

## *Voices from Inside a Black Snake: Religious Monuments of Sonora's Highways*

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It was May 21, 1999, and I was photographing and recording roadside religious art along Mexico's Highway 15 between Santa Ana and Hermosillo in Sonora. It was a hot day in the middle of one of the region's periodic droughts, and after photographing one of the many crosses marking fatal accidents, I chatted with a young man who was cutting grass by the road for his horse. I explained what we were doing and why, and remarked that a lot of people had died along that stretch of road. "Yes," he replied, "My grandmother told me that when she was a little girl a big black snake came to Sonora and started eating the people. And it was the highway."<sup>1</sup>

### SUDDEN DEATH ON THE ROAD

On December 23, 1783, Felipe de Neve, commandant-general of the Interior Provinces of New Spain, sat in his office in Arizpe following a serious discussion with Fray Antonio de los Reyes, first bishop of Sonora, and composed a letter to Don Pedro Corbalán, intendant-governor of Sonora. In it he issued an order

that along all of the roads connecting our settlements all of the crosses erected in memory of those who have died at the hands of enemy Apaches at those sites be taken down. For one thing, the practice tends to cheapen the sacred symbol and even expose it to acts of irreverence. The custom has perhaps an even worse effect by frightening the passersby, reminding them of the unfortunates sacrificed at these places, and could even unnerve them to the point of being unable to defend themselves from a like attack at the same places. Such excessive fear would only add to Apache boldness and arrogance, for they too know the meaning of the crosses.

I therefore order your worthy office to see to it that these crosses are taken down by making copies of this, my communica-

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tion, and circulating them among the local officials of the settlements and missions of your province, forbidding at the same time any continuance of this custom. ("Hispanic Custom" 1983: 7)

One has only to drive down Highway 15 between the U.S.-Mexico border and the Sonoran capital of Hermosillo to judge the long-term effects of this formal command: none whatsoever. The highway is positively lined with crosses, with an average of more than one per kilometer. The main differences are that the internal combustion engine has replaced the Apaches as the major cause of roadside death, and the crosses are probably far more frequent than they ever were in the eighteenth century.

The custom of erecting a cross to mark the spot at which a soul was separated from its body without the spiritual preparation afforded by the Church appears to be an old one in Catholic Mexico. In the past, before it was relatively easy to transport the body to a cemetery, the body might have been buried at the spot. At least that is what Howard Scott Gentry thought in his 1942 article "Caminos de San Bernardo," about the trail system in and around a community in Sonora's Sierra Madre. Possibly because there was a human body present, the cross often surmounted a large pile of rocks. (Rock piles are common additions to rural graves in this region for a simple purpose: to keep the bodies from being dug up by dogs or coyotes.) Passersby would add a rock to the pile and, if so inclined, recite a prayer for the repose of the soul that went to meet its Maker at that spot. This reflects the traditional Catholic belief that many souls spend time after death in purgatory, which is thought of as a place of purification. This prepares the soul to enter into heaven, which is to say, into the presence of God. It is believed that the souls in purgatory may be assisted by the prayers of the living and after entering heaven may intercede in turn for the living.

Rock pile shrines seem to antedate Catholicism in the region that is now northern Sonora and southern Arizona. Cairns and alignments of rocks may be seen along many prehistoric trails in the area that historically was occupied by the O'odham. Many of these shrines, if that is what they are, are located where the trail goes through a pass in the mountains—a place of potential danger. According to Kozak and Lopez (1991: 3–7) there are three traditional death marker shrines in Tohono O'odham country—the Twins' Shrine between the villages of Santa Rosa and Covered Wells; Nawicu's Rock Pile, where a ceremonial participant fell dead, and the Ho:oki Ki near the village of Pozo Verde, where a witch was put to death in the distant past. Each of these shrines

is traditionally “used” by placing offerings—often rocks in the first two cases—on or by it. This act may bring power to the individual involved. The offerings at the first two shrines, both of which are beside roads, usually consist of rocks. However, because the Tohono O’odham have been in contact with missionaries and other Catholics since the late seventeenth century, these two shrines may well have been influenced by traditional Mexican Catholic practice. This certainly holds true for the many modern death markers along the roads of the Tohono O’odham Nation.

