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Don Juan de Oñate and the First Thanksgiving

by Don Adams www.headformexico.com
 & Teresa A. Kendrick www.chapalaguide.com

The events leading up to the First Thanksgiving in the New World began in 1573 when the Spanish King Felipe II signed a document called the Colonization Laws of Spain. This document provided the incentive for adventurers to launch expeditions into Mexico, call that time by the Spanish "New Spain", to find wealth and to elevate their prestige with the Spanish crown. It also listed the responsibilities of the explorers. Besides the Spaniards, expeditions by Italians, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Portuguese and Norsemen were led in the New World for many years. For the reasons noted in the sidebar at your right, we'll narrow our focus to Spain's expeditions during the 15th and 16th centuries.

Our story began in 1595 in the city of Zacatecas, Mexico, where a young man named Don Juan Pérez de Oñate y Salazar lived. ¹ He was born either in 1550 or 1552 to Don Cristóbal Oñate, a wealthy rancher and silver mine developer and the co-founder of Zacatecas with his wife, Doña Catalina de Salazar. Oñate was one of the richest men in Zacatecas because of his family's silver mines, their rare involvement in the lucrative Indian slave trade. He also married a rich woman, Isabel de Tolosa Cortés de Moctezuma, who was the illegitimate grand-daughter of the conqueror of New Spain, Hernán Cortés, and Isabel Moctezuma. Oñate and Doña Isabel produced two children, Cristóbal de Narriahondo Pérez Oñate y Cortés Moctezuma, and a daughter María de Oñate y Cortés Moctezuma. ²

Not only was Oñate a wealthy and powerful man, he also had friends in high places. Very high places. One such friend was Viceroy de Velasco. Spanish Viceroys served as the King's personal representatives in New Spain. They were President, Governor, and Captain General of the colony; viceroys had the power to grant huge favors. One of those favors was to make recommendations to the king about who should be allowed to colonize untamed lands. In 1595, acting on behalf of King Felipe II, Viceroy Velasco gave permission to Oñate to lead a colonizing expedition into the unexplored region of New Spain called El Nuevo Mexico. Now a part of the United States, the name for that territory, El Nuevo Mexico (or New Mexico) was in common use at the time, reportedly having first been used in dispatches submitted in 1581 by the Franciscan Fray Agustin Rodriguez who led a small expedition into the area to spread the Word of Christianity among the natives.

Viceroy Velasco looked favorably upon Oñate because of the prominence of the Oñate family and the relationship between Oñate and Don Luis de Velasco II. Oñate and Don Luis had joined in several campaigns against the nearby Chichimeca Indians. The fact that Oñate held great personal wealth and had equally rich brothers and relatives didn't hurt him either.

Getting the nod from Viceroy Velasco elevated Oñate's prospects enormously, but it also committed him to huge expenses and enormous risks. In order to get the nod, Oñate, at his own expense, had to agree to equip, arm, and feed two hundred men who would act as soldier-colonists committed to exploring and settling in Nuevo Mexico. Oñate also agreed to take mining equipment, tools, wheat, farming implements, blacksmithing tools, corn, trade goods for the indigenous populace, medicines, a thousand head of cat, a thousand head of sheep for wool and another thousand for mutton, a thousand goats, a hundred head of black cattle, a hundred mares, and a goodly supply of jerked beef.

That was more or less the standard laundry list for expeditions of the age. Since the King technically owned all conquered territories, individual *conquistadors* and developers had to pay their own way initially, and if they hit pay dirt of any kind, they had to pay the king a percentage of what they found. Usually this was a fixed twenty percent of all profits, taxes, and any treasure discovered or "liberated." This was referred to as the *quinto*, or the "King's Fifth."

If it seems as though the King had something of a rigged game going, maybe Oñate's gamble becomes more understandable after you consider one more aspect of his birth. In spite of his wealth and power, Oñate was a *criollo*, a Spaniard who was born in the New World rather than in Spain. This fine distinction of biology and geography allowed the Spaniards born on European soil to consider themselves to be physically, mentally, and morally inferior. They thought of them as lazy, irresponsible, effete and generally not too bright. A number of the *criollos* managed to move up to high positions in the government and the church as well as to amass fortunes, but the prejudice against them remained in spite of their collective and individual accomplishments.

For his substantial risk, Oñate was to be appointed ruler of the lands he would colonize and for which he would be paid six thousand ducats a year. In addition to the cash, he had the right to borrow three artillery pieces from the Royal Arsenal should the indigenous population become problematic. He was also given the authority to make land grants to settlers, as well as to collect tribute from subjugated Indians who inhabited the land; the power to establish a royal treasury, build forts, appoint officials to govern the territory and to set up mining operations.

Perhaps most enticing to him, was the final set of rewards. Oñate was to be granted respectability beyond any expectations he could ever hold. He was to become Governor, *Adelantado* and Captain General with full authority to exercise total civil and criminal jurisdiction in Nuevo Mexico. His newfound status would allow him to report directly to the Royal Council of the Indies in Spain, bypassing the normal and established procedure of submitting requests and reports to the Viceroy. All of this was to be his in perpetuity and would be passed on to his immediate heirs. Unfortunately his request for the right to report directly to the Royal Council of the Indies was to deal him mighty misery later on.

