

# The First Thanksgiving

(The Pilgrims Missed It)

by *Pauline Chavez Bent*

**T**hanksgiving Day in the United States is a holiday like no other:

Families gather to celebrate and enjoy the blessings of this land of freedom and plentitude. But to those of us who descend from the original colonizing families of New Mexico, our special day is **April 30th**.

On April 30th four centuries ago, our ancestors, led by Don Juan de Oñate, reached the banks of *El Rio Bravo* (Rio Grande). The first recorded act of thanksgiving by colonizing Europeans on this continent occurred on that April day in 1598 in *Nuevo Mexico*, about 25 miles south of what is now El Paso, Texas. After having begun their northward trek in March of that same year, the entire caravan was gathered at this point. The 400 person expedition included soldiers, families, servants, personal belongings, and livestock . . . virtually a living village. Two thirds of the colonizers were from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain, Portugal, and the Canary Islands). There was even one Greek and a man from Flanders! The rest were Mexican Indians and *mestizos* (mixed bloods).

The starting point for the colonists had been in Zacatecas, *Nueva España* (now Mexico) and by being part of the colonizing expedition they had been promised the title of *Hidalgo*, men with rights and privileges equal to Spain's nobility. Juan de Oñate was a man of wealth and prominence, the son of Cristobal Oñate, silver mine owner whose family had come to the New World from the Basque region of Spain. Titles granted to him by Viceroy Luis de Velasco were Governor and *Adelantado* of New Mexico. The colonists suffered hardships and deprivations as they headed north, but they were also headed toward posterity: they would participate in the first recorded act of Thanksgiving by colonizing Europeans on this continent—22 years before the English colonists similarly gave thanks on the Atlantic coast. The expedition is well recorded by Gaspar Perez de Villagr a, the Spanish poet who traveled with the group. He wrote, "We were sadly lacking in all knowledge of the stars, the winds, and other knowledge by which to guide our steps."



On April 30, 1598, the scouts made camp along the Rio Grande and prepared to drink and eat their fill, for there they found fishes and waterfowl. Villagr  wrote,

*"We built a great bonfire and roasted meat and fish, and then sat down to a repast the like of which we had never enjoyed before." Before this bountiful meal, Don Juan de O ate personally nailed a cross to a living tree and prayed, "Open the door to these heathens, establish the church altars where the body and blood of the Son of God may be offered, open to us the way to security and peace for their preservation and ours, and give to our king and to me in his royal name, peaceful possession of these kingdoms and provinces for His blessed glory. Amen."*

On April 30, many of us with roots in New Mexico commemorate that first Thanksgiving, not with "turkey and all the trimmings," but with the knowledge that our ancestors helped settle and develop this land—through tenacity, perseverance and deep faith. It is partly through their contributions that America was destined to become unique; providing freedom as well as opportunity to all people wishing to come to its shores.

**Happy Thanksgiving Day!**