Although marking death sites is an important purpose of roadside and trailside crosses in Catholic Mexico, it is not the only one. I have seen crosses marking the tops of mountains (protection against the Devil, who can occupy the air; Steele 1993:23–26), indicating the limits of traditional village boundaries, and at potentially dangerous river crossings. Such crosses may or may not be accompanied by rock piles. J. Frank Dobie (1980: 154–65) mentions all these and more in his chapter on crosses in *Tongues of the Monte*. He also mentions several specific crosses and their stories. Although death crosses along modern highways are not usually accompanied by rock piles, on older trails and dirt roads such piles are still sometimes found, and travelers still occasionally stop their cars or trucks, get out, add a rock to the pile, and drive on.

Where there is no rock pile—as with almost all modern death markers—passersby can still add something: They can say prayers. Several people have told me that they or their older relatives say a short prayer when passing a death marker, especially if the marker represents a friend or relative. Many people in this still predominantly Catholic culture will at least cross themselves. Some motorists who see the crosses may instinctively slow down or drive a little more carefully. Even on modern, high-speed divided highways, the crosses often still elicit responses from those who see them.

How long do the crosses and other death markers last? That is hard to answer. I seldom see a dated marker from as far back as the 1960s. However, Dobie claims to have heard in the 1920s or ’30s of a still-existing trailside cross in northern Mexico which memorialized a death that took place in 1594 (Dobie 1980: 162–64). Personally, I think it unlikely that many crosses and their stories last as long as a hundred years in these faster-moving, more impersonal days.

Crosses constitute the most common death markers on Mexico’s highways. They may be of metal, wood, or composition material. A cross may be commissioned from a firm specializing in cast composition

grave markers or in ornamental ironwork. It may also be made at home, if a family member has the necessary skills, or it may be commissioned from a neighboring craftsperson. The cross may or may not rest on a pedestal or, in some cases, on a rectangular concrete slab that makes it look like a grave, although there is no body beneath the slab. Information concerning the deceased is often written on the slab, on the cross itself, or on a name plate affixed to the crossing. This always gives the names of the deceased and the date of death. For a little child, the name is preceded by the word *niño* or *niña*, and for a person under twenty, by the word *joven* (young person). Additional information may include the birth date or age of the deceased, and the deceased's relationship to the persons erecting the marker. The initials Q. E. P. D. (*Que en Paz Descanse*—"May He/She Rest in Peace") usually appear at the bottom of the inscription.

Very occasionally some quotation, brief poem, or other sentiment appears in addition to the data. Examples of these follow:

For a thirty-year-old woman:

Dios mio te llevaste  
lo que más amabamos  
en el mundo, aun  
nuestra alma está  
llena de amargura  
así lo dispusiste  
Señor acatamos tu  
Santa Voluntad

(My God, you took / that which we loved most / in the world.  
Although / our soul is / filled with distress, / you disposed it thus;  
/ Lord, we respect your / Holy Will).

And, on a marker for an eighteen-year-old young man:

Tu que estás en el cielo  
ruega a Dios por nosotros  
siempre vivirás en  
nuestros corazones.

(You who are in heaven / pray to God for us. / You will always  
live in / our hearts.)



Other cultural information on the markers may include membership in some official body, such as the police, or employment for a bus or trucking company.

Very occasionally there will be a bit of art associated with the memorial. I have seen a pencil sketch, presumably of the victim, with the written legend “*le espero en el cielo*” (I await you in heaven). Another cross has the face of the Suffering Savior painted on it, along with the name and dates of the young victim. But such representations are rare.

Often, small, non-salvageable bits of the wrecked car will be placed on or in front of the monument. Strips of reflector are common, so are mud flaps and floor mats. I have seen a section of shiny blue fiberglass body, surrounded by flakes of fiberglass; a fender; hubcaps; and other parts. As I said, most of the wreck fragments placed by the crosses are just that: bits and pieces that are too small to be worth salvaging in this country and culture where almost everything gets recycled.

Some crosses are more elaborate in their arrangement. On a low berm on the north side of Mexico’s Highway 2, just west of Sonoyta, Sonora, stands a white wooden cross some three feet tall. A small, polychrome corpus from a crucifix is attached to the front of the cross near its top. A repoussé metal plaque of the Virgin of Guadalupe is attached to the front of the cross near its base. Clusters of plastic flowers are attached at the base and crossing. In front of the cross, the berm on which it stands is covered by a pile of medium-sized granite rocks, the upper layer of which has been artificially blackened. To the left of the cross, letters made of smaller rocks painted white are arranged along the berm to spell out “Don Lupe.” (*Don* is an honorific title; evidently this man, whose first name was Guadalupe—or “Lupe”—was a person of considerable age and standing.) The entire assemblage combines to create a very moving monument to the man who lost his life on this stretch of desert highway.

