

## THE HISTORY OF BELEN

### The Nativity of Ranching

by Donald A. Chavez y Gilbert

In the eighteenth century, Diego de Torres and the other Spanish founders christened the 200,000.00-acre land grant south of the present day village of Los Lunas with the Spanish name for Bethlehem, Belen, perhaps because the geographic area and climate of Belen, New Mexico is so similar to that of Palestine and Israel. Similarly, in Portuguese the name is Belem. Most Belenites know that the name "Belen" means Bethlehem, but few understand Belen's rich history and that the history of the name stems far back to its Christian, Arabic, and Hebrew roots. To Christians for over two thousand years the word Bethlehem in Judah represents the birthplace of Jesus Christ in Central Palestine. The Arabic version is Bayt Lahm meaning "house of meat." In Hebrew Bet Lehem means "house of bread."

Spain originally governed the territory of New Mexico from 1540 to 1821, then from 1821 to 1845 under the Mexican flag. Before the thirteen original (*American*) colonies signed the declaration of independence in 1776, people born in the Belen colony were already thirty-six years old. By the time of the American conquest in 1848, several generations of Belenites had been established during the interim hundred years. The ranching and cowboy culture was originally brought to what is modern day United States of America by the Spanish colony established by Don Juan de Onate and 560 original colonists in the year 1598, almost a decade before the establishment of Jamestown, Virginia, and almost a quarter century before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts. The American West was indeed born in New Mexico, including Valencia County, the heart, the nativity of New Mexico. The first ranches and cowboy culture evolved right here along the Rio Grande River over a period of over four hundred years.

As the descendents of the Onate colonization in El Rio Arriba, (upper river valley), gained ownership of northern New Mexico lands, new generations of Spanish settlers gradually moved south in search of new cultivatable farmland. By 1740, the movement reached El Rio Abajo, (Lower River valley). A group of citizens from Albuquerque, which was founded in 1706, was looking south to improve their lot. To put this pursuit in the words of the Belen petitioners -

*translated from sixteenth century Spanish*, their petition read as follows:

**To his Excellency, the Governor and Captain General: Captain Diego de Torres and Antonio de Salazar, and the other signers hereto, before the greatness of Your Excellency, with the greatest possible submission, state: That, whereas, we have large families and have no convenient lands with which to support them and having examined an uncultivated and vacant tract of land at the point of the Rio Abajo and being inappropriate, we register the same and petition for a grant in the royal name of His Majesty, [Whom God may preserve] for the purpose of settling thereon, there being suitable lands for cultivation, for pasture grounds for our herds and flocks, which we promise to occupy and settle as required by the Royal Ordinances; the boundaries of which are, on the east by the Sandia Mountains and on the west, the Rio Puerco River. The North boundary is the lands of Nicolas Chavez and those of the adjoining settlers of Our Lady of Concepcion, tract of Tome; and on the south the place called Phelipe Romero, in a direct line until it intersects the boundaries above mentioned from east to west; which Your Excellency being pleased to grant without third party prejudice and provide as we request by doing in which we will receive grace and favor, and we affirm in due form that this, our petition, is done in good faith for the purpose of overcoming our difficulties.**

Signed

Captain Diego de Torres Tadeo Torres

Antonio de Salazar Cayentano Cristobal Torres

Pedro Vigil Barbara Romero  
Miguel Salazar Gabriel Romero  
Juana Teresa Romero Maria Vigil  
Juan Antonio Salazar Francisco Martin  
Miguel Salazar Nicolas Martiniano  
Pablo Salazar Ignacio Barrera  
Nicolas Salazar Juan Domingo Torres  
Manuel Antonio Trujillo Jose Romero  
Maria Torres Jose Tenorio  
Salvador Torres Juan Jose Sandoval  
Jose Antonio Torres Francisco Trujillo  
Franco Jiron Bartolome Torres  
Jose Antonio Naranjo Pedro Romero

