A REVIEW OF THE DE SOTO EXPEDITION IN TERRITORIES OF OUR PRESENT SOUTHERN UNITED STATES

By Leslie McRill

A subject of lasting interest to all who are wont to follow events of the early explorers of our country is that of the expedition of Hernando de Soto in the years 1539-1542. So much has been written about this expedition that at this late date it might seem unnecessary to further pursue the subject, but so much also of controversy had arisen among authorities in the different states where the trek took place, that it was deemed of sufficient importance, in the light of its being the four hundredth anniversary of the event, to make an official survey with the use of all authorities, both early and late. Accordingly, the United States government appointed a commission, composed of outstanding scholars, to make a complete examination of all materials at hand, and put them in an official report. This report is of great value, as it sets forth all possible data available for such a study. As the Commission states, it may not be considered the last word, since later discoveries in the way of excavations of Indian towns, or of other manuscripts, are possible. But it is the last word so far as materials, sources, and studies up to the date of the report are concerned. The report was made and final presentation given in 1939.¹

This Report is of special interest to Oklahoma historians because hitherto there has been some discussion about whether De Soto came into Oklahoma. Authorities were disagreed. Among the writers and cartographers of more than one hundred years ago whose works show that De Soto did enter Oklahoma have been Henry B. Schoolcraft (1851-57), Buckingham Smith, (1866-Brevvoort’s Map) and De l’Isle’s Map (1718).² It


²The De Soto Expedition Commission consisted of the following scholars with Dr. John R. Swanton of the Smithsonian Institution as Chairman: Hon. W. G. Brorein, Tampa, Fla.; Miss Caroline Dormon, Chestnut, La.; Col John R. Fordyce, Hot Springs (later Little Rock), Ark.; V. Birney Imes, Columbus, Miss.; Andrew O. Holmes, Memphis, Tenn.; Dr. Walter B. Jones, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Ala.

The three works given here are: Henry R. Schoolcraft, Historical and Statistical Information respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States, Parts I-VI (Philadelphia, 1851-57), pp. 58-68; Buckingham Smith, translator, Narratives of the Career of Hernando de Soto (New York, 1866); Guillaume De l’Isle, famous French Cartographer, Maps, 1718.
may be noted that the writer of *Discoverers of the New World* (1960) apparently based his data on these early sources instead of the findings of the De Soto Commission's *Report* (1939) since a map in the recent 1960 book shows the Expedition traversing Northeastern Oklahoma.³

However, we shall see in our digest here that the very careful studies presented in the Commission’s *Report* show that De Soto’s march did not include Oklahoma. Some who have based their conclusions on the earlier investigators of the subject have asserted in their writings that De Soto was in the immediate neighborhood of Fort Gibson. It is well to have the matter definitely settled by the *Report* (1939) which presents the results of painstaking work done by a scholarly and well informed committee.

Before taking up the story of the route as studied and plotted by the Commission, it is well to take a brief look at De Soto’s life and some of the events that made him a great explorer. He was a native of the Kingdom of Extremadura in Spain, a province which furnished more than one notable name in the list of early explorers in America. Among them were Vasco Nunez de Balboa, Cortez, and Pizarro. De Soto was with the last named in Peru. The following remarks about the age are of interest: “Finally, it must be remembered that De Soto’s expedition was launched in the very midst of the golden age of Spanish power, in the reign of the Emperor Charles V, the most powerful monarch to arise in Europe since Charlemagne, one who bade fair to become to Spain in the sixteenth century what Louis le Grand was to France in the eighteenth.”⁴

The date of De Soto’s birth is not definitely established, authorities insisting upon ranging it between the years 1496 and 1501. The place of birth is also a matter of dispute, the rival claimants of the honor being Badajoz, Villanueva de Barcarrota, and Jerez de los Caballeros. Villanueva de Barcarrota is maintained by Garcilaso de la Vega, one of the authoritative sources for the route and events of the expedition in America. A monument has been erected in the latter place commemorative of De Soto. De Soto served with Pizarro in Peru and probably it was during this service that he became enamored of the idea of having a kingdom of his own in the southern continent over which he might have exclusive power. One of his companions in Peru, Luis de Moscoso, was destined later to be De Soto’s chief aid on the memorable march, and to take charge of the expedition upon the death of his chief.