Sometimes the very location of the cross adds to the spectacle. On the mountainous highway between the Sonora and Moctezuma rivers in north central Sonora, on the edge of a steep precipice, is a small, flat, black, metal cross with splayed finials. Although it has a rectangular plate at the crossing, no name was painted there when I photographed the scene in July 1999. It stands on an equally small rectangular cement slab. To the left of the cross is the left rear fender and part of the side of a dark blue pickup truck, obviously torn from the rest of the vehicle.

At the rear of the fiberglass panel is Wakko, a Warner Brothers cartoon character who was introduced in 1963 in the United States and marketed in Mexico shortly thereafter. He is making the two-finger peace sign with his right hand. From the freshness of the painting, it may well have been applied after the wreck. Behind the memorial, on the other side of the precipice, the distant road may be seen snaking along to its destination.

Not all death markers in Sonora consist of crosses. Some are small, free-standing niches, or *nichos*, large enough to contain a religious statue, a candle or two, and quite possibly some sort of name plaque. These might best be described as the size of a doghouse, standing perhaps two feet tall and of a similar width and length. The roof is usually gabled. In a few cases, highway deaths are memorialized with actual chapels, or *capillas* (also sometimes called *oratorios*), large enough for one or two people to enter. Such *nichos* and *capillas* usually have a plaque bearing the same kind of dedicatory data as the crosses. There is always an altar at the end of the building opposite the door, at least one saint's image, and often candles, flowers, or both.

### CHAPELS AND MURAL PAINTINGS

Most of the chapels and roadside religious paintings along Sonora's highways, however, are not death markers, but rather have been erected either as part of a petition for a miracle or as a thanks offering for a miracle granted. The chapels may range from double telephone booth size to buildings just large enough to hold a priest saying mass and perhaps four or five other people.

The chapels are of many styles, but a large proportion owe at least a part of their appearance to the baroque styles so important in colonial New Spain. It seems clear that for many Mexicans, most of whom grew up seeing a wide range of colonial churches, the baroque equates in some important way with the Catholic religion. The chapel may have a scalloped gable or a complex window shape; or there may be *salomonica* or *estipite*<sup>2</sup> columns flanking the altar; or the organizational principles of motion, contrast, and richness of color, materials, and concepts may be applied in some other way. But a large percentage of the roadside *capillas* at least nod in the direction of a colonial heritage.

Every chapel is dedicated to a specific saint. By far the most common along Sonora's highways is the Virgin Mary in her guise as Our Lady of Guadalupe. This devotion, according to popular belief, dates back to 1531, when the Virgin appeared to an Indian named Juan Diego, just outside Mexico City. After La Guadalupana, as she is popularly known, the saint most commonly found along Sonora's highways is St. Jude (San Judas). St. Jude was one of the twelve original followers of Jesus and brother to St. James. Little is known of his life, but in the late twentieth century he achieved tremendous popularity as the patron of impossible causes. He is known in Sonora as one who can assist in finding a job.

An occasional older chapel is dedicated to St. Martin of Porres, or to the reclining St. Francis Xavier, an important devotion in northern Sonora and southern Arizona. San Martín de Porres was a Dominican lay brother of mixed Spanish and African descent, born in Peru in 1579. A humble man devoted to serving the poorest of the poor, he was only canonized in 1962. During the 1960s and '70s, he enjoyed the same kind of popularity as a worker of difficult miracles as St. Jude does today. San Francisco Xavier was a sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary who worked in Asia and whose body lies in state in Goa, India. According to tradition, an image of San Francisco at the moment of his death was brought into Sonora by this region's first missionary, the Jesuit Eusebio Francisco Kino. This saint's devotion centers in the town of Magdalena de Kino, Sonora (Griffith 1992).

Another form of roadside religious art that seems to be gaining in popularity is the religious mural. These murals are painted on sections of wall, or rather upright cement slabs, erected for the purpose. They are also found on cliff faces and in road cuts, painted either on the rock itself or on a slab affixed to the rock. By far the most common subject is, once again, the Virgin of Guadalupe, although I have seen an occasional St. Jude, a Sacred Heart of Jesus, and a cement slab bearing a depiction of the Transfiguration.

