MISSION SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO:

“The Jewel of the Missions”

4TH GRADE MR. SAMS

FEBRUARY 28, 2001

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The seventh California mission, was founded November 1, 1776 by Father Junipero Serra. It had been previously established by Father Fermin Lasuen October 30, 1775 but abandoned because of Indian unrest. The mission was named for St. John of Capistrano, Italy, a theologian and inquisitor of the 14th century. The Mission’s stone church was begun in 1796; it was completed in 1806; and was destroyed by an earthquake in 1812. The Mission is located in San Juan Capistrano, California on Interstate Highway 5.

The old ruins of San Juan Capistrano tell a story of mixed achievement and disaster. The wide-spreading adobe structure shows what was once a thriving community. Massive remains of a great church stand as a monument to a brief but glorious chapter in early California history. The broken ivy-covered walls of the church is all that remains of a once-manificent structure that took nearly a decade to build, which was used for only a brief six years, and collapsed in one minute in a violent earthquake in 1812.

Ivy has grown over the walls of the buildings. White doves splash in the fountains. Flowers line the walkways and in the spring and summer and the swallows add to the sounds of the mission.
In its prime, the mission was one of the most successful in the chain, but in the beginning, there was little to predict the ultimate success of the project.

**Founding of the Mission**

Capistrano was really founded twice. In 1775, Father Lasuen set up a cross and dedicated the ground. A crowd of Indians curiously watched the rites and willingly helped to haul timber for the construction of a temporary chapel and other buildings. The work went on for eight days, but was suddenly stopped when news arrived of an Indian attack at the San Diego Mission. The bells were buried in a hurry and the small party hurried to San Diego where they took shelter in the presidio. When peace was assured, a second founding party under Father Serra journeyed to the site a year later. They found the cross that had been erected the year before still in place. They dug up the bells, hung them from a tree, and recited the service on November 1, 1776.

In another year the first little church was built, a modest structure that is still in use today. Considered the oldest church in California, it is called Father Serra Church because it is the only one still standing where it is known that he said Mass.
Once established, the mission prospered almost from the start. The beautiful valley was fertile, pleasant, and blessed with a moderate climate. The fields yielded abundant harvests of grains, vegetables, fruit, and livestock. In time, store houses, shops, and barracks for the soldiers were built around a large patio. The enclosed square was spacious enough to hold all of the followers and their belongings in case of trouble. The patio was irregular in shape, each side being a different length, because the padres paced off the measurement instead of using surveyor’s instruments.

The First Buildings

Few trees grew in southern Alta California so that wood was not abundant. Instead of wood, the church was made from a material called adobe. Adobe is a heavy clay soil common in dry regions. The priests taught the mission Indians to make adobe bricks. The mission Indians became experts in brick making.

First they dug up the clay which they threw into a shallow ditch and covered with grass or straw. Then the Indians added water to make the mixture stick together. Workers including children stirred the mixture with their feet. The Indians then put the bricks into adobe wooden molds and placed them in the sun to dry. The sun would harden the bricks. The children would then guard the bricks so that animals would not make tracks in the soft
adobe bricks. Each brick weighed about 60 pounds when they were dry.

Priests and Indians from other missions taught the beginning learners at San Juan Capistrano the skills for constructing buildings. The Indians were the people doing most of the labor of the mission but the padres showed the Indians where to build the mission structures. Some of the priests had measuring sticks to make sure the walls were straight and of the same length. Other padres just walked along the path, pointing out where the mission walls should go. These walls were often crooked.

First they collected stones for the building's foundation. The stones were stacked to create the base of the building. Indian workers added mortar to make the rocks stick together. Next the Indians stacked the heavy adobe bricks to build the walls. The thick adobe walls helped the buildings stay cool in the summer. They also held in heat created by small fireplaces that kept the buildings warm in winter.

Because adobe turns to mud when wet the missions needed a solid roof to keep the buildings from falling and crumbling. The Indians covered the roofs with thin sheets of clay that was dried in a kiln. Then the Indians white washed the walls with a mixture of lime, salt, and sometimes goat’s milk.
The workers built the buildings around a quadrangle. This provided a defense from possible attacks. It also allowed the priests to keep track of the Indians. The church was one side of the quadrangle. The priests made up other sides of the quadrangle. At the back of the quadrangle were separate quarters for the unmarried women and girls. These were called mongeries. It also included workshops, classrooms, storage rooms and kitchens.

