

## American Indians in S.A. mark a milestone

Veronica Flores-Paniagua: Coahuiltecan descendants reflect on their past but look ahead to possibility of making San Antonio a hub for 'urban' Indians.

Ramon Vasquez points to the ground where Saturday's early morning ceremony will take place at Mission San Juan Capistrano. He and about three dozen others will erect a tepee 20 feet from the cemetery that holds the remains of Coahuiltecan Indians, Vasquez's ancestors who helped build the San Antonio missions. Sand will be spread to form the bed of a bonfire and reflections will begin.

Members of Tap Pilam, a local alliance of Coahuiltecan families, have held the ceremony for the past 10 years, since the Coahuiltecan remains were repatriated in thiscamposanto. For Vasquez, the ceremony will hold special significance as he considers how far his people have come since 1999.

That year, American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, Tap Pilam's legal entity, successfully closed a decades-long quest to re-inter the remains that archaeologists excavated from the mission in 1967.

"Standing here, it feels like it was just yesterday," said Vasquez, AIT's executive director. "It was a very emotional time."

Two hearses carried the bones from UTSA to Mission San Juan on that November day, and Tap Pilam elders worked two weeks to prepare the remains.

Not wanting to leave anything to chance, Vasquez said, only two bundles of bones were released for the public burial over which Archbishop Patrick Flores presided two days after Thanksgiving. All the remains ultimately were buried on the mission grounds, at the site of a church that never was completed.

The repatriation would catapult San Antonio's indigenous history into the public consciousness but not

**University Children's Health Stars**

Come be a part of a revolutionary endeavor to establish San Antonio as a landmark for excellence in pediatric care.

A partnership for advanced pediatric care

Children's Health  
University Health System

UT kids  
UT MEDICINE SAN ANTONIO

MAGNET  
RECOGNIZED  
AMERICAN NURSES  
ACCREDITATION BOARD

BEST  
REGIONAL HOSPITALS  
USNews  
SAN ANTONIO, TX  
HOSPITALS SPECIALTY  
2013-14

without a twist of irony. Coahuiltecan is the name assigned to South Texas Indian groups that were related by language. During the Spanish colonial period, many of these groups entered missions and were assimilated.

Descendants of Coahuiltecan, however, do not have federally recognized American Indian status. The Tap Pilam tribe has petitioned for federal recognition, but the process can take decades.

Despite the attempt to gain federal status, there is a debate among Coahuiltecan descendants about the need to secure official recognition.

"It's like we're asking permission to be who we are," Vasquez said. "We've been very self-sufficient. We're living the life we want to live."

Figures from the 2000 Census would appear to affirm his assertion. With its new feature allowing respondents to check more than one racial category, the 2000 count spurred an American Indian boom. Nearly 20,000 were counted in Bexar County, a stark contrast from the 4,265 counted in 1990.

Vasquez expects next year's count to be even larger, and his group has partnered with the U.S. Census Bureau for outreach into the local American Indian community. He looks excitedly toward the possibility of making San Antonio a hub for "urban" Indians.

So while Saturday's ceremony will be about the past, it also will be about the future.

"We're not here to fight anymore," Vasquez said. "We're looking for creative opportunities to do the right thing."

[vflores@express-news.net](mailto:vflores@express-news.net)

## University Children's Health Stars



Come be a part of  
a revolutionary endeavor  
to establish San Antonio  
as a landmark for  
excellence in pediatric care.

A partnership for advanced pediatric care



Children's Health  
University Health System

UT kids  
UT MEDICINE SAN ANTONIO

MAGNET  
RECOGNIZED  
AMERICAN NURSES  
ACCREDITATION CENTER

BEST  
REGIONAL HOSPITALS  
USNews  
SAN ANTONIO, TX  
HOSPITALS/RURAL  
2013-14

**HEARST** newspapers

© 2014 Hearst Newspapers, LLC