

St Michael's Church San Miguel del Vado, San Miguel County, New Mexico

MR Oberndorf

The history of the small villages of northern New Mexico, and their regionally unique vernacular architecture, has not been well documented. Because of the central role of the Catholic Church in the everyday lives of most of the residents, past and present, church buildings comprise an important part of this architectural and cultural tradition. This study, an RCHME Level 3 archaeological survey, was undertaken in August, 2001, to record St Michael's Parish church in the village of San Miguel del Vado, New Mexico, USA. The aim was to determine whether the reported construction date of 1805 could be confirmed, modifications to the structure, and materials and building techniques detected, and to relate any such changes to cultural changes in the village over time.

Introduction

St Michael's Church is on the west side of the Pecos River and New Mexico State Route 3. The church is oriented approximately east-west (82°-262°), with the front entrance facing the Pecos River crossing of the Santa Fe Trail, about 200m to the east. The church form was that of a traditional, rural Spanish church with bell-towers flush with the front and possibly the sides, too. It has been in continuous use as a parish church since its construction was completed in 1806 or 1807, but Eller (2000), Mascarenas (2001) and Sheehan (1998) give it as 1805 to 1806. The life of the church saw the coming of the Santa Fe Railroad in 1879, suggesting an influx of new ideas and access to new materials.

The project

Little work has been done on the unique vernacular architecture of the small villages of northern New Mexico. Nearly every village in the region - some with populations of less than 100 - has a church or chapel, yet few of these culturally important structures have been studied. Built by residents in c1805 of stone, mud, adobe, and ponderosa

pine, the church was originally constructed in traditional rural Spanish style. It was later re-modelled with internal modifications; the traditional flat roof was replaced with a hipped and gabled sheet metal one, and bell-towers added to

