

# THE OLD SANTA FÉ TRAIL

## INTRODUCTION

THE FIRST EUROPEANS WHO TRAVERSED THE GREAT HIGHWAY  
— ALVAR NUNEZ GABEÇA DE VACA — HERNANDO DE SOTO,  
AND FRANCISCO VASQUEZ DE CORONADO — SPANISH EXPE-  
DITION FROM SANTA FÉ EASTWARDLY — ESCAPE OF THE  
SOLE SURVIVORS

*The Old Bells of  
Santa Fé*



**F**OR more than three centu-  
ries, a period extending  
from 1541 to 1851, his-  
torians believed, and so  
announced to the liter-  
ary world, that Francisco  
Vasquez de Coronado,  
the celebrated Spanish  
explorer, in his search  
for the Seven Cities of  
Cibola and the Kingdom  
of Quivira, was the first  
European to travel over  
the intra-continent region  
of North America. In the last  
year above referred to, however, Buck-  
ingham Smith, of Florida, an eminent Spanish scholar,  
and secretary of the American Legation at Madrid, dis-

covered among the archives of State the *Narrative of Alvar Nunez Cabeça de Vaca*, where for nearly three hundred years it had lain, musty and begrimed with the dust of ages, an unread and forgotten story of suffering that has no parallel in fiction. The distinguished antiquarian unearthed the valuable manuscript from its grave of oblivion, translated it into English, and gave it to the world of letters; conferring honour upon whom honour was due, and tearing the laurels from such grand voyagers and discoverers as De Soto, La Salle, and Coronado, upon whose heads history had erroneously placed them, through no fault, or arrogance, however, of their own.

Cabeça, beyond any question, travelled the Old Santa Fé Trail for many miles, crossed it where it intersects the Arkansas River, a little east of Fort William or Bent's Fort, and went thence on into New Mexico, following the famous highway as far, at least, as Las Vegas. Cabeça's march antedated that of Coronado by five years. To this intrepid Spanish voyageur we are indebted for the first description of the American bison, or buffalo as the animal is erroneously called. While not so quaint in its language as that of Coronado's historian, a lustrum later, the statement cannot be perverted into any other reference than to the great shaggy monsters of the plains:

"Cattle come as far as this. I have seen them three times and eaten of their meat. I think they are about the size of those of Spain. They have small horns like the cows of Morocco, and the hair very long and flocky, like that of the merino; some are light brown, others black. To my judgment the flesh is finer and fatter than that of this country. The Indians make blankets of the hides of those not full grown. They range over a district of more than four hundred leagues, and in the whole extent of plain over which they run the people that inhabit

near there descend and live on them and scatter a vast many skins throughout the country."

It will be remembered by the student of the early history of our country, that when Alvar Nunez Cabeça de Vaca, a follower of the unfortunate Panphilo de Narvaez, and who had been long thought dead, landed in Spain, he gave such glowing accounts of Florida<sup>1</sup> and the neighbouring regions that the whole kingdom was in a ferment, and many a heart panted to emigrate to a land where the fruits were perennial, and where it was thought flowed the fabled fountain of youth.

Three expeditions to that country had already been tried: one undertaken in 1512, by Juan Ponce de Leon, formerly a companion of Columbus; another in 1520, by Vasquez de Allyon; and another by Panphilo de Narvaez. All of these had signally failed, the bones of most of the leaders and their followers having been left to bleach upon the soil they had come to conquer.

The unfortunate issue of the former expeditions did not operate as a check upon the aspiring mind of De Soto, but made him the more anxious to spring as an actor into the arena which had been the scene of the discomfiture and death of the hardy chivalry of the kingdom. He sought an audience of the emperor, and the latter, after hearing De Soto's proposition that, "he could conquer the country known as Florida at his own expense," conferred upon him the title of "Governor of Cuba and Florida."

On the 6th of April, 1538, De Soto sailed from Spain with an armament of ten vessels and a splendidly equipped army of nine hundred chosen men, amidst the roar of cannons and the inspiring strains of martial music.