By the 1700’s Serra’s Chapel was too small to fit all the Indians who were now living at the mission. Father Vincent Fuster and Father Norberto de Santiago wanted to build the grandest church ever seen in Alta California. To make sure the building was durable and attractive the priests hired Isidro Aguilar a skilled stonesman from New Spain. He showed the workers his trade and carved elegant stone doorways and arches for the church.
Work slowed during the 1800’s a drought ruined the missions crops. People got sick from lack of food. Many died including Father Fuster. A fire later destroyed food kept in one of the storehouses and in 1803 Aguilar died. But the work of building the church continued.

It took them nine long years to build this cathedral-like church. When it was finished it stood as the most magnificent church of all the California missions, 180 feet long 40 feet wide. Designed in the form of a cross, it had a vaulted ceiling surrounded by seven domes. The main entrance was crowded by a massive belltower 120 feet tall that could be seen for ten miles. The yellow sandstone for the great church was carried by the Indians in a never-ending procession from a quarry six miles away.

In 1812 San Juan Capistrano was thriving. It had soap and candle factories, a blacksmith shop, a winery and wine cellar, spinning and weaving rooms and even a hat shop. The mission also had an olive press to make oil, two huge granaries and a tannery for tanning animal hides. It also operated a foundry for casting metal, the only one in the mission chain.

Major crops at the mission included beans, wheat and corn. There were peach and apricot orchids. Sheep, cattle and goats grazed the pasture. Horses roamed the grounds. The mission often traded farm goods with other missions.
On the morning of December 8, 1812, a massive earthquake struck during morning religious service. The walls crumbled and the domes caved in, killing some 40 panicked Indians worshipers inside, including two young bell ringers who fell from the towers. A few escaped from an exit near the altar area. The priests who were in front of the church at the time survived.
After the rubble had been cleared, what remained of the stone church was full of cracks. They returned to hold services in Serra’s Chapel. No one had the heart to rebuild the Great Stone Church. During the following year the Indians spent time repairing damage to other mission buildings. San Juan Capistrano began to decline when disease struck killing many Indians and leaving fewer workers.

There had never been an attempt to rebuild the Great Stone Church, and its ruins have changed little over the centuries. Today, the Great Stone Church is the mission’s priority preservation project. Now the Great Stone Church is being rebuilt.

Efforts to rebuild the mission are careful to use the original methods of the padres and Indian builders. The work is described as restoration, but reconstruction is a big part of the effort. The goal is to create exact duplicates of the original structures. Scaffolding is erected around the structure to hold the walls in place. As funds are raised to help pay for the project a support structure will be built inside the old church as well.

The plan for the preservation and long-term protection of the Mission will cost an estimated $20 million, and will require eight to ten years to accomplish.
The Indians

Native Americans were the first people to live in the southern part of Alta California. There were about 7,000 Indians during the 1500’s. These Native Americans spoke in dialects that came from two languages – the Shoshonean and the Yuman. In what is now San Diego is where the Yuman-speaking people settled. While the Shoshonean-speaking people settled just north of there which is the
area of the San Juan Capistrano Mission. Descendants of the Shoshonean-speakers are now known as Acagchemem.

The Shoshonean-speakers settled along the creeks or on river-banks where fresh water was available. They built dome-shaped houses, lashing sticks together to create a wooded frame. The Indians then tied reeds or other grasses over the frame. Sometimes the builders added a layer of soil over these materials to keep out the rain and wind. When their homes got too dirty or full of bugs the Indians burned the structure and built new ones.

The Indian’s way of life fit the seasons and the environment. Because the weather was mild, the Shoshonean wore few clothes. Women wore skirts made from reed, rabbit skins or the soft inner bark of willow trees. Men wore a belt where they carried a knife, food and tools. Children age 10 and younger went naked. In colder weather they wore capes and blankets made from animal skins.

When the men were hunting in the desert they would wear sandals to protect their feet. The sandals were made from the agave plant – a large desert plant with tough fibers.

Shoshonean speakers caught fish and shellfish from the ocean. They hunted birds, deer, rabbits and other animals with nets, arrows and slings. They were also gathers of roots, herbs, and other plants for food. They gathered acorns, which they placed in baskets. These baskets were hidden in caves, hung in trees and on poles above the ground to keep from animals.

In 1542 Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, an explorer met Indians on the coast, but did not respect their rights to the land. He claimed the land for the Spanish king and sailed away. In 1602 Sebastián Vizcaíno, another explorer, sailed into a large bay which he named the port of San Diego, and continued northward. Spain lost interest in this land until Russian began to explore the Pacific coast. The king decided to establish Spanish settlements in Alta California to prevent foreigners from gaining territory.