⁴ All quotations herein are from the *Report of the Commission*, given from the references in footnote 2, *supra*. 
De Soto's expedition was formed in Spain, but the base of his operations in the new world was Havana, Cuba. Cuba had been settled by Spaniards in 1519. De Soto went back to Spain after his campaigns with Pizarro, and there entreated the monarch to grant him land in the southern continent. This was denied. He was given, instead, the land of Florida. He recruited his men, his ships, secured provisions and necessities and made complete plans for the new venture. Several of his trustworthy men were those who had previously served with him in America, some from Seville, and several from Portugal. One of these, the Gentleman of Elvas, was a chief chronicler of the trip and its events.

The fleet sailed from San Lucar, Spain, April 6, 1538, "accompanied by the Mexican fleet," according to Garcilaso. The fleet consisted of seven large ships and three small ones. The company has been variously estimated by the chroniclers from 500 to 1000, some counting groups of companeros omitted by others. They arrived in June, 1538, at Santiago de Cuba, and sailed from Havana on May 18th. On the 25th, they sighted the land of Florida.

Before taking up the business of the landing and the route followed, it should be pointed out that the sources for this study are very definitely fixed. Three or four interested ones give the information, and these in varying outlines of facts. Each seems to be conscientious and imbued with the idea of giving authentic details of the events as they transpired. Our authorities tell us that "three of the four known narratives of the De Soto expedition—those of Ranjel, Elvas and Biedma, in approximately that order—possess a very high degree of reliability, while the fourth, the 'Florida' of Garcilaso de la Vega, is of great utility but requires constant checking by means of the other narratives."

It may be remarked here that Garcilaso de la Vega was foremost as a writer of literature, and as such, saw no harm in making his accounts readable and interesting. Hence a little exaggeration, here and there, in the way of "poetic license" would give his imagination full play, and at the same time do no harm to his readers. The other narrators were only interested in giving what was actually happening as an official record of the trip—this to be preserved for history their task. Thus each serves as a buffer to the other. "These, then, furnish the principal materials contemporary with the expedition. .... To them may be added the so-called 'De Soto Map,' which, whether or not it was based upon direct information, belongs to a time nearly contemporaneous."

Then there are certain archives of later dates that throw some light on items and information of a more local color. The
greatest determination had to be based by members of the Com-
mission on topographical features and locations of Indian tribes
and towns. But in these only can the larger aspects be relied
upon, such as the Mississippi River, the Appalachians, etc. The
weather for the years involved becomes an important part of
the decisions, since whether the year in question was a par-
ticularly dry one, or on the other hand, a wet one—this in-
formation enters largely in placing swamps, swollen rivers, etc.,
which are mentioned in the various parts of the narrations.
Every possible detail has been taken into consideration by the
Commission up to a point where the reader may even feel that
he is present and taking each step with the original discoverers.
So much is this true, that one feels that he may be standing
with one foot poised for the next step forward through the
swamps or over the rugged terrain, but must not step to the
right or to the left, nor even forward until it is determined by
the investigators where he may next set his foot down! The
subject is that carefully studied, debated, pro and con, that no
wrong conclusion may enter into the direction taken. In a few
instances alternate routes are mapped out between two given
points with the remark that either could have been the route.
The Report is exceedingly interesting to those who have precon-
ceived notions of their own and wish to see them corroborated,
even in the face of contrary evidences.

Following the maps showing the routes determined be-
comes very like a jig-saw puzzle, no rhyme or reason seemingly
as to the route chosen by the leaders of the march. But this must
be kept in mind that De Soto was exploring his new realm and
every hint of a large village or of good food supplies was to be
taken advantage of. Like Coronado, he could be deceived by the
natives, or believe exaggerated stories of great wealth. He was
a “man of iron” and intended that all the natives be subject
to his decrees, and to this end, nearly always carried with him,
after visiting a nation, the chief of the tribe in order to insure
the safety of his men on their line of march.

