

Neto's Tucson: 209-year-old Presidio bell to ring again

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Brian Donahue, left, and Doug Thompson are crafting a case to hold a bell dated 1807 that hung on Tucson's adobe AZ. Photo taken Wednesday, August 10, 2016.

Ron Medvescek / Arizona Daily Star

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For the past several years, a bell sat hidden in a storage room inside St. Augustine Cathedral. This was not your ordinary church bell, however.

For this bronze bell, now a shade of patina, is dated 1807 and is dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe. And it once hung outside the small, adobe Chapel of the Presidio Real de San Agustín del Tucson, during the Spanish colonial period.

The bell will ring again when it returns to the downtown cathedral during a special 5:30 p.m. Mass on Aug. 27, as part of Tucson's 241st birthday celebration.

Representatives of Tucson historical and religious organizations will participate in the ceremony, and Msgr. Raúl Trevizo of St. John the Evangelist Church will bless the bell, similar to what his Presidio predecessor, Fray Pedro Arriquibar, did 209 years ago.

The bell and the cathedral are inextricably connected, said Raúl Ramírez of Los Descendientes del Presidio de Tucson, a nonprofit cultural and educational organization that supports local historic preservation efforts.

"We're bringing them back together again," Ramirez said.

The bell's presence in Tucson is well documented, cited by priests and territorial visitors alike. The earliest citation was made by Arriquibar, shortly before he died, in 1820. Later it was cited by a visiting Texas cowboy, James Bell, who passed through

Tucson on Sept. 20, 1854, shortly after Tucson became part of the United States. Bell kept a diary and wrote about the Presidio church, and the bell.

But where was the bell cast?

One possibility is that it was cast in Spain and shipped to Mexico as a gift from the Spanish crown. It might have been taken by cart north to this frontier post in the Pimería Alta, the Spanish colonial name given to what is today Southern Arizona and northern Sonora.

Another explanation is that the bell was made in central Mexico where numerous crafts houses churned out untold number of religious items that were sent across New Spain.

Or just maybe the Guadalupe bell was cast here in the desert by one or more itinerant craftsmen who used local materials and imported bronze, speculated Doug Thompson.

Thompson and his partner, Brian Donahue, created the bell carriage that will be used to display it. Working out of the shop, Doug Thompson Metalcraft at East 18th Street and South Campbell Avenue, the two master craftsmen marvel at the bell's history and the possibility that it originated here.

One hint is the bell's thick bottom. The bell's visible inscription reads: "Nvestra Señora de Gvadalvpe Año de 1807." In old Spanish, the "v" is used for the "u."

The Tucson metal artists, both of whom attended Rincon High School and graduated from the University of Arizona, suggested that their historical counterparts, working with rudimentary tools, intentionally cast a thick bottom to ensure that it not break during the lengthy, tedious process.

"It would have been a remarkable feat of craftsmanship," said Thompson.

Because of the bell's thickness — it weighs about 250 pounds — its sound is dull. But its story rings clear.

The Guadalupe bell was one of three in the Presidio, which was established on Aug. 20, 1775 in a piece of today's downtown that's bounded by Pennington and Washington streets, and Main and Church avenues.

The other two bells remain in the area. One bell is at Mission San Xavier and the second is at Saint Pius X Church, 1800 N. Camino Pio Decimo, near the Morris K. Udall Regional Park, in an alcove next to the church's entrance. Both are dedicated to San Agustín, Tucson's patron saint.

The bells — one hung from the chapel wall and the other two outside its door — called inhabitants to Mass or warned them of danger. They were rung for celebrations, to welcome important visitors or announce the time of the day.

When the Presidio church fell into disrepair sometime in the late 1850s, it was moved to a home that was converted to a chapel. About 10 years later the bell was placed in the newly constructed brick Cathedral on La Plaza de la Mesilla, about where the Pancho Villa statue stands today near Church Avenue and Broadway.

The bell moved again to the new cathedral on South Stone Avenue, which was completed in 1897. It hung in the south bell tower and remained at St. Augustine Cathedral when it was renovated in the late 1960s.

At some point the bell's chime was silenced. Then in August 1986, the Guadalupe bell was taken down and moved to the Arizona Historical Society on East Second Street near the UA campus, where it and the other two bells were displayed.

The bell returned to the cathedral and was placed in a Plexiglas display case in the vestibule and later shoved into a storage room when the Cathedral was repainted and redecorated.

The traveling bell's long journey will soon end as it returns home.

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Los Descendientes honor Carmen Duarte

Reporter Carmen Duarte of the Arizona Daily Star and two local authors were honored Saturday night by Los Descendientes del Presidio de Tucson at the group's annual gala celebrating Tucson's 241st birthday. The other honorees were author Patricia Preciado Martin and Lydia Otero, an associate professor in the Department of Mexican American Studies at the University of Arizona.

The three were recognized for their years of documenting Tucson's history and heritage through their published works.

Duarte, a Tucson native, has been a journalist for the Arizona Daily Star for 35 years. She shared her family's history through the life of her late mother, Leonarda "Nala" Bejarano Duarte. The 36-part series published in 2000 by the Daily Star, "Mama Santos: An Airzona Life," earned Duarte 11 state, national and international awards.

Preciado Martin is the author of three oral histories and several short stories published by the University of Arizona Press. For 30 years she has narrated the history, culture and traditions of Mexican-Americans in Tucson and Southern Arizona, winning numerous awards and recognition. She currently is working on an exhibit of vaquero families who lived and worked on the historic Canoa Ranch.

Otero is a descendant of the territorial Otero family and an advocate for Mexican-American studies in public schools. In her 2010 book, "La Calle: Spatial Conflicts and Urban Renewal in a Southwestern City" published by UA Press, Otero documented the systematic destruction of Tucson's Barrio Viejo and the displacement of its residents. It earned her several awards and was the source for "Barrio Stories," a recent production of Borderlands Theater.

The event was held at JW Marriott Tucson Starr Pass Resort.