



Los Cuentos de Cristo Rey

What stories this mountain could tell!



By Lisa Kay Tate

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One of the area's oldest residents, Mount Cristo Rey, stands quietly and proudly at the edge of El Paso overlooking several communities and two nations.

The mountain has been a place of worship, study, rest and reflection for millions of years, providing a habitat for local flora and fauna and a landmark for travelers. Even though thousands of El Pasoans pass by the mountain everyday, most are unaware of its legacy in shaping the history of their hometown.

With October hosting such events as Celebrations of Our Mountains, and The Feast Day Celebration of Christ the King, many individuals are eager to act as a voice for Cristo Rey and share a few of its countless stories.

A witness to history

El Paso historian Alex Apostolides said Mount Cristo Rey served as, among other things, a landmark, an observation post and an object of religious worship by the many cultures of the El Paso/Juarez area.

"For thousands of years it was a landmark," Apostolides said. "It has seen Oñate's people passing by, and the shifting of the Rio Grande."

Apostolides said Cristo Rey also witnessed the travels of Aztec empire traders, who went as far north as what is now Idaho, perhaps building shrines to gods such as Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc, the god of wind and rain, just as Christian travelers erected their own shrines.

Long before the mountain was known as Cristo Rey, its peak was known by some as El Cerro de los Muleros (The Hill of the Mule Trainers).

"Mule trains in the area were used to take salt down to Chihuahua," he said. "You could see some mule trains on the roads around the mountains as recently as 20 years ago."

Cristo Rey also saw its share of conflict between the area's cultures including Apache raids and Pancho Villa's battle for independence. The mountain was also a well-defended border during World War II (some remnants of bunkers and fox holes can still be seen), and is still the site of continual struggles between U.S. Border Patrol agents and illegal immigrants.

Even though the mountain is smaller in scale to neighboring ranges such as the Franklin and Juarez mountains, Apostolides said Cristo Rey is "imposing" for its size.

"It has a personality all its own," he said. "You can see it far away from the south, and it is a hill like no other around it."

Apostolides said Cristo Rey's role in the natural, cultural and spiritual past of the area makes it a vital part of Southwest history.

"It saw the landscape change, it saw the growth of El Paso del Norte, and the building of Asarco," he concluded. "It was an eyewitness to everything that happened here for the past 47 million years."

A Geological Marvel

“Fossil Heaven.”

This is how University of Texas at El Paso geology faculty often refers to Cristo Rey. Geologists Chris Andronicos, Philip Goodell and William Cornell all consider the mountain is an essential teaching tool of geology, topography and evolution for their classes.

“I think it stands out, because it is one of the best exposed shallow level intrusions in western North America,” Andronicos said. “It’s fantastic in that it exposes you to a lot of geology, but that you also have great access to it.”

The easy accessibility to the mountain is one of its most desirable qualities.

“It’s some of the best geology in the world and you are able to park your car, get out and see it,” Andronicos said.

“What’s available there is a thick section of fossils,” Cornell added. “There are all types of invertebrates found there like moss, snails, oysters, cephalopods, sea urchins — and that’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

Cornell said the Cristo Rey intrusion itself is approximately 47 million years old, and friendly debate is still ongoing among geologists as to how much this pre- or post-dates the Franklin Mountains. The mountain’s fossils and formations give some of the best examples of the landscape when it was an ocean floor, millions of years before the mountains were formed. The tide went out as the mountains began to form, but evidence shows the area was under the surface of Lake Cabeza de Vaca as recently as 100,000 years ago during a time Goodell refers to as “the Lake Country of Northern Chihuahua.”

UTEP geology faculty still has students work on projects concerning the mountain, as it is a continual wealth of information.

“Every time we go to the mountains we see something we haven’t seen before, or we see it with new eyes,” Cornell said.

Cornell added that the Rio Grande is to thank for making Cristo Rey such a popular formation among geologists.

“If not for the river, the mountain’s fossils would be undiscovered,” he said. “The river cut down 400 feet into the mountain making it possible for us to see the museum-quality fossils found on the mountain.”

Many fossils recovered from the mountain can be found at UTEP’s Centennial Museum as well as in natural history museums throughout the country.