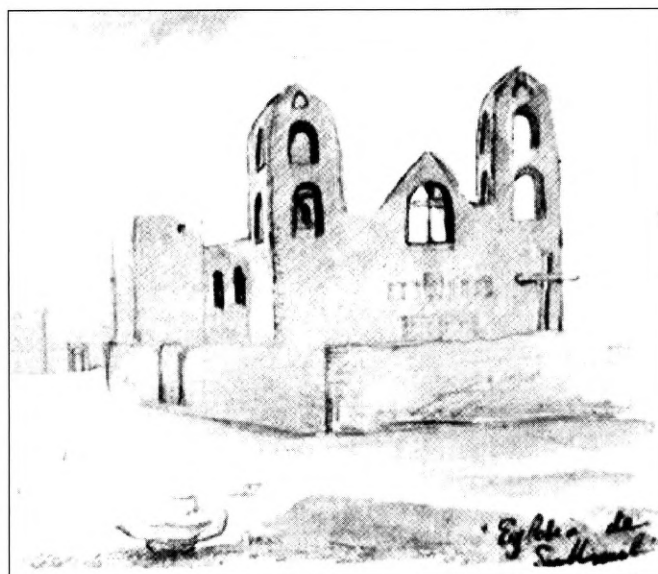


Fig 2: Watercolour of Iglesia de San Miguel de Vado by Lt JW Abert, dated 1846

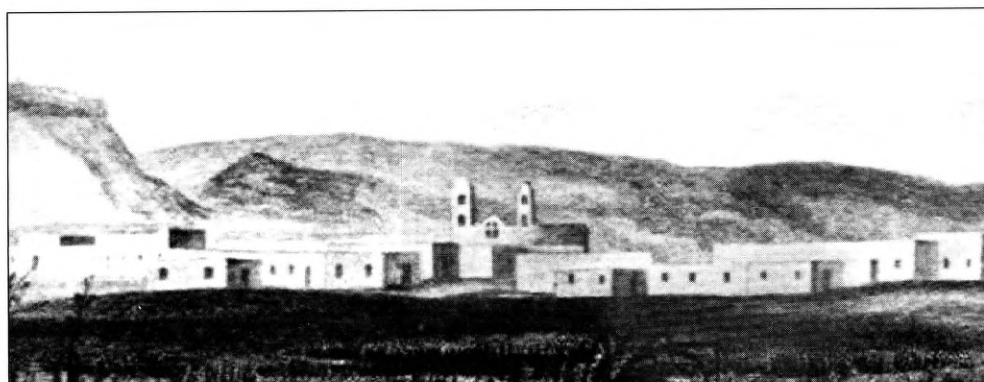


Fig 1: Watercolour of the village of St Miguel de Vado seen from the east of the Pecos River by JW Abert, dated 1846

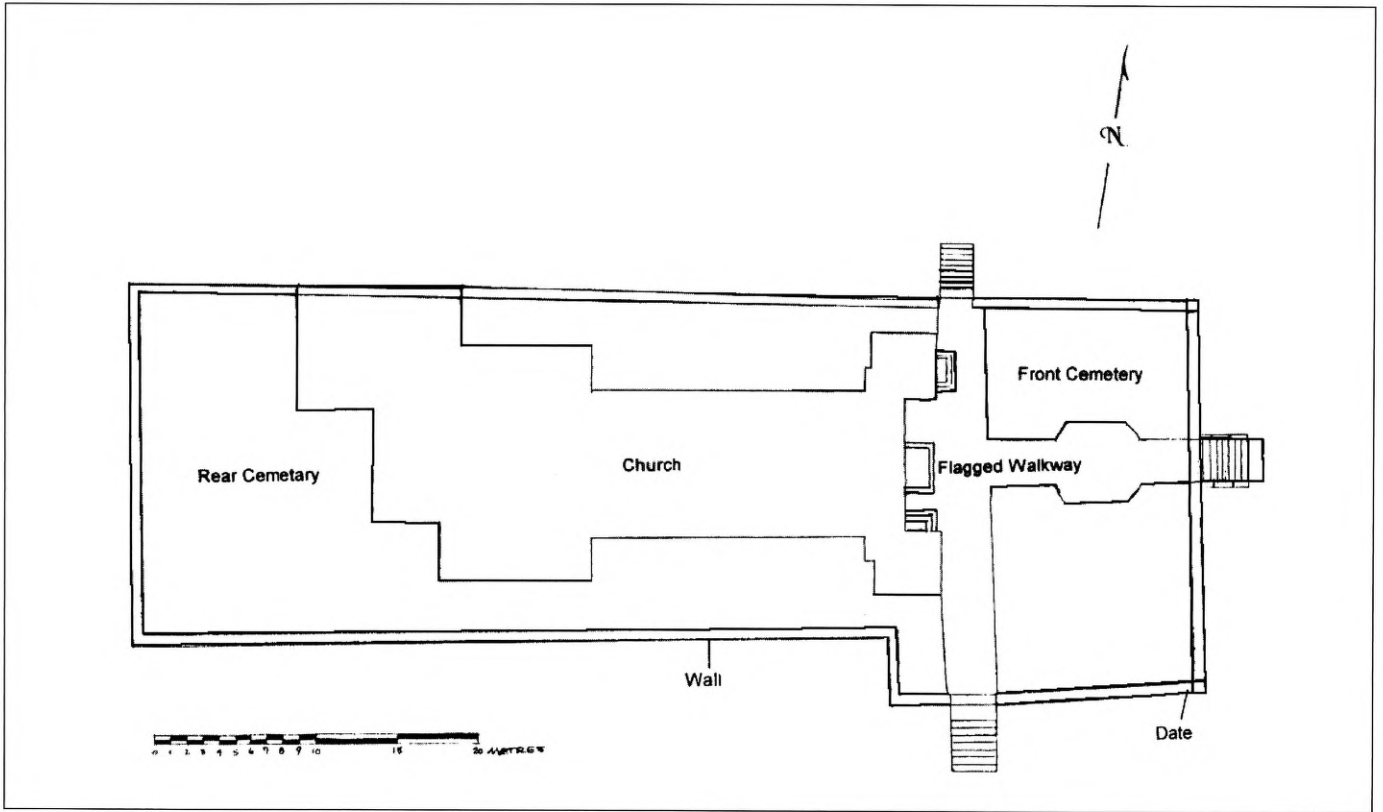


Fig 3: Plan of the church of San Miguel de Vado within its compound (Oberndorf)

