

Jumano Native Americans still revere Lady in Blue

A tribe, once thought to be extinct, emerges in the 21st century with new vigor

by MARILYN H. FEDewa



Detail of 17th century portrait of Sor María, age 38-42. Oil on canvas, artist unknown. On display in convent museum, Ágreda, Spain.

Photo by Marilyn Fedewa

They were etched forever in American colonial history, as was the Lady in Blue, by the Benavides Memorials of 1630 and 1634. Yet by the 20th century, the Jumanos were all but extinct.

In his memorials, Padre Alonso de Benavides recorded valuable pioneering data about the American Southwest. His reports have endured in colonial histories throughout the centuries as some of the earliest first-hand knowledge of the population characteristics, statistics, locations and customs of many native tribes and the natural resources in their locales. He gave particular attention to the miraculous conversion of the Jumano people by a mysterious “Lady in Blue.”

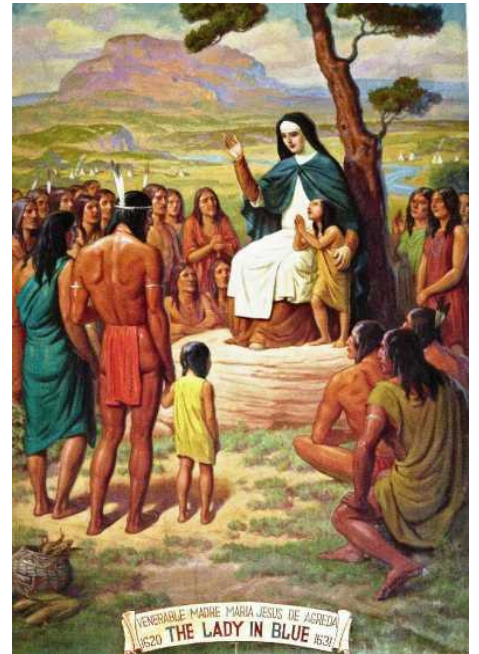
Nomadic traders and farmers dating

back to North America’s early Plains history, the Jumanos were noted for their skilled commerce in goods and information-sharing throughout the Southwest. It is difficult to imagine why such a memorable people disappeared. Yet, after innumerable conflicts among Native American tribes, and between Native Americans and colonists, the once proud Jumanos were thought to have been absorbed to the point of extinction into the Apache, the Wichita, and the Tejas peoples. Over the centuries, their official numbers dwindled, from tens of thousands in the early 17th century, to less than fifty families by the mid 18th century, then virtual obscurity.

Recent events, however, say otherwise, and their latest public emergence ties in now, as it did in the 17th century, with the legacy of the cloistered abbess, Sor María de Jesús of Ágreda, Spain, who is said to have taught them Christianity and urged them to become baptized (see *Tradicion Revista*, Vol. X, No. 3, 2005).

Through what were described as mystical apparitions, Sor María of Ágreda appeared to the Jumanos hundreds of times in the 1620s, in multiple locations throughout Texas, New Mexico and Arizona—all apparently without leaving her convent in Ágreda. She wore the traditional garb of the Franciscans—brown and cream-colored robes—to which her Conceptionist order added a blue outer cloak and black veil. Over time, the Jumanos referred to their special teacher as the Lady in Blue, because of her outer cape of blue.

While the growing number of accounts of the Lady in Blue produced an infectious excitement among colonial and native people of the time, Sor María’s experiences of these events—as well as her prolific writing—drew



Twentieth century mural of Sor María preaching to Jumano Native Americans, from original painting by Dorothy White. On display in—and image courtesy of—St. Anne’s Parish, Beaumont, Texas.

grueling interrogations by the Spanish Inquisition, although her inquisitors ultimately exonerated and praised her. Her unusual mystical experiences also drew the attention of then Hapsburg king, Felipe IV of Spain, whom she advised spiritually and politically for twenty-two years in documented correspondence comprising over 600 letters between them. More importantly to the Jumanos, her spiritual presence drew this Native American tribe into Christianity in a way that would forever link the Ágreda and Jumano legacies historically and spiritually.

In fact, because of their connection with the Lady in Blue, the Jumanos are responsible for a little known—yet seismically important—fact in the history of Texas missions. Previously, the onset of missionary activity in Texas was thought to have begun in 1682, and continued in



Milpa runs for strength in coming-of-age ceremony outside Corpus Christi, Texas, August 2008. Photo by and courtesy of Maria Rebeca Tamez Drury.

earnest over the next hundred years. Twentieth century historian Marion Habig, however, links the first Texas mission—albeit in operation for only six months—with the 1632 expedition from Isleta, New Mexico to the San Angelo area in Texas. The motivating force behind the expedition was the determination of the Jumanos to establish one or more missions near their primary encampments. The 1632 expedition was the second such made—the first being in 1629, to the Amarillo area in Texas—also at the insistence of the Jumanos, as urged by their beloved Lady in Blue, Sor María of Ágreda.

“The missionaries from New Mexico came all the way down to San Angelo to the confluence of the three Concho rivers,” Habig, a protégé of noted historian Henry Bolton, said in a 1982 interview on record at the University of Texas’ Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio, sharing information he later included in his book, *Spanish Texas Pilgrimage* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1990).

“Established in 1632, that was the first mission in Texas,” he said, after having personally recreated and tra-

versed each mission route over a period of many years.

