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ALONSO DE LEON:  
PATHFINDER IN EAST TEXAS, 1686-1690

by Donald E. Chipman

The 1680s were a time of crisis for the northern frontier of New Mexico (Colonial Mexico). In New Mexico the decade began with a massive, coordinated revolt involving most of the Pueblo Indians. The Great Revolt of 1680 forced the Spanish to abandon a province held continuously since 1598, and it claimed more than 400 lives. Survivors, well over 2,000 of them, retreated down the Río Grande to El Paso del Río del Norte, transforming it overnight from a way station and missionary outpost along the road to New Mexico proper into a focus of empire. From El Paso the first European settlement within the present boundaries of Texas, Corpus Christi de la Isleta, was established in 1682. Also from El Paso, short-lived missionary endeavors were undertaken at La Junta de los Ríos, the junction of the Río Conchos and Río Grande at modern Presidio, Texas. And early in 1684 a Spanish captain, Juan Domínguez de Mendoza, founded a camp, perhaps to the south of the upper reaches of the Colorado River, where a few Indians were baptized and large numbers of buffalo were slaughtered. In the following year, Domínguez de Mendoza and Father Nicolás López, custodian of the El Paso missions, traveled to Mexico City and strongly urged the occupation of lands they had visited with soldiers and missionaries. Their pleading fell on deaf ears, for that same year the viceroy of New Spain learned of French designs, spearheaded by René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle, to found a colony on the northern Gulf Coast.

The viceroy of New Spain ordered that all energies be focused on finding the foreign interlopers and extirpating their colony. Response by sea could be carried out most expeditiously, and those efforts were launched early in 1686. To ensure a more thorough search, officials in New Spain also decided to organize a complementary land expedition. Unable to find in their midst a person familiar with lands along the northeastern coast, the search broadened to Nuevo León where a frontiersman was rumored to be experienced in the region of the Río Grande and Río de las Palmas. That person, Alonso DeLeón, the younger, was destined to play a significant role as pathfinder in early Texas history.

De León was born in Cadereyta, Nuevo León, in 1639 or 1640. He was the third son of Alonso De León, the elder, and Josefa González, who had married on September 23, 1635. Doña Josefa later remarked that she entered wedlock at the age of fifteen to seventeen, placing her birth date around 1620. Indirect evidence suggests that the senior De León was born in the first decade of the 1600s, while his Castilian parents, Lorenzo Pérez and Adriana De León, resided in Mexico City. Growing up in the capital with its well-established schools provided rare educational opportunities for Don Alonso. In 1635, the

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year of his marriage, Alonso De León entered the frontier province of Nuevo León. Initially, he was a *ganadero*, a stockman who raised sheep, but he quickly moved into a position of greater influence by accepting an office in the cabildo of Cadereyta. His first military experience came as a captain in the company of Bernardo García de Sepúlveda, and by 1655 he could claim participation in thirty-five campaigns of pacification and discovery. He also had established himself as a man of letters, having written a brief chronicle of the discovery, settlement, and control of Nuevo León. In directing his finished work to an inquisitor of the Holy Office in Mexico City, as well as in the first few chapters of the discourse wherein he displayed both familiarity with Scriptures and a fervent conviction that all men must come to know God as the Universal Creator, Don Alonso displayed an unusual devoutness that had great influence on his son of the same name.<sup>1</sup>

In 1653, under orders of the governor, De León led thirty men eastward toward the Gulf of Mexico. He encountered friendly Indians of differing groups and arrived at the coast in the environs of twenty-four degrees north latitude. That position placed De León at the mouth of the Soto la Marina (the Río de las Palmas of colonial times). The good will of the natives was in striking contrast to their forbearers who consistently opposed Spanish expeditionary forces along the coast and preyed upon shipwreck victims in the sixteenth century. The bad reputation of these coastal groups had prompted Cabeza de Vaca and his companions to veer inland during their mid-1530s trek toward New Spain.<sup>2</sup>

The expedition in 1653 was intended “to discover lands and learn of routes” that might redound to the future benefit of the king of Spain. As a youth of only twelve or thirteen, the younger De León was then in Spain and perhaps missed an opportunity to tag along with his father. Later, he must have heard tales of largely unexplored regions toward the rising sun and the Sea of the North, as the Spanish called the Gulf of Mexico.