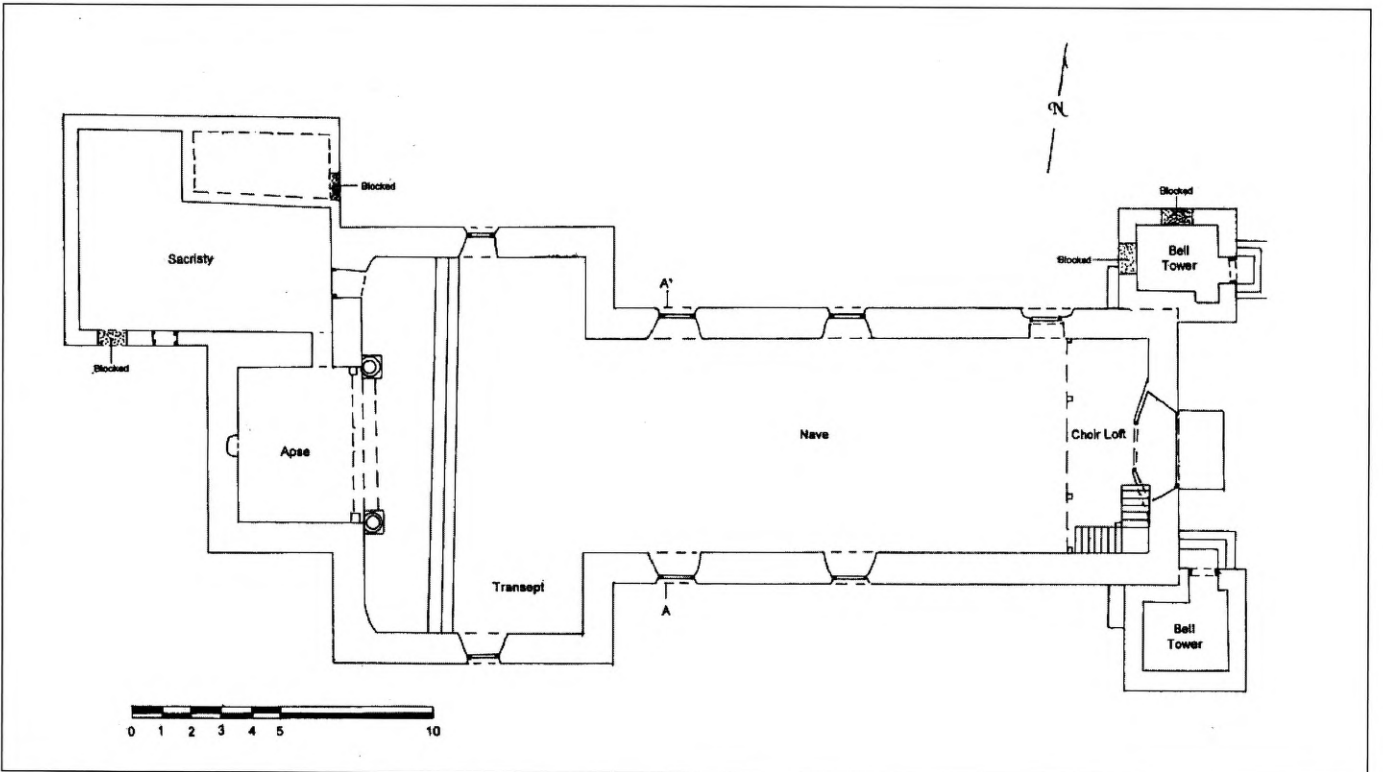


Fig 4: Plan of the church of San Miguel de Vado (Oberndorf)

