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COLUMN ONE

## **Tribe hopes melody will summon precious violin**

### **Recovering the 200-year-old instrument, stolen from a mission, is a matter of Salinan Indian pride.**

By Steve Chawkins, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Jolon, Calif.

Jose Maria Carabajal was toiling for the friars at Mission San Antonio on California's Central Coast when he first heard the exalted strains of a violin.

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His people — the Salinan Indians — had been making music for thousands of years, but he'd never heard anything like the sounds soaring from the priest's polished chunk of wood and gut.

Intrigued, Carabajal decided to make his own. The instrument he crafted in 1798 from bay laurel and other native woods was solid enough to last more than two centuries and sweet enough to build a reputation of its own.

The Carabajal, as it came to be known, was handed down through generations. It was played at fiestas and in saloons, at Masses and barn dances. Salinans came to see it as an important piece of their past. Scholars saw it as a rare artifact of the Mission era.

Now it's gone — stolen from an unlocked display case at the mission's tiny museum seven years ago.

"There's a lot of history here — and a lot of mystery," said John Warren, founder and leader of the New World Baroque Orchestra in Paso Robles. He isn't a Salinan but, at 70, he's worked with the tribe for years and is the longtime caretaker of the mission's ancient instruments.

In the early 1990s, Warren restored the Carabajal (pronounced car-ah-bah-HALL). Over the years, he would gingerly remove it from its cabinet and carry it out of the museum for concerts, admiring its workmanship,

its grain patterns, its rough-hewn tuning pegs.

"It wasn't glorious, but it was very, very good," he said. "It wasn't a Stradivarius. It had a simple little varnish."

Warren has worked much of his life to preserve mission music. At a Stanford University archive, he unearthed 200-year-old compositions by Father Juan Bautista Sancho, who led Mission San Antonio and taught Jose Carabajal and other Salinans sacred Christian music.

In August 2003, Warren was to play one of those pieces, Sancho's Mass in G, on the Carabajal at a meeting of the California Mission Studies Assn. But when he went to retrieve it, he was jolted; where the one-of-a-kind instrument should have been, someone had left a cheap student violin that could have come straight from a pawnshop.

"It tore my heart apart," Warren said.

The Monterey County Sheriff's Department administered lie detector tests to Warren and others who were present at the museum. Notices in international violin journals unearthed nothing. The FBI was called in. But everyone came up empty.

Ugly rumors spread: It was a disgruntled former mission employee. Or someone acting out of spite in a festering intratribal dispute. Or a group of Salinans who believed that they were Carabajal's true heirs and that his instrument should be in their possession.

Over the years, the Salinans, like many tribes, have splintered. The tribe has struggled through a decades-long process of seeking federal recognition, spawning internal quarrels over just who should qualify for membership, said Shirley Macagni, a tribal elder. It's a point of pride but also one of potential profit: Salinans have discussed developing a casino if they're recognized.

Today, the historic complex 50 miles north of Paso Robles would seem to pose a challenge for thieves. It sits deep within Ft. Hunter Liggett, a sprawling Army base. Travelers must show a driver's license and proof of insurance just to pass through the base gate. Troop carriers and tanks rumble through the rolling, oak-studded grasslands. Cameras track visitors as they wander through the little museum.

But seven years ago, security was lax. The Carabajal's display case had a hidden latch, but not a lock. Anyone could have slipped away with it. Other artifacts — Salinan drums, spear points, a huge book of musical notations on sheepskin pages — were untouched.

To John Burch, the spiritual head of the Salinan Nation of San Luis Obispo and Monterey Counties, getting the instrument back is a matter of tribal pride — "to show that some Salinan Indian 200 years ago laid aside his tom-tom and said, 'Look what I can do!' "

Jose Carabajal's violin elevated him to a respected calling.

The son of a Spanish soldier and a Salinan woman, he was given a plum position: a seat in Mission San Antonio's orchestra.

"It was like being a quarterback in a small town," said Craig Russell, a music professor at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and author of "From Serra to Sancho: Music and Pageantry in the California Missions." "It was a point of prestige, an honor that elevated your family and followed you through life."

The mission system endured only about 60 years. By the time it collapsed in the 1830s, Indians along the California coast were decimated, mostly from Old World diseases. Tribal cultures teetered on extinction.

But the music, somehow, lived on.

On the ranches around Mission San Antonio, Carabajal's violin was played by one generation after the next. Family members — mostly ranch hands in the area around tiny Jolon — treasured it. Sometime in the late 1800s, Carabajal's great-grandson and namesake took it up. He played it for decades in a trio that crisscrossed the mountains on horseback, entertaining at schoolhouse dances and smoky bars. When he died in 1923, a local writer penned a tribute to him:

"His tuneful violin is hushed, and no more will he sweep the strings with 'Goodnight Ladies' as day is breaking and smile his gentle 'Adios.' "

Over the next half a century, the heirloom made its way through the branches of the Carabajal family tree. In 1973, Leonard Lane, a Carabajal descendant living in Ventura, thought it deserved to be in its original home and donated it to Mission San Antonio.

"The priest there knew all about it but didn't know where it was," said Lane, now 78. "When I told them I would donate it, they went halfway berserk, hugging me and all that."

At 60, John Burch is a trim man with flowing gray hair and a leathery face. As a leader of the 600-member tribe, he has a special feeling for the Carabajal — and a special plan.

"We've tried every avenue: the feds, local law enforcement, pleading, praying, putting the word out on the street, everything," Burch said. "Now I've come up with another method of opening the book, so to speak: creating a sound that induces someone to change their heart."

Burch, a painting contractor by trade, plays the keyboard but doesn't read music. That hasn't stopped him from composing a lament in three brief parts. He named his composition "The Calling."

In December, Mission San Miguel, 40 miles down the road from Mission San Antonio, reopened after being shuttered by an earthquake in 2004. In front of a packed house, Warren's New World Baroque Orchestra and a collection of local choirs belted out Handel's "Messiah." Afterward, Burch took center stage to perform the first part of "The Calling."

"It was one of the gutsiest things I ever did, playing in front of a packed mission," he said.

Macagni, one of the tribal elders, was one of many who were moved that night. "We felt that some of the people responsible for the violin being taken were even there in the audience, and this could possibly get the return started," she said.

It hasn't yet. The Carabajal remains in the wind.

Burch plans to play the second part of "The Calling" at Mission San Miguel in December.

Meanwhile, in the cool, dark corridors of the mission's museum, a violin on a recorded loop plays the haunting "El Cantico del Alba," a hymn to dawn that was once sung each morning.

The instrument in the recording, missing from the crumbling case still on display, is the Carabajal.

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