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Stand-In' Victim of Vengeance

Juan Ortiz

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There’s an historic marker on the west side of Park Street N in St. Petersburg that tells the story of the 16th-century explorer, Pamfilo DeNarvaez. What it doesn’t tell is his heavy-handed way with the Indians and how one of his men was a “stand-in” for their vengeance.

Juan Ortiz, a 19-year-old cabin boy on one of the explorer’s caravels, returned to Tampa Bay to find the lost expedition. Many say the tale that unfolded was the model for the famous Capt. John Smith-Pocahontas legend and that it all happened in Florida a century earlier.

When Juan and his two sailor companions landed on shore, the Timucuans grabbed them and hustled them off to Chief Hirrihigua. What a sight this royal Indian was, with the face of a disfigured skull! He had waited to get his hands on some Spaniards to settle an old debt. DeNarvaez, looking for gold, had ransacked his village and, when he protested, the Spaniard turned his dogs on the chief’s mother and they tore her to bits. Then he turned on Hirrihigua and slashed his lips and cut off his nose. Ready for vengeance, the Indians stripped the two sailors and made them run from side to side in the village plaza, while they shot at them with bows and arrows until their quarry lay like dead birds in the dust. Part of Ortiz’s torture was to watch the proceedings but he was to be saved for a lingering torture on the next Feast Day.

In the morning, the Timucuans built a barbacao of green wood, normally used for smoking wild game, and tied Ortiz to the rack. Over a slow, smoky fire he lay while his skin dried, blackened and blistered.

His agonized shrieks attracted the chief’s wife and daughter. They were overcome with pity and begged Ortiz be released. Hirrihigua relented and the princess took the prisoner to her hut where she dressed his
wounds and healed his burns with aloes. Many times the young man wished he were dead because he never knew what torture he would face. Some days they made him run all day in the plaza while archers stood guard to shoot him if he rested.

He was made to stand guard over the dead, in the cemetery out from the village, so that no wild animals could carry off the fresh corpse that was drying there. He dozed off and realized that an animal had come and dragged off a body. Desperately he went in pursuit, shot his bow toward the rustling in the underbrush and was disconsolate when the animal got away. He knew that in the morning he would face the fate of a sentry that failed. The Indians would strike him over the head with clubs until he died. However, in the morning, the search party found the animal had been killed by a single dart. Juan Ortiz became an immediate hero.

This only added fuel to Hirrihigua’s hatred and he vowed to kill his captive at the next Feast Day. The princess came to the Spaniard and outlined a plan for him to escape to the neighboring village of her fiancée Macoso.

Ortiz made it successfully and found sympathy in the new village where he was content to live as an Indian, learning all their customs and language. Macoso never married the princess, however, because her father was so angry that his plan had been thwarted.

Eleven years later, May 25, 1539, Hernando De Soto sighted Tampa Bay, and the Indians realized they would again meet the Spaniards. Macoso asked Ortiz to go to his people and ask for a peaceful meeting. De Soto had heard that there might be Spaniards held captive by the Indians and hoped to find one as an interpreter for his expedition.

According to his diary, he sent Baltazar Gallegos and 40 men ashore, and, after a minor skirmish and a case of mistaken identity, they met Ortiz, who was able to identify himself as a Spaniard. They took him back with them to De Soto and he was given clothing, armor and a horse and became an invaluable member of the expedition.

De Soto's meeting with Macoso was allegedly peaceful as they shook hands under a large oak. Some claim the tree still stands on the grounds of the University of Tampa.

Set on finding gold, De Soto and his men went inland. In the winter of 1541-42, west of the Mississippi, Ortiz died several months ahead of De Soto's own death, so he never returned to his native land.