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HERNANDO DESOTO: SAINT OR SADIST?

By HAMPTON DUNN

Hernando DeSoto was a dichotomy. A schism. Perhaps he was even a split personality, a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of his day. Was he a saint - or a sadist?

Historians are divided in their description of this Spanish conquistador who tramped through the wilds of Florida for a period of ten months in 1539-40.

"Brave" and "gallant" are the two most-oft-used adjectives attributed to DeSoto. But, there is another side of the coin.

Such an image is challenged by Florida historian, the late Karl H. Grismer, who wrote: "It would be nice indeed if DeSoto could be described as a gallant, benevolent, kindly nobleman inspired by a desire to carry the story of the Cross to the brown-skinned men of Florida. But to do so would be in direct contradiction to the facts. He certainly was brave and he may have been gallant according to the 16th century definition of the word. But, he certainly was neither benevolent nor kind. Not if old Spanish writers can be believed. Said one of them: 'DeSoto was fond of the sport of killing Indians.'"

To which Grismer adds, "If killing Indians was sport, then DeSoto had sport galore in his lifetime. His record literally drips with Indian blood."

Hernando DeSoto was a dichotomy. A schism. Perhaps he was even a split

ASSISTED THE PRIESTS

Father Gannon stated: "Although it is recorded that DeSoto was not above the use of deception in dealing with the Indians, nor averse to reducing them to slavery when it served his purposes, to his credit it is also recorded that he sometimes assisted the priests in instructing Indian chiefs and tribesmen in the basic beliefs of Christianity.

"On one such occasion—by a strange coincidence the same day, March 26, 1541, when his one-time commander, Francisco Pizarro, was assassinated in his palace in Peru, and, calling out 'Jesus!' drew a cross with his finger in his own blood on the floor—on that same day, DeSoto fashioned and raised a towering pine-tree Cross at the town of Casqui on the western bank of the Mississippi River, and proclaimed to the
Indians of the place: 'This was He who had made the sky and the earth and man in His own image. Upon the tree of the Cross He suffered to save the human race, and rose from the tomb on His third day ... and having ascended into heaven, was there to receive with open arms all who would be converted to Him.'"

That, again, was DeSoto speaking, according to Father Gannon.

'NOT CRUEL AT HEART'

Now, one more view of Hernando DeSoto ... this from historian Dr. Henry William Elson in his textbook published in 1918: "DeSoto was not at heart a cruel man. He had no desire to wantonly slay the natives; he fully intended, however, to give battle whenever the Indians opposed his march...."

Well, you see there's no clear-cut vision of this adventurer from Spain Who came to Florida not seeking the fountain of youth, or our famous sunshine of today. He came in search of money—as in gold. More about that later.

DeSoto was born in the year 1500 of an impoverished aristocratic family. It is said that Ferdinand, or Hernando, DeSoto was a boy of remarkable beauty and gave early promise of unusual talent. His father was too poor to educate him and too proud to teach him the art of earning a livelihood. His boyhood, then, would have been spent in idleness, had not a powerful nobleman, Don Pedro Avila, adopted him into his family. And Avila saw to it that the boy got a thorough education.

Upon reaching manhood, DeSoto made his way to the New World, and many were his deeds of wild and daring adventure. It was
reported that he was the handsomest and most chivalric man in the army and that he surpassed all his fellows as a horseman and swordsman.

**PILLAGING PERU**

He joined up with Francisco Pizarro in Peru, as second in command, in 1531. One historian wrote that although DeSoto was far more humane than his cruel and heartless chief, "the fact that he was a member of that gang of robbers and shared in its spoils must remain forever a blot upon his name."

The young man wound up with Peruvian gold valued at a half a million dollars - big bucks at that time in history ... and even today that ain't hay!

He returned home to Spain to claim the hand of Isabella, the daughter of his benefactor, Avila. Ah, Isabella, the playmate of his childhood, who had been pronounced the most beautiful woman in all the kingdom!

DeSoto was unused to wealth and soon blew his big nest egg. He lived in a mansion and kept trains of servants. In two years, half of his fortune had melted away.

Figuring there was more gold where that had come from, he turned his attention to returning to the New World. He assigned himself the task to "conquer, pacify, and populate" the peninsula of Florida and the lands extending westward to the Rio Grande. He obtained a devious contract with Emperor Charles V giving him immense powers over Florida "for all the days of your life."

Thus, DeSoto gathered together an army of over 700 men, described as the flower of Spain and Portugal, and outfitted a fleet of nine ships. He sailed, bringing his bride Isabella along, for Cuba. The band spent the winter of 1538-39 having a wonderful time in Havana and staging for their expedition. Finally, in May of '39, the high-spirited army sailed for Florida ... DeSoto kissing Isabella goodbye at the Havana port - never to see her again.

