

Ysleta, Texas

Ysleta, perhaps the oldest town in Texas, came into being as a refuge for Spanish conquistadors, Franciscan clerics and Tigua Indians. Isleta today is part of the city of El Paso. Given its location, you might expect many residents to be of Mexican heritage, but the community of Isleta was started by Tigua Indians who fled from present-day New Mexico in 1680 due to a Pueblo Revolt. They were accompanied by Franciscan clerics who held the first mass in an adobe church at Ysleta in 1680.

When it was first established, the mission and settlement was about 3 miles south of the Rio Grande River. The river was prone to flooding and silt deposit, resulting in the river often changing course. Because the Rio Grande has long served as a border between Mexico and Texas, Isleta was sometimes a Mexican town and sometimes a Texas town. In the early 1830s the river moved much further south than usual, resulting in the town becoming a permanent part of Texas. When the Republic of Texas joined the United States, Isleta also became part of the union.

The Rio Grande River, however, knew no political boundaries. Floods washed away mission buildings several times, and fire damaged the church at least once. But the Tigua of Ysleta were among the most faithful Christian converts in the area so the Catholic Church repeatedly helped the settlement rebuild and grow.

El Paso, to the north of Ysleta, grew and expanded so much that the Ysleta community was annexed as a suburb by its larger neighbor in 1955, despite protests by Isleta residents. The Tigua Indians struggled to retain their identity at a time that Texas was reluctant to recognize any Native American tribes. Due in part to their service as US military scouts during the Indian wars, they were finally recognized as a tribe in 1967.

The church you can visit in Ysleta today was built in 1851, with a beautiful silver domed bell tower added in 1897. You are also welcome to celebrate mass with descendants of the steadfast group of Indian and Spanish settlers who made Ysleta their home.

Source(s):

<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/tx/tx3.htm>

<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/YY/hny6.html>

<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/CC/uqc3.html>

<http://www.texasindians.com/tigua.htm>

Author(s):

Written by Susan G. Scott, Lecturer in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2009.