Oñate had one more request for King Felipe II. He asked that "serious monks" be assigned to the party of settlers and soldiers so that one more goal of the expedition could be accomplished: the conversion of the indigenous population. Felipe II complied by sending a Commissary and Delegate, with full powers of the monarch, Fray Rodrigo Durán, who was joined by Frays Diego Márquez, Baltasar Cristóbal de Salazar, and "others of skill and virtue." These priests were subsidized by a special fund for missionaries. The King provided a *Patronato Real*, or Royal Patronage, so the Franciscans would not be a financial burden to Oñate, but rather a source of friendship and comfort. Fray Márquez became a favorite of Oñate but was later recalled, along with the other priests, from the expeditionary force.

On October 21, 1595, the deal was struck after it was approved by the King. Viceroy Velasco formally appointed his friend Cristóbal de Oñate as "governor, captain general, *caudillo*, discoverer, and pacifier..." of El Nuevo Mexico. Little did Oñate suspect that, although the distance to be traveled to reach New Mexico was only a bit less than 800 miles, it would be more than two and a half years from the date until he entered the new territory.

As Oñate set about recruiting for the expedition, he was helped by stories of Nuevo Mexico that had been circulating for years. Explorations, both sanctioned and illegal, carried back stories of rich mines, fertile farmland and vast grazing lands, a fable of the 'Seven Cities of Cibola' and one of 'Quivera', and of passive Indians easily enslaved. Even missionary orders had ventured into the area without receiving Royal permission. Some recruits were enticed by the opportunity to explore new lands and to prove their mettle against

and nature.

As word circulated about the expedition, Oñate began to assemble a diverse group of men, women and children. They ranged from young children to a warrior sixty years old. They came from mainland Spain, the Canary Islands, the Balearic Islands, Italy, Guatemala, Portugal, Greece, and Cuba. There was one volunteer from Flanders as well as a few Chichimeca Indian slaves, Africans, quadroons, mulattos, and fellow *criollos*. Women and children signed up to accompany their husbands and fathers, and it would be unusual if there were several single women who joined the expedition as unmarried individuals eager to improve their lot. ⁴ The male recruits who survived the expedition and who could put down roots for five years would be awarded the title of *Hidalgo*. This was the lowest rank of nobleman, but it was a title not likely to be earned in many other ways. The title carried a few benefits including exemption from taxes and freedom from fear of being imprisoned for unpaid debts.

History seldom runs in a straight line, and in this case there were a number of twists and turns to be endured by our hero. Before the expedition could get on the road there was still a bit of political intrigue, some larceny, a beheading or two, extortion, bruised egos and a few overzealous and petty bureaucrats, and a score of mutinous soldiers to deal with.

Just as Oñate began making his final plans to leave, an unsettling change occurred. In late October 1595 Viceroy Velasco transferred to a new post as the Viceroy of Peru. He was replaced by Don Gaspar de Zúñiga y Acevedo, the Lord of Ulloa and Bishop and Comte (count) of Monterrey. Before the contract between Velasco and Oñate could be implemented, the new Viceroy, Zúñiga, ordered Velasco to "go forth with measured steps" until he, Zúñiga, could review the expedition contract. That review lasted until January 1598, two years and three months after Oñate first prepared to leave. During this delay, Oñate was required to maintain hundreds of soldiers and settlers and the huge herds of livestock he had gathered in anticipation of his departure. Even a man of his wealth and of his backers, would be taxed to the limit to sustain such an assemblage.

Other ambitious and adventurous men of wealth and high standing had bid for the right of colonizing Nuevo Mexico and did not hesitate to try to undermine Oñate's agreement in order to gain his rights for themselves. Some historians claim that a conspiracy of char assassination and personal vindictiveness against Oñate was launched by one Juan Lomas y Colmenares who wanted to wrest the contract away from him. One version of the event asserts that Lomas's conspirators convinced Pedro Ponce de León, Comte of Bailén, to ask for the contract. This was not the same Ponce de León who gained fame for his exploration of Florida in 1513. That gentleman died in 1522.

Who had the ear of the King?

On May 8, 1596 King Felipe II sent a Royal *cédula* to Viceroy Zúñiga ordering him to delay the departure of the planned expedition until the court could fully investigate the qualifications of the petitioner Ponce de León. When he received the letter on August 12, Zúñiga immediately sent a copy of the King's order, along with his personal command, to his inspector Don Lope de Ulloa who was given the task of informing Oñate that all preparations for the expedition's departure cease.

Zúñiga used the delay to scrupulously examine Oñate's contract for any discrepancies or shortcomings, as well as for legal and logical errors. Some historians believe he could have legally confiscated Oñate's property had he been able to prove shortcomings with the document. He directed Lope de Ulloa to inspect Oñate's standing force of men to make sure he was fulfilling the requirements set in the original contract. While carrying out his assigned duties, Lope de Ulloa managed to add to his coffers at the expense of Oñate perhaps with a bit of quiet encouragement from the Viceroy.

Lope de Ulloa dealt Oñate a great deal of misery. As a *criollo* and a colonist, Oñate had no option other than to weather the storm on his own. An unidentified Viceroy wrote, "The colonists were born to be silent and obey and not to discuss or proffer advice on the higher affairs of government." And as far as Lope de Ulloa's stealing with impunity, the mores of the day seemed to tolerate widespread corruption including the trafficking in official offices and titles, and even in some cases, defrauding the King.