It is not within the province of this work to follow De Soto through all his terrible trials on the North American

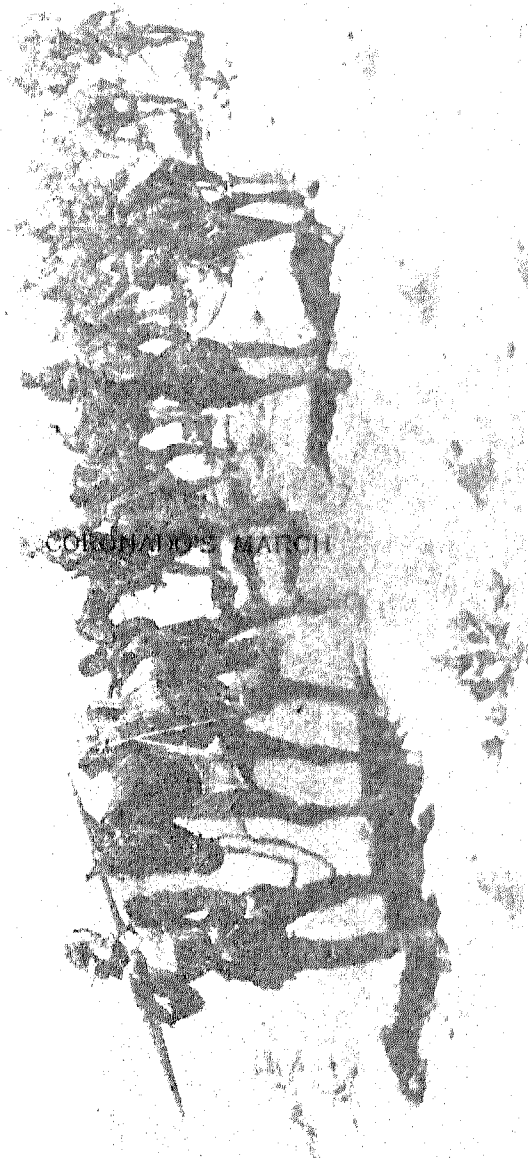
<sup>1</sup>The whole country watered by the Mississippi and Missouri was called Florida at that time.

can continent; the wonderful story may be found in every well-organized library. It is recorded, however, that some time during the year 1542, his decimated army, then under the command of Luis de Moscoso, De Soto having died the previous May, was camped on the Arkansas River, far upward towards what is now Kansas. It was this command, too, of the unfortunate but cruel De Soto, that saw the Rocky Mountains from the east. The chronicler of the disastrous journey toward the mountains says: "The entire route became a trail of fire and blood," as they had many a desperate struggle with the savages of the plains, who "were of gigantic structure, and fought with heavy strong clubs, with the desperation of demons. Such was their tremendous strength, that one of these warriors was a match for a Spanish soldier, though mounted on a horse, armed with a sword and cased in armour!"

Moscoso was searching for Coronado, and he was one of the most humane of all the officers of De Soto's command, for he evidently bent every energy to extricate his men from the dreadful environments of their situation; despairing of reaching the Gulf by the Mississippi, he struck westward, hoping, as Cabeza de Vaca had done, to arrive in Mexico overland.

A period of six months was consumed in Moscoso's march towards the Rocky Mountains, but he failed to find Coronado, who at that time was camped near where Wichita, Kansas, is located; according to his historian, "at the junction of the St. Peter and St. Paul" (the Big and Little Arkansas?). That point was the place of separation between Coronado and a number of his followers; many returning to Mexico, while the undaunted commander, with as many as he could induce to accompany him, continued easterly, still in search of the mythical Quivira.

How far westward Moscoso travelled cannot be determined accurately, but that his route extended up the



CORONADO'S MATCH

valley of the Arkansas for more than three hundred miles, into what is now Kansas, is proved by the statement of his historian, who says: "They saw great chains of mountains and forests to the west, which they understood were uninhabited."

Another strong confirmatory fact is, that, in 1884, a group of mounds was discovered in McPherson County, Kansas, which were thoroughly explored by the professors of Bethany College, Lindsborg, who found, among other interesting relics, a piece of chain-mail armour, of hard steel; undoubtedly part of the equipment of a Spanish soldier either of the command of Cabeça de Vaca, De Soto, or of Coronado. The probability is, that it was worn by one of De Soto's unfortunate men, as neither Panphilo de Narvaez, De Vaca, or Coronado experienced any difficulty with the savages of the great plains, because those leaders were humane and treated the Indians kindly, in contradistinction to De Soto, who was the most inhuman of all the early Spanish explorers. He was of the same school as Pizarro and Cortez; possessing their daring valour, their contempt of danger, and their tenacity of purpose, as well as their cruelty and avarice. De Soto made treaties with the Indians which he constantly violated, and murdered the misguided creatures without mercy. During the retreat of Moscoso's weakened command down the Arkansas River, the Hot Springs of Arkansas were discovered. His historian writes: "And when they saw the foaming fountain, they thought it was the long-searched-for 'Fountain of Youth,' reported by fame to exist somewhere in the country, but ten of the soldiers dying from excessive drinking, they were soon convinced of their error."

