

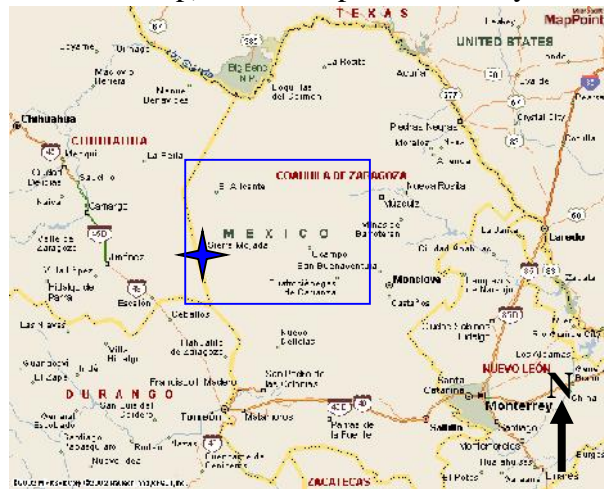
Vignettes of Mexican Missions (written in 2003)



It is best for the author to introduce himself right from the start. My name is Rev. James Lienert, Missionary of the Holy Family (MSF). I worked in our Mexican mission territory for 33 years from 1967 to 2000. During these years I was the pastor, and sole priest, in the parish of Our Lady of Refuge located (blue star on the map) in the state of Coahuila, Mexico. In the year 2000 I turned seventy-five, at which age it is obligatory to present a letter of resignation. It is true that the letter of resignation would have been put on hold had I been willing to continue, but I realized that I was no longer able to adequately take care of the needs of the faithful, and that it would be for the good of the people to have a younger and more up-to-date priest to serve the people of the parish.

The following is a general profile of our mission territory. It should be noted that I am not one devoted to statistics and precise numbers. These facts, figures and history are only meant to acquaint you to the area and to provide you with a sense of the area. The inspirational experiences with the people of the area and their deep faith will be the subject of future vignettes.

The MSF territory (shown as the blue box on the map) was comprised of only three parishes spanning the counties of Cuatro Ciénegas, Ocampo and Sierra Mojada. Ocampo is the largest county in all of Mexico. These three counties are located in the northwestern area of the State of Coahuila. The area is roughly 175 miles wide and 200 miles long. All this area is semi arid, sparsely populated, and similar to the borderlands of the Southwest. Until more recently, there were only about 75 miles of paved road in the entire area, and this on the eastern edge. All the rest of the roads were made by simply “driving that way”.



Before the Missionaries of the Holy Family arrived in 1967 there was only a priest in Cuatro Ciénegas, which is on the far eastern edge of this three county area. While he frequently visited the larger communities to the west it was at special times, such as Christmas and Easter, that a priest from the Diocese would be in the smaller communities of Ocampo and La Esmeralda. So in general, the faithful in this large area were provided with only the most basic spiritual services, and in the more remote areas, not even that. The reasons for this were that the area was remote and inaccessible, and secondly, the people were mostly too poor to support a priest. It was for these reasons that the Bishop of the Diocese of Saltillo granted this territory to the Missionaries of the Holy Family.

My area of work was on the far western side, the most remote part of the territory. This is parish of Our Lady of Refuge. It is roughly seventy-five miles wide and two hundred miles long. The church of Our Lady of Refuge, is located in Sierra Mojada, while I made my residence in La Esmeralda, which is only a couple miles away, but where most of the people now live. The reason for the church being in Sierra Mojada dates back to when the area was a vibrant mining community. In the year 1879 rich silver ore was discovered at Sierra Mojada, where the first mines were located and a town quickly grew. Sierra Mojada became the largest town and the official seat of district, or country so the church was built there. The ore and the mines at Sierra Mojada were closer to the surface so mining was easier. During the days of the bonanza Sierra Mojada continued to prosper, but later more abundant ore was found in deeper mines at La Esmeralda and Sierra Mojada slowly declined. Today, most of the abode houses of the miners are now heaps of dirt. Only some of the better-built homes of the wealthy are still standing and are in only fair repair. Many of the man-made caves where miners used to live are still inhabited. It is said that at one time the town had a population of twenty-three thousand (Most consider that an exaggeration.), and now only about seven hundred people live in Sierra Mojada.

La Esmeralda is now a town of about fifteen hundred. When the large mining companies closed the mines in La Esmeralda in the thirties, the miners formed a cooperative, rented the mines, and continued mining, but on a reduced scale. Later, by law, the ownership of the mines passed to the Cooperative. By this time all the silver and lead ores had been depleted, and now only zinc was being mined, and it was a marginal grade of ore. Around 1992 the smelters refused to accept the marginal ore, and so the mines closed completely. Later the Cooperative sold the mines to a company based in Seattle, and it is almost certain that the mines will reopen of a large scale, and the ore will be processed right at the mines.

So now you have a bit of the geography and the history of the area. In the next of these vignettes I will share with you about the most fabulous natural resource in the area – the people and their faith!

Until next time,

Padre Jaime.

PS: I am presently stationed in the parish of St. Joseph, Donna, Texas as the second Parish Vicar. This parish too is sheperded by the Missionaries of the Holy Family. I no longer have any administrative duties; rather, I am involved in various aspects of the ministry to the faithful.