

THE DE LUNA EXPEDITION

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WHEN Charles V abdicated the throne of Spain in favor of his son, Phillip II, many grave and critical problems were presenting themselves for settlement. Of the many colonial affairs the one relating to the colonizing of Florida was of great moment. Florida at that time was not limited to the peninsula that now bears its name, but embraced all the territory to the north and west of the present state of Florida.

For years the northern shores of the Gulf of Mexico and the storm-swept coast of Florida were regarded as almost unconquerable obstacles to colonization. Many were the gruesome tales describing the wrecks off the coast and the cruel murder of those who were able to save themselves from the sea. Necessity, however, at this time, demanded the colonization of Florida. Unfriendly nations were making contact with the Indians of this section. The lost gold and silver of the wrecks were finding their way into the coffers of Spain's competitors. To halt all this Phillip II, following the advice of his chief counsellors, ordered that an expedition be fitted out to carry colonists to Florida.

Don Louis de Velasco, Viceroy, of Mexico, was commissioned to take charge. Tristan de Luna, whom Velasco appointed Governor of Florida, was placed in command of the expedition. His subordinate officers consisted of twelve captains chosen equally from the cavalry and infantry then in Mexico. Efficiency ruled the preparations for the journey. An abundant supply of food, clothing, farming and building implements were stored on thirteen vessels which were to carry the 1500 potential colonists to Florida. On board were also 240 horses, only half of which were destined to reach Florida.

The spiritual side of the undertaking was given the same thoughtful consideration as the material. The Dominicans willingly accepted the offer of the Viceroy to accompany the expedition. Their duty was to care for the spiritual needs of the Spaniards and to work for the conversion of the Indians. The policy of the Friar Preachers

of bringing the Indians into the fold of Christ by example, instruction, good works, kindness and presents, rather than enslavement, was looked upon most favorably by both Phillip and Velasco.

The Provincial of the Dominicans in Mexico, Father Dominic de Santa Maria, assured the expedition of prudent and holy leadership when he named Father Peter Martin, Prior of St. Dominic's in Mexico City, as head of the missionary band. Four other Dominican priests and a lay brother were assigned to accompany Father Martin. The priests, Fathers Dominic de la Annunciacion, Dominic de Salazar, later the first Bishop of the Phillipine Islands, John de Mazuelas and James de Santo Domingo, were men whose spiritual and intellectual attainments ranked them among the outstanding Friars in Mexico. Bartholomew Mateos, a lay brother, made the sixth member of the Dominican party.

On June 11, 1559, Tristan de Luna gave orders to sail from Santa Cruz. Approximately two months later, on the eve of the Assumption, the boats dropped anchor at Ochuse, the present Pensacola Bay. In honor of the great feast the port was renamed Santa Maria. The beautiful bay, the fertile soil, the abundance of fish and the plentifulness of fresh water filled the Spaniards with a spirit of contentment and thanksgiving. So great was their enthusiasm that precious days were wasted in celebrating. This festival, although harmless in itself, was far from the proper way to commence the colonization project. Much future anxiety would have been prevented had de Luna immediately unloaded the cargo. His procrastination was just one of the many imprudent moves which he was to make and which were to be such powerful causes in bringing about the dismal failure of the venture.

When de Luna decided to get down to serious work his first act was to send out two companies to explore the surrounding territories in order to locate the natives. Father Dominic de la Annunciacion accompanied the band which rowed up the Escambia river, while Father Peter Martin travelled with the group which went overland. For two weeks both parties searched in vain for any Indian settlement. When they returned to Pensacola Bay suffering greatly from hunger and exhaustion the sight that greeted their eyes increased their despair a hundredfold.

Hardly had the searching parties left when two ships made ready to sail to Spain carrying to Phillip a most glorious report concerning the opportunity for a successful colony. A glowing account was also being taken to Mexico by a galleon returning for supplies. Anything

but failure was in the minds of the would-be colonists. But this optimistic spirit was to be short lived. On September 20, a devastating storm broke. A large part of the fleet was destroyed; the rest was badly crippled and a number of men drowned, Brother Bartholomew Mateos among them. To make a bad situation worse, most of the food, enough to feed the expedition for over a year, along with other supplies was lost. This catastrophe completely disheartened those at Pensacola Bay and it was almost a death blow to the courage of the exhausted searching parties.

