

The Pueblo Revolt

By Sam Sanchez, Sr.

On August 10, 1680, the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest rose in revolt, setting off a massive assault upon the Spanish Kingdom of New Mexico. Before it was over, twenty-one Franciscan missionaries, more than four hundred Spaniards, and an uncounted number of Indians had perished.

Of itself, what befell the Spaniards and the Pueblos in 1680 furnishes a stirring tale. The origins of their conflict are discernible as early as 1598, when Don Juan de Onate first laid the foundations for the New Mexico colony in the upper Rio Grande Valley. He found the Indians, living in multi-storied and terraced towns of adobe and rock.

The Indians were intensely religious people, but of such a nature as to be highly offensive to the Spanish sensibilities. Native rituals, for instance, emphasized public dancing, wearing of painted masks, and sprinkling of sacred cornmeal. To the medieval thinking of the Spaniards, such things suggested a trace of Devil worship. The missionary friars, moved by single-minded dedication, set about eradicating all aspects of Pueblo ceremonial rituals. In as much as the Indians had never encountered religious persecution, attack by the Spanish clergy left them totally bewildered.

During the period after 1650, drought plus several epidemics of European-introduced disease afflicted the Pueblos, reducing the number of agricultural workers and depleting food reserves. An accumulation of tensions and grievances finally led the Pueblo people to resort to something that they had never done before. The Pueblo people drew together in a common cause against a common enemy. It took five years to weld the Pueblos together to one accord.

By the summer of 1680, the alliance was complete. August 10, was chosen as the day of the uprising. The symbol of rebellion was a knotted cord; the knots were a code, announcing the number of days that remained before the day of reckoning. Swift runners brought the cord to the Pueblos.

At sunrise, on August 10, 1680, the Indians of New Mexico launched their assault against the almost totally unprepared Spanish settlers. The Indians went about killing the Padres and setting fire to the churches on all the northern Pueblos. News of the catastrophe reached Governor Antonio de Otermin at seven o'clock on Saturday morning, as he was on his way to church.

Otermin sent a squad of soldiers to Tesuque Pueblo to see what had occurred there and to quell any disturbance. They came back later in the day with word that the priest was indeed dead and the church had been burned. All the cattle and horses belonging to the mission had been seized by the Indians. So it was in all the other Pueblos. Flames and smoke could be seen over all the churches and most of the isolated farms. Everyone who was still alive on the outskirts of Santa Fe, hurried into the city, and the gates were locked.

More than a thousand men, women, and children huddled in terror in the capital. A garrison of 150 men guarded the frightened city. Messengers from distant outposts arrived, bringing tales of death and destruction, burning churches, murdered friars. The whole land had gone mad. No news came

from southern New Mexico at all. Were they all dead there too, in Isleta and Socorro? Where was Alonso Garcia, the Lieutenant-general of the Province? Who would come to the aide of Santa Fe?

As the days passed, more and more Indians appeared. Now some 2500 of them surrounded Santa Fe. The Spaniards could do nothing but wait. The Indians cut the ditch that supplied the capital with water. Otermin sent troops out to retake and repair the ditch, but they could not reach it and were driven back behind the gates of the plaza.

The situation in the north seemed hopeless. After conferring with his lieutenants and clergymen, Otermin decided to abandon the capital and lead the settlers downriver to the village of Isleta.

On August 21, the awful exodus from Santa Fe began. The colonists left without a crust of bread or a grain of wheat or maize. Over their heads, as they marched, fluttered the century-old flag of yellow silk that Don Juan Onate had carried on his triumphal entry into the new found colony of New Mexico.

Alonso Garcia received word that everybody in the north was dead and the settlements destroyed. Garcia decided the logical thing to do was to save those who still lived by evacuating southern New Mexico before the rebels reached it.

Only about 385 Indians from Isleta stayed with Garcia. All in all, two thousand homeless people, including the settlers from the north, joined the group from the south. With scarcely any food, they straggled on down the river on the dreary trek to El Paso Del Norte. Then came the strenuous business of fording the river. Fray Francisco de Ayeta, watching the refugees, walk unsteadily into the mission of Our Lady of Guadalupe south of the river, said he had never seen "such great unhappiness and pitiful tragedy, with the need corresponding to the great numbers, and the poor women and children on foot and without shoes, of such a hue they looked like the dead."