

It is no longer news that Spanish *conquistadores*—not British Pilgrims—staged the first Thanksgiving on present United States soil. But which *conquistadores*? The arrival of Don Juan de Oñate's *conquistadores*, on the banks of the Río Grande in 1598, has been widely publicized. Having reached the river en route to colonizing New Mexico, Oñate formally proclaimed a feast of possession, and with it the attendant pageantry the Spanish so loved.

But was it within the present United States? The observance was held on the south side of the Río Grande. Proponents of the Oñate theory claim the river later shifted its course and cut a new channel. This presumably threw the international boundary below San Elizario, which is believed—but not proven—the site of the celebration.

And was Oñate's Thanksgiving the first? Or should that honor go to Coronado's small vanguard, who had finally reached Cibola?

The year was 1540—more than half a century before Don Juan's ritual—and the place was Kawikuh, near present Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico—indisputably in the United States.

Both expeditions were chronicled by participants, Coronado's principally by Pedro de Castañeda and the general himself, Oñate's by a self-styled poet, Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà. This latter-day Virgil erred on the side of excessive, melodramatic and not always reliable detail. Castañeda and Coronado, intent on military brevity, included too few. Villagrà focused on the ritual of taking possession, Coronado and Castañeda on their efforts at conversion and exploration. All dwelled enthusiastically on the food they found.

Regarding religious rites, they were all vague: Why should they waste space on what was taken for granted? In both cases their lives—and their expeditions—were saved by what none doubted was divine intervention, for which no 16th-century Spaniard, even on an enterprise of less solemn purpose, would have failed gratefully to acknowledge. Certainly Coronado's dedicated *padres*—three of whom would soon be martyred for their faith—offered full ceremonial thanksgiving.

For, though they sought gold, theirs was primarily a missionary venture. Juan de Zaldívar, bishop of Mexico, had expressly instructed that the conquest be "Christian and apostolic, and not a butchery," and Viceroy Mendoza had issued like orders, which, Castañeda recorded, were "faithfully performed." No expedition, declared Capt. Hernando de Alvarado, was ever made by men "more Christian or more fearful of God." Had they been gold-

lusting adventurers, they would have turned back immediately on finding only poor mud villages.

Coronado's band, unlike Oñate's, did not don their finest clothes—they had none to don. Nor, starving, footsore and battle-bludgeoned, could they write and perform a play. But no Spaniard of their day ever did anything without the proper rites, and the feast at Hawikuh on 7 July 1540 was assuredly the first on United States soil.

## THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

### Staking out Coronado's Claim to an American Holiday

by Dorothy Cave + Illustration by Armen Kojoyian

They had found Cibola. Of the fabled gold there was none. But one soldier writes, "We found something we prized more than gold or silver; namely, plentiful maize and beans, fowls larger than those . . . in New Spain, and salt better than any I have ever seen. . . ." Having observed the customary rites with what must have been more than customary gratitude, the starved men fell to the feast.

Theirs had been a rough and roadless trek. Making history was, like life itself, a tortuous journey, one that demanded a tough hide, naked courage and a dream. Sparked by the amazing but actual accounts of Cabeza de Vaca and the highly colored tales of Fray Marcos de Niza, they had set out from Compostela in February, with iron in their hearts and visions in their eyes.

The blue-robed, sandal-clad Franciscans walked the entire way. Beneath the red-and-gold banner of Spain rode the gilt-armored Coronado, and there followed the lone line of cavalry, foot soldiers and Indian allies, and some 1,500 animals.

Three soldiers brought their wives. María Maldonado—they called her their angel of mercy—mended the soldiers' clothes and nursed their wounds. At the other extreme was Francisca de Hozes, who took one child, bore another on the trail and carped unceasingly all the way, a burr under Coronado's saddle.

At Chiametla they intercepted Melchoir Díaz, returning from a four-month reconnaissance. He reported privately to Coronado that the natives he had met were friendly but poor. The Zunis who inhabited Cibola, he had been told, were just as poor and were, moreover, hostile. An extremely difficult passage lay ahead.

Leaving the main army to await orders at Culiacán, Coronado rode ahead with a small vanguard, all the friars and the *virago*, Francisca de Hozes. Crossing a rugged range, scant of food and forage, men and animals grew gaunt. Horses died from exhaustion.

Chichilticale, they found, was nowhere near the South Sea, as Fray Marcos had reported. Their chances plunged of meeting the ships that had sailed to reprovision them.

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## THANKSGIVING

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Here they entered the *despoblado*, a barren 150-mile wilderness. Acute hunger, lack of grass and perilous mountain passages took further toll of men and beasts before they reached the Little Colorado, which they called the Bermejo. Then, ahead, lay Cibola—wealth perhaps, souls to be saved certainly and—most immediately important—food.

As the Spaniards neared Hawi-kuh, the first of Cibola's Seven Cities, the Zunis signaled by smoke their approach, attacked a small advance party at midnight and disappeared into the hills.

The *conquistadores* pushed on at dawn. "I thought we should all die of starvation if we had to wait another day," wrote Coronado in his report to Mendoza. Then, on the brow of a low hill it rose, a distant solidity against a cloudless sky. Here was Cibola!

They drew closer, and Hawi-kuh took form. The golden city! But they gasped, and then cried, disbelieving: Cibola was nothing but an earthen village, "looking as if it had all been crumpled together," Castañeda wrote. Their rainbow dissolved in reality, their mirage in mud.

But they had come for more than gold. Within were souls for the church, an empire, however poor, for their king and food.

Two hundred armed warriors stood before the terraced village, and on the roofs massed several hundred more. A *cacique* poured a line of sacred cornmeal, which by gesture he forbade the intruders to cross. The Zuni ritual completed, the Spaniards enacted their own. They came in peace, the *maestro de campo* said through an interpreter. The Cibolans need only accept cross and crown.

A rain of arrows answered the exhortation. A blast of the war horn, a rush of Zunis, a cry of *¡Santiago!* and the Battle of Hawi-kuh was joined—the first formal military engagement between Europeans and Native Americans to be fought on present United States soil.

The battle was short and fierce.

Though better armed, the Spaniards were outnumbered. They had to scale the walls and, Coronado wrote later, his army "had arrived so weak they could scarcely stand on their feet." Before it ended Coronado lay unconscious from rocks hurled from the roofs and with an arrow through his foot.

The defeated Zunis repaired to their sacred mesa, Towayálane. After he recovered, Coronado offered them gifts and friendship. The priests began to teach, the soldiers to explore.

But first they feasted thankfully.

Before he returned to Mexico in 1542, Coronado had traveled more than 7,000 miles in a silent, unknown vastness. He had made the greatest *entrada* ever staged in North America, had given the first realistic and detailed report of its interior. His *conquistadores* had found the Hopi mesas, the Río Grande pueblos, the continental divide, the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. They had found Cibola and, hearing of Quivira, had crossed the great buffalo plains.

They had gained souls for their God and an empire for their king. Coronado had chased a rainbow and caught a continent, too large to be at once digested.

Oñate, half a century later, followed a different route, reclaimed pueblo land, founded New Mexico's first colony and culminated the great mission.

But Coronado came first, and there is no doubt on whose soil he gave thanks for life and land. And, to put the bloom on the cactus, unlike Oñate's settlers (who dined on fish and waterfowl), Coronado's feasted on—what else? —the all-American turkey!



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