Fortunately chalices, vestments, missals, flour and wine were saved from the wreck, for the Spaniards fully appreciated what a help their religion could be in such dire circumstances. Religious services were carried on, mollifying to some extent the harsh effect of the disaster on the morale of the party.

De Luna was still determined to establish a colony in Florida. He immediately planned to overcome the defeat. One of the few remaining boats was sent back to Vera Cruz for supplies. An expedition headed by Major Matthew del Sauz was ordered to search the inlands for Indian villages. Fathers Dominic de Salazar and Dominic de la Annunciacion accompanied the exploring party. Why de Luna refused to found a colony on Pensacola Bay instead of loafing and waiting for a report from del Sauz and hoping for the supply boat's return is an unexplained problem.

Scarcity of food added to the roughness of the country forced the del Sauz party to endure many hardships. Finally, they discovered a small Indian settlement, called Nanipacna, situated along the banks of the Alabama, or the upper reaches of the Escambia river. The Indians, convinced that the Spaniards meant no harm, received them cordially, related the history of the villages, and treated them well. The white men came to the village and in one of those queer perversions destroyed their homes. Most of the former inhabitants sought shelter elsewhere fearing a return of the now unwelcome expedition.

When del Sauz's report reached de Luna, the party at Pensacola Bay was in dire straits. Sea food provided them with their entire bill of fare. The desire of all, despite a none too favorable report, to set out for Nanipacna is readily understood. The men were hungry and dreams of good food in abundance offered a powerful motive. The three Dominicans also were eager to head for the inland settlement. Not only did they think that the temporal welfare of the Spaniards would be improved, but they were of the opinion that an

opportunity to do some missionary work would be presented to them at Nanipacna. De Luna himself wanted to delay until the discovery of a better site, but he was unable to withstand pressure brought to bear on him from all sides.

In February, 1560, the two bands which de Luna had formed at Pensacola Bay arrived at Nanipacna. Their sorrowful condition can be imagined when we realize that besides suffering the hardships of travel, their food consisted in what they could find on the way. The eating of poisonous leaves and herbs spelled death for a considerable number. The fact that the Spaniards renamed Nanipacna Santa Cruz is significant.

It took no great foresight to realize that the scanty provisions at Nanipacna would be exhausted shortly. So de Luna again commissioned del Sauz to lead another expedition to find the Coosa Indians who dwelt in central Alabama.

The Spaniards who remained at Nanipacna experienced agonies far worse than those undergone at Pensacola Bay. Despair and dissatisfaction grew. They demanded that de Luna take them back to the port where their chances of getting relief or returning to Mexico were much more favorable. De Luna showed his stubbornness. Not only did he refuse their request, but for a time harbored the idea of following the band which was in search of the Coosans. Wiser heads, however, won the day, and the discouraged party left Santa Cruz in July of 1560.

Three Dominican Fathers, Peter Martin, John de Mazuelas and James de Santo Domingo, remained with the division staying at Nanipacna. So we know that the distressed Spaniards had the consolations of their religion although very little missionary work was done among the natives. The Indians at Nanipacna were too few as well as too far removed from any other tribe to warrant the establishment of a successful mission station. For this reason the Friars were heartily in accord with the men in their request to return to the Bay.

Before leaving Nanipacna the Spaniards wrote a note telling of their plans. They placed it in a kettle which they buried under a tree. They then nailed a placard to the tree with the words "Dig below" printed on it. By following these directions the party returning from Coosa would be able to learn just what happened to the rest.

When the worn out travellers reached Pensacola Bay after a journey no less severe than the trip to Nanipacna they were bitterly disappointed to find no supplies. Eight days later, however, a very inadequate cargo of provisions reached the port. Dissatisfaction

continued to grow. The physical and mental health of the band failed rapidly. For this reason Fathers Martin, de Mazuelas and de Santo Domingo voted strongly for a return to Mexico, not that they had lost any of their zeal to convert the Indians of Florida, but rather because it was evident that any attempt at conversion or colonization at present would result in complete failure. So de Luna much against his will sent a number of men, women and children back to Vera Cruz. Father John de Mazuelas accompanied these. Fathers Martin and de Santo Domingo sailed for Havana where they hoped to procure aid for those remaining in Florida.

Father Martin, on his arrival in Mexico from Havana, presented Velasco with a letter from de Luna. To this report the Friar added his own detailed account. This undoubtedly was the first true story that the Viceroy received concerning the expedition. Velasco, grieved by the situation, prepared to act swiftly and efficiently.