By late March of 1597, the King determined that the Comte de León had neither the financial resources nor the robust health required to successfully carry out the exploration and colonization of Nuevo Mexico. On April 2, 1597 the King notified Zúñiga that Oñate's expedition would be allowed to proceed.

Finally, after much frustration, great expense, and an almost interminable wait, Zúñiga authorized Oñate to begin his *salida*. But first he demanded certain concessions. Chief among them was that the authority to bypass him to deal directly with the Royal Council of the Indies be stricken. He also added clauses giving him greater personal control over the expedition. Zúñiga demanded one month of inspection, but told Oñate that if he could withstand yet another delay he would appoint and dispatch a Commissary from his own ranks within two months. Upon hearing the news, the soldiers and settlers complained bitterly and some of them left the expedition.

During one of the forced moves, several of Oñate's soldiers decided to rebel and leave the expedition to strike out for Nuevo Mexico on their own. The Sergeant Major of the expeditionary force, Don Juan Vicente de Zaldívar, Oñate's nephew, quickly quelled the mutiny by cutting off the head of the ringleader.

Because of the long delay that had caused dissent and open mutiny within the expeditionary party and because of the unavailability of maintaining such a large force, Oñate agreed to the new terms. This was a decision he would come to regret later.

A final inspection was ordered and it began December 22, 1597 near the Todos Santos mines near Santa Barbara, Chihuahua. On January 15, Oñate must have been pleased to learn that his old nemesis, Lope de Ulloa, was on his way to a new post in Asunción, "General to China", even though the change created yet another delay. Lope de Ulloa's assistant, Francisco Esquivel, completed the inspection and on January 26, 1598, the Oñate expedition was allowed to set out from Chihuahua, near the present day town of Santa Barbara in the Valley of San Bartolomé, and to head north to the Río de Conchas.

What began more than two years earlier as a well provisioned and eager expedition was now something else. It was less than half the size, undermanned, ill provisioned, and short on livestock and supplies due to the venality of Lope de Ulloa. Not only had he stolen from the expedition, he had forced them to use a good portion of their stores and energy by forcing them to move from their campground near Santa Barbara to another while they waited.

Those who stayed were to greet a new inspector, Don Juan de Frías Salazar, who was to accompany the expedition for part of the journey. That gentleman, immediately upon his entry into the assembled camp, ordered the group to leave the campground at once, allowing them no time to properly load their provisions. They had no choice but to proceed.

After traveling less than fifteen miles, the expedition was told to stop and make camp in an area where little water or firewood could be found. Luckily, there were a few small pools in the campground from which the group could gather a bit of water with which to sustain themselves. Probably to the great disappointment of Inspector Frías, a miracle appeared. Don Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà, poet and historian of the journey wrote:

*"But God, who always aids us all
Arranged that certain tiny pools
That showed themselves near to our camp
Should pour out water in great abundance
And should flow out in sight of all,
Having before held back their streams
And hid them in their secret veins."*

That problem solved itself but the enterprising Frías quickly set up others. He ordered that under pain of death no person was to leave the camp. That meant that firewood for cooking could not be gathered, and that the huge herds and flocks of livestock went unattended. Frías then ordered that all servants and soldiers, as well as any officers, who wished to abandon the party, were free

so. He also ordered that those who were of mixed blood or under a certain age were to be discharged. He further ordered that o next day all the livestock be brought to him to be registered. When the expedition complied with this order, he sanctioned some an and refused others. He sent word that none of the neighboring people were to sell livestock to Oñate or any member of the expe to make up the shortages he'd caused.

In an extreme effort to humiliate Oñate, he demanded that the leader confess, without the benefit of a written accounting, that he failed to fulfill the contract terms agreed to by Zúñiga. Frías's demented demands seemed to indicate that Zúñiga and his cohorts intended to make Oñate fail.

History shows that they badly misjudged the caliber of Oñate's friends, relatives, and members of the expedition. Frías demanded Don Juan Guerra de Resa and his wife Doña Ana de Mendoza, Oñate's uncle and aunt, make up the shortfall in the troops require the contract, a discrepancy that he himself had engineered, by pledging their personal funds to outfit, arm and deliver to the eighty men to serve as soldiers. They agreed. They were to also stand as guarantors for any damages caused by these men and were also to pay the salaries of any agents the Viceroy might choose to come and officially start the expedition. Guerra de Resa along with Oñate's brothers Cristóbal and Alonso, one the chief financial backers.

To add further insult, Frías demanded that Guerra de Resa and his wife subject themselves to his whims. He could at any time, f reason given, withdraw anything previously promised them. He demanded that they give up the right to obtain land, to serve i government of Nuevo Mexico, or to hold any other property. Much to the surprise and chagrin of Frías, the couple agreed, electi continue their financial support, leaving Frías no option but to allow the expedition to proceed. They willingly sacrificed their mone; their future riches for the good of the many.

Despite the many problems created by Frías, Oñate led an impressively large force. Reports indicate that there were about 400 129 of them soldiers, 150 of them with families and servants, and 10 Franciscans, bringing the total to 539 people; eighty-ox-carts, twenty-four wagons and two of Oñate's personal carriages; and approximately seven thousand head of livestock. Pér Villagrà, who recorded the journey, defined the distribution of stock as including "oxen, a beef herd, swine, goats, donkeys, sl horses, and mules." He wrote that the moving camp spread out for three miles in length along the trail and was just as wide. ⁵

The earlier explorers of the region had always chosen a route that turned east at the Río de Conchas, now called the Río Conchos, b follow it to its confluence with the Río Bravo del Norte (now known as the Río Grande), then turned northwest to follow the Río Brav into Nuevo Mexico. Oñate decided to ford the Río de Conchas and strike out due north across the Chihuahuan Desert on a more dire route to the new territory. That must have seemed like a good idea at the time, but the river asserted its authority very quickly.