At age ten the younger Alonso had been sent to Spain, where he enrolled in school and prepared for a career in the royal navy. The sole information about the young cadet’s experience comes from his father, who journeyed to Spain in 1655 as *procurador* (solicitor) for the governor of Nuevo León. At that time, the senior De León visited his son, then sixteen, at Cádiz, where the teenager assisted in the defense of the port city against an attack by eighty English vessels. By 1660 Don Alonso, the younger, was back in Nuevo León. Over the next two decades, he led a series of entradas that traversed the northeast coast of New Spain as well as the banks of the Río de San Juan.<sup>3</sup>

In 1682 Alonso DeLeón petitioned the viceroy of New Spain for a franchise to work salt deposits along the San Juan River, open trade with neighboring settlements, and search for mines. His efforts won a fifteen-year concession that served to familiarize him with additional lands that adjoined the future Lone Star State.<sup>4</sup> As an entrepreneur, De León must have gained experience in managing sizable numbers of Indian laborers, and he honed his already considerable leadership qualities.

By the 1680s Alonso De León had become a seasoned outdoorsman and successful businessman. Like his father, he was also an extremely devout Roman Catholic and a capable military commander. Thanks to the concern of his father, who probably worried about the absence of schools in a rough frontier province, the younger De León's educational experiences in Spain had made him literate – a gift that he employed to good advantage in writing letters and drafting reports. By adulthood De León had developed confidence in his own judgment, a down-to-earth assessment of Indians, and a penchant for telling the unvarnished truth. The latter is a luxury few men in positions of power and authority can afford, and in the long run would cost him dearly.

Selected by the viceroy to mount an overland search for the French colony, De León's initial reconnaissance was organized in the summer of 1686 from two companies of men formed at Monterrey and Cadereyta. The troop consisted of fifty soldiers, an Indian guide, and a chaplain. It followed the Río de San Juan north and east toward its confluence with the Río Grande. Striking the larger river, Don Alonso followed its right bank to the coast and then turned southward toward the Río de las Palmas. Along the shoreline, De León found flotsam from a wrecked vessel and a flask that he judged to be non-Spanish, but he found no conclusive evidence that Frenchmen had visited the region. Don Alonso then retraced his march to Cadereyta, having spent almost the entire month of July in the field.<sup>5</sup>

De León's second overland expedition set out in February 1687. This effort forded the Río Grande, perhaps at El Cántaro, near the present town of Roma, and followed the left bank to the coast, arriving there on March 20. Ironically, the object of his search, René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle, had been murdered in East Texas on the previous day. Don Alonso marched up the Texas coast to the environs of Baffin Bay, but again found no evidence of Frenchmen. His second expedition was as fruitless as the first.<sup>6</sup>

Though unaware of La Salle's death and the sorry condition of the surviving colonists on Garcitas Creek, a tributary of Matagorda Bay, Spanish officials understandably were optimistic. Two searches by sea and land had failed to find a single Frenchman. Their optimism was further buoyed by a report from Spain, based on pirated French documents acquired by the Spanish ambassador in London. The communique suggested that the French colony had been racked by disease and dysentery, menaced by Indians, and endangered by lost provisions from its inception. Unfortunately, from the Spanish perspective, this favorable view of matters soon was shattered. Surviving Frenchmen were among the Indian nations of Texas.<sup>7</sup>

These ominous tidings reached Coahuila via two Indians, one of whom claimed to have been "in the very houses of the French." The informant journeyed to mission Caldera, situated to the east of Monclova, to give this report to the resident priest, Father Damián Massanet. At that same time, July 1687, Alonso De León had just been appointed governor of Coahuila and captain of the presidio at Monclova.<sup>8</sup>

Before assuming command of the garrison, De León traveled to mission Caldera. There Father Massanet “made known to him what had passed between the Indians and me.” Don Alonso asked for “some unmistakable signs” that the report was true, and the priest summoned the second Indian, named Juan, who professed knowledge of a white man dwelling among Indians at a *rancheria* (temporary settlement) located some sixty leagues distant. The Indian Juan agreed to travel there in an attempt to bring this person to Caldera. He found the white man, but could not persuade him to call at the mission. Massanet then notified Captain De León of what had transpired.<sup>9</sup>