The Spaniards decided to use the new settlements in Alta California as a way of gaining new converts to the Catholic faith. They needed people to build churches and to farm the land. Although people from New Spain would settle the new communities, Spanish officials wanted to make the Indians of Alta California Spanish citizens.

Spanish officials sent Father Serra north to San Diego and Monterey to found missions. His job was to covert Indians near the
missions to the Roman Catholic faith. Captain Portolá and a handful of other soldiers agreed to set up presidios near the missions. The presidios would protect the padres and ensure that the Indians obeyed the Spaniards. Eventually the missions would be turned into pueblos, towns with Indians and Spanish settlers. The Spanish officials made the Indians workers, relying on them as their source of labor.

Indians came to the mission because they were ill from diseases that the Spaniards had unknowingly brought from Europe. The shamans (tribal doctors) couldn’t heal the sick, so they thought that since the Spaniards had brought the diseases they would have the cure. But often the Indians who were ill eventually died.

The Native Americans did not realize that the priests expected them to stay at the mission for good. They were supposed to live there and give up their way of life. Mission Indians also had to give up their religion and accept the Catholic faith. They had to work in order to join the mission. The missionaries taught the neophytes to farm the land and take care of livestock so that the mission would have food. The Indians did all of the work of the mission. They also learned to make adobe bricks, candles, soap, olive oil and wine.

The Indians had to attend religious services conducted in a language that they didn’t understand. Although they did not understand the meanings behind the Catholic ceremonies, the Indians listened to the music and chanting.

Indian revolts did not occur at the San Juan Capistrano mission although they did not far away in San Diego. This was probably because it was the first mission. The Native Americans revolted against the Spaniards with clubs and arrows. They were no match for the soldiers with their weapons. The Indians killed one soldier and a servant before losing the battle. During the conflict, three Indians lost their lives and many others were wounded. Afterward a restless peace settled over Mission San Diego.
The Padres

The padres were missionaries sent by Spain along with leaders of the Roman Catholic Church to establish missions and presidios throughout the Spanish Empire in order to strengthen its claim on the land. The goal of the Spanish mission system in North America was to make Indians accept Spanish ways and become loyal subject of the Spanish king. Priests were to convert the local Indian population to Catholicism and to teach them to dress and behave like Spaniards. Soldiers came to protect the missionaries and to make sure the Indians obeyed the priests. The priests sometimes
lured Indians with glass beads and colored cloth other items new to the Native Americans.

The padres’ work consisted of teaching the Indians about Christianity and working the mission. The missions became so productive that the Franciscans established a valuable trade network. Mission priests exchanged goods and provided nearby soldiers and settlers with provisions. They traded fruits, vegetables, and leather goods, soap, and tallow among the missions.

**Secularization**

In the early 1800’s the Franciscan priests no longer relied on New Spain for supplies. The missions depended on goods the Indians produced. By this time the missions were also providing goods to the soldiers living near the settlements. Settlers who lived in growing pueblos near the missions also got their supplies from the priests. At the same time the settlers and soldiers were growing angry that most of Alta California’s fertile land was in the hands of the Franciscan priests.

In 1813 Spain passed a law limiting the power of the mission priests. It said that priest who had been at the mission for more than 10 years were to transfer their authority to a bishop appointed by Spain. But mission life remained the same because the ruling was not made known in Alta California. In 1821 New Spain reenacted the law. The bishop still allowed the settlements to stay under control of the priest because of other church business.

In 1821 when New Spain won its independence from the Spanish Empire it became known as the Republic of Mexico. Mexico claimed Alta California. During this time the settlers who lived near the missions, saw this as an political opportunity. These people called Californios were mainly of Spanish heritage. They wanted better land to which to run their ranches. The Californios argued that the mission system was a failure because the Indians had not fully adopted the Spanish ways. But the real reason was that the Californios did not like the mission system because they wanted the land for themselves.

Throughout the 1820’s the Californios and the missionaries argued. The Californios wanted the land and so the urged secularization – a policy that would remove the missions from the
Franciscan control. People who wanted this wanted the mission land divided up into estates that private citizens would then be allowed to own. The idea of secularization had been around for a long time. Spain had always intended that the Indians would one day take over the missions. But the priests felt that the Indians were not yet ready to take over the missions and that they still needed routines and supervision offered by mission life. The priests also felt that if the Indians did not have the mission, they would give up the Catholic religion and the Spanish ways. They also thought that the Californios might take over the missions.