So, landing in Florida, De Soto used information gained
from the previous expedition of Panfilo de Narvaez which was
taken eleven years before. This was of great value to De Soto
in making some of his decisions. Tampa Bay had been accepted
by most writers as the landing place, but it began to be ques-
tioned, especially by T. H. Lewis in an article in the American
Antiquarian, 1900. This question having been raised, our Com-
mission now turns to Ranjel and all other sources available,
studies them, along with all present indications, and finally
comes to the conclusion with the following facts: “The landing
place of De Soto was in Tampa Bay as proved by— comparisons
of descriptions with the geography of the country; three inlets
considered—Tampa Bay, Charlotte Harbor, and San Carlos Bay. Of the above, Tampa Bay is the one most nearly in a line north of Havana in agreement with Ranjel’s statement.”

The route through Florida, from the Bahia del Espiritu Santo, or Tampa Bay, took its source from the headquarters of the Expedition established on the aboriginal site on Terra Ceia Island. “The site of the Spanish Camp is clearly indicated and generally admitted to have been at or close to Tallahassee, where they passed the winter of 1539-1540.”

Scouting parties were sent out to the north and to the south. While these scouts were making their discoveries, the main army was being harassed by the Apalaches, who were constantly surprising and attacking the Spaniards. In the spring the march was again taken up and passed into what is now Georgia. Leaving the present site of Tallahassee the Spaniards marched north-west to the Flint River. Then on to where the towns of Capachequi were located. They arrived by ferry, or via canoes provided by the Lady of Coffitachequi.

The line of march then proceeded through the Eastern Highlands, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee and Northern Alabama. Summarizing this march our source states:

De Soto would have passed over or near the sites of Edgefield, Greenwood, and Anderson, and between Pickens and Walhalla, all in South Carolina. In North Carolina he would have passed through Highlands, Franklin, and Murphy, and in Tennessee through or near Cleveland, and certainly over the site of Chattanooga. Coming to Alabama, we find he left the Tennessee at Guntersville, reached the Coosa near Attalla and Gadsden, and passed near Talladega on the way to Coosa town, north of Childersburg.

Still in 1540, De Soto entered Southern Alabama and Northeastern Mississippi. “From Coosa town the Spaniards went almost straight south and may have kept along Coosa River . . . . there can be little doubt that Ulibahali, the first place of importance, was on the north bank of the Tallapoosa, approximately where the same town—more correctly known as Hothliwahali—was situated before the removal of the Creeks to the west of the Mississippi.” Then the expedition turned south into Alabama. In Mississippi, De Soto came within a few miles of Columbus and wintered south of Pontotoc or in the neighborhood of Tupelo.

Now we proceed with the expedition from the Chickasaw country to Utiangue, or through northern Mississippi and to Arkansas. This is the spring of 1541, when the greatest disaster befell the Spaniards. It is known as the Battle of Mabila. The Indians swooped down upon the Spanish camp, which was not wholly unprepared, but where the whole army was taken by surprise. Biedma, Ranjel, and Elvas, all agree as to this en-
counter and the seriousness of it. The Spaniards were so demoralized for a time that every effort had to be made to recuperate their lost fortunes. "In their new camp," says Ranjel, "they made haste to set up a forge, and they made bellows of bear skins, and they retempered their arms, and made new frames for their saddles." Adding to this report, Elvas says:

If, perchance, any one still had any clothing left from the fire at Mavilla, it was now all burned up in that place; and many were naked, as they had no time to snatch their jerkins. There they endured great suffering from the cold, for which they got relief in large fires. The whole night was passed turning from one side to the other without sleeping, for if they were warmed on one side they froze on the other. They managed to make some mats out of dry grass, woven together, and placed one mat below and the other above. Many laughed at this contrivance, but afterwards necessity forced them to do likewise.