At the head of a detachment of twelve soldiers, the new governor crossed the Río Grande on May 26, 1688, and after some difficulty found a large settlement of Indians presided over by a naked, aged, and mentally confused Frenchman, Jean Géry. The captive Frenchman, almost certainly a survivor of the La Salle expedition, was apprehended on May 30 and returned to Coahuila on June 6. From there he was sent to Mexico City, where his very presence, not necessarily his mendacious testimony, undermined the viceroy’s optimism and spurred further efforts by land and sea to find the French colony.<sup>10</sup>

On July 23, 1688, the viceroy commissioned Alonso De León as commander of a fourth *entrada*, and sent Jean Géry northward to serve as De León’s guide. Assembling troops from distant presidios, combined with attention to Indian problems, occasioned delays until March 1689. In all, the force totaled 114 men, including Chaplain Damián Massanet, soldiers, mule drivers, servants, and the French prisoner. De León, only recently promoted to the rank of general, was provisioned with eighty-five loads of supplies and presents for Indians.<sup>11</sup>

On April 2 Don Alonso again forded the Río Grande and began a march eastward toward Matagorda Bay. Although De León logged his daily progress, reconstructing his path across Texas largely is guesswork, for his latitude sightings were thrown off by a defective astrolabe.<sup>12</sup>

Jean Géry apparently proved useless as a guide. By De León’s own admission, he relied more and more on a faithful Indian, one of the natives who had brought news of the French settlement to mission Caldera. This person assured the governor “that he knew the country, and that he would bring us where there were some men like ourselves, in a settlement of six or seven houses; [and] that they had wives and children.”<sup>13</sup>

De León’s log entry on Palm Sunday, April 3, 1689, reflected an educated and cautious man. He noted that his tables for computing the vernal equinox were made “before the so-called Gregorian correction” of 1582. By his computation, April 3 corresponded to March 24 in the pre-Gregorian method of determining Easter. And he added the caveat: “It has been necessary to state these facts in explanation, in case it should appear that a mistake has been made because of our lack of modern tables.” How many field commanders would have felt it necessary to document the rationale for determining religious observances in the wilds of seventeenth-century Texas?<sup>14</sup>

En route to Matagorda Bay, De León commented on a dense thicket: “we had to cut a passage into it for almost a league with our cutlasses and axes.” He remarked on great stands of prickly pears and mesquite that impeded progress, and applied names to rivers that remain to this day: the Nueces, the Frio (Sarco), and the Medina. On April 14 De León’s party encountered the first buffaloes they had seen for 100 leagues and killed six of them to supplement their larder.<sup>15</sup>

On April 20, Don Alonso’s sun shot, made east of the river named Our Lady of Guadalupe, placed him, if accurate, a few miles southeast of present Victoria, Texas. Two days later the expedition marched down Garcitas Creek. Shortly before noon, it came upon the ruins of the French settlement. Four years of searching finally had borne results.<sup>16</sup>

Both De León and Massanet recorded a scene of utter devastation. In Father Massanet’s words, “we found six houses, not very large, built with poles plastered with mud, and roofed with buffalo hides, another large house where pigs were fattened, and a wooden fort made from the hulk of a wrecked vessel.” De León added that all of the houses were sacked; chests, bottle cases, and furniture smashed into pieces; more than 200 books torn apart “with their rotten leaves scattered through the patios – all in French.” Among the devastation were three bodies, one with a dress still clinging to the bones. After a funeral mass chanted by Father Massanet, all were interred in a common grave.<sup>17</sup>

French ordnance was much in evidence. De León recorded finding eight pieces of artillery, all of medium bore – four or five pounders – some with broken carriages. There were also iron bars, ship’s nails, and “casks with their heads knocked in and contents spilled out.” In Don Alonso’s view, Fort St. Louis, located by his reckoning 136 leagues above Monclova, contained almost nothing of value.<sup>18</sup>

One day after the discovery of Fort St. Louis, De León, guided by Jean Géry, set out to reconnoiter Matagorda Bay. On April 24 his party viewed the entrance to the bay and saw the remains of one of La Salle’s wrecked vessels. In a nearby abandoned Indian village the explorers found a book in French and other items, which suggested that the former residents had participated in the final attack on La Salle’s colony. Satisfied that there was nothing further to report, De León began the march back to the main camp on Garcitas Creek.<sup>19</sup>

On the outward trek to Matagorda Bay, De León routinely questioned Indians about their knowledge of Frenchmen. He learned on April 16 that four white men occupied a nearby *rancheria*, but investigation revealed nothing but an abandoned camp. Indians near the site, however, knew of the Frenchmen and reported that they had gone on horseback to visit Tejas Indians. De León ordered a letter composed in French and dispatched it to the men by Indian carriers.<sup>20</sup>