On arriving at the river on February 6, 1598 the first chore was to find a suitable ford to, in Pérez de Villagrà's words, "...oppos rushing water's force, because it all appeared quite deep..."

Oñate, seeing the hesitation of his men, "...then leaped upon a fearless horse of terrible and fearless mettle..." and plunged int swiftly flowing water, showing the others the place to cross. The men, emboldened by his actions, sprang into action and began di the oxen across, some of which were pulling heavy carts, and then the beef cattle, the swine, the cows, the goats, and the horse; mules. The only ones unable to swim were the sheep. Their wool, when soaked, became too heavy and made them sink.

Unwilling to suffer the loss of such a valuable resource, Oñate devised a plan to salvage the situation. He ordered that two dozen se wheels from the "well-made wagons", owned by the Captain Don Luis de Velasco, be removed and brought to the river. He then la them together to make a foundation for a bridge that could span the raging waters and secured connecting cables to both sides c riverbank. Large trees were downed and stripped of their limbs, then laid over the wheels and secured.

*"And then with faggots and with rubbish and
With earth well tamed was made
A sturdy bridge, and o'er it passed
What baggage there yet lacked, and then
Immediately, all was taken down again."*

Quite a feat from a *criollo*, and surely an affront to the expectations and prejudices of the Viceroy's inspector. Yes, Frías was still the expedition.

Once the camp had slept and recovered from the rigors of the crossing they assembled quietly on the morning of February 7, h that inspector Frías would finally deem them worthy to continue their journey without his supervision.

A Mass was said, led by Fray Francisco de San Miguel, the lone priest who had remained loyal to the expedition. Following the l Frías coldly informed Oñate that he could continue the expedition "with relief." Without further word, Frías departed the camp wi handing Oñate written orders to proceed, much less acknowledging the expedition's industry and service to the Crown. Normally the inspector and leader of the expedition would meet in front of the assembled members of the company for a formal signing of ri permissions, and charges. It was customary for the inspector to offer words of thanks and best wishes for a prosperous journey. rode from the camp without offering any of these conventions. Pérez de Villagrà wrote of the insult...

*"But when Don Juan saw that in fact
The inspector marched away apace,
Not to be lacking in a thing, he went
With thirty goodly mounted men,
And quickly racing, their horses' flanks,
Slacking their reins with goodly skill,
Light-footed, all together, spurred
Until they caught up to their man,
And there the Governor, with great respect,
Wished to accompany him some leagues,
Asking him honestly that he make use
Of some good escort of the soldiery.
At which noble and goodly courtesy,
And with the fewest words could be,
He took leave there, nor did he wish,
That he accompany him a step."*

Believing himself to be rid of Frías at last, Oñate began moving the caravan north. He was soon paused in his journey when he rec notification that replacements for Fray Márquez and the other monks who left before the expedition got underway were coming February 10, Oñate halted on the banks of the Río San Pedro to rest and await their arrival. On that day he also dispatched 16 s under the command of the Sergeant Major, Captain Vicente de Zaldivar, his nephew, to search for a safe and passable route to th Bravo.

About three weeks later, on March 1, Oñate received word that the friars were close by and he assigned a "noble squadron of warriors" under the command of Captain Marcos Farfán de los Gados, "...to give them welcome with good words of great politenes: of high respect..." and to escort them to the camp.

Two days later the clergymen arrived and were greeted with great ceremony and fanfare and treated to a "goodly meal set forth courtly service." This Franciscan contingent was to remain with the expedition all the way to Nuevo Mexico.

While the entire company rejoiced to see the friars, Oñate was especially pleased that the Crown endorsed again the reliable component of the expedition.

On March 4, the day following the arrival of the clergy, half of the scouts sent out with his nephew Vicente de Zaldívar returned to report about the route that lay ahead. They reported, with full knowledge of their deceit, that they had discovered a "fine road", good grazing lands, "waters and good woods." The reality of the terrain was quite different, but his nephew, in a misguided attempt to alleviate the worries of the expedition, ordered them to lie about what they'd found.

In the retelling of the expedition's experiences, those of the scouting parties are often confused with those of the entire caravan. In truth, the challenges of the expedition paled in comparison to the hardships experienced by the scouting parties. With that in mind, examine the journey the scouts experienced from the Río San Pedro.

On February 10, Oñate dispatched sixteen scouts under the command of his nephew Vicente de Zaldívar from the expedition's rendezvous place on the Río San Pedro. They rode together to the plains of San Martín where they split up and became disoriented. Lost and wandering for several days, half of the lost scouts saw smoke rising in the distance, and came upon a group of Indians. The Spaniards asked them to guide them to water, having not drunk for three days. As they talked the other contingent of scouts rode up and reported that they had come upon a small spring. They all rode to the water, drank deeply and bathed. The next morning, Zaldívar, running on supplies, sent back half of the scouts to the expedition, unfortunately sending all of the experienced and knowledgeable ones.