Another attack by the Indians was easily repulsed we are told by the narrators.
The course pursued by De Soto's army during the season of 1541 is as follows: Leaving the Chickasaw country in Mississippi, it immediately entered the territory of the Alabama Indians who seem to have lived at that time in the southeastern part of Lafayette Co., the northeastern part of Calhoun, or in the western part of Pontotoc. After capturing a stockade manned by these Indians they marched directly west of the neighborhood of the present Sunflower Landing probably paralleling the course of Yocona River and then swinging south as far as Charleston. After crossing the Mississippi, they came first to the towns of the province of Aquixo south of Modoc in the present Phillips County, Arkansas, crossed a branch of White River on a bridge, waded through the swamps beyond it, entered the province of Casqui on Crowley's Ridge, and found the Casqui towns lying perhaps on Big Creek of the L'Anguille. An expedition was sent out from this province into northeastern Arkansas, which seems to have penetrated the prairie country about Wheatley, between the St. Francis and the White.

Turning south from Pacaha, the Spaniards re-entered the head town of the Casqui and marched southwest to the White probably at St. Charles where the Casqui Indians forced them over. From this point they traveled south along the west side of White River and came to the town of Quiguate in the delta between the White and the Arkansas. The most probable site of this town is at the Menard group of mounds 7 miles east of Arkansas Post. It is probable that it was then on White River and that the Arkansas main channel was farther south than it is today.

On leaving Quiguate, they marched northwest, first through swamps and then over hills, crossing the Arkansas above Pine Bluff, recrossing it near Woodson and coming upon the Coliqua town on the north bank of the Arkansas at the Great Rock. From here they turned southwest past Benton, probably followed the Saline a short distance toward the south and then turned west to the Ouachita, coming in contact with it perhaps near Friendship or Donaldson. From that point they went up along the Ouachita to Tanico not far from Hot Springs and from there up the valley of the Big Mazaran to Caddo Gap, then occupied by a powerful Caddo tribe called Tula. On leaving the Tula Indians the Spaniards traveled toward the southeast and probably followed one of two routes back to the Arkansas. Either they kept near Caddo River until they reached the neighborhood of Arkadelphia where they crossed to the east bank of the Ouachita and followed it down to the little Missouri and Ouachita rivers. Their winter quarters were probably near either Camden or Calion, both of which were noted as trail centers.

Water Valley, Charleston, and Clarksdale, in Mississippi, are believed to be near the route followed by De Soto.

In Arkansas Helena is the first place of any size that may confidently be cited as having a location near it. Pine Bluff probably lay a bit to the south but Little Rock, or more exactly, Great Rock, seems to mark the site of Coligua. Benton and Malvern were near if not exactly upon the trail, Hot Springs close by, Arkadelphia possibly upon it, and Camden certainly so.

We have spent a little more time with the Arkansas route because of its proximity to Oklahoma. Some remarks about the winter quarters are interesting. We read:

From time to time when De Soto and his followers arrived at Utianque [Arkansas] until the end of the expedition we are compelled
to rely on the narrative of the Portuguese chronicler with such material as may be gleaned from the texts of Biedma and Garcilaso. Utiangue is said to have been in a level country abounding in corn and other food supplies, and particular mention is made both by Elvas and Garcilaso of the trapping of two kinds of rabbits. The town was on a fine plain, says Garcilaso, with a stream on either side of it, and the inhabitants, although warlike, seemed to be of a finer character than those of Tula.

It might be well to say here that Ranjel's narrative affords an almost exact itinerary from the time the army landed until the narrative comes to an end at Utiangue, where the winter of 1541-42 was passed. Ranjel was De Soto's private secretary, and the Report states:

It is evident that, in making preparations for the winter, De Soto had his bitter experiences of the two winters preceding in mind, for he "ordered a wooden stockade to be built about the place where that camp was established at some distance from the houses, so that the Indians without might not harm it with fire. Having measured off the land by paces, he allotted to each one the amount that was proper for him to build, in proportion to the number of Indians he had. Thereupon the wood was brought in by them and within three days the stockade was built of very high timbers set close together in the ground and with many boards placed crosswise."