Whether they be chapels or murals or even free-standing statues, many of these sites are actively used. People do not simply drive by—they stop and pray. Some of the sites are more popular than others, but many contain enough candles and floral or other offerings to indicate that many people besides the original builders use them, and use them regularly, to request help or offer thanks for some perceived miracle.

In other words, they may be thought of as communications centers of a kind. Descriptions of a few of Sonora's roadside chapels and murals follow.

On Highway 15, at the north end of the mountains just south of the village of Cibuta, is a cluster of three small, double-phone-booth-sized chapels. Up until about 2001, there were only two chapels—one dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe and one dedicated to both the Virgin and San Judas. There was also an upright cement slab with a picture of San Judas on it (Griffith 2000a: 42). By April 2002, the slab (which had become badly weathered) had been removed and replaced by a San Judas chapel equal in size to the other two. All three chapels seem to be well tended; all have contained many burning candles whenever I have passed by. I have not been able to find out any information concerning the elaborate assemblage of chapels; however, their apparent cost of erection and their placement on the northbound lane of a major north-south highway has led some of my Sonoran acquaintances to speculate that they were built on the orders of someone in the drug trade.

In fact, many of the people I have spoken with attribute many if not all of Sonora's large roadside shrines and religious paintings to *los narcotraficantes*—the drug smugglers. The rationale for the assumption is fairly simple: These men have the money to commission large chapels and paintings, they are engaged in a high-risk business involving north-south highway travel, and they have been described to me as superstitious. For obvious reasons, however, solid evidence for or against this generalization is hard to come by. Here are two cases for which I have at least hearsay evidence.

Just east of the Sonoran town of Fronteras, along the dirt road that leads to the junction town of Santa Ana, is a chapel built on a rocky hillside in an open field. The chapel is a remarkable piece of engineering. It is cantilevered out from the hillside on a platform. One end of the platform is attached to the hill, while the other rests on two cement pillars that are perhaps fifteen feet tall. The space at the end of the platform between the pillars is filled with cement blocks, and on the wall thus formed is painted a huge mural of St. Martin of Tours (San Martín Caballero), parting his cloak for the beggar (Griffith 2000b: 50). San Martín is the patron of businesspeople, among others, but there are prayer cards printed in Mexico that ascribe a more sinister class of activity to him. In these prayers St. Martin is requested to deliver the speaker's enemies to him under some sort of enchantment (Griffith 2000b: 41).



Highway 2, across from Santa Ana Viejo. (Photograph by author)