The exploring party under del Sauz which travelled northward in search of the Coosans encountered the same indescribable miseries that affected every division of de Luna's men. A few words can sum up the march: rough country, no food, eating herbs and roots and finally cutting and boiling all leather equipment in order to get sustenance from the concoction.

A small Indian settlement on the Olibahali stream provided the Spaniards with a place of refreshment. This prolonged stop, occurring fifty days after the departure from Nanipacna, was the only extended one of the journey.

The two Dominicans, Fathers de Salazar and de la Annunciacion, accompanying the expedition, found it most difficult to sustain the morale of the men. Although they celebrated Mass whenever possible and preached sermons emphasizing the sufferings of Christ, they found it practically impossible to combat the despair of the men. The trying task of maintaining a spirit of hope within such men taxed the Friars to the utmost.

A few days after leaving the villages along the Olibahali river, del Sauz came upon the Coosans. Reports had been misleading. Instead of finding well populated villages, the Spaniards found the remnants of a once great settlement. The Coosans, however, received their white visitors hospitably.

From their Indian friends the Spaniards learned that only one other small tribe besides the Olibahali inhabited the country. This tribe, the Napochies, freed themselves from the Coosan domination. The Coosans requested their white guests to aid in subduing their

former subjects. The request was granted. The Coosans with their new allies swooped down on the Napochie settlement. The surprised Napochies fled, pursued by the Coosans. They were not overtaken and defeated until they had arrived at the banks of the Mississippi, called by the Indians, the Oquechiton.

Father de la Annunciacion accompanied the warriors. His principal motive for so doing was to investigate the possibilities for the erection of missions in that country. His presence proved fortunate as the Coosans were bent on massacring the defeated tribe. The Friar prevented the cruel action. Moreover he persuaded the Indians not to burn the village of the Napochies pointing out the waste of the much-needed food that would result.

After months of study and exploration the Spaniards unanimously concluded that Coosa afforded little prospect either for a colony or mission. Twelve men set out for Nanipacna carrying the report of the conference. The document was worded in a style calculated to demonstrate the unfavorableness of the site without wounding the feelings of de Luna. The messengers were instructed to emphasize the impossibility of founding a colony at Coosa.

Deserted Nanipacna offered a problem to the messengers until they found the note explaining the actions of their countrymen. At Pensacola Bay they delivered the report as well as their own impression concerning Coosa. These impressions angered de Luna who accused the men of interpreting del Sauz's letter in an unfavorable light. The other officers accepted the version of the messengers and refused to obey the Governor's command to proceed to Coosa.

To wreck the commander's plan a subordinate officer despatched a note to Coosa ordering the Spaniards to the Bay. Returning to the port del Sauz found the relations existing between the Governor and his men to be most hostile. De Luna stubborn, sullen and worried seemed to be the victim of a mental breakdown. He foolishly pronounced the sentence of excommunication on George Ceron along with a number of other leading officers for acting contrary to orders, although it was evident that their actions were for the common good.

Naturally, the mutual hate existing between Governor and subjects had a disastrous effect on the spirituality of the camp. As the months passed many were losing all sense of religious obligations. The two Friars used reason and persuasion to convince de Luna of his folly but it was to no avail.

Ordinary means having failed to persuade de Luna, the Dominicans resorted to extraordinary. It is recorded that at the Com-

munion of the Mass on Palm Sunday, Father de la Annunciacion called the Governor from his place to the front of the altar. The Friar then told de Luna that Jesus was warning him to become reconciled with his men. The priest promised de Luna that if he followed the command of Christ food would be brought to the camp within three days. The effect on the commander bordered on the miraculous. After Mass, with tearful eyes and contrite heart he begged pardon from his men. Two days later the provisions arrived.

A new Governor, Angel de Villafane, arrived with the relief expedition. It was his intention to leave the Bay and establish a colony in St. Helena. This move closed the de Luna expedition. Some men remained with Villafane, others among whom were the three Dominicans returned to Mexico.

Had the Spaniards come upon some of the populous Indian settlements which were located in Alabama a different story might be recorded of the de Luna undertaking. As it is the whole enterprise both in respect to colonization and conversion is rated as a dismal failure. Yet this should not detract any from the glory of the brave colonists and fearless missionaries who endured indescribable miseries in the vain attempt to promote the glory of God as well as that of Spain.

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