lemitar area, marrying Irish born Theresa Stapleton in 1861. Mr. and Mrs. Fortune, both being Irish-Catholics, became very involved in the Lemitar Church. Patrick donated money, time, and labor in continually improving the church from plastering and painting the walls to building pews and furniture. Patching leaks in the flat dirt-filled roof was a constant job.

The Fortunes had one child, Edward, born in Lemitar in 1863. The following year, Patrick took ill with pneumonia and died at only about 37 years of age. Mrs. Fortune survived him by many years, passing away in 1914.

Due to his premature death, prominence in the community, and service to the church, Patrick Fortune became the first person to be buried near the altar inside the Sagrada Familia church.

Patrick's son, Edward, married Maria Guadalupe Baca in Socorro. Their first of eight children was daughter Jennie Fortune, born in 1895.

Jennie Fortune was a well known business woman in Socorro and also served as the New Mexico Secretary of State 1927-1928 under Governor Richard Dillon. She died in Socorro in 1996 at 101 years of age.

Pablo and Leonor Sanchez

Pablo Sanchez was born in Lemitar in 1845. The 1870 census shows he was a farmer and his 20-year old wife, Leonor, a housekeeper. They lived with Juan Montolla in his Lemitar general store.

Around 1900, La Sagrada Familia church roof was leaking and falling into disrepair. Over several years, Pablo Sanchez, and others, performed much work on the church, including building the pitched roof to replace the old flat dirt roof, and installing glass-paned windows.

Shortly thereafter, Pablo died and the congregation agreed his life of service to the church should be rewarded. Pablo Sanchez became the second person buried near the church altar.

His widow, Leonor Sanchez, served as the postmaster at the Lemitar Post Office from 1899 through 1904. Upon her death in 1918, the parishioners of La Sagrada Familia church agreed she should be buried next to her husband. Leonor became the third, and last, person to be buried inside the church.

In the mid-1900s, another Pablo Sanchez was well known in Lemitar for building and running a saloon, dance hall and pool room for many years. It is the old adobe building complex just south of the junction of NM-408 with Severo Vigil Street, commonly called the gEscondida Lake Road. While many no doubt found his bar and dance hall to be a service to the community, this is not the Pablo Sanchez buried in the church!



Photo courtesy Delores Romero

Santiago Romero (left), wife Magarita, and son Jim stand in front of La Sagrada Familia de Lemitar church about 1960 – before the bell towers were added.

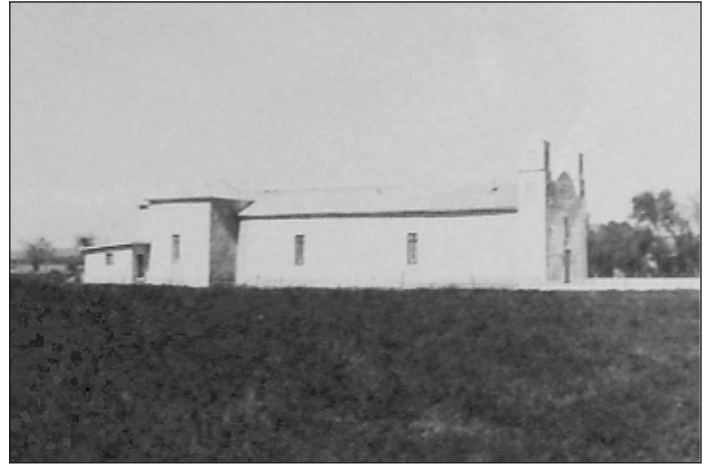


Photo courtesy Delores Romero

The Lemitar church shortly after the corner bell towers and front facade were added in 1963, giving it an appearance similar to San Miguel church in Socorro.

Church Renovations

In the 1920s, a galvanized steel covering was added to the pitched roof and the sacristry was rebuilt. The concrete wall in front of the church, enclosing the camposanto iglesia, bears the date 1931.

In 1950, Conrad Hilton donated money to help with needed renovations. The church association and townsfolk raised additional money for many significant improvements. Church records indicate Jose Lopez and Santiago Romero plastered the outside walls. The original packed earth dirt floor, in use for about 120 years, was finally covered with a wooden floor. Inside walls were replastered and painted, and the old wood heating stoves were replaced with gas heaters. The glass-paned windows, installed by Pablo Sanchez in 1895, were replaced with the lead stain glass windows one sees today.

In 1963, the church association again raised money to upgrade the church by adding the corner bell towers. Previously, there was a single small steeple built when the pitch roof was added in the early 1900s. The front facade was raised above the pitched roof line and crosses added to the cupolas on top of the bell towers. These changes made the Lemitar church to be similar in appearance to Socorro's San Miguel church.

Though numerous changes and renovations have been performed to the church over the past 175 years, much of it remains the original 1830s built church – making it the second oldest church in the Socorro Parish. La Sagrada Familia church has the same original cross shape, foundation, walls, and the 30 vigas of the original church. It is a classic example of the early mission style churches built in the colonial days.

To recognize the historic nature of one of the state's oldest churches, La Sagrada Familia de Lemitar church was placed on the New Mexico Register of Cultural Properties in 1982, and on the National Register of historic places the following year.

The Lemitar Church Today

In October 2009, the church was closed for structural improvements, the first in nearly 50 years, to strengthen the aging adobe walls. During this reconstruction, much of the west adobe wall of the Lemitar church and her sacristry failed and collapsed on June 29, 2010. Damage to the historic church is extensive.

Emergency repairs and cleanup has begun to stabilize the church, but there is much work to perform. In the early 1830s, churches were built by the entire community. In the gold days, everybody pitched in to help a neighbor build a house, or a corral, or a church. To fully repair the Lemitar church, it will take



Photo by Paul Harden

Damage to the Lemitar church on June 29, 2010, the day of the west wall collapse.



Photo courtesy San Miguel Mission

Father Andrew Pavlak, Pastor at San Miguel Parish, inspects the damage to the church. The wall collapsed during the lunch hour, sparing injury to workers in the church.



Photo courtesy Father Andrew Pavlak

An inside view of the damage to the Lemitar church following the June 2010 west wall collapse. The adobe walls and the 30 ceiling vigas are from the original 1830s construction.

the help of the entire community, just like the good old days.

The apparent sleepy little town of Lemitar has a magnificent history. And, so does her church. All the mission churches along the Rio Grande are an irreplaceable part of our history. They must be saved. They bring a charm to Socorro County and a standing testament to the rich heritage and culture of New Mexico.

If you would like to help repair the Lemitar church with a financial contribution, or with elbow grease during the repair phases, please contact the mayordomos or the San Miguel church office.

Some of the references used in this article:

"A Cultural Resource Investigation of Two Historic Sites in Lemitar, New Mexico" by Don Scurlock; "Rio Abajo" by Michael Marshall and Henry Walt; "Commemorating the Solemn Rededication of Old San Miguel Mission," (1974); N.M. Rootsweb; interviews with Benito Chavez, Jim Romero, Angeles (Gonzales) Lawrence, and others; and field work by the author. A special thanks to Father Andrew Pavlak, Pastor of San Miguel Parish, mayordomos Bill and Lorella Chaves, and Rosalio and Delores Romero for their assistance and invaluable photographs.

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Photo by Paul Harden

Emergency repairs and cleanup of the church damage has begun, but there is plenty of hard work yet ahead to restore the 1830s built church. (Aug. 2010).



Photo by Paul Harden

The June 2010 wall collapse at La Sagrada Familia church was covered by most major news media.