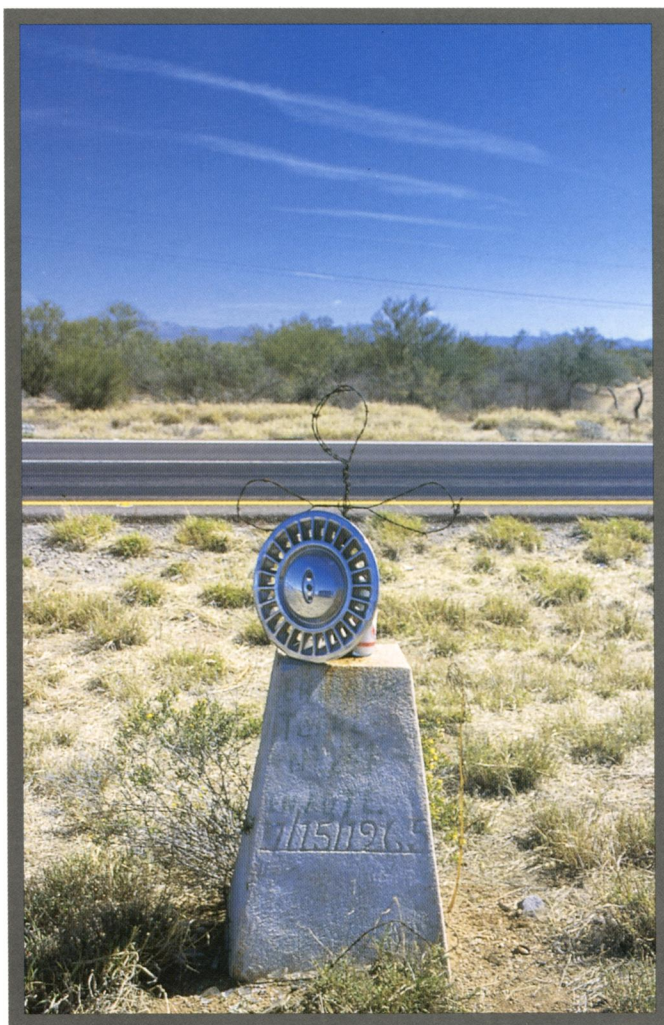


*Median, Highway 15, kilometer 65. (Photograph by author)*









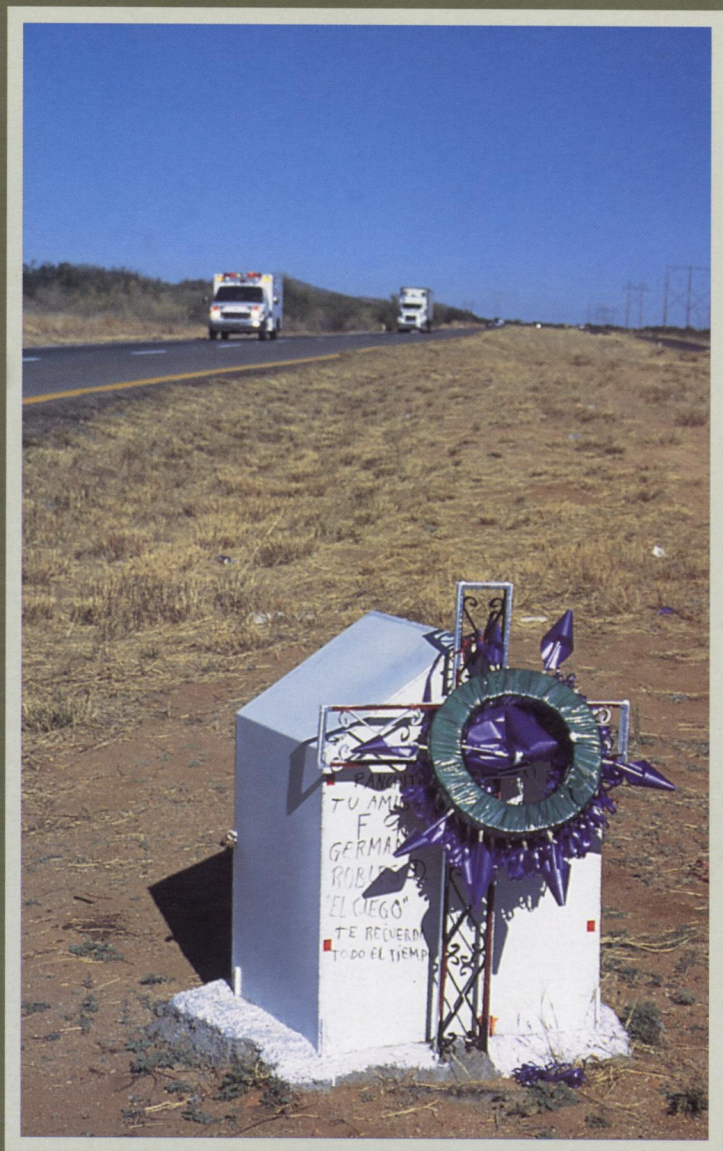
*Median, Highway 15, kilometer 106.5.  
(Photograph by author)*

*El Oasis, Highway 15.  
(Photograph by author)*









*Median, Highway 15, kilometer 88. (Photograph by author)*





*East side of Highway 15, between kilometers 37 and 38.  
(Photograph by author)*



*Median, Highway 15, between kilometers 134 and 135.  
(Photograph by author)*

*East side of Highway 15, kilometer 100.  
(Photograph by author)*







*Median, Highway 15, between kilometers 87 and 88. (Photograph by author)*









*Guadalupe Capilla, east side of Highway 15, kilometer 126. (Photograph by author)*





The owner of the ranch on which the chapel stands, a well-known mafioso, caused the structure to be built around 1978. Around 1979, two men described as “business associates” arrived at his door and requested that he go with them, telling his wife that they would bring him back soon. His body was found ten days later by the railroad tracks. Apparently San Martín was not as helpful as was hoped.

