THE MISSION IS BROAD at San Xavier del Bac

by Craig Baker
It was 1691 when Italian-born Jesuit missionary Father Eusebio Kino was intercepted about 10 miles west of modern-day Nogales by “some messengers or couriers of the Sobaipuris of San Xavier del Bac” (his words). He traveled north with them and made it as far as Tumacácori that January, but it would be roughly another 18 months before his first visit to the small native village of Wak.

Kino brought with him an array of fruits, grains, and a modest train of livestock, much to the delight of the locals. Though Kino never built a church on the site, anticipating the addition of a priest in residence at San Xavier, the villagers built a small adobe home there to serve the missionary.

Kino, who lived in a mission called Dolores about 100 miles to the southeast in present-day Sonora, Mexico, never lived to see a dedicated place of worship installed on the San Xavier site (he died in 1711); the first church there was not built until the 1750s and was headed by another Jesuit missionary, Father Alonso Espinosa. The so-called Espinosa Chapel was erected west of the current church, though archaeological evidence suggests that it was torn down sometime in the early
19th century and moved, brick-by-brick, to form the convento wing on the east side of the present structure.

The Mission San Xavier del Bac as we know it today is the oldest building in the greater Tucson area. Its construction overseen by Spanish Franciscan priests Juan Bautista de Velderrain and Juan Bautista Llorens between 1783 and 1797, the building has survived raids by Apache warriors, targeted attacks by thieves and vandals, an 1887 earthquake, a 1964 tornado, lightning strikes in 1937 and 1997, and rule under the flags of four different nations (Spain, Mexico, the U.S., and Tohono O’odham).

The church, which stands a few miles southwest of Tucson, is “the largest and most elaborate of Spanish colonial structures within hundreds of miles,” according to the book San Xavier del Bac: Portrait of a Desert Church, by resident historian Bernard “Bunny” Fontana. And, despite myriad threats to the structure throughout its more than two centuries of history, it was a misguided effort of preservation in the 1950s that could have posed the biggest threat to the landmark.

Patronato San Xavier is the non-sectarian nonprofit whose purpose is to promote and fund the restoration, maintenance, and preservation of Mission San Xavier del Bac. The organization’s executive director, Miles Green, explains that “in the ’50s, part of the restoration at that time was an application of Portland cement” to the entire exterior of the building. It was intended to serve as a sort of impenetrable shell for the ancient structure underneath. “But,” Green says, “concrete is a much more impervious material” than the “burned adobe” bricks underneath. And as cracks and

...
The right tower of Mission San Xavier del Bac was brick in 1887 when this photo was taken by Leo Goldschmidt.

Low-soot votive candles are available for worshippers wishing to leave an offering.

Many of the details on the building, including the finials and balustrades, had to be remade by hand.
Danny Morales is a fourth-generation mason and builder at San Xavier. His son, Vincent, also works with him, making it five consecutive Morales generations that have been involved with the site since the late 1940s. “It was all done with good intentions,” says Danny, referring to the addition of the concrete layer, “but the moisture is going to get in no matter what. It’s a moving building. It’s going to crack, and moisture is going to get in.”

As a result of that inevitable cracking, Morales says that in the 1980s he began to notice that the bricks under the concrete were beginning to spall, or disintegrate. The bricks that had been farthest from the mesquite heat source when baked in the onsite kilns two centuries before were in especially bad shape, with a number of them having turned completely to dust.

Patronato then began what has been a $12 million undertaking to date to chip away at that layer of cement, replace the bad bricks, and reapply a limestone-based wash, which was what originally covered the structure, to the exterior. “The lime is like the pores of your skin; it breathes. It’ll allow the water in, but it’ll also allow it to escape,” explains Morales.

He says the addition of a sort-of-secret ingredient—glue from the pads of the nopal (prickly pear) cactus—makes the material ideal for longevity, given the challenges of the harsh Southern Arizona climate.

Bob Vint, who has worked as an architect at San Xavier del Bac for more than 25 years, elaborates: “[The cactus glue] has several functions. It’s somewhat sticky, so it works as an adhesive and helps the mortar stick to the wall better. It also helps the mortar flow better; it’s a ‘fluidifier,’ and you can use less water if you add nopal glue. … It also slows the drying time, which allows the mixture to cure better.”

And though the large-scale restorations at San Xavier have been about a quarter century in the making, the finish line is in sight, says Vint. “The heavy work should be done in the next 15 years,” he adds. After that, “it will just be a matter of routine maintenance.”

The “heavy work” to which he refers includes the next two big phases of the project: restoring the east tower and then the front façade. The latter has never been done before. Costs on the west tower totaled about $2.5 million over about six years. Those involved in the east tower restoration anticipate a similar price tag but believe they can complete the task a year faster.

Green says that Patronato San Xavier has raised about $1 million for restoration of the east tower thus far, through its White Dove Capital Campaign, though there’s clearly much more to be done before the scaffolding can go up. A bond referendum that was defeated last fall would have provided the sum necessary for the work, but the task of raising the cash now rests with the Patronato. Green says that the six annual Christmas concerts on site are the biggest fundraisers, but each series provides only about 10 percent of the $1.5 million still needed to cover the restoration.

Whether you can see it or not, the work at Mission San Xavier del Bac goes on—underground, on the roof, and in narrow passageways that wind upward and outward toward the towers above. And you can bet that three generations of Moraleses will be there, working on a mission of their own—to keep Tucson’s oldest building upright for at least another 200 years.

More information about the San Xavier del Bac Mission is available online at sanxaviermission.org; to learn more about how to contribute to the ongoing restoration or to acquire tickets to the annual Patronato Christmas Concert, visit patronatosanxavier.org.

Craig Baker is a local freelance writer. Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.