

The Land of Enchantment

For centuries New Mexico, known as the Land of Enchantment, has drawn travelers and settlers from all directions. The cultures of Native Americans and Spanish Catholics who arrived in the sixteenth century often conflicted. Later, this clash of cultures was further complicated by the introduction of Anglos, who journeyed west after New Mexico became an American territory in 1850. Although these disparate peoples inevitably adopted new ways of living from each other, they also struggled, sometimes violently, to protect their freedom, language, and sovereign traditions. They often fought over land and religion. At other times, native peoples, Spanish, and Anglos coexisted peacefully and harmoniously.

Indigenous peoples have been living in the southwest for thousands of years. The Pueblo Indians of northern New Mexico settled villages of small stone dwellings in what we now call the Four Corners region (where Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah converge). These villages irrigated the land, tended crops, raised fowl, made pottery and woven baskets, and fashioned sophisticated tools from stone. Their lives and art were intimately connected with the seasons and resources of the land. The Navajo people traveled along trade routes, exchanging maize and cotton for bison and other materials. The Navajo believe that life itself is connected to the land, and that a balance between earth, sky, and spiritual people is the source of life. All living things share a common connection among their inner spirit, and this connection gives order to the world.

The freedom to roam the land is an essential aspect of their well-being, and as an expression of their reverence for the land as a sacred being underscores

the independence of the Navajo people, who retained much of their culture after the arrival of the conquistadors. When the Spanish brought sheep and horses up from Mexico, the Navajo people quickly adopted them for their own purposes. The ranchers and nomadic tribes came to share a love and respect for horses and the open land, the *llano*. We see this balance of independence and respect for the land among the Spanish *vaqueros*, the cowboys whose legacy of tough-willed independence survives in our imaginations today.

From the native peoples the Spanish adopted the *curandera*, a spiritual healer who uses herbs and plants to cure the sick. The *curandera* preserves ancient traditions handed down from one generation to the next through personal teaching and oral tradition. The *curandera* is a kind of shaman, a person of insight and sensitivity who learns the healing arts from a master teacher, often a relative or a distinguished person of wisdom and age in the community. Rituals include steeping herbs in water to prepare special teas, or mashing herbs into a compress to heal wounds. Because the Spanish adopted these healing traditions from the Native Americans, the *curandera* also represents the point of intersection where culture was exchanged and shared by people of different religions. From their indigenous ancestors, New Mexicans inherited not only a reverence for the great spirit that unites all living things on earth, but also a desire to know this spirit intimately. The work of the *curandera* acknowledges the spiritual connections among plants, earth, people, and dreams, weaving a tapestry of mystery and sacred magic that remains important to New Mexicans to this day.