Goodell addressed a common question as to whether or not Cristo Rey is a volcano. The mountain was actually a magma chamber or an underground bulge of igneous rock called a “pluton,” but not actually a volcano as many area residents believe.

The most detailed geological mapping of Cristo Rey, for those interested in seeing its structure in detail, was created by former UTEP professor Dr. Earl Lovejoy. The project took the professor and his helpers five years of painstaking work to complete.

Goodell said the mountain’s structure may be one of the reasons it was once called Cerro de los Muleros.

“In the center of the mountain is ring which is topographically lower than the edges,” he said. “This served as a type of natural corral for mules in mule trains.”

“The mountain also has the most points where you know how old things are,” Andronicos said regarding the mountain’s structure. “By looking at the mountain you can construct a very accu-



Photo by Wayne May

rate time line of the last 100,000 years.”

In addition to the geologic information found on the mountain, Cristo Rey’s 4,576-foot peak is a good vantage point from which to study other surrounding formations.

“Being in the Rio Grande Rift, the top of the mountains gives us a good view of everything around us,” Goodell said.

Although Goodell, Andronicos and Cornell all advise against visiting the mountain alone, due to possible threats from vandals or bandits, they agreed that common sense, checking in with border patrol agents in the area, visiting the mountain during the day and in large groups should decrease any possible dangers.

“If we felt visiting the mountain was a real threat to people’s safety we wouldn’t be doing it with our classes,” Cornell said.

Along the Camino Real

In 1598, Don Juan de Oñate and a procession of 500 colonists held a thanksgiving celebration upon crossing the Rio Grande en route from Mexico to their final settlement near Española, N.M. They traveled along a trail known as El Camino Real (The King’s Highway), which, at 1,600 miles in length, was the longest highway in North America for almost 200 years.

Mount Cristo Rey is located on what was one of the trail’s most active locations.

“Native Americans have used the passage for thousands of years,” El Paso Community College professor George Torok said. “This is the route that connected the Pueblo Indians of the North to the interior (of Mexico).”

“All the goods that came along the Camino Real came right through the mountains,” Torok said.

According to Torok there are two possible routes of the trail near Cristo Rey, the more well-known route that parallels Paisano Drive in El Paso, and a lesser traveled alternate route used when harsh weather conditions made the made route impassible.

“Either way, the route certainly wrapped around the mountain base,” he noted.

Torok said the trail is relatively unmarked in the El Paso area, so many people passing by or along it may be unaware of the historic path they are following.

One marker visible on a hillside near Cristo Rey is the second of several border monuments. The local monuments, according to the El Paso Heritage Corridor Director Gary Williams, are the first of 258 border markers between El Paso and San Diego, Calif., that were first erected by the Emory-Salazar commission

in the 1850s.

Williams said Border Monument No. 1 at the base of the mountain near the Rio Grande serves as the junction of the states of New Mexico, Texas and Chihuahua as well as the international border between Mexico and the United States.

“The marker information reads ‘This monument marks the initial point where the border established under the so-called Gadsden Treaty of 1853 leaves the Rio Grande to run westward,’” Williams said.

The actual junction of the three states is in the middle of the Rio Grande; Marker No. 1 is on land just west of the river, next to Madero Park on the Juarez side.

“You can see Monument No. 2 on the hillside near Cristo Rey and Monument No. 3 is visible from the mountain’s peak,” Williams said. “The rest of the monuments continue westward from there.”

Torok said those who traveled near Cristo Rey along the Camino Real formed the heritage of most everyone in the El Paso area.

“Probably, most of the people living in El Paso and Ciudad Juarez today came along Camino Real near Cristo Rey, whether it was 400 or five years ago,” he said. “It is also a spot where most of the lifestyle of the Southwest arrived, such as the food we eat and the religions we follow.”

The trail also saw the arrival of horses that changed the Native American lifestyle, agricultural changes, place names bearing influence by Spanish conquistadors and missionaries, Anglo travelers, Indian traders and African slaves.

“The Camino Real really shaped the American Southwest,” Torok said.