After these intrepid explorers the restless Coronado appears on the Old Trail. In the third volume of Hakluyt's *Voyages*, published in London, 1600, Coronado's historian



thus describes the great plains of Kansas and Colorado, the bison, and a tornado:—

“From Cienye they went to Quivira, which after their account is almost three hundred leagues distant, through mighty plains, and sandy heaths so smooth and wearisome, and bare of wood that they made heaps of ox-dung, for want of stones and trees, that they might not lose themselves at their return: for three horses were lost on that plain, and one Spaniard which went from his company on hunting. . . . All that way of plains are as full of crooked-back oxen as the mountain Serrena in Spain is of sheep, but there is no such people as keep those cattle. . . . They were a great succour for the hunger and the want of bread, which our party stood in need of. . . .

“One day it rained in that plain a great shower of hail, as big as oranges, which caused many tears, weakness and bowes.

“These oxen are of the bigness and colour of our bulls, but their bones are not so great. They have a great bunch upon their fore-shoulder, and more hair on their fore part than on their hinder part, and it is like wool. They have as it were an horse-mane upon their backbone, and much hair and very long from their knees downward. They have great tufts of hair hanging down on their foreheads, and it seemeth they have beards because of the great store of hair hanging down at their chins and throats. The males have very long tails, and a great knob or flock at the end, so that in some respects they resemble the lion, and in some other the camel. They push with their horns, they run, they overtake and kill an horse when they are in their rage and anger. Finally it is a foul and fierce-beast of countenance and form of body. The horses fled from them, either because of their deformed shape, or else because they had never before seen them.”

“The number,” continues the historian, “was incredi-

ble.” When the soldiers, in their excitement for the chase, began to kill them, they rushed together in such masses that hundreds were literally crushed to death. At one place there was a great ravine; they jumped into it in their efforts to escape from the hunters, and so terrible was the slaughter as they tumbled over the precipice that the depression was completely filled up, their carcasses forming a bridge, over which the remainder passed with ease.

The next recorded expedition across the plains *via* the Old Trail was also by the Spaniards from Santa Fé, eastwardly, in the year 1716, “for the purpose of establishing a Military Post in the Upper Mississippi Valley as a barrier to the further encroachments of the French in that direction.” An account of this expedition is found in *Mémoires Historiques sur La Louisiane*, published in Paris in 1858, but never translated in its entirety. The author, Lieutenant Dumont of the French army, was one of a party ascending the Arkansas River in search of a supposed mass of emeralds. The narrative relates: “There was more than half a league to traverse to gain the other bank of the river, and our people were no sooner arrived than they found there a party of Missouris, sent to M. de la Harpe by M. de Bienville, then commandant general at Louisiana, to deliver orders to the former. Consequently they gave the signal order, and our other two canoes having crossed the river, the savages gave to our commandant the letters of M. de Bienville, in which he informed him that the Spaniards had sent out a detachment from New Mexico to go to the Missouris and to establish a post in that country. . . . The success of this expedition was very calamitous to the Spaniards. Their caravan was composed of fifteen hundred people, men, women and soldiers, having with them a Jacobin for a chaplain, and bringing also a great number of horses and cattle, according to the custom of that nation to forget nothing

that might be necessary for a settlement. Their design was to destroy the Missouris, and to seize upon their country, and with this intention they had resolved to go first to the Osages, a neighbouring nation, enemies of the Missouris, to form an alliance with them, and to engage them in their behalf for the execution of their plan. Perhaps the map which guided them was not correct, or they had not exactly followed it, for it chanced that instead of going to the Osages whom they sought, they fell, without knowing it, into a village of the Missouris, where the Spanish commander, presenting himself to the great chief and offering him the calumet, made him understand through an interpreter, believing himself to be speaking to the Osage chief, that they were enemies of the Missouris, that they had come to destroy them, to make their women and children slaves and to take possession of their country. He begged the chief to be willing to form an alliance with them, against a nation whom the Osages regarded as their enemy, and to second them in this enterprise, promising to recompense them liberally for the service rendered, and always to be their friend in the future. Upon this discourse the Missouri chief understood perfectly well the mistake. He dissimulated and thanked the Spaniard for the confidence he had in his nation; he consented to form an alliance with them against the Missouris, and to join them with all his forces to destroy them; but he represented that his people were not armed, and that they dared not expose themselves without arms in such an enterprise. Deceived by so favourable a reception, the Spaniards fell into the trap laid for them. They received with due ceremony, in the little camp they had formed on their arrival, the calumet which the great chief of the Missouris presented to the Spanish commander. The alliance for war was sworn to by both parties; they agreed upon a day for the execution of the plan which they meditated, and the Spaniards fur-