The original Belen Land Grant consisted of approximately 200,000 acres extending from the Rio Puerco on the west to the Manzano Mountains on the east, and from the north from the Tome Land Grant and Los Chavez, to the south by the town of Bernardo. To Indian crops like corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, chili, and melons, the Belen colonists added crops such as oats, wheat, and all kinds of fruit trees as well as European livestock such as sheep, horses, cattle, goats, chickens, and pigs. These first settlers built adobe homes with hornos to make bread, which required the use of Spanish yeast. Some of these Spanish settlers continued developing the cowboy, (vaqueros), and ranching industry while others specialized in grand farms. The Belen land was fertile and despite regular attacks from wild Apache and Comanche Indians, the colony thrived and grew. Working together with the Pueblo Indians the two groups of people formed a strong military and religious alliance while learning and borrowing from each other, forever changing their respective cultures and that of the American Southwest. In 1750, a military garrison was established in Belen for the protection of the missions and the haciendas scattered along the lower river valley. Ten years later, it was developed into a presidio and Belen became an armed protector against Indian marauders for 150 years to come. By 1790, the colonists of the Belen Land Grant had established six semi-military posts with a Commandate in charge of each Plaza.

Just prior to the American conquest of New Mexico, the only source of supplies for non-agricultural materials was by caravan trade with Chihuahua, Mexico. Yearly caravans of carretas, (two wheeled wagons), journeyed from Chihuahua to New Mexico and back, creating a class of ricos, rich New Mexicans like Nicolas T. Armijo nephew of the Mexican General Manuel Armijo. When the Santa Fe Trail opened eastern American markets, New Mexicans were quick to take advantage of the opportunities. Some of these men from Belen and El Rio Abajo were Colonel Francisco Perea, and Antonio Jose Otero who made their fortunes selling sheep to California. Jose Antonio Chavez, a cousin of the Perea and son of New Mexico's first governor under Mexican rule was robbed of \$12,000 in gold and murdered on the Santa Fe Trail on his way to Independence, Kansas by a band of Texans led by John McDaniel. Felipe Chavez, "El Millionario," and grandson of Francisco Xavier Chavez first Mexican Governor of New Mexico, increased his wealth in the sheep and caravan business. He later financed new Belen and Los Lunas merchant immigrants like the Beckers and Hunings respectively.

The first significant wave of non-Hispanic ancestors arrived after the American conquest. These new members of the community came from everywhere, but primarily funneled through the American east coast as Germans, Irish, French, and Italian emigrants, e.g., surnames: Bordeaux, Connelly, Fiel, Gilbert, Hubbell, Robinson, and Sachs. They too brought innovations, commerce, and new languages. It must have been difficult for the Spanish-speaking people to learn English from newcomers speaking with German American, French American, Irish American, and Italian American accents. In actuality, being that Spanish was the most universal language of the time, it was the emigrants as well as the American Indians who learned to speak Spanish. There are still a few elderly Indians particularly in the Pueblos who are tri-lingual speaking heir native tongue, old Spanish and new English. Similarly, there are to this day a few old timer Spanish Americans who speak the fifteenth century Spanish, which arrived with the original Spanish explorers and

colonists. English would not become a major influence in the Belen area until the time between the early 1900s and World War I. At that time, almost everyone was Spanish/English bilingual. By the time World War II was over English was becoming the dominant language. Most baby boomers spoke English well with varying degrees of Old Spanish fluency. The Old Spanish has been virtually replaced, (with the exception of the oldsters and some baby boomers) by the modern Spanish of Mexican national migrant farm workers and other immigrants from central and South America.

The economic history of Belen can be divided into three waves. First, the pre-railroad period era when farming and ranching, (agriculture), was the principal industry sprinkled in with some merchants and shippers. However, most trading was just that, trading or bartering of goods and services. There was little or no money of which to speak. Second, the railroad era; After the railroad arrived in Belen in the summer of 1880 money in substantial quantity was introduced and became the principal method of trade. Railroad workers were paid in U.S. currency and Belen experienced a major economic boom. Many more Belen ancestors arrived via the Santa Fe Railroad. The Santa Fe Railroad is to this day a major employer in the community. The city of Belen was incorporated into a municipality in the year 1918.

Third, commencing the new millennium, Albuquerque, having outgrown its boundaries spilled into Los Lunas twenty miles to the south in the 1980's with developers gobbling up the few remaining open spaces for residential and commercial zoning, the wave has begun to touch the borders of Belen. Farms are beginning to give way to smaller uses such as residential and business uses, and land values have accelerated in prime areas rapidly. The pressure of this latest wave of new people needing places to live combined with the arrival of the 21st century, and the high tech computer allowing more people to leave the city to work at home has set Belen on the brink of a dramatic economic and social boom. It will take the concerted and coordinated efforts of actively involved community members and elected officials to ensure that Belen continues healthy economic growth while simultaneously preserving its relaxed rural atmosphere, rich heritage, as well as that of its surrounding neighbors, like Pueblitos, Casa Colorada, Los Chavez, Tome, Jarales, Vegita, and Bosque. There are many ways to work toward this goal. One way is to appreciate and celebrate our past. Another is to actively capture and preserve traditions and icons of our unique culture, and finally we must teach our children our true history and set aside land and land marks to as teaching examples for future generations.

