

NEWS

Mission descendants revel in World Heritage limelight

Heritage status could help mission descendants gain more recognition

By Scott Huddleston | July 18, 2015 | Updated: July 18, 2015 11:13pm

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Photo: Matthew Busch, For San Antonio Express-News / For San Antonio Express-News

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Calvin Osife, wearing non-traditional Navajo attire, poses for a portrait inside of the Mission Espada church after the 6th Annual Four Seasons Indian Market at Mission Espada on Saturday, July 18, 2015. The recent designation of the Missions of San Antonio as UNESCO World Heritage Sites is raising awareness of the indigenous peoples who were involved in the building of the missions and their subsequent histories.

Hundreds gathered Saturday at Mission Espada to celebrate traditions of indigenous South Texans that now are under a global spotlight.

The sixth annual Four Seasons Indian Market, a four-hour Native American festival, drew a near-record crowd of about 500 people two weeks after the five San Antonio missions were **declared a World Heritage Site**.

Jesse Reyes, board member of the American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, or AIT, the event's lead organizer, said the care taken to preserve indigenous culture convinced him that the World Heritage designation would be good for his people. A panel with representation from 21 countries that are members of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization unanimously approved the designation July 5, putting the missions **among 1,031 heritage sites worldwide**, including the Statue of Liberty and Stonehenge.

Reyes said he hopes the title will aid efforts to have some mission descendants' groups listed as federally recognized tribes.

"We're bringing awareness to a culture that is not well known here," said Reyes, an anthropologist who is helping seek federal tribal recognition for at least 200 descendants of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation.

According to a 349-page World Heritage nomination presented to UNESCO, the term "Coahuiltecan" has been used to describe large numbers of hunter-gatherers who inhabited South

LOCAL



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don't chat with those
armed civilians**

Texas for thousands of years. The Native Americans of the missions also included indigenous groups from the Coastal Plains called the Karankawas; Lipan Apaches from present-day New Mexico; and Tlaxcaltecas from Mexico. The Spanish mission system sought to convert the people through loyalty to the Catholic traditions and the monarchy, and replacement of nomadic lifestyles with farming, ranching, arts, music and vocations such as carpentry and stone masonry.

Today, the AIT focuses on promotion of indigenous arts, civic engagement and family health and well-being, said Karla Aguilar, development coordinator with the 21-year-old group. Federal recognition would help Coahuiltecan descendants gain access to federal health benefits.

“That’s where we need to have a political voice,” Aguilar said.

But the overall mood of the event was light. Local actor Jesse Borrego, a Native American descendant, performed in a group dance, dressed as the “coyote man.”

Elizabeth Oudie of Seguin and her mother, Ernestine, brought folding chairs to see the dances. Both have ancestral ties to indigenous people of Mexico.

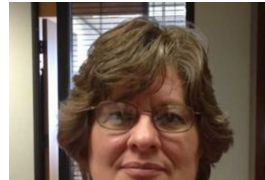
“My mother loves the dancing. I love the costumes,” Oudie said.



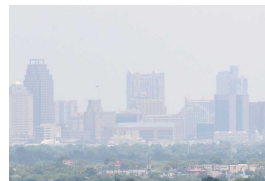
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One of the vendors, Elizabeth Day, wants to start an interactive outdoor experience to educate people about “Native American lifeways,” including some that can benefit humans and the environment. She founded the Prickly Pear Living History Museum, which obtained nonprofit status in May and has begun to raise funds.

Day was selling handmade arts, children’s toys and indigenous-type hunting tools made with natural materials, as well as smudge sticks of estafiate, an herb used for centuries to treat stomachaches, fever and other maladies. Day believes World Heritage status will revive interest in San Antonio’s indigenous history.

“A lot of people don’t even know there are native people from this region who are still alive,” she said.

To help Texans research their ancestry, AIT is developing a program with Northwest Vista College to create an archive of records from the San Antonio missions.

“Many families that have been here for centuries feel a bond to the land that they can’t explain,” Aguilar said.

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