The army spent a very comfortable winter, we are told, since there was plenty of wood and food. Elvas says that "the Christians were there a month amid snow during which they never left the town." When they needed wood a trail was made by the horsemen through the snow so the footmen could bring in the needed supply. Biedma says that De Soto set out at the beginning of March: "On Monday, March 6th, of the year 1542, the governor set out from Autianque to go in search of Nilco, which the Indians said was near the great river, with the intention of reaching the sea." Again, it is stated in the Report:

De Soto's route in the spring of 1542 lay down the Ouachita River to the site of the present Jonesville. He is believed to have crossed the Ouachita from west to east near Columbia, and to have recrossed it near Pippin Landing though the wording of our texts would imply a continuous movement east. Guachoya, the town on the Mississippi where he established himself at leaving Anilco and where he died, is believed to have been near Ferriday though it was possibly higher up.

The route pursued by Moscoso after De Soto's death is thought to have been northwest by way of Sicily Island to Columbia where he crossed the Ouachita and then went to Drake's (Chaguate), northwest to Bistineau Lake (Aguacay) and west to a place on the Red River above Shreveport.

After wandering in what is now Texas, and finding nothing of importance, Moscoso's men retraced their route and finally came to Aminoya where they intrenched for the winter, built their boats, and from which they set out, in the spring, for Mexico. Little may be guessed about their travel along the Louisiana and Texas coasts, but it is believed that they reached and entered the mouth of Matagorda Bay.
It is of interest and very helpful to quote from the conclusions of the Commission as to purposes, bravery and skill, both of the invading Spaniards and the native Indian tribes. We read:

If with all their failings, we may not withhold our respect for the rough-diamonds of De Soto's army on account of their hardiness and their hardihood, we must extend the same to their native opponents who matched their naked bodies and primitive instruments of warfare again and again in reckless daring with a force equipped with the best weapons that the most warlike European nation of its time had to offer, in the hands of a picked force of experienced veterans and led by a commander inferior to none of the other conquistadores in native ability and in familiarity with Indian methods of fighting. Our estimate of the Indians comes, of course, entirely through the pens of their enemies but these testify to a profound admiration for their red antagonists. The devotion to their captured chief exhibited by the Indians of Aguacalique, the proud and unflinching valor of the Apalachee, the hopeless but bitter-end fight of the Mabila Indians, the skill displayed by that unknown Chickasaw chief who nearly destroyed the entire invading army and put an end to the whole expedition, and the impression created by those Caddo spearmen of Tula, who are called "the best fighters they encountered in all Florida" are so many witnesses to the presence of the sterner virtues which the Spaniards themselves so much esteemed.

And continuing, we read:

Many of those Indians were of the same stock as those to whom the magnificent mound groups of the lower Mississippi valley owed their origin and mounds were still in use among them though the great mound-building period was somewhat past its prime. They were also the ancestors of the Indians of the Creek, Cherokee, Choc-taws, Chickasaw and Seminole confederations which played such an important part in the later history of our southern states, and showed themselves to be as faithful in their friendship and as determined and resourceful in their enmity as their ancestors had been in the time of De Soto.

We have merely sketched in this article the findings of the Commission, whose fine report and arduous work celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of the expedition. It may well be that this short expose of their findings will lead those interested to get the full and complete Report which contains many very interesting happenings encountered all along the routes made by the De Soto army. The Commission was composed of many well known authorities on early American events and their importance and significance to our American heritage.

Some of the most interesting features of the Commission's Report are a very good biographical sketch of De Soto; a splendid presentation of the four authorities on the expedition; previous attempts to locate the routes of De Soto and Moscoso; the Indians encountered by De Soto and Moscoso; background of the Expedition; the beginnings of the expedition and its personnel; domestic animals brought to North America by De Soto; the weather during the expedition; the vessels for the ocean.
voyage; many maps showing the route in sections of the march, as well as overall maps of the complete route; appended materials giving distances, and a very well worked-out "Parallel Itinerary of the Expedition." In this latter we have the years and what each source had to say as to dates, places, occurrences; bibliography; participants in the expedition arranged alphabetically, and a general index.