Between Ímuris and Cocóspera, at a point where Highway 2 passes through a mountain range, there is a high road cut. This is occupied by a vertical cement slab perhaps twenty feet high bearing a large painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Two tiny ledges high up on the slab hold statues of San Judas and the Virgin. Though the painting is signed by the artists who executed it, there is no other dedicatory statement. The “word on the road,” however, has it that the shrine was commissioned by an individual who is well known as a prominent figure in Sonora’s international drug trade.

A far different story is attached to a huge painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe, three meters wide by twelve meters high, which can be seen just west of Highway 15 a few miles south of the Sonoran capital of Hermosillo. She is painted on a hill called El Cerro de las Víboras (the Hill of the Rattlesnakes) and was created in 1957 by one Guillermo Jordán Engberg with the help of three other men. Jordán was born in 1916 in California and moved to Sonora with his family at the age of seventeen. A painter and carpenter by trade, he lived in Sonora until 1965, when he moved to Arizona. He retired in 1980, in which year he returned to Sonora to repaint his gigantic mural. He died in 1999 at the age of eighty-two, and his ashes were deposited, at his request, in a hollow at the base of the shrine (“Descansa Jordán” 2000).

Something about Jordán’s act of devotion must have appealed to many people, for the painting of the Virgin is the focus of a cluster of thousands of ex-voto plaques and other offerings. Plaques line the rocks and hillside leading up to the painting. Lengths of human hair, cut off and offered to the Virgin, are thrust into cracks in the rock. *Nichos* and even small *capillas* are scattered at the foot of the hill. A cleared space with scattered mesquite trees invites parking. A nearby Pemex gasoline station is named the Gasolinera Guadalupana, and has its own shrine to the Virgin. The site has become a true public place of petitions.

There seems to be yet another interactive use of the chapels for communication. They are very occasionally vandalized, with all the images and candles on the altars deliberately smashed. At least some chapel

owners believe this to be a deliberate theological statement, probably by fundamentalist Protestants for whom religious images constitute idolatry. Fundamentalist Protestant evangelists are extremely active and increasingly successful in Mexico, a country that for years was almost totally Catholic. Evidence for this belief is occasionally found in hand-lettered signs attached to some interior chapel walls. For example, in February 1990 I saw a sign in one chapel on the highway between Sonoyta and the resort and fishing community of Puerto Peñasco (Rocky Point to most Americans). It read: "Hermano separado / si crees en Dios / no destruyas / este santuario." (Separated brother / if you believe in God / do not destroy / this sanctuary.) I can only assume that the "separated brothers" are Protestants.

I found a sign bearing a similar message in a roadside chapel in northern Chihuahua in 1990. It lacked a salutation, and was signed *Católicos* (Catholics). In essence, it asked even those who did not believe in the saints to respect the beliefs of others and not to damage the images in the chapel. And on a road cut near Palomas, Chihuahua, a mural of San Martín Caballero has been blotted out with black spray paint. Beside it on the cliff are scrawled the words "no existe" (He doesn't exist.) Whether or not iconoclasm, as opposed to simple vandalism, has been the motive behind the periodic very real desecration of roadside chapels, it certainly seems to be so in the case of this mural (Griffith 1988: 17).

### A CASE STUDY

When I first traveled Mexico's Highway 15 between Santa Ana and Hermosillo, Sonora, in the 1960s, it was a two-lane highway with several dangerous hilly curves and a number of narrow bridges. At some point around 1980, it was turned into a four-lane, divided highway. The bridges were widened, but the hilly stretches remain. The road receives virtually all the long-distance traffic that runs along Mexico's west coast. Heavy trucks, buses, and private cars share the highway. Although the posted speed limit is around sixty-five miles an hour, traffic usually proceeds at between seventy and seventy-five. The road is especially crowded in early January, when the *paisanos*, Mexicans who live and work in the United States for most of the year, are returning north after having spent Christmas with their families.

The 140 kilometers of divided highway between Santa Ana, Sonora (km 165), and the Hermosillo tollbooth (km 15) contain at least 143 death markers at 123 locations. I say “at least” because it is highly likely that we missed a few markers. The earliest dated marker I have been able to find commemorates a death that took place in 1961. This is located to the west of the divided highway. The east side of the east lane, which was added to the original two-lane road in the 1980s, has far fewer markers than do the west side and median strip, and the earliest recorded death on the east side of the road took place in November 1984.