Zaldívar and the remaining men, guided by the Indians, continued to search for enough water to sustain the expedition. By the time they located a river, they had exhausted their supplies and were forced to kill and eat one of their horses. Before heading back to the expedition, they gave articles of clothing to the "barbarians". Meanwhile, Oñate had sent out a party of six soldiers, under the direction of a Captain Landín, to search for the scouts. After ten days of riding they discovered the group. They were tired, hungry, and tired and one of the scouts was dying. The timely intervention of supplies and aid allowed the failing man to recover and they returned to the camped expedition.

Following their return, the expedition once again got underway and marched to the Río Sacramento and set up camp on March 19. They constructed a small chapel of tree trunks and on the 20th performed the rituals of the Blessed Sacrament. The priests held throughout the night and some of the camp, Oñate included, engaged in self-flagellation.

The next day, Oñate sent out another scouting party under the command of Zaldívar that included the Purveyor-General of the expedition, Diego de Zubía, six soldiers, and the chronicler of the expedition, Pérez de Villagrà, all of whom, unfortunately incapable of navigating over large areas. Pérez de Villagrà wrote:

*"All were so ignorant of latitudes,
Directions, stars, winds, and middle winds
That after the sun was hid, I suspect,
There was not one of us could say
Affirmatively and without mistake
'Here is the East and there you see the West'."*

Before long the group had again exhausted their supplies and after three days and nights without food or water, they saw the fires of an Indian village. As Zaldívar and Pérez de Villagrà crept forward on reconnaissance they were attacked by seven natives who beat them with animal skins. A tenuous truce was made and the scouts were invited to the village where they observed about 200 warriors. They spoke briefly with the Indians and then returned to the waiting scouts. Because of their desperate situation, having lost three horses and thirst on that same night, they decided to attack the village at dawn. They drove their horses into the village to give the impression that their numbers were larger than they actually were, attacked the natives, seized and destroyed their bows, and took several captives to serve as guides.

Of the seven natives they managed to capture they released all but two who agreed to help them. The others were given beads, trinkets and set free. The Spaniards also took food from the village: deer, badger, rabbit, fox, hares, as well as grasses and roots. After eating their fill, they re-provisioned themselves for the journey ahead. Still needing to water their mounts, the scouts implored the natives to lead them to water. They led them to six small wells about a mile from the village. The deepest was about eight inches deep and a shallow pool fed by seepage. As the first scouts to arrive stood by respectfully waiting for Zaldívar to drink, an honor he declined, the other scouts arrived with the packhorses that immediately stampeded to drink from the well. Two of the scouts, unable to wait, fell to the ground among the horses and were injured while trying to drink.

After the horses had slaked their thirst the scouts and their captives drank and then resumed their journey. At one point they stopped to offer gifts of clothing to their captives and to ask directions to the Río Bravo. Amazingly, one of the Indians drew a very detailed map on the dirt, providing good directions to the river. Later that Indian escaped.

The scouts set off again, suffering more of nature's challenges. A seven day rain tormented them, and again they depleted their rations. After the rains stopped and they were able to resume, they encountered a vast area of thick brush and rocky ravines that shredded clothes and completely destroyed their boots. They were left barefooted and forced to scavenge for roots. After a number of days they found the pass their Indian captive had drawn so accurately, only to find a harsher land, the dunes of Los Médanos de Samalayuta in the far northern Chihuahua desert. They traversed that area for four days without water. On the fifth day they arrived at the Río Bravo. The men rushed to the lake and drank their fill, but two of their horses overindulged and "burst and died", and two more ventured far into the current and in their weakened state, were swept away and drowned.

After their torturous journey and the loss of seven of their horses, they found the water, the shade of willows and poplars, waterfowl, and lush grazing for the remaining horses luxurious. They hunted, fished and cooked a great feast for themselves.

Meanwhile, the main caravan of the expedition was making its own way to the Río Bravo. After sending out the scouts on March 21, Oñate broke camp at Río San Pedro and then led the expedition to an oak grove they named "*Encinar de la Resurrección*" where there was enough water and grass for them and the animals. They constructed a small chapel in which to observe Easter Sunday. The next day they again struck camp and for the next eight days, until April 1, traveled through terrain without grass or water, depleting their water supply to such an extent that Pérez de Villagrà recorded Oñate's words:

*"That, with their throats all miserable dry,
The tender children, women, and the men,
Afflicted, ruined, quite burnt up,
Did beg for aid from sovereign God,
This being the final remedy
That they should have in such distress.
And the sad, tired animals,
Feeble as those of Ninevah,
Worn down by the unchecked fast,
Thus all did show themselves worn out
By the weather they had borne."*

Much to their relief, God answered their prayers in the affirmative. Or so they believed, when from a cloudless sky without any war of lightning or thunder, a cloudburst opened up and delivered rain to the expedition. Oñate reported that sufficient rain fell to form so much water that the animals could drink their fill. And though not stated in that narrative, we can assume that enough water was collected in barrels for the expedition to continue. Rainstorms are a fairly common occurrence in the Chihuahuan desert at that time of year.

who can say why that one occurred when and where it did? Whatever the metaphysics of the matter, the rain provided enough relief for the expedition to continue for a few more days.

On April 7, the expedition made a fortunate discovery when they encountered a large freshwater marsh. This was to prove essential because their next obstacle was the Los Médanos de Samalayuca dunes. The dunes are an arid remnant of an ice age lake, and a square miles is the largest drifting sand dune area on the North American continent. It harbors no water or useful vegetation of any kind.