This seminal missionary activity definitively links the Jumanos, the reported evangelization of the Lady in Blue, and the San Angelo area, with the earliest Christian mission heritage of Texas. And while Bishop Michael Pfeiffer and the community of San Angelo have since the 1990s begun to own the significance of their part in the history of the state, there seems to have been no known Jumanos to claim their own similar laurels. Similarly, there is no statewide recognition by the Catholic Church of one of their most faithful daughters’ roles in the history of one of the largest states in North America.

Then in 2005, another unusual event occurred. A bluebonnet flower measuring over five feet in height—the tallest in any known popular history of the flower—was sighted in the Big Bend area of West Texas. Its significance relates to one legend about how the bluebonnet became the state flower of Texas. According to this legend, when the Lady in Blue announced to the Jumanos that her visits were at an end, and that they were now ready to seek baptism from the missionary fathers, the hillside from which she had appeared was blanketed with the beautiful blue flowers that came to be known as the bluebonnet. The five foot-plus specimen found in Big Bend is one of the many varieties of the bluebonnet recognized as the official state flower of Texas.

“When we saw the flower, we knew the Lady in Blue had come back to help us again,” said tribal historian Enrique Madrid, in a phone interview with this author. “Because of her work with us, we survived,” Madrid said, “but part of that survival meant going underground.” He referred, of course, to the carnage wreaked on untold numbers of Native Americans amid and following colonial attempts to tame and conquer the Southwest. To some extent, the Jumanos succeeded in their goal of survival, by as-

similating into other tribes, primarily the Apache, and by adopting Christianity, which also afforded the benefits of military protection that accompanied the missions. That the missions did not endure for very long, no doubt influenced this savvy people to go underground for their own protection.

Madrid spoke of over three centuries in hiding, however, without rancor.

“It was a dark age for us,” he said, “and now we are trying to have a renaissance.”

Yet, even throughout generations of hiding, the Jumanos never relinquished their collective memories and heritage. And now, for several years they have worked to officially re-establish their tribal identity with the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Dubbing themselves Jumano-Apaches, they have currently registered 400-500 members



Milpa, daughter of Margo Tamez, Jumano Apache of Texas, incorporates blue into all her ceremonial costumes. Photo courtesy of Maria Rebeca Tamez Drury, Lipan Apache – Jumano Apache.

with BIA, some with mitochondrial DNA in hand.

Tribal chieftain Gabriel Carrasco told this author that they had made much progress in registering tribal members, but that there was much work yet to be done.

“I think that there are at least 1,000-2,000 more members,” he said, “scattered throughout Texas [and more beyond]. . . . In today’s mobile society, it is difficult to find everyone, but we are trying to get the word out. . . . As we do, we are encouraged, because we believe the Lady in Blue is telling us now that ‘it is time for the Jumanos to come forward’.”

While this formerly nomadic people traded, hunted and farmed from several locations—including near present-day Amarillo, and New Mexico’s Salinas Pueblos at Gran Quivira (known through the 18th century as “Las Humanas”)—their primary base was near present-day San Angelo, from which they also over-wintered nearby in La Junta de los Rios. La Junta lies at the junction of the Rio Grande and Los Conchos rivers, an area thought to be the longest and most continually farmed region in Texas history, another historic credit accruing to the Jumanos. And, it is through la Junta—according to the acknowledged preeminent scholar on the Jumanos, Nancy Hickerson—that the Jumanos and the missionaries most likely traversed in 1632, en route to the San Angelo area encampment.

It is from there that many of the present-day tribal leaders emanate. Their affiliation with the Apache also



Milpa extends traditional blessing to her uncle, Jumano Apache tribal historian Enrique Madrid (in red). Photo by and courtesy of Maria Rebeca Tamez Drury.

extends their reach into South Texas, where many Jumano-Apache celebrate their traditional ceremonies.

One such ceremony recently celebrated the coming-of-age of Enrique Madrid’s young niece, Milpa, the 12-year old daughter of Jumano-Apache Margo Tamez of Texas. In the multi-day Na’ii’ees Esdzanadehe (White Painted Woman) Apache ceremony, Milpa was surrounded by members of her extended family. They supported and helped her, as she enacted the eloquent archetypal story of the beginning of all human life and the spiritual power of womanhood. All Milpa’s ceremonial dresses lovingly incorporate some shade of her favorite color—

blue—as her mother Margo Tamez points out in an email interview with the author. This reflects Milpa’s very personal love for her people and her history, and their entwined history with the Lady in Blue.

Enrique Madrid believes that the spirit of the Lady in Blue has returned to help them again, infusing and empowering his niece to help restore the heritage of Jumano Apaches. He and her mother feel that the Jumano Apache youth are the spiritual and progressive leaders of their community.

“They are showing us what we adults need to be doing,” Tamez said, “to liberate our people from oppression, fear, racism, hatred, depression, anguish, violence and despair . . . and for that they need strength.” During the ceremony, therefore, said Tamez, Milpa symbolically “runs for strength, and for endurance for life’s challenges that will come.”

For the Jumanos, those challenges are many, as they engage in their work for official tribal recognition and sovereignty. In doing so, they continue to count on the assistance of the Lady in Blue.

“It’s not the end of her story,” says Madrid, “it’s the beginning.”

Marilyn H. Fedewa is a published author and communications consultant residing in Lansing, Michigan. Her definitive treatment of Sor María’s life and times—entitled *MARÍA OF ÁGREDA: Mystical Lady in Blue*—is scheduled for release with the University of New Mexico Press in early Spring 2009. Visit the author’s website at www.cambridgeconnections.net/Maria_html or UNMP’s website at www.unmpress.com for updated availability of the biography of this compelling historical figure.

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