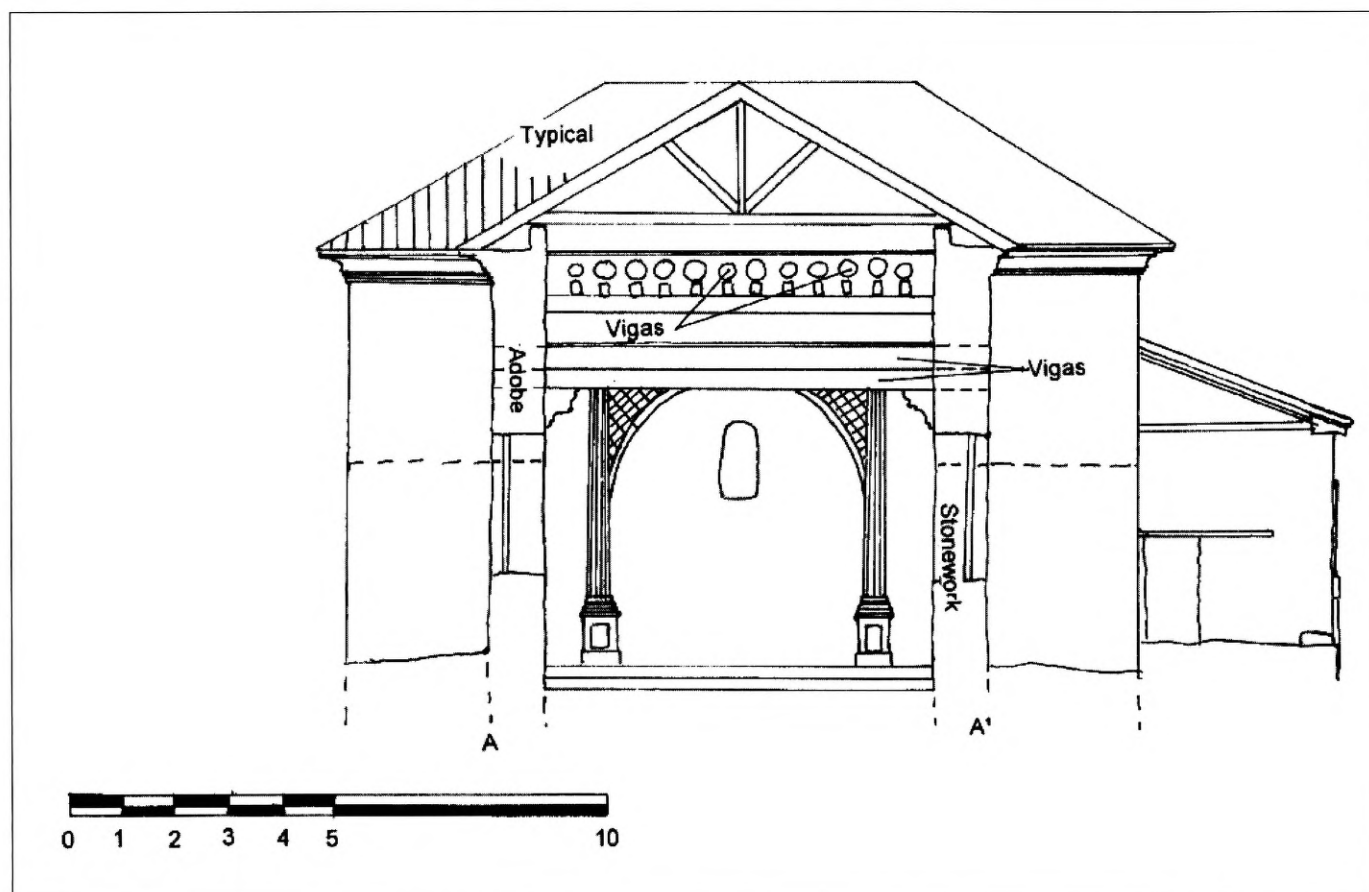


Fig 5: Section through the church of San Miguel de Vado (Oberndorf)