When they arrived at the dunes, they found a faint trail left by the scouts. They began following it, believing at first that the scout had found a way to skirt the huge dunes. But after several days of following an erratic trail, Oñate ordered the expedition to strike out across the dangerous wasteland.

The party bogged down immediately and the resourceful Oñate once more devised a plan. He divided the group in halves and doubled the number of draft animals in each wagon's harness so they could be dragged through the deep shifting sands.

Pérez de Villagrà did not relate much of the hardship the expedition experienced as they struggled through the dunes, but he did relate the next few events in great detail.

On April 21, 1598, the exhausted expedition reached the banks of the Río Bravo where they set up camp near the present day Elizario, Texas. They soon found their scouts who had arrived several days earlier, and because they'd had time to rest, Oñate ordered them out to find a place where the expedition could ford the Río Bravo and cross into Nuevo Mexico. They traveled upriver to present day El Paso where they found a village of Indians they named "Mansos" and who they befriended with gifts of clothing. The Mansos showed the scouts where to ford the river and four of them accompanied the scouts back to the main expedition. The Mansos repaid the scouts' gifts of clothing by presenting them with fish netted from the river.

Safe and grateful for the expedition's deliverance from the extreme hardships of the journey, Oñate ordered that the travelers construct a church with a nave large enough to hold the entire camp. Inside the church, on April 30, 1598, the first Thanksgiving celebration of European colonists in the New World was held.

Fray Alfonso Martínez, the Commissary Apostolic, led the members of the expedition in singing a "very solemn Mass" and then delivered a "famous sermon, well thought out" to give thanks to God for their deliverance from the hardships of the trail. After eighty-six days over almost eight hundred miles of Northern Mexico, most of it unexplored, the expedition was on the verge of realizing the purpose of their mission: to cross into El Nuevo Mexico.

Following the solemn Mass, the attending Mansos were baptized and a play was presented. Written by Captain Marcos Farfán de Gados, the play depicted, as Pérez de Villagrà wrote:

*"The great reception of the church
That all of New Mexico did give,
Congratulating it upon its arrival,
Begging, with thorough reverence,
And kneeling on the ground, it would wash out
Its faults with that holy water
Of precious Baptism which they brought,
With which most salutary sacrament
We saw many barbarians cleansed
When we were traveling through their lands."*

Farfán's play did not survive to the present day, but it is considered by some scholars to be the first literary work written in what is now the present day United States. The correct argument is that the play was part of the First Thanksgiving Celebration that was held in Massachusetts or Newfoundland, but in Mexico, on the south bank of the Río Bravo.

Oñate then began the ceremony of "La Toma", the taking. The Spaniards were the most legal minded of all the New World conquerors and they followed a strictly prescribed procedure for claiming new territory for the King and Church.

"In the name of the most Holy Trinity...I wish to take possession of the land today...through the person of Juan Pérez de Donís, Notary of his Majesty and Secretary of the journey ...in the voice and name of the most Christian King, our lord, don Felipe, the Second of this name...and for the crown of Castile...I take and seize one, two, and three times...the Royal tenancy and possession...at this aforesaid River of the North, without excepting anything and without limitation, with the meadows, glens, and their pastures and watering places...towns, cities, villas, castles, and strong houses and dwellings... the leaf on the mountain to the rock in the river and sands of it, and from the rock and sands of the river to the leaf on the mountain."

He then, to the fanfare of trumpets and volleys of musket shots, affixed the Royal standard and a Holy Cross to a tree to complete the legal requirements of "La Toma." His written speech of "La Toma" was then notarized with the signature and seal of Donís and witnessed by the priests and Oñate's senior officers.

The Oñate expedition and their Manso guests then went on to celebrate their April 30th Thanksgiving with a feast of fish, "many crabs and geese", and supplies from their stores. Little more was reported about the menu, but one thing is certain: at the Thanksgiving no one ate turkey.

Authors' Note: This article is based on historical documents and writings from the 16th and 17th centuries as well as those of modern authors and historians. A complete bibliography is below. As with all historical accounts, facts vary according to when they were interpreted, as well as by whom. We've chosen the versions of events that we believe to be most defensible as to accuracy. In any dispute we carefully considered, as we understood it, the original document written by a participant in the expedition. This article should be read as a research work in progress as we have many books and articles yet to explore. Any errors or misinterpretations are ours.

*Don Adams and Teresa Kendrick
November, 2003
Chapala, Jalisco, Mexico*

Footnotes

1. Timeline of the Oñate Expedition

1550 or 1552: Juan de Oñate born near Zacatecas.

1593 or 1594: Isabel de Tolosa Cortés, wife of Oñate died.

1573: Colonization Laws of Spain enacted by decree of King Felipe II.

June 21, 1595: King Felipe II of Spain approved a contract with Oñate for the settlement of Nuevo Mexico.

August 24, 1595: Viceroy Velasco wrote to Oñate with news that he would approve his request to lead an expedition into Nuevo Mexico.

September 21, 1595: Oñate signed a contract with Viceroy Velasco authorizing him to lead an expeditionary force into El N

Mexico.

October 21, 1595: Velasco appointed Oñate "governor, captain general, caudillo, discoverer, and pacifier" of Nuevo Mexico.

