

Frequently Asked Questions about Native American Life at a Mission



Why did the Native Americans decide to live at missions?

The Spanish padres attracted Native Americans (their leaders) to a mission with presents of glass beads, clothing, blankets and food. The padres also brought many new forms of technology like metal knives and pots that heightened the Native Americans interest in joining. Curiosity and conversation with the padres convinced many to come visit if not live within a mission complex.

As best they could, padres explained the expectations of those individuals who decided to join a mission. Padres urged the Native Americans to be baptized. When a Native American chose to be baptized it symbolized his or her commitment to the Catholic faith and permanently bonded the individual with a mission community. The decision to join a mission meant learning, accepting, and practicing a completely new way of life.



How did their lives change?

The day of baptism was important, because it represented their commitment to God and to their mission. Not only did the baptized individual receive a new Christian name, they also agreed to new rules and lifestyle changes. One condition of joining a mission was that the converts could no longer leave the grounds without permission. The padres taught the Native American converts the Spanish language, a new set of craft skills, the Christian religion, and European and Christian social customs.

Not all Native Americans liked their new way of life. Some converts realized they no longer wanted to be a part of a mission, some rebelled, and some ran away. At other missions, like San Diego San Gabriel, or La Purisima some Native Americans even set fire to the buildings and led revolts.

Runaways were sought after by the soldiers and brought back. Some form of discipline was administered to the runaways. Punishment for runaways usually consisted of two days in the stocks, and sometimes lashings.

Many historians compare the lifestyle of the Native people to slavery, indentured servants or feudalism. Major differences and similarities can be found with each comparison, and we should remember to put mission practices in light of the Spanish culture of the late 18th century.



What jobs did they have?

Men and women were taught new craft skills. Because mission communities worked toward self sufficiency, there were many jobs to be done.

Men usually did the more labor intensive jobs like adobe brick making, construction, farming, hide tanning (leather making), tallow work, cattle rounding, and blacksmithing.

Women usually did more of the domestic labor like food preparation, textile production (weaving), tallow candle and soap making, animal care, child care, laundry, cleaning, and fire wood gathering.

Younger boys attended school, and helped their mothers with tasks. Older boys were apprentices learning new skills, and would also be used for labor intensive planting, harvesting, and other farming needs.

Young girls helped their mothers, while older girls learned new skills like weaving and cooking.

What was an average day like?

An average day started and ended with the ringing of the bells. The bells rang at sunrise to gather the people into the early mass worship service. After the service, all would gather for breakfast at the mission kitchen. There they would receive a portion of food called atolé, a gruel made of ground grain similar to oatmeal. After the meal period, work began.

Morning work lasted for about three to four hours until the noon bells rang summoning the people for lunch and prayer. The community gathered for a their mid-day meal, pozolé, a thick meat stew. After lunch, a short siesta commenced. Around two o'clock work resumed until five o'clock when the bells rang again signaling the end of the work day. The community gathered at the church for prayer and the reciting of the rosary. Afterward, dinner was served, consisting of another helping of atolé. The hours following dinner were considered free time. The Native Americans might socialize, dance, sing, and play, until they heard the final ringing of the bells around nine o'clock which announced the evening curfew.

Thus, day after day, year after year the ringing of the bells regulated mission communities. The bells were important in signaling the community in every day tasks, but they were also important for announcing births, deaths, raids, and celebrations. The way the bells were rung conveyed a different meaning to the community.



What did they wear?

A Russian artist drew this sketch in early 1816 of neophytes, or Native American converts, who were playing a game of chance during their siesta presumably. Russian artist, Choris's sketch shows the Native Americans to be wearing a shirt, blanket, and breechcloths made of striped material. No trousers are to be seen in his sketches.

Padre Ramon Abella from San Francisco de Asis describes the clothing as the following: "The male Indians wear a Cotón, which is a kind of shirt of wool, the breech cloth, and the majority also wear a blanket. Others on horseback, or who go about the house, such as the alacalde (Native American assigned to assist the padre), or who occupy some position, wear pants, and those who wear pants generally also wear shoes. The Indian women and girls also wear the Contón, a skirt, and a blanket all these of woolen cloth woven in the Mission."

(Quote taken from Edith Buckland Webb, Indian Life at the Old Mission)

Where were they housed?

Padres believed that the Native American converts would advance toward becoming better Christians and workers if families were divided into three groups. Each separate group was housed separately.

Married couples and small children lived in their own village a few hundred yards from the central portion of a mission's complex. In the early mission days, the village consisted of Kiichas, or Acjachemen domed huts, for living quarters. After a mission became more established, the homes were made from adobe.

The girls eight years and older who were unmarried, or widowed were given a room or apartment of their own where they would sleep. The dormitory style room where the unmarried women slept was often called the monjerio. At night, the door was locked so that the women could be protected.

The boys and young men slept in their own quarters but unlike the girls, they were not locked in at night.



What was a church service like?

Twice daily, the padres held mass in the Serra Chapel (from 1806-1812 in the Great Stone Church). The services differed greatly from modern services. Today's modern comforts of pews and kneelers did not exist for the Native American converts. Instead, they stood or knelt on the ground. Padres generally gave the mass service in the Latin language, which the Native Americans and most of the uneducated Europeans did not speak or understand.

Native Americans contributed to the beauty of worship services by their amazing musical talents. The padres taught the Native Americans spiritual hymns, and taught them how to play a wide variety of musical instruments.

Not only did the Native American converts enhance the musical beauty of mass, they also contributed to the beauty and art of the church interior. The creative and skilled workers painted and decorated the Serra Chapel, and later the Great Stone Church. Their beautiful artisanship can still be seen on the chapel walls, and in the dome of the Great Stone Church.