nished the savages with all the munitions which they thought were needed. After the ceremony both parties gave themselves up equally to joy and good cheer. At the end of three days two thousand savages were armed and in the midst of dances and amusements; each party thought of nothing but the execution of its design. It was the evening before their departure upon their concerted expedition, and the Spaniards had retired to their camps as usual, when the great chief of the Missouris, having assembled his warriors, declared to them his intentions, and exhorted them to deal treacherously with these strangers who were come to their home only with the design of destroying them. At daybreak the savages divided into several bands, fell on the Spaniards, who expected nothing of the kind, and in less than a quarter of an hour all the caravan were murdered. No one escaped from the massacre except the chaplain, whom the barbarians saved because of his dress; at the same time they took possession of all the merchandise and other effects which they found in their camp. The Spaniards had brought with them, as I have said, a certain number of horses, and as the savages were ignorant of the use of these animals, they took pleasure in making the Jacobin whom they had saved, and who had become their slave, mount them. The priest gave them this amusement almost every day for the five or six months that he remained with them in their village, without any of them daring to imitate him. Tired at last of his slavery, and regarding the lack of daring in these barbarians as a means of Providence to regain his liberty, he made secretly all the provisions possible for him to make, and which he believed necessary to his plan. At last, having chosen the best horse and having mounted him, after performing several of his exploits before the savages, and while they were all occupied with his manœuvres, he spurred up and disappeared from

their sight, taking the road to Mexico, where doubtless he arrived."

Charlevoix,<sup>1</sup> who travelled from Quebec to New Orleans in the year 1721, says in one of his letters to the Duchess of Lesdignières, dated at Kaskaskia, July 21, 1721: "About two years ago some Spaniards, coming, as they say, from New Mexico, and intending to get into the country of the Illinois and drive the French from thence, whom they saw with extreme jealousy approach so near the Missouri, came down the river and attacked two villages of the Otoyas,<sup>2</sup> who are the allies of the Ayouez,<sup>3</sup> and from whom it is said also that they are derived. As the savages had no firearms and were surprised, the Spaniards made an easy conquest and killed a great many of them. A third village, which was not far off from the other two, being informed of what had passed, and not doubting but these conquerors would attack them, laid an ambush into which the Spaniards heedlessly fell. Others say that the savages, having heard that the enemy were almost all drunk and fast asleep, fell upon them in the night. However it was, it is certain the greater part of them were killed. There were in the party two almoners; one of them was killed directly and the other got away to the Missouri, who took him prisoner, but he escaped them very dexterously. He had a very fine horse and the Missouri took pleasure in seeing him ride it, which he did very skillfully. He took advantage of their curiosity to get out of their hands.

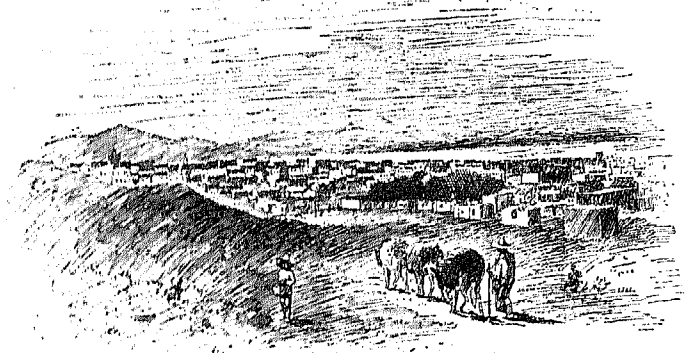
"One day as he was prancing and exercising his horse before them, he got a little distance from them insensibly; then suddenly clapping spurs to his horse he was soon out of sight."

<sup>1</sup>The celebrated Jesuit, author of *The History of New France, Journals of a Voyage to North America, Letters to the Duchess, etc.*

<sup>2</sup>Otoes.

<sup>3</sup>Iowas.

The Missouri Indians once occupied all the territory near the junction of the Kaw and Missouri rivers, but they were constantly decimated by the continual depredations of their warlike and feudal enemies, the Pawnees and Sioux, and at last fell a prey to that dreadful scourge, the small-pox, which swept them off by thousands. The remnant of the once powerful tribe then found shelter and a home with the Otoes, finally becoming merged in that tribe.



*Santa Fé from Fort Marcy in 1870*