

Holding on to ancestors

The Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation is nothing if not patient.

Its members are descendants of the indigenous people who populated South Texas and Northeast Mexico and built San Antonio's Spanish colonial missions, now seeking World Heritage-site recognition from UNESCO.

If approved, all five — Concepción, San José, San Juan, Espada and the Alamo — will be listed alongside the Statue of Liberty, Tower of London and the ancient Temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia for their significance to world culture.

It has taken time to appreciate the rich heritage of the missions, the land on which they rest and their builders.

For American Indians, they've always been sacred places, places where their people rest.

The Tap Pilam isn't alone. Other Coahuiltecan tribes, linked linguistically, roamed Texas before the Spanish arrived and long before the Pilgrims got to eastern shores.

Though once in doubt, today it's generally accepted that the descendants of Mission Indians still roam the Earth. It's a sensitive subject for Tap Pilam, whose members are among the Hispanic families still living near the missions.

In the 1960s, when the Archdiocese of San Antonio allowed archaeologists to excavate human remains, no one asked descendants for permission, or even an opinion.

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 BOARD OF
CERTIFICATION

BEST
REGIONAL HOSPITALS
USNews
SAN ANTONIO, TX
2013-14

More than 100 human remains were desecrated, crimes now addressed by federal law, says Ramón Vásquez, executive director of the Tap Pilam's nonprofit, the American Indians of Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions. He said protests were waged. He acknowledged, stoically, that Native Americans and archaeologists haven't exactly been allies.

It's no secret American Indians feel demeaned about remains being "studied" like dinosaur bones, as if, like them, they're extinct. The archdiocese, archaeologists and the National Park Service have been criticized equally.

After a protracted battle, in 1999, the remains were re-interred. American Indians gathered to grieve and honor them. They were reburied at San Juan, in the old church ruins.

Every year, they hold an overnight vigil to remember them. Soon, they'll gather for another ceremony.

This summer the skeletal remains of about 15 people were uncovered at San Juan during renovation work. The remains, none intact, included those of infants and young children, buried near the church door.

A report from UTSA archaeologists is expected this spring. Until then, Vásquez says he's withholding judgment. "I can't say anything was done right or wrong. What I can say is that what was done right is we were included in the conversation."

Vásquez points to unfinished business. UTSA must return artifacts, and Tap Pilam would like the park service to erect a marker at the burial site.

He hopes, "We could figure out a way to be proactive with this as we move forward." As UNESCO work continues, "We have to have good relationships."

For now, the Tap Pilam is waiting to hear when they can rebury the remains. They're being patient. They've had a lot of practice at it.

eayala@express-news.net

Twitter: @ElaineAyala

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
HOSPITAL & SPECIALTY
2013-14

HEARST newspapers

© 2014 Hearst Newspapers, LLC