Despite the protest by the priests, secularization passed. The priests lost their authority and could no longer run the missions with a free hand. The Mexican government appointed civil administrators to run the missions and the Indians. The Mexican government also wanted to replace the Franciscan priests with Mexican priests. But they were not available. Mission San Juan Capistrano was secularized in 1833. Some of the Indians received land but most was granted to the Californios. They set up private estates called ranchos. Californios persuaded the Indians to sell the farms and pastures. Because most of the Indians had not been taught to read, they were not familiar with the Mexican laws of landownership.

Eventually the United States government moved many Native Americans onto reservations. In southern California the reservations were on rocky land that no one else wanted because it was difficult to farm. The Indians had trouble hunting and farming and had to rely on government money and supplies to support their families.

**Abraham Lincoln Saves Mission San Juan Capistrano**

Most people know that President Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, but few realize he saved the Mission as well. A month before his death in 1865, Lincoln signed historic documents deeding Mission San Juan Capistrano back to the Church after it had been unjustly seized by the Mexican government and sold to private parties.

In 1845, the last Mexican governor of California, Pio Pico, sold the Mission to his brother-in-law for $710. In 1848, the United States took control of California and voided this deal.
For the next 10 years the Mission documents made their way through the different departments of the government, and finally came to the desk of the President. He signed the documents returning them to the Church. Tragically, Lincoln’s life ended just a month later, on April 14, 1865, when he was assassinated while watching a play.

One hundred years later, in 1965, the Mission got a copy of the Lincoln documents to be displayed.

**Role of the Mission Today**

In 1884 author Helen Hunt Jackson published Ramona a novel about early California and people throughout the country were attracted by the dramatic history of the California Missions. In 1895 writer and editor Charles F. Lummis started an organization called the Landmarks Club. The first project was to restore San Juan Capistrano. They put a new roof on fragile Serra’s Chapel. Serra’s Chapel was about to collapse before the renovation. Father John O’Sullivan a young priest with tuberculosis who had visited the site in 1910, got permission from the Catholic Church to restore the mission so it could hold services again. By 1918 Father O’Sullivan had turned the dusty old chapel back into an active church.

Visitors will discover many areas of interest within the Mission walls. You can hear the tolling of the old Mission bells and walk down its time worn paths. The beauty and peace amid the 10 acres
of lush gardens and cool fountains, cloistered by old adobe walls, offers visitors seclusion from the sights and sounds of a busy world. You can learn about the Serra Chapel, padres quarters, industrial area, soldiers barracks, and cemetery.

The Mission is a registered historic landmark. It contains museums, period rooms and a gift shop. They host art exhibits throughout the year as well as public festivals. They also engage in folk art demonstrations; performance arts; period demonstrations; and educational and cultural programs.

The Mission also offers two types of tours:

**Self-Guided Tours** - must be comprised of fifteen [15] people or more. Reservations are required. Tour guides will receive a Mission Calendar and Guide upon entrance. This ‘old fashioned’ gazette contains written features and news article as well as a map that guides the visitors through the most important points of the Mission.
**Docent Guided Tours** - must be comprised of fifteen [15] people or more. Reservations are required. Visitors experience an informative and fascinating ninety [90] minute guided tour of the Mission grounds, history and folklore.

**Return of the Swallows Celebration**

In what has become a favorite springtime event, thousands of people gather at Mission San Juan Capistrano for the legendary Return of the Swallows. The famous old Mission bells ring as the first swallows are sighted after daybreak.

As the legend goes, a Spanish padre was visiting San Juan Capistrano and was upset upon witnessing an innkeeper destroying the nests that cliff swallows had built into the crevices of his inn's roof (the swallows often attach their tiny, conical mud nests to structures and have a bad rap for being noisy and messy pests). In the tradition of animal-loving St. Francis, the padre "invited" the birds to take refuge at the Mission, where there was "room for all." Today, a favorite nesting place for the swallows is in the ruins of the Great Stone Church.

The return of the swallows was a pretty low-key affair until the 1930s when the first national live broadcast on "Swallows Day" occurred. An overly dramatic local announcer then reported that
"the skies are black with swallows" and caught the attention of the country.

In recent years, the swallow count at the Mission has been dropping drastically (probably due to a construction explosion in the area, which has added to the inventory of nesting sites). In an effort to lure the birds back, experts have done everything from creating pre-fabricated nests to releasing thousands of insects around the Mission. Unfortunately, success to date has been limited.

Joshua Genzuk’s Mission San Juan Capistrano Website

For Additional Information visit “Joshua Genzuk’s Mission San Juan Capistrano Report” Website at:

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