the front. In 2000, the outer stucco was removed and the internal fabric exposed. Renovation provided an opportunity to examine and record St Michael's Church as a good example of the genre. A desk-top survey was carried out, and over the course of two days, the church building was photographed and measured, using steel tapes and an engineer's compass to provide the basis for scaled drawings (Figs 3, 4). The fabric was examined and notes taken regarding its constituent parts, but a stone-by-stone recording was not felt to be necessary. Access to most parts of the church was possible, allowing examination of some of the original roof vigas (rafters made from whole logs), mud, and adobe, currently exposed by renovations to the attic in the apse area.

The building

The church sits within a compound, surrounded by a wall, 1.5m high in the rear or western part, and almost 3m high on the front to the east. From areas where the outer covering of stucco has either been removed or fallen off, the wall was seen to be constructed of roughly dressed sandstone with mud mortar. A date of 1946 with names written on the stucco when still wet, was found on the south-east corner of the wall. The construction type here is irregular coursed

rubble (Morris 2000; McAlester and McAlester 1992). Part of it is similar in style and consistency to materials in the main body of the church, suggesting contemporaneity. A water-colour sketch of the church from 1846, showing a wall (Fig 2) seems to support this suggestion. The lower part of almost the entire building is constructed of roughly dressed and irregularly coursed tabular sandstone. This sandstone is available and easily quarried from outcrops occurring in the immediate vicinity.

The present ground surface within the wall is approximately 1.5m to 2m above the level of the ground surrounding the church. The areas within the wall to the front and rear of the church are cemeteries, with the earliest marked gravestone, dated 1845, in the rear portion. The front of the church, including the two bell-towers, is 16.10 m wide. The upper levels of the stone in the main building and the two bell towers are uneven; the main building is higher than the stonework in either tower, and the stonework in the north tower is higher than the south tower. Since the joints between the main building and towers were butt joints, with no interlocking stone or adobe, the towers must be an addition to the original structure. Coping just below the crown moulding and clapboard-covered gable of the main building, and visible