October 1595: Viceroy Zúñiga replaced Velasco.

December 1595: The modified contract is approved by Zúñiga and Oñate is granted permission to proceed.

April 1596: The Royal Council of the Indies received a petition from Don Pedro Ponce de León, Count of Bailén, asking to be Oñate's contract. This was not the famous explorer of Florida. He died in 1521.

May 8, 1596: A letter from King Felipe II to Viceroy Zúñiga ordered him to withhold a decision on allowing Oñate to proceed until the Court had fully considered the request of Don Ponce de León

August 12, 1596: Viceroy Zúñiga wrote to his inspector Don Lope de Ulloa commanding that he not allow Oñate to proceed with expedition.

September 9, 1596: Royal cédula arrived ordering Oñate to stay put until de Leon's request could be considered.

December 9, 1596: Oñate's request for an inspection was honored and Don Ulloa arrived.

January 15, 1597: Ulloa relieved of duties as inspector and transferred to new post in the Orient. Inspection completed by assistant, Francisco de Esquivel.

April 2, 1597: King Felipe II authorized Oñate's expedition to begin journey.

December 22, 1597: New inspector, Don Juan Frías began his inspection.

January 8, 1597: All members of the expedition ordered to assemble near Santa Barbara to complete inspection.

January 21, 1598: Inspection by Frías completed.

January 26, 1598: Oñate expedition departed Santa Barbara.

January 28, 1598: Expedition camped near Ojo de la Cruz.

February 6, 1598: Expedition reached and crossed the Rio de Conchas.

February 7, 1598: Inspector left expedition after verbally granting Oñate permission to continue. Expedition traveled on to San I River.

February 10, 1598: Expedition halted at Rio San Pedro to rest and wait for Franciscan priests. Oñate sent out Zaldívar with 16 scouts to find a suitable route to the Rio Bravo.

March 3, 1598: Scouts reached the Rio Bravo (Rio Grande) and some began the return trip to meet up with the expedition. Ponce de León joined the expedition at the Rio San Pedro.

March 4, 1598: Scouts sent back by Zaldívar reached the camp.

March 10, 1598: Remainder of scouts rejoined the expedition at the Rio San Pedro.

March 11, 1598: Expedition resumed travel and reached Santo Greco.

March 12, 1598: Expedition camped at Charcos de las Mojarras.

March 14, 1598: Expedition camped at San Buenaventura oak grove.

March 15, 1598: Oñate and advisors wrote letter to King Felipe II to complain of the treatment they had received from vice inspectors.

March 18, 1598: Expedition reached the Sierra de Sacramento.

March 19, 1598: Expedition camped on the banks of the Rio Sacramento about 20 miles north of Chihuahua.

March 20, 1598: Expedition observed the Feast of the Blessed Sacrament. Oñate again sent out a scouting party of 9 men. Oñate and others engaged in self-flagellation during the religious observance.

March 21, 1598: Expedition departed from Rio Sacramento.

March 22, 1598: Expedition stopped in an oak grove they named "Encinar de la Resurrección" and observed Easter Sunday.

March 25, 1598: Expedition reached Laguna de San Benito.

March 28, 1598: Expedition reached Bocas del Peñol de Veléz.

March 30, 1598: Expedition resumed travel.

March 31, 1598: Expedition reached Fuente de San Francisco de Paula.

April 1, 1598: Desert thunderstorm supplied water to parched expedition. The travelers named the site El Agua del Milagro.

April 7, 1598: Expedition discovered a fresh water marsh.

April 8, 1598: Expedition reached the sand dunes of Los Médanos de Samalayuca, the arid remnant of an Ice Age lake bottom which covers about 770 square miles, is the largest drifting sand dune region in North America. They wandered for several days trying to find an alternate route.

April 19, 1598: Unable to find a route around the sand dunes, the expedition began crossing to the northeast, about 45 miles to the Rio Bravo.

April 21, 1598: Expedition completed crossing of Los Médanos and reached the banks of the Rio Bravo where they set up camp at present day El Paso, Texas, near San Elizario. Oñate sent out scouts to find a suitable crossing point.

April 30, 1598: Oñate took possession of New Mexico in the name of King Felipe II of Spain. Farfán presented his play. The Thanksgiving observance by families of European colonists was celebrated.

May 1, 1598: The expedition began the short trek to the ford found by the scouts.

May 4, 1598: The expedition crossed the Rio Bravo at what is present day El Paso. This marks the first intrusion of the full expedition into El Nuevo Mexico.

Aside from certain well-documented historically important dates, some of these, especially in relation to some of the various c along the line of march, may be off by a day or two. Further study will determine if a more accurate accounting is possible. For so used in compiling this timeline, please refer to the bibliography.

2 Oñate Salazar and Tolosa Cortés Genealogies

Juan Pérez de Narriahondo Oñate

- b. 1460
- m. 1488 to Osana González
- d.

Cristóbal de Oñate

- b. 1504
- m. 1528 to Catalina de Salazar
- d. 1567

Juan de Oñate Salazar

- b. 1550 or 52
- m. to Isabel de Tolosa Cortés
- d.

Juan Cristóbal de Narriahondo Pérez Oñate y Cortés Moctezuma

- b. 1580

Moctezuma II

- b. circa 1468
- m. Teotalco
- d. 1520

Tecuichpotzin (Isabel)

- b.
- m. Hernan Cortés
- d.