Soler and Father Lourdes

The item most commonly associated with Cristo Rey is its cross, but few know the names or history of the two main inspirations behind the sacred monument: Father Lourdes Francis Costa and Spanish sculptor Urbici Soler.

“There’s a lot more to Soler and to the mountain than people realize,” said Paul Daniggelis, author of the Urbici Soler biography “Rodant Pel Mon.” “He wasn’t just this strange guy who came out of Spain and built a cross.”

Costa, also born in Spain, attended seminary in Spain and the United States and was ordained in 1911 in San Antonio. He was serving as a missionary for churches in the Marfa area in 1924 when he was asked to administer the poor parish in the Smelertown district of El Paso. Initially, Costa wanted to remain in Marfa, but developed a severe ear infection that evening. Costa took this as a sign God was reprimanding him for his disobedience to serve where he was called.

He was appointed pastor of the Smelertown parish of San Jose del Rio Grande. The parish members and Costa (called “Father Lourdes” affectionately) were close, but Costa was sometimes disheartened to see the church and community suffer from poverty and depression. As the economic depression of the early 1930s reached the community, the lack of morale and jobs resulted in a drop in church attendance. Costa discussed erecting a cross on the mountain as a way to restore the small community’s faith and morale.

“Father Costa is looking towards the mountain ... His imagina-

tion sees a big monumental Cross atop the peak,” area diocese manuscripts read of Costa’s desire.

“Because he thinks the mountain is not on American soil he rejects the idea ... but he cannot do it as some invisible hand is holding him there. He kneels and prays and promises to investigate and then to plant a cross there.”

His investigations proved fruitful. When Costa learned the peak was in New Mexico, not Mexico, he knew he would be able to erect the cross.

Before the limestone cross that now stands on the mountain was built, smaller crosses were erected in 1934. First was a 12-foot wooden cross, soon replaced by a 20-foot welded iron cross created by students at the Smelter Vocational School.

“I remember going up there when it was a wooden cross,” historian Patti Apostolides recalled. “I remember thinking ‘what a wonderful place to worship.’”

By 1935, the U. S. Geographic Board in Washington, D.C. approved the naming of the mountain as Sierra del Cristo Rey, but a series of political, legal and financial setbacks delayed the construction of the Costa’s ultimate vision of the grand monument. In 1937, When Costa was finally able to continue with his project, he recommended Soler for the job.

Costa first met Soler at a Catalanian function in Mexico and felt the artist was worthy of creating a monument befitting both the splendor of the mountain and the glory of Christ the King.

Soler arrived in El Paso in October of 1937. According to “Rodant Pel Mon,” Soler was a flamboyant artist who was had a very specific artistic vision of the final appearance of Cristo Rey. His vision was not always complemented by the need to raise money for the project. He didn’t prefer to have hand-painted ceramic tiles bearing donators’ names form a base for the statue, but the base remained as the tiles were a vital fund-raising scheme for project’s completion.

Daniggelis said Soler wanted the sculpture to serve as an enhancement to Mt. Cristo Rey’s already beautiful shape, and was appalled to learn of unnecessary dynamiting or other destructive methods used to build a path to the monument, particularly since some other monuments on the mountain were destroyed in the process.

Soler, who created more than 143 works worldwide, also originally intended for a crown to surround the sculpture, according to Daniggelis but this vision was not realized until long after the sculptor’s death.



Urbici Soler at work on statue in 1939. Photo from “Rodant Pel Mon”

Though both Soler and Costa faced countless delays and conflicts, the shrine was completed in time for the annual Feast Day of Christ the King by the end of the 1930s.

Costa's parish led the first procession of more than 3,000 pilgrims to the new shrine, carrying traditional flags, banners and posters declaring "Smelter Parish we promised it — October 29, 1933 ... Smelter Parish we fulfilled it — October 29, 1939."

The cross itself (not including the base) stands 29 feet high, one foot higher than Mateo Alonzo's Christ of the Andes on the Chile-Argentina border. Constructed of limestone obtained by a quarry in Austin and transported up the mountain via a tractor-driven trailer, the statue can withstand winds of up to 100 miles per hour.

Soler stayed in El Paso, taught at the university and died here in 1953.

