

WALK ACROSS TEXAS

By Michael Ventura

March 30, 2001

Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was born in 1490 and died in 1557. Today's media enshrine the cliché that our era has seen the greatest change in human history, but judge for yourself whether or not the changes in Cabeza de Vaca's lifetime were equally transformative:

Columbus opened the Americas to European exploitation, beginning the greatest mass migration in history, a population shift that ended up creating no fewer than 45 new nations; 800,000 Jews were expelled from Spain and the Inquisition was instituted; Cortez ended two civilizations, the Aztec and the Inca; Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Hieronymus Bosch, Dürer, and Brueghel revolutionized Western art; the first modern clock was built, beginning a transformation in our perception of Time; the German priest Martin Luther and the English King Henry VIII broke from the Church of Rome, ending a 1,000-year dominance; Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, initiating the modern view of politics; Copernicus developed the theory of the solar system that inaugurated contemporary science; the African slave trade began; the first insurance policies were written, the first surgical manual was published, the first theory of germs was formulated; in England, theatres became the first European public space not under direct control of church or state.

So Cabeza de Vaca lived as we live, in a time of terrible violence and sweeping innovation during which centuries-old certainties dissolved. At the age of 35 he was appointed second-in-command to Pamfilo de Narvaez for what was intended to be the conquest of Florida. Narvaez had won power by such acts as ordering the slaughter of 2,500 Native Americans who'd come bringing his (earlier) expedition food. That Cabeza de Vaca accepted a commission with him tells us that, at this point, he was quite willing to be your average murderous conquistador. But quickly something changed him. In his *La Relacion* (the first important book written about America), he tells of the Florida expedition's stop in Cuba for provisions, and gives the first description of a West Indies hurricane:

"All the houses and churches went down. We had to walk seven or eight together, locking arms, to keep from being blown away ... We wandered all night in this raging tempest ... Particularly from midnight on, we heard a great roaring and the sound of many voices, of little bells, also flutes, tambourines, and other instruments ... till morning, when the storm ceased." His record for clear-headedness as a soldier argues against fancifulness; rather, this account shows that in extreme situations some strange inner sense opened in the man. Catastrophes that brought out fear and worse in others caused Cabeza de Vaca to experience a deepened, wild spiritual awareness. In the midst of a hurricane, while fighting for his life, he could hear music. This is the signature of the man.

Florida was a disaster. Narvaez made stupid, vicious decisions. Disease and needless warfare with the Florida tribes decimated the Spaniards. Most, Cabeza de Vaca included, became separated from their ships and were lost. "You can imagine what it would be like," he wrote, "in a strange, remote land, destitute of means either to remain or get out."

On the west coast of Florida, the survivors built huge rafts to try to make it around the Gulf Coast to Vera Cruz, though they had no accurate idea of the distance. The rafts quickly were separated. No one knows what happened to the others, but Cabeza de Vaca's raft inched its way around the coast; these were the first Europeans to see the Mississippi, and in *La Relacion* Cabeza de Vaca was the first to write of that river. Finally, storms blew them to what they called the Isle of Doom and what we call Galveston. These first Europeans to set foot in Texas were by now "so emaciated we would easily count every bone."

What happened next went against all their expectations. Tribal people found them. "The Indians, understanding our full plight, sat down and lamented ... in compassion for us." The native people cared for them. Now he records the first known instance of cannibalism in North America. "Five Christians [as he refers to his people] came to the extremity of eating one another. The Indians were so shocked ... that, if they had seen it sometime earlier, they surely would have killed every one of us ... Then half the natives died from a disease of the bowels and blamed us." Not surprisingly, some sought to kill the Spaniards. "The Indian who kept me" interceded, saying that if the Spaniards were sorcerers they would not be dying of the same disease. Reason prevailed. Cabeza de Vaca had come to conquer Indians. Now he owed his life to one. For the remainder of his time in the Americas, he would never kill, or initiate battle with, another Native American.

Time passed. Eighty Spaniards had survived the raft voyage; under a dozen were left. Then things took another extraordinary turn. The tribe "wanted to make us physicians ... we scoffed ... at the idea we knew how to heal." The tribe denied them food until the Spaniards complied. They had come to subdue; now they were commanded to heal. "Our method ... was to bless the sick, breathe upon them, recite a Pater Noster and Ave Maria, and pray earnestly to God our Lord for their recovery." No one was more surprised than he when his method worked. "God willed that our patients should directly spread the news that they had been restored to health." Here Cabeza de Vaca passes the point where history is prepared to accept him (which is why he is the least famous figure of the exploratory period). He ceases to be a conquistador and explorer and journeys beyond category.

More time passed. Finally, only four of his party remained: Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso Castillo, Andres Dorantes, and Dorantes' slave, a Moroccan Moor converted to Christianity named Estevanico, the first black man in North America (a century before the Pilgrims). They lived a strange, difficult life. By now able to speak the native tongues, sometimes they healed, with Cabeza de Vaca's ministrations being especially effective; sometimes they were treated as mere slaves; sometimes Cabeza de Vaca served as a kind of traveling merchant between tribes. By various adventures they made their way west across Texas -- remaining for a time in what is now the Austin area, the first non-natives to live in this country. Now, wherever they went, the four would be housed with the tribal shamans, a fact indicative of their status and function. "Since the Indians all throughout the region talked only of the wonders which God our Lord worked through us, individuals sought us from many parts in hope of healing ... If anyone did not recover, he still contended he would. What they who did recover related caused general rejoicing."

There is corroboration. Years later, when Coronado's expedition went north of the Rio Grande, tribal people told them stories (as a contemporary account relates) of "four great doctors, one of them black, the others white, who gave blessings and healed the sick."

When, after nearly eight years, Cabeza de Vaca and his companions met up with conquistadors pushing north from Mexico, the Native Americans would not believe Cabeza de Vaca was of the same race as these who murdered and enslaved. "We had come from the sunrise, they from the sunset; we healed the sick, they killed the sound; we came naked and barefoot, they clothed, horsed, and lanced; we coveted nothing but gave whatever we were given, while they robbed whomever they found ... To the last I could not convince the Indians that we were of the same people as the Christian slavers." Cabeza de Vaca tried unsuccessfully, in "hot argument," to stop the terrible actions of his countrymen. "When the Indians took their leave of us they said they would do as we commanded and rebuild their towns, if the Christians let them. And I solemnly swear that if they have not done so it is the fault of the Christians." In *La Relacion* he wrote to his king: "They are a substantial people with a capacity for unlimited development. Clearly, to bring all these people to Christianity and subjection to Your Imperial Majesty, they must be won by kindness, the only certain way." It would be centuries before any vocal Euro-American would share this view.

It was only when he was once again among his own people that Cabeza de Vaca was truly lost. "I could not stand to wear any clothes for some time, or to sleep anywhere but on the bare floor." If he retained or ever again used his shamanic powers, he made no record of it. In 1540, he was appointed governor of a South American province, where he prohibited the slaving, raping, and looting of Native Americans. His soldiers had come for booty and they resisted his strictures; they finally deposed him, imprisoned him, and sent him back to Spain in chains, where he remained in prison for eight years (almost as long a time as he'd wandered in Texas). Finally his wife bribed away the better part of her fortune to free him; he died in 1557, at the age of 67. When the great raconteur Lord Buckley retold his story in the early 1960s, he summarized Cabeza de Vaca's truth like this: "There is a great power within. And when you use it, it spreads like a living garden. And when you do not use it, it recedes from you." The inner history of our country is outlined in those sentences. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. Remember him.

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