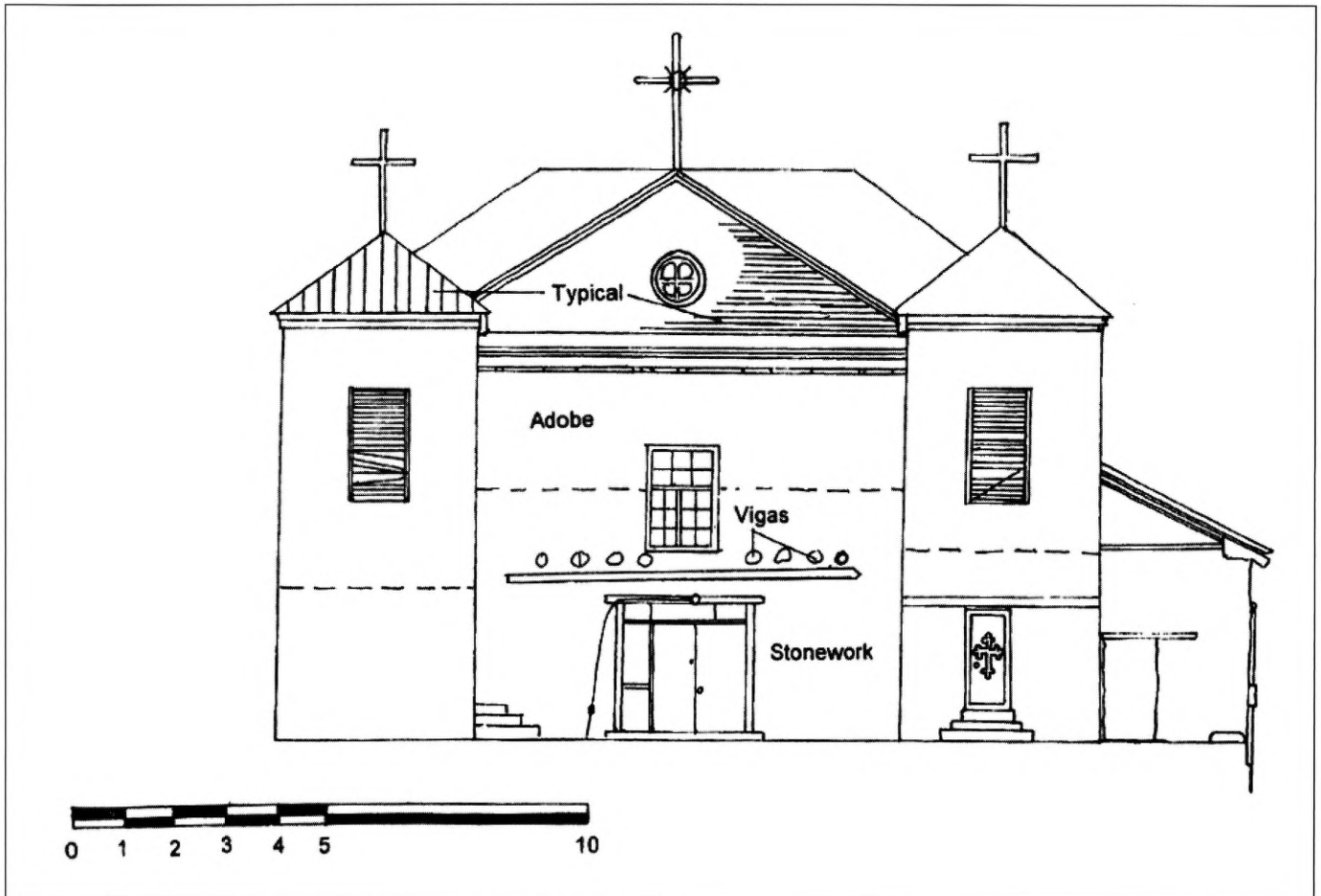


Fig 6: Front elevation of the church of San Miguel de Vado (Oberndorf)

on the north and south sides of the nave, is missing from the towers; the coping was a protective cap on the top of the original adobe walls, and not necessary with the new metal roof. Since the roof appeared in the 1882 photograph, it was probably added sometime between 1846 and 1882. The local church historian states that the tin roof was installed, and new Santos (statues of the Catholic saints, often made by local artists) were acquired, in 1881 (Victoria Mascarenas 2001); the original towers were probably added then. Blocked openings are clearly discernable on the top of the north tower, but stonework on the south tower uses larger, more uniform blocks, and shows no blocked openings. Mascarenas states that 'one of the towers collapsed in the late 30s', and according to the parish priest, Father Ortiz (pers comm), the south tower was blown over during a severe storm. A comparison of the photograph from 1882 and one from 1911, with a photograph taken in 1940, shows the towers lower in 1940, with no light visible through the north tower opening, indicating that only a front opening then existed.

A 6.75 metre-long, hand-hewn beam spans nearly the entire width of the present opening, giving added support over the main entrance, and carrying the vigas that support the choir loft. The beam has some carved decoration.

According to the church Sacristan, the upper design represents a rope and is traditional. Upside-down lettering reads 'Año de 1805', and is the probable construction date. A similar feature exists at the church in Villanueva, 11 miles to the south, built a few years after St. Michael's.