Daniggelis said his book on Soler is the product of many years. It started out as an uncompleted college project, and eventually was published in 1995 by El Paso's International Association for the Visual Arts, ten years after he completed the manuscript. The title, "Rodant Pel Mon," is Catalanian (the region of Spain Soler came from) for "Roaming around the World."

Having gotten to know members of Soler's family throughout the years, Daniggelis and his book helped bring overdue recognition to the artist and his work. This recognition included Soler being selected with El Paso artist William Kolliker as the first inductees to the El Paso Artist's Hall of Fame.

In addition, several of Soler's smaller sculptures were found in Soler's Anapra (now Sunland Park, N.M.) home after the artist's death and have been part of various local museum displays.

They are now part of the permanent collection of the International Museum of Art in El Paso.

Restoration efforts

According to Daniggelis, Soler would be saddened to see his creation showing the effects of time.

"I think he would see that the destruction to the monument is incredible," he said. "Even in spite of the efforts of those maintaining the mountain, it still seems to be suffering from constant deterioration, either naturally or from vandals."

Daniggelis acknowledged the hard work currently being done to restore the mountain and its cross, but believes returning the statue to its original glory will take ongoing volunteer efforts, particularly in the form of security and protection.

"It will have to rely on devoted volunteers, and I think the current group of people is really dedicated," he said.

Past efforts have been made to illuminate the cross, including the installation of a generator on the peak. The generator lit the cross on nights marking religious or patriotic observances, making the mountain as unique as night as it was by day. Unfortunately, the box was destroyed by vandals, and more extensive work on permanent lighting for the stature, as well as Cristo Rey's trail, is being done.

Felix Vasquez Jr., president of the Cristo Rey Restoration Committee, said committee members spend every weekend working to maintain and restore the monument, its shrines and trails. The committee is made up of the descendents of the San Jose del Rio Grande Parish who have taken up the obligation to maintain the shrine.

Vasquez said Cristo Rey is not just for the descendents of Smelertown but for everyone. "When I see families walking the trails it makes the labor of love worthwhile."

Those who keep the statue and its trail in good condition are also working to making sure more people can enjoy Cristo Rey safely in the future. The Mount Cristo Rey Illumination Project, consisting of many members of the restoration committee and others, are raising funds to install permanent lighting along the trail to the cross as well as around the statue itself.

Permanent lighting around the statue could make it possible for the cross to be lit every night. The mountain's other shrines and stations of the cross will also be illuminated in the future.

"This would be a nice addition to the star on the (Franklin) mountains," Vasquez explained. "We're also trying to work with local government to get a road built around the mountain so the Border Patrol can guard it easier."

In addition, he hopes to see the illumination project coordinate with local law enforcement to create a security system along the trail, safeguarding the mountain or its visitors from vandalism and theft.

"I go up there every week and I am still awed by it," he concluded. "It's beautiful to see what God puts before you. You're there and it's peaceful."

To make a donation to the Mount Cristo Rey Illumination Project write P.O. Box 1003 Sunland Park, N.M. 88063.



Photo by Mary Bream

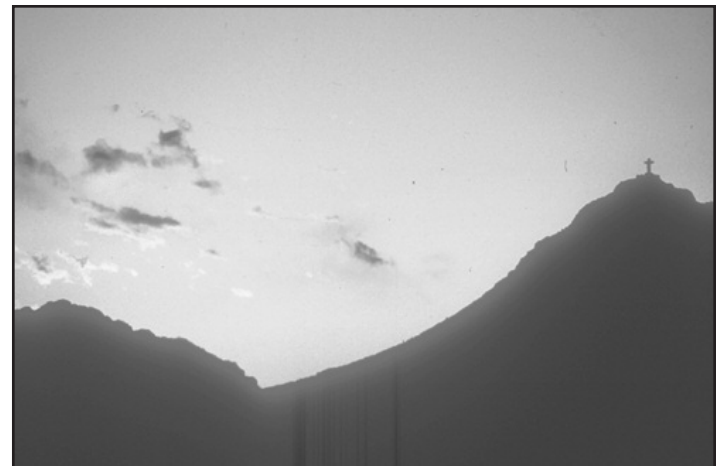


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