DeSoto landed somewhere on the Gulf coast of Florida ... you can get an argument all the way from Apalachicola to Key West as to where he actually landed. My good friend and historian, the late Walter P. Fuller, declared that DeSoto landed in the Point Pinellas-Safety Harbor area, touching land first at Mullet Key. (The Safety Harbor Spa today claims DeSoto's party "took of the waters" there and were healed of beri beri). A lawyer from Jacksonville, named Warren Wilkinson, argued with Fuller that DeSoto landed at Charlotte Harbor.

In the 1930s, on the eve of the 400th anniversary of DeSoto's landing, Congress decided it would determine once and for all where DeSoto landed. They sent a team from Smithsonian Institution to make that determination. They decided the explorer landed at Shaw's Point on State Road 64 just west of today's Bradenton. A modern historian, Fairbanks, claimed DeSoto landed at Gadsden Point (where MacDill Air Force Base is today). And, of course, Tampans have claimed that DeSoto negotiated with the Indians under the "DeSoto Oak" in front of the Tampa Bay Hotel, now the University of Tampa.

**IT'S "ESPIRITU SANTO"**

A few years ago Anthropologist William M. Goza of the Florida State Museum at Gainesville sided with Wilkinson - that DeSoto came in at Charlotte Harbor and
landed on the banks of the Caloosahatchee River in the Fort Myers region.

All that be as it may, DeSoto made history because he gave Tampa Bay its first name, Espiritu Santo. He gave it that name because the Spanish festival of Espiritu Santo, or Spirit of the Saint, fell on May 25, the day he first sighted land. DeSoto’s report to his superiors back home, it turns out, was the first letter ever written with a Florida "dateline" -Espiritu Santo, Florida, July 9, 1539.

DeSoto learned early on after his landing May 30 that there were rich Indian villages north of his landing place and he set out to loot Florida as other Spaniards had done in raids on Mexico and Peru.

The Spanish commander now made a most fortunate acquisition to his army in the person of Juan Ortiz, a fellow-countryman who had lived with the Indians for ten years. He had come from Cuba with a party searching for Panfilo de Narvaez, and with three companions had been made captive. The other three were tortured to death, but Ortiz, a handsome and athletic youth of 18 years, was saved by an emotional "Pocahontas," the daughter of the chief, who begged her father to spare him. The heroine’s name actually was Princess Ulelah and her father was Chief Ucita. This love story developed 80 years before the Pocahontas-Captain John Smith romance occurred at Jamestown in 1607.

Young Juan, after a decade of living with the Indians, was now familiar with their language and habits, and he became DeSoto’s guide and interpreter. But he never lead the explorer to where the gold might be.

VISITS LAKE TONOTOSASSA

DeSoto began his trek on July 15, crossed the Alafia River, came to Lake Thonotosassa, which he called the River of the Rabbit because a rabbit frightened the horses there. On July 19, the DeSoto group camped at a site near present-day Dade City. Reports of scouts told of a very large and almost impassable marsh northward. This was the "Big Swamp" on the Withlacoochee River, the route DeSoto was pursuing. He encountered hostile Indians. Some were captured and pressed into service as guides.

The party crossed the Withlacoochee near present-day Istachatta. It then moved through the Floral City (my hometown) area, and along the west bank of Lake Tsalal Apopka. Around July 23, they passed through the Inverness area and probably overnighted in this vicinity. Continuing along the lakefront, DeSoto reached the Hernando area which now bears his name. There the hogs he was carrying along for
food on the expedition broke loose one night and raided the lush corn crops of the Indians.

(By the way, when the Florida Legislature created the 22nd county, in 1843, it was named Hernando for the explorer DeSoto, who had passed through that section. The county seat was named DeSoto but later was changed to Brooksville. The county name also was short-lived. It was changed to Benton in 1844 to honor U.S. Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, whose sponsorship of the Armed Occupation Act of 1842 won favor among Floridians eager to evict the Indians. Benton's moderation during the Missouri Compromise, however caused extremists in the Legislature to switch the name back to Hernando on Christmas Eve, 1850. In 1877, Hernando County was split, like ancient Gaul, into three parts, with Pasco and Citrus Counties being carved away from the mother county.)

THOROUGHBRED RACING

It is believed that DeSoto passed from Citrus County to Marion County by crossing the Withlacoochee about where State Road 200 crosses it today. Soon he came to the Ocala area. It was known at the time as Ocale, or just Cale.

