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Pilgrimage to Sonora offers trek of faith

By Lourdes Medrano

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

MAGDALENA, Sonora — The afternoon sun beat down mercilessly on the three men as they trekked slowly along the Magdalena River valley.

Their journey of faith and physical endurance had begun two days earlier in Nogales, Sonora, and after about 40 hours of walking, their legs felt heavy and their feet ached for relief.

Still, brothers Frederick and Mark Joaquin, and their cousin, Gerald Joaquin, kept moving toward Magdalena de Kino.

There, their pilgrimage would end in another four hours, they figured, and the trio would pay their respects to St. Francis Xavier in the town church during the centuries-old Fiestas de San Francisco.

"I'm tired but relieved that we're almost there," said Mark Joaquin, 43, who followed a path that his Tohono O'odham ancestors carved long ago. His people have remained devoted to Catholicism since Spanish missionaries introduced the religion to them in the 1600s.

Each year, thousands of O'odham, as well as Pasqua Yaqui tribal members from the Tucson area, join the crowds of Mexican faithful in the annual pilgrimage that culminates today. The secular part of the festival continues through Sunday.

Like the Joaquins, people walk, drive or ride horses to the mission church, Santa Maria Magdalena, in gratitude for favors granted or to seek spiritual strength. Inside, they venerate a life-size, reclining statue of St. Francis Xavier that many consider miraculous.

"We've been coming here since we were kids," said Gerald Joaquin, 38. The family had made the trip mostly by car from the reservation southwest of Tucson, he said, but this is his second year walking the 60 miles from Nogales to Magdalena.

"I almost lost both of my parents, they were in a really bad car accident," he said Monday. "I promised I would make this trip if they recovered, and they eventually did."

This is the sixth year that Frederick Joaquin, 36, has walked to Magdalena in memory of his late father, Mark Joaquin Sr., and to give thanks for the well-being of his family. It is his brother's second year walking the route in memory of a deceased friend.

Relatives dropped off the trio in the border city Saturday at 6 p.m., planning to meet them later in Magdalena, where many O'odham camp out near the church in the town's central plaza, which is packed with vendors of food, religious images and crafts.

For Gerald Joaquin and his two cousins who live off the reservation in Tucson and Mesa, the pilgrimage goes beyond fulfilling a manda, or religious vow. It is also an opportunity to reunite with fellow O'odham they don't see often.

At the camp, they rest their tired feet, say the rosary together and share stories until it's time to head home,

If you go

● The mission church of Santa Maria Magdalena, which draws many Catholics during an annual pilgrimage honoring St. Francis Xavier, is in Magdalena de Kino about 120 miles south of Tucson.

To get there, take Interstate 19 south about 60 miles to Nogales and continue on Mexican Route 15 another 60 miles to the town.

A checkpoint 13 miles south of Nogales requires a stop to obtain a tourist visa, which calls for identification such as a passport or birth certificate.

the men said. "This is a family tradition, and an O'odham tradition," Gerald Joaquin said.

As they walked, good Samaritans handed out water, juice, sandwiches and tacos to the throngs of pilgrims. The Joaquins said one family even invited them into their home for a hot meal of chicken stew and beans.

"People along the way have been so supportive," Mark Joaquin said. "And there are a lot of people back home praying for us."

Nearby, Gloria Sepúlveda, 66, and friend Myrna Barragán, 54, gave bottled water to passers-by out of a black Jeep. Ill health keeps the residents of nearby Santa Ana from making the pilgrimage on foot, Sepúlveda said, "so we try to help the people who are fulfilling a manda."

About a mile ahead, Francisco Tapia, 24, walked briskly with Jorge Peña and José Luis Lara, both 14. The three were part of a group of 14 relatives and friends that started walking Saturday from Cananea, 66 miles from Magdalena.

Like the Joaquins, Tapia and his companions slept just three or four hours along dusty trails at night, eager to arrive at their destination. "We're doing it for the family and so that there is never a lack of work," said Tapia, a bricklayer.

In Magdalena, pilgrims make their way to St. Francis through the rows of food and merchandise stands that block a full view of the church during the festival. The church is a legacy of Padre Eusebio Francisco Kino, the Jesuit missionary who devoted his life to the late-17th- and early-18th-century Indians in the Pimería Alta region of northern Sonora and parts of Arizona. Kino's remains lie in a crypt next to the church.

St. Francis attracts thousands of devotees to Magdalena each year. Even though Oct. 4 recognizes the St. Francis of Assisi feast day, it is the St. Francis Xavier statue that the pilgrims seek out. At some point, local history relates, the Franciscan missionaries who replaced the Jesuits may have moved the St. Francis Xavier feast day to October from December because inclement weather kept people from making the journey.

This is the third year that Patricia Cerna, 37, has walked the 120 miles to the town from the San Xavier District of the Tohono O'odham Nation, about nine miles south of Tucson.

In previous years, she has walked from points closer to Magdalena, seeking strength to get through a divorce, she said.

This year Cerna said she walked with friends and her 16-year-old daughter, Reannon Manuel, on behalf of her own mother. "She just got diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease," she said at the O'odham camp.

Just then, her godchild, Austin Miguel, 7, arrived at the camp with his mother, Cheryl Encinas, and friend Lucas Bahyesva, 7.

The two boys, also from San Xavier, walked a few miles to Magdalena, which their group reached Monday morning.

Back in the church chapel where people lined up to touch and kiss St. Francis, the 16th-century Jesuit missionary, Letitia Enos, the sister of the Joaquin brothers, and her family venerated the statue.

She and her husband, Delvin, their children, 1-year-old Dellene and 3-week-old Devaughn, drove to Magdalena from Sells.

Strolling out of the chapel, Enos gazed out onto the crowded plaza, hoping to catch a glimpse of her brothers and cousin.

"They should be here soon," Enos said. "They've been walking a long time."

If you go to Magdalena de Kino

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