

## **Kumeyaay historian dispels the California origin myth**

The contribution of the Spanish mission system in California's history has become legendary, in no small part due to the emphasis on missions in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum.

Yet, fewer Californians may be aware that the original Spanish missions built during the 1700s by Junipero Serra and other Franciscan priests had all but disintegrated when the intercontinental railroad and a novel by a minister's daughter sparked a movement to rebuild the missions in the late 1800s.

Helen Hunt Jackson intended her novel, *Ramona*, to do for Indians what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for African-Americans in promoting reform. But as her book became hugely successful, the law of unintended consequences took effect.

Railroad entrepreneurs wanted to drive tourists to California, and as *Ramona*-readers arrived from the East, they wanted to visit the missions and ranchos romanticized in the novel.

"The missions were rubble and the presidios were gone," says Michael Connolly Miskwish, a Kumeyaay tribal member and adjunct professor at San Diego State University who has written a textbook covering the period before the Spaniards came to the area until 1893. "But people in the towns in California said we've got something that people want to see, so let's recreate it."

By the 1890s architects were employing the Mission Revival style in residences, commercial buildings, schools, and railroad depots characterized by stucco walls and red tile roofs. That and the subsequent Spanish Revival style have become classic California architecture.

"It was Anglo-Americans who actually created this whole type of structure as an imitation of what they saw as the Spanish period," notes Miskwish. "They created the mythology that there's been this continuous history from the Spanish period through the Mexican period into the American period of a legacy of a Spanish culture that is California. It became this myth of California origin."

The problem, he says, is that in the process of creating this "California origin myth," the indigenous people got written out of the narrative. The focus got placed on the missions, which, in actuality, controlled just a small portion of California.

"Missionization really was a coastal phenomenon," Miskwish says, with the Kumeyaay and many other California tribes retaining control of their lands.



Figure 1: Extent of Spanish Missionization; Source: Michael Connolly Miskwish

But in those coastal regions controlled by missionization, some tribes, such as the Amah Mutsun, or Ohlone, of Monterey County, were pulled into the missions in their entirety. “They weren’t able to resist,” says Miskwish. “Their environment got changed radically by the introduction of grazing animals into their territory. Even for the people who wanted to leave, they couldn’t really go back and live a traditional lifestyle.”

In a curriculum he developed with other Kumeyaay tribal members, faculty at the Kumeyaay Community College, and the Sycuan Cultural Department, Miskwish presents a history of the Kumeyaay people and a timeline of contact with Europeans. The [Learning Landscapes Educational Curriculum](#) is a model for other tribes to use in providing information about their own history and culture for use in schools as an alternative to the traditional 4<sup>th</sup> grade project to build models of Spanish missions. The curriculum contains resources that can be used at any grade level. [See how it’s being used in one school district. (link to story)]

Find his textbook, “Kumeyaay: A History Textbook, Vol. 1, Precontact to 1893,” and a list of other approved books of California Indian history and culture at <http://www.kumeyaay.info/books/>.