Former Miami Herald writer, Nixon Smiley, once wrote that DeSoto saw Ocale in 1539 when he and his "intrepid... followers crashed through the underbrush in full battle regalia." The visitor counted 600 huts here. Another writer estimated a population of 2,000 for the village. His army of nearly 1,000 and some 350 horses found plenty to eat after the Indians, frightened to see white-skinned men riding four-legged snorting animals, fled to the wilderness. The Spaniards dispossessed the prosperous Indians, confiscating their food and anything else of value.

Oh yes, lest we forget, let's score this footnote to history: It was Hernando DeSoto who was the first to bring thoroughbred horses to Florida and to Marion County in 1539. He brought with him about 225 head of the Royal Spanish stock which had raced in Cuba in the previous winter. Although there is no actual record of a formal race program in Florida that first year, it is generally assumed that thoroughbred racing took place within the state in 1539! Probably here in Ocala. And, as we all know, Marion County today has a thriving thoroughbred industry.

A part of DeSoto's army liked Marion County so much, they stayed around here for a month. The town was so large and its wonders so grand, DeSoto himself wrote in his only known extant letter, "That I dare not repeat what is stated about it." He did reveal, however, that he had heard "there are many traders and much barter, and ... an abundance of gold and silver and many pearls."

SORRY, NO GOLD HERE

But, alas, the invaders found no gold in Ocale, or Ocali, or Ocala, even. Burying their heavy iron pots and tools behind for a contemplated return to Ocali in the winter, DeSoto and his men left at last, pushing toward Apalachee.

Following Indian foot trails, they advanced to today's Lake City, then turned westward to what is now Tallahassee. By October they reached "Apalachee and there found an abundance of 'maize, pumpkins, beans and dried plums.'" The men settled down for the winter months. It was in this spot that DeSoto at Christmastime celebrated the first
Christ’s Mass in the New World north of Mexico. DeSoto broke camp in March and continued his unsuccessful search for gold, headed northward from Tallahassee along the trail of today’s U.S. 319, toward Thomasville, Georgia. Thence, through the Southeast, to the Mississippi River, which he crossed with barges.

The river was little used, because, in the words of Mark Twain, "nobody happened to want such a river; nobody needed it, nobody was curious about it; so ... the Mississippi remained out of the market and undisturbed. When DeSoto found it, he was not hunting for a river, and had no present occasion for one; consequently he did not value it or even take any particular notice of it."

Between leaving Florida and arriving at the Mississippi River, DeSoto and his men had come on hard times. At Mobile, they tangled with Chief Tuscaloosa. En route there were other battles and big losses of men, horses and supplies. DeSoto feared his men might desert him and he was deeply dejected. He had spent his fortune and accomplished nothing.

His faithful Isabella had written him, urging and begging that he give up his vain pursuit of fortune and return to her.

But, we’re told, DeSoto’s spirit was too proud; he could not yield. How would he return with his ragged and penniless army? How could he endure poverty and humiliation after the taste of wealth and popularity he had enjoyed? No, he must succeed or die: gold was more precious than life, and disgrace was worse than death....

DeSoto was no longer the frank, energetic, and trusted commander; he was moody, sullen, distant and careworn. He had lived about 40 years, but the furrows of age were deepening in his face. It is believed that from this time forth his mind was unbalanced....

Crossing the Mississippi, DeSoto roamed around Arkansas for a while and finally made his way back to the river he had discovered. He was stricken with malaria fever and died May 21, 1542, near the great river. His body was committed to those waters with the impressive services of the Church. DeSoto was only 42 when he died of a broken heart. Years before, an astrologer had foretold his death at that age.

**ISABELLA HEARTBROKEN**

When Dona Isabella, back in Cuba, heard of his death, she was unable to control her grief. One historian noted: "Her grief was the grief of Niobe and in a few years she had mourned herself to death."

One biographer noted that for wild and reckless adventure the career of Hernando DeSoto would be difficult to parallel. But his great expedition in the Southeastern United States, while fascinating, was singularly barren of good results. Aside from the accidental discovery of the great river there is nothing to mark it as useful - no study of the language and habits of the natives, no record of the flora and fauna, nor scientific observations of the topography of the country. Little indeed was added to the knowledge of the New World by this costly expedition of DeSoto.

In his awkward way, he had helped the priests in their attempts to Christianize the Indians... and he did start the custom of celebrating Christmas in Florida.

The chronicler of the DeSoto trek, in announcing the commander’s death,
described him as "the magnanimous, the intrepid, the virtuous Captain…."