Of the eighty deaths for which dates are available, thirteen occurred in December. After that, July (nine), May and October (eight each), and February and August (seven each) had the most fatalities. The other months ranged from three to six fatalities, with January having the fewest at three deaths. Ages are given on forty-five of the markers. Of these, five were under fifteen, six from fifteen to twenty, eleven from twenty to thirty, and sixteen from thirty to forty. The count then tapered off sharply, with two from forty to fifty, three from fifty to sixty, and one each in their seventies and eighties. These data don’t help much in interpreting the death markers, but they certainly give a picture of just who is being memorialized.

So much for statistics. Here are some of the voices from this particular black snake.

Km 133, west side: A plain iron cross with a rectangular name plate.

Cross and plate are painted white, and no inscription is visible.

The cross sits on a base of adobe bricks with a cement core into which four white seashells have been pressed.

Km 123, west side: A small cluster of crosses. Facing east onto the road is a three-foot-high white metal cross with a polychrome crucifix attached to it. Directly in front of this is a smaller black metal cross bearing a rectangular plate. Hand-lettered on the plate is: “Fco. Eduardo Salazar Lugo / \*25-4-62 / †16-4-92” (The star and cross are standard symbols for birth and death. In Mexican date style, the day comes first, then the month, then the year.) Directly north of these crosses, facing north, is a foot-high white vertical cement slab surmounted by a small, ornate, white metal cross. The slab bears the logo of the COMISIÓN NACIONAL DE EMERGENCIA, along with a

text that reads: “Francisco Eduardo Salazar Lugo / \*25-4-62 / †16-4-92 / amor es dar la vida por los demás, / ya que moriste en cumplimiento / de tu deber, que Dios le premié. / Son los deseos de tus padres, hermanos / esposa, hijos y compañeros de Comisión / Nacional de emergencia / Nogales.” (Love is giving one’s life for others. Now that you died fulfilling your duty, may God raise you to the heights. These are the wishes of your parents, siblings, wife, children and companions of the National Emergency Commission.) Beside this slab stands a small black cross.

Km 134, median: A large cross, about three feet tall, with trifoil finials made of laminated wood. Three pointed wooden rays stick out from each quarter-section of the cross. There is a metal relief head of Christ at the crossing, and small stamped metal angels and other figures on the cross’s uprights and arms. I have seen many crosses just like this in San Antonino Velasco in the valley of Oaxaca, but nowhere else. Near the base of the cross is a small picture of the Virgin of Juquila, a Oaxacan devotion.

Burned into a wooden plaque is “Señor Margarito Reyes / Carreza Fallecio el 19 de diciembre de 1997 / a la edad de 39 años / Descanse en Paz / Recuerdo de sus Padrinos.” (Mr. Margarito Reyes Carreza. Died on December 19, 1997, at the age of thirty-nine years. Rest in peace. A remembrance from his godparents.) I photographed this cross twice. In May 1999, the wood was freshly varnished and there were two fairly fresh offerings of artificial flowers on the cross. An automobile mirror back and other bits of wreckage rested on the supporting slab. In February 2002, the cross was quite weathered and no flowers were in evidence. However, plastic bases for flower arrangements and one empty plastic pot hung from the cross, and there was a pot containing dirt and a struggling plant at its base.

Km 88, median: Just north of this kilometer marker is a metal *nicho*, painted white, with a peaked, gabled roof. Inside is a candle to San Judas, two printed San Judas cards, one card with a picture of the Virgin, and a hand-lettered card bearing a sketch of a man’s face and the legend “les espero en el cielo” (I await you in heaven). Outside, hand-lettered on the left half of the rear

wall is “Panchito / tu amigo / F.V. / German / Robles D. / “El Ciego” / te recuerdo / todo el tiempo.” (Frankie, your friend F. V. German Robles, “the blind man,” remembers you always.)

Km 54, east side: Just south of this kilometer marker is a yellow *capilla* with stepped gable end, set back against the fence. There is a white tiled altar against the head wall, with a tile mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe over it. The chapel is dedicated to “Jesús Calderón Quintero / \*01-05-41 †01-22-98.” At the time of my visit, on January 6, 2002, the chapel was almost completely surrounded by tall grass. This was the only *capilla* that had a dedication to a deceased person.

I documented ten additional chapels along the 140-kilometer stretch of Highway 15. This does not count two ranch chapels, which were both set back from the road and surrounded by fences. It does include chapels standing by themselves, free-standing chapels next to motels or restaurants, and chapels attached to restaurants. Of the chapels we documented, one was next to an unfinished and abandoned motel, and four were associated with restaurants. In addition there was a free-standing statue of Guadalupe and a more than life-sized statue of Christ the King on top of rocky hills on the west side of the highway. All of these sites had at least a few candles left at them.