The choir loft vigas of ponderosa pine average 24.8cms in diameter; two of the eight vigas have notched ends, suggesting that they were re-used from an earlier structure, and dendrochronological samples support this (Dean 2001). The windows and clapboard cladding were probably installed when the roof was altered in 1881, but both are probably replacements - the lower, rectangular casement, prior to 1942, and the circular one in recent times. The entry doors and the doors to the towers are recent. The ends of the original roof vigas, resting on hand-hewn beams, are visible on the north wall of the nave, as is the coping (just below the crown moulding) and the 1846 water-colour shows a clerestory. The windows, blocked with adobe, are visible only from inside the attic; as with the windows on the front, the four gothic style windows on the sides of the nave and the two on the transepts were probably installed in 1881. It is likely that they have been replaced since then.

An additional feature on the north wall, just west of the north tower, is a half-buried door, discovered when the outer

stucco was removed from the surface of the building. The door extends 1.4m above the present ground surface, suggesting that approximately 1.3m of it is buried; its knob is typical of the type common in the late 19th century and into the middle of the 20th century. Attached to the rear of the church, the sacristy shows evidence of being partially buried, too, and Mascarenas says that the original church included at least part of the existing sacristy. On the south wall is a blocked doorway that extends below the present ground surface; the door next to it is a recent replacement, probably installed in the renovations of 1881. An addition was made to the east part of the north side at some date. A doorway on the east side was blocked within the last two years.

The present interior appears to date from renovations in 1881. Entry is gained through a small vestibule at the east end of the nave, opening into the area beneath the choir loft. On the right, next to the confessional, is a recessed case that is probably built into the partially buried door opening. Originally, burials were interred under the floor of the church, a practice that ended when the wooden floor was installed (Mascarenas 2001). It is not clear whether burials occurred outside in the cemetery areas at the same time.

The nave contains pews, and Santos stand in the recessed window openings, a little over 2m above the floor. The floor is constructed of 8.3cms wide pine boards, probably tongue-in-groove. Wainscoting of factory-produced 8.3cms tongue-in-groove panelling, capped with chair-rail moulding, rises to a height of 58cms around the nave, ending at the west wall of the transept. The transept is divided by a riser running north-south, 40cms high. The apse, or sanctuary, is framed by two wooden 'Doric' columns seated on 98cms high pedestals. There is no architrave, and the frieze is mounted above a latticed wooden arch that sits just behind the columns. The ceiling comprises factory-produced 12.7cms wide tongue-in-groove with a decorative groove in the centre; it is bordered by cornice moulding. The recently remodelled sacristy can be entered by a door leading from the north transept, or a short passageway leading off the north side of the apse. The south, west and north walls may be original, but an interior wall, creating a room in the north-east corner, is probably later. Access to the attic is currently gained by ladders from the south bell-tower. Repairs to the floor over the original roof have been undertaken during the last two years and are still in progress. The roof is supported by king post trusses with two-by-six inch members and two-by-eight inch rafters that measure the full dimensions (diagnostic of pre-WWII milling).

Prehistoric antecedant

A totally unexpected find was the presence of earlier material within the mud mortar on the north, south and west walls; they contained large amounts of charcoal, bone fragments, a few chips of chert, and both decorated and undecorated

prehistoric pottery sherds. The source of the inclusions appears to have derived from a prehistoric or early historic Pueblo midden, re-used in the bonding for the stonework of the original construction phase. A preliminary analysis of the painted sherds made while they were still within their mortar matrix, and left *in situ*, suggests that the sherds may be Wiyo Black-on-White, dated from between c AD 1300 to AD 1425, or Sankawi Black-on-Cream, dated from between c AD 1500 to AD 1600 (Elliott 1982). Definitive typing must wait for detailed laboratory analysis in some future project. It was not uncommon for Spanish Catholic churches to be built on top of pre-existing prehistoric structures, making a symbolic statement.

