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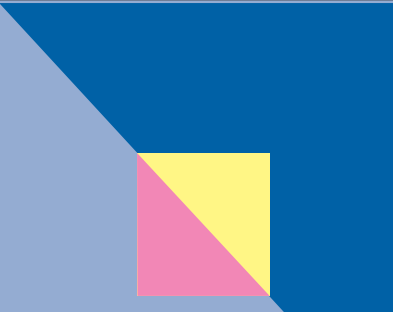
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Restoring the Faith in RUIDOSA



By Rob D'Amico

Photos by Sarah Vasquez



Benny Benavides has fond memories of his time spent as a kid in the tiny community of Ruidosa, down on the Mexican border west of Presidio – helping his mother with her little store and taking refuge from the hot Texas sun across the road in the once grand adobe church. Ruidosa had a history of being a harsh but rejuvenating place, a hamlet of homes and buildings perched above the Rio Grande where families scraped out a living. Yet they would always celebrate life's milestones in the church amid the rocky hillsides and thorny scrub of the Chihuahuan Desert.

But one late night in 1991, Benny recalled something big – almost catastrophic – happening with the church while his family slept in peace under the dark, starlit skies of the border. “We just heard a boom. We got up and went out to the front door and looked through the glass and all we could see was a cloud of smoke, dirt.” One of the church's lofty towers had collapsed into the road. “The adobe, where it shattered against the pavement, created a big old dust storm, a big old dust cloud.”

Benny's mother called the state transportation

office in Presidio for help, because the road (Highway 170) was blocked by the debris, and the bus picking up school kids from the tiny town of Candelaria to the west wouldn't be able to get through. Heavy equipment arrived to scoop up the remains and dump it into a nearby arroyo. And now, more than three decades later, it's become apparent that renovating the second church tower to save it from falling proved to be a lot more difficult than cleaning up the one that fell.

The Ruidosa Catholic church (El Corazon Sagrado de la Iglesia de Jesus) was first built at the direction of a priest from mud adobe bricks in 1915 by locals in a small but thriving farm community. It was a marvel for them, who held masses, weddings and funerals there under a high ceiling with four arches – a difficult architectural achievement to construct from wood and adobe. The church's two towers framed an arched entryway with a bell perched atop it to ring the town together for services and celebrations. But Ruidosa, even with its school, store, and post office, was already in decline. The once booming population of some 1,700 in the late 1800s started

to leave after irrigation water from the Rio Grande began drying up with droughts and an upstream dam. The cotton gin closed in 1936, with the post office leaving in 1954, both signaling an eventual end of services at the church. Today, only a dozen or so permanent residents remain.

Decades of abandonment did not fare well for the adobe structure, which lacked plaster to protect its bare bricks from the elements. By the 1990s, it was but a shell of its former glory. The Catholic diocese in El Paso was determined to demolish the structure for safety reasons. But many Big Bend residents were just as determined to bring a new story to the historic structure.

In November, Ismael Cabezuela Rodriguez stood near the entryway to the church, proudly pointing to a board pinned with some three dozen photos – many of them old and faded – to tell visitors of his family's long history in the Ruidosa area. One photo is taken against the wall of the church with a posing wedding party. “This was taken in 1915 or 1916, or somewhere around there,” he said, pointing to another, a group of men

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