I will close with a transcript of the ROYAL BELEN LAND GRANT, by Governor and Captain General of the Kingdom of New Mexico, followed by the DEED AND CONVEYANCE OF THE BELEN LAND GRANT, by Senior Justice, and War Captain, Nicolas Duran De Chaves.

### ***The Royal Belen Land Grant:***

***In the Town of Santa Fe, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of November, One Thousand Seven Hundred and Forty, 1, the Lieutenant Colonel, Governor and Captain General of the Kingdom of New Mexico, Don Gaspar Domingo de Mendoza having seen the present petition made by the persons therein referred to, should order, and did order, that a grant be made to them of the tract they ask for, in the name of the King, Our Sovereign, [whom God may preserve] in order that they may settle, cultivate and improve the same for the benefit of themselves, their children, heirs and any third party as they promise in their petition. Therefore, I order and direct the Senior Justice of the Town of Albuquerque, Don Nicolas de Chaves, to give them the possession referred to, under the conditions and terms required in such cases; and, there being no doubt of the existence of other royal grants in the vicinity and the deed and title of these who adjoin said lands are required to be presented for the fulfillment of this new grant in order that it may be divided with more propriety for the purpose of avoiding suits and difficulties at the present time as well as in the future, I deem it proper to conform to the forms which are provided. I have so provided, ordered and signed, with my attending witnesses***

acting by appointment in the absence of a notary, there being none in the kingdom.

Don Gaspar de Mendoza

Antonio de HERRERA

Jose TERRUS

It is noted in my book of government on file in the Archives of this Capitol on the reverse of page 68, Mendoza

The Royal Deed And Conveyance Of The Belen Land Grant:

Santa Fe, January 25<sup>th</sup> 1742

At the place of Our Lady of Belen, jurisdiction of the Town of Albuquerque, on the Ninth day of the month of December of the year, One Thousand Seven Hundred and Forty, I Captain Nicolas Duran de Chaves, Senior Justice and War Captain of said town and jurisdiction, by virtue of the decree of Lieutenant Colonel Don Gaspar de Mendoza, Governor and Captain General of this kingdom, promulgated on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of November of said year (1740) wherein I am directed to proceed to give royal possession to Captain Diego de Torres as the representative of the persons to the tenor of their petition, a grant is made to them in the name of His Majesty, which decree was published to those adjoining said lands by my order, and there being no objection to the petition, I proceed to give possession; said lands being bounded on the north by those of Captain Nicolas Duran de Chaves, on the house fronting on the foundation of the house of Phelipe Romero; on the west, the Rio Puerco, that portion of the opposite of the river of the Purisima Concepcion, and on the east by the Sandia mountains, and the south by ruins of the foundation of the house of the said aforesaid, Phelipe Romero, and having examined said boundaries with three attending and instrumental witnesses, according to the law I took the aforesaid Torres by the hand and walked with him over the lands and he cried in a loud voice and pulled up grass and threw stones and gave other manifestations which are made and provided in such cases, receiving this possession in the name of His Majesty, quietly and peacefully with the same boundaries contained in his petition; whereupon, I directed perpetual landmarks to be established, giving him said lands free and with general pastures, waters, watering places, timber uses and customs, in order that he, his children, heirs and successors, may enjoy the same without opposition, and the royal possession to be evidence of the sufficient title, and by virtue of which he shall enjoy the same afore estates, and in order that it may so appear, I place it onto the record, Bernabe Baca, Baltazar Baca and those in attendance, being instrumental witnesses who signed with me, acting judge, on the present common paper, there being none in these parts, before me as acting Judge.

Captain Nicolas Duran de Chaves

Attending:

Jose Miguel Alvarez de Castillo

Guillermo Saavedra

**A couple of sources of more detailed history of the Belen area are El Rio Abajo by Gilbert Espinosa and Tibo T. Chavez Sr., and Original Families of New Mexico, by Fray Angelico Chavez.**

COWBOYS - VAQUEROS Origins of The First American Cowboys by Donald Chavez y Gilbert ©  
NMHCPL.org