Discussion

Evidence for a building date of 1805 was in the form of a date cut into a hand-hewn beam. The long beam is embedded in the irregularly coursed rubble wall of the original structure above the main entry and supports the eight choir loft vigas. A similar beam, also with an upside-down date, reportedly exists in the church at Villanueva, 11 miles to the south, built a few years after St. Michael's. This may lend support to the suggestion that the date was carved at the time of construction, rather than being later graffiti. Samples from roof vigas produced cutting dates of late summer or early autumn of 1807 which suggests at least a three-year construction period, 1805 to at least 1807, consistent with the amount of time needed to construct a structure 31.5m long and over 16m wide, with walls one metre thick and seven metres high, by the residents of a village of only 52 families (Sheehan 1998). Although four samples from the ceiling of the apse gave dates of 1816 to 1817, it is probable that these were later additions or repairs.

A number of alterations to the original structure are evident: burial under the floor of the church ceased after installation of a new, undated, floor. The earliest tombstone in the cemetery, all of which sit at present ground level, is dated 1845. Two half-buried doorways - one on the north side of the nave, at the east end, and one on the south side of the sacristy - and the water-colour of 1846 (Fig 2), showing a gate at ground level, opening directly through the wall, indicate that soil was deposited inside the compound wall. This may have been done to accommodate outdoor burials, filling in the rear first (c1845), and the sides and front later (post 1846). Comparison of wall heights shows that the in-filling, at least of the front area, continued beyond 1942. The date of 1946 in the stucco on the south-east corner may indicate the completion and finishing of the wall alterations, done to accommodate the new ground level.

The two bell-towers are clearly later additions, as evidenced by their butt joints to the main building, rather than interlocking stone and adobe. The metal roof was added in 1881, probably at the same time. Modifications to the interior, the addition of wainscoting and ceiling,

columns and a lattice-work arch creating a proscenium framing the apse or sanctuary, gothic style fenestration of the nave and transept, and a casement window for the choir loft over the entrance at the east end of the nave, were probably all done at this time. A hipped and gabled, water-impermeable, metal roof would have been a great improvement over a flat roof of mud; though more costly to initially purchase and install, its useful life was much longer, and maintenance costs, both in labour and cash, were much lower. Over time, the rest of the community followed the lead of the church, and flat roofs gradually were replaced by metal throughout the Pecos River valley.

The south tower collapsed during a storm in the late 1930s. When it was rebuilt the profile was lowered on both towers. Originally each tower had three openings. Only one opening was installed in the north tower, presumably due to the difficulty of making new ones in the already existing walls, a problem not encountered in the south tower, which was rebuilt from scratch. Other changes are evident in the sacristy, where at some point, an extension was added on the north-east corner and a window and two doors blocked with adobe at different, undetermined times.

The pride taken by Father Ortiz and his parishioners in their church and its history, and the enlightened view of the Catholic Archdiocese of Santa Fe towards preservation, are the best guarantees that St Michael's Church will remain for future generations. It is to be hoped, too, that this pride will lead to further, more detailed studies of the church and its environs. Both provide an opportunity to make a major contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the cultures and history of this unique area.

Acknowledgements

Dendrochronological samples from several parts of the building were taken by Thomas C Windes, of the National Park Service, and analysed using the services of Jeffrey S Dean, of the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research at the University of Arizona in Tucson (Dean 2001).

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Editor's Note

A 'viga' is a tree trunk from which the bark has been peeled. They are round beams, now usually only between eight and ten inches in diameter, used in the ceiling for decoration or as a ceiling support. When the ends of vigas are visible on the exterior they are called 'exposed vigas.'

'Santos' are small figures or groups of figures up to about 20 inches high. They are wood carvings coated with gesso and brightly painted; some figures are jointed, some have silver crowns or radiances or other metal objects; subject matter is religious and varied, from crucifixions to saints, angels, Mary and Jesus, Joseph and Mary.

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