Leonor Moctezuma

- b.
- m. Juanes de Tolosa
- d.

Isabel de Tolosa Cortés y Moctezuma

- b.
- m. Juan de Oñate Salazar
- d. 1593 or 94

Some of these dates are suspect, especially the 1580 birth date of Juan de Oñate Cortés who Villagrà says in 1595 was "...a te child..." and who was listed on the Gary Felix list as, "Eight to ten years old."

The "marriage" between Tecuichpotzin and Cortés was one of the many dalliances engaged in by the conquistador and was not le binding in any way. The children of that union were all illegitimate but in his will Cortés bequeathed to his son Martín, born of his i with Malinalli Tenepal, (Marina, Malinche) an inheritance of one thousand ducats annually for life. Martin was also legitimized by i decree.

Cristóbal de Oñate was a participant in the conquest of Jalisco, Culiacán, and Zacatecas provinces and was involved in the foundi Culiacán and Guadalajara cities. He was also a co-founder of the city of Zacatecas. At one time, he served as Governor of New Galic

Cristóbal's wife, Catalina de Salazar was the daughter of Gonzalo de Salazar, the Royal Treasurer of New Spain, and Catalina Cadena. Oñate served for a time as an assistant to the treasurer. Gonzalo de Salazar was a converso, or Jew who had convert Christianity in response to the excesses of the Spanish Inquisition.

Felix, Gary. *The Genealogy of Moctezuma II: Emperor of the Mexica (Aztec) Empire*. Available: members.tripod.com/~GaryFelix/index60.htm (10/12/2003)

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3. Franciscan Members of the Oñate Expedition

The members of the Order of St. Francis who joined the expedition on March 3, 1598 at the Río San Pedro.

1. Father Fray Alonso Martinez, Commissary Apostolic and leader of the group.
2. Fray Francisco de San Miguel, the priest who stayed with the expedition when the others of the first group departed.
3. Fray Francisco de Zamora
4. Fray Juan de Rosas
5. Fray Alonso de Lugo
6. Fray Andrés Corchado
7. Fray Juan Claros
8. Fray Cristóbal de Salazar
9. Lay Friar Juan de Buenaventura
10. Lay Friar Pedro de Vergara

In Spanish the word "*fray*" is a contraction used before a proper name of the word "*fraile*", which means "friar."

The Commissary Apostolic is someone who has received authority from a superior authority to gather information about a specific c or action, and to pass judgment. In this case, the cause was the expedition and the totality of the subsequent treatment of the In of El Nuevo Mexico.

The Franciscans were the first of the missionary orders to arrive in New Spain. After their entry in 1524, they were followe Dominicans, Augustinians, and Jesuits.

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Miguel Encinas, Alfred Rodriguez, and Joseph P. Sanchez. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992.

4. ; Spanish Women of War and Exploration

The presence of Spanish women in Mexico can be traced back to the Conquest. Arriving with Cortés and his conquistadores were se Castilian wives who often distinguished themselves in battle. They were:

Beatriz Hernández, María de Vera, Elvira Hernández, another Beatriz Hernández, Isabel Rodrigo, Catarina Márquez, Beatriz O Francisca Ordaz, María de Estrada, Beatriz Bermúdez de Velasco, Beatriz Palacios, and Juana Martín.

Eight were white, four were black, and at least five of them were killed in battle with the Indians.

Beatriz Bermúdez fought bravely at Tenochtitlán, and Cortés gave María de Estrada two towns in reward for her battlefield bra Beatriz Palacios, "La Parda" or "part black," stood guard, cooked, and tended to the horses and cared for the wounded. B Hernández also fought as a soldier and today is commemorated by a statue at the edge of Plaza Tapatía near the Cathedi Guadalajara in honor of her part in choosing the present day location of that city.

Felix, Gary. *The Genealogy of Mexico: List of Men Who Were Part of the Oñate Expedition*.

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5. A Partial Inventory of the Oñate Expedition to El Nuevo Mexico

Historical sources disagree on the number of people in the expedition. The count ranges from four to six hundred, but the sourc chose is from Villagrà. The translators interpreted his account to include the following:

"...four hundred men, 150 with families; eighty-three wagons; and some seven thousand head of cattle of various kinds." Near the point in his text, he also identified the presence of at least twelve wagons by writing that Oñate had "brought to him two dozen p wheels from off the well-made wagons."

One source also indicates that Oñate brought along two carriages for his personal use and that there were the three artillery p loaned to the expedition by King Felipe II.

Villagrà later gave a list of livestock that included sheep, lambs, swine, cows, goats and kids, horses, colts, fillies, mares, and m The muster list provided by Gary Felix relates that Villagrà donated several donkeys to the expedition.

Two Internet sources provide a list of the men in the expedition, and one, the Gary Felix list, tells which men brought wives families. Based on these, here is an approximate count of the muster list: of soldiers and other free men, there were about Twenty-three wives were listed, although not by name. Likewise, forty-one anonymous children were tallied.

Fifteen of the men did not indicate the number of children in their families. Also listed without names were twenty-three servant addition to these were the ten Franciscan priests. At this point your guess is as good as mine as to the true total but this list, assu two children to each family that did not provide a tally, equals 458 bodies. It is understood that not all the members of the exper were listed or referred to in the Felix list.

Felix, Gary *The Genealogy of Mexico: List of Men Who Were Part of the Oñate Expedition*.

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