The *capilla* of Our Lady of Fátima stands between the El Oasis restaurant and a new Pemex gas station, around Km 60. It is a large, free-standing building built a few feet off the ground, with a columned porch across the front and “Fátima” in neon on its front. Inside is a three-foot-tall statue of the Virgin, smaller statues of the three shepherd children to whom she appeared, flower vases, a glass case containing a statue of the Santo Niño de Atocha, and a pair of statues of angels. The Virgin herself occupies a dark brown and gold, glass-fronted case in a highly baroque style, complete with engaged *estípites*. The chapel was built in 1948 by a family from the railroad town of Carbó, about twelve kilometers east of the highway. The elderly woman who takes care of the chapel as of 2002 is the daughter of the woman who had it built. A statue of Our Lady of Fátima was ordered from Portugal and the chapel was built as a petition for the recovered health of a child.

The chapel is heavily used; whenever I have visited it over the past twenty-five years, someone has always pulled up in a car or truck,

entered, and prayed. According to the woman who takes care of it, the folks who use it the most are the *trailereros*, or drivers of the big semi trucks that drive to and from the U.S.-Mexican border. It has become a popular place at which to pray for a safe journey. Many people leave offerings of money in a small collection box beside the altar. Each May 16, on the feast day of the Virgin, this money is spent to feed everyone who comes to the mass and rosary. As the owner of the chapel explained to me, the Virgin takes care of her own.

### A FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

What do all these crosses, paintings, and chapels have in common, aside from the fact that they are all built alongside highways? In the first place, each one commemorates some sort of event: a sudden death, a prayer made, a prayer answered. A relationship is stated, whether it be between a deceased individual and his or her surviving friends, or between an individual and some saint.

In the second place, each cross, *nicho*, or chapel invites some sort of reaction or interaction. Relatives and others may say brief prayers as they pass the death markers. Family members often try to renew and decorate the markers on or before November 2, All Souls' Day in the Catholic calendar and the Day of the Dead in Mexico. Passersby have the option of stopping at the roadside shrines and chapels to pray or offer thanks for their own miracles. From the evidence of candles, many do so. Some apparently feel the need to protest actively against the use of religious images and act on this need. Not all of the sites of thanks and petition are heavily used; some certainly are.

None of these markers or religious sites was set up to my knowledge by corporate entities. Each represents the work, or at least the initiative, of an individual or family. In a few cases, however, members of corporate entities have added their own messages to existing markers or even added their own markers. Finally, I wish to return to the image with which I began this essay: the highway as a giant black snake. Snakes figure heavily in Mexican traditional consciousness, both as personifications of evil in the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Garden of Eden and as the much more benevolent water-associated, plumed serpent of Mesoamerica. We know that both of these conceptual serpents are alive in Sonora, the one brought with Catholicism and the other disseminated

by indigenous peoples (Griffith 1992: 3–13). Which is the highway? I am not really sure at this point that the two are separable. Whatever the case may be, this particular snake, black today, trail-dust brown in the past, has been eating people for centuries, and for centuries Sonorans, like folks all over Mexico, have been memorializing this fact by erecting, among other things, crosses. ❖

## NOTES

1. This recording of roadside religious art is part of a larger study of the religious art of the state of Sonora. The 145-kilometer stretch of Highway 15 between Santa Ana and the Hermosillo tollbooth is used as a control; art on other stretches of road is being recorded more randomly. Assisting me on the Highway 15 project have been Jack Childs, Loma Griffith, and Susan Fair. I have discussed the art and its significance with a number of friends, including Alfredo Figueroa, Bernard Fontana, Al Gonzales, Adán Morales, Dr. Felipe de Jesús Valenzuela, and Francisco Javier Manzo Taylor of Hermosillo, who is my partner on the overall project. The study is being done with the generous support of the Southwest Center of the University of Arizona.

2. *Salamónicas*, or salomonic columns, are spiral or helical columns. *Estípites* are complex columns consisting of squares, lozenges, cylinders, and other shapes in combination. Both are typical of Mexican colonial baroque architecture, the former being more popular in the seventeenth century and the latter during the later eighteenth century.

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