The actual letter is not extant, but De León summarized its contents in a report. He told the Frenchmen that he had been informed of the death of their

fellow Christians at the hands of coastal Indians, and he invited them to return to civilization. A postscript was added in Latin in case any of the four might be a religious person. It, too, exhorted the survivors to surrender themselves. In hopes of contacting the men, De León promised to wait in the area for several days.<sup>21</sup>

Upon reaching the camp at Garcitas Creek, he found waiting a reply to the letter he had dispatched to the land of the Tejas. Two Frenchmen, Jean L'Archevêque and Jacques Grollet, agreed to accept his invitation and surrender themselves. Traveling northward for approximately sixty-five miles, a detachment of soldiers followed an Indian guide and encountered the two white men on the Colorado River in the Smithville-La Grange area. Also present were eight Tejas Indians and a chieftain. From interrogation of the Indians, De León and Massanet learned secondhand information about the rich lands of the Hasinai Confederacy. For Massanet this intelligence fired his missionary zeal, and through an interpreter he urged the chieftain and his people to accept Christianity. Father Damián also promised to bring priests like himself to their land, and that "I would be there in the following year, at the time of sowing corn." Again in Massanet's words, the chieftain "seemed well pleased, and I was still more so, seeing the harvest to be reaped among the many souls in those lands who know not God."<sup>22</sup> The report of De León was not so euphoric.

Under questioning, L'Archevêque and Grollet gave an account of the final throes of La Salle's colony at Fort St. Louis. Initially, a smallpox epidemic may have claimed the lives of more than 100 people. The survivors, finding themselves without a strong leader and divided by internal squabbles, paid little heed to the possibility of Indian treachery. Many of them, in fact, believed that they were on good terms with natives of the region. However, at Christmas time in 1688 five Indians had approached the settlement and entered the most remote house on the pretext of imparting some important news. More Indians then appeared under the same pretext and began to embrace other members of the colony. These friendly gestures diverted attention from another party of natives who surreptitiously approached along the bed of a creek. Suddenly, an attack by warriors armed with sharp weapons and clubs killed all of the adults, including three religious persons, and the sacking of the houses followed.<sup>23</sup>

An eyewitness account, given a few years later by a youthful survivor, added graphic details to the massacre. Jean-Baptiste Talon saw his mother slain before his eyes. He reported that Indian women, moved by consideration for the children, had carried several youngsters to their village. Unfortunately, they could not save a three-month old infant – the first European child born in Texas. Its mother died first, and then the baby's life ended at the hands of a Karankawa warrior who "dashed [its head] against a tree while holding it by a foot."<sup>24</sup>

A few men, including L'Archevêque and Grollet, had been off among the Tejas and were spared the general carnage. Later, four of them, having heard

news of the attack, returned to Fort St. Louis and buried fourteen of their companions. They also exploded approximately 100 barrels of powder to prevent its falling into the hands of Indians or foreigners. L'Archevêque and Grollet concluded their testimony by informing De León that the settlement had been supplied with firearms, swords, chalices, and a large collection of books with rare bindings.<sup>25</sup>

De León incorporated comments made by the Tejas chieftain into his report, and those remarks likewise served to heighten interest in East Texas. The Indian leader, who was admittedly a long distance from his own country, related that in the past "*una mujer*" had visited his ancestors and imparted religious instruction to them. In response to her teachings, the Tejas had effected religious accessories, such as a chapel – its interior illuminated by a perpetual flame fed by deer fat – an altar, images of saints, and a cross. These appearances of Christianity would be interpreted in Mexico City as further evidence of miraculous visitations among Texas Indians by María Jesús de Agreda, the Spanish nun known as the legendary "Lady in Blue."<sup>26</sup>

Without firsthand observation, De León recorded that the Indians lived in nine settlements of wooden houses, and that they had a governmental organization similar to culturally advanced Indians of New Spain. The Tejas chieftain also reported that his people sowed abundant crops of corn, beans, pumpkins, watermelons, and cantaloupe. Finally, Don Alonso noted that the Tejas leader expressed interest in receiving religious instruction for his people; and he informed the viceroy that his companion, Father Massanet, as well as his brethren of the College of Santa Cruz in Querétaro, would volunteer their services gladly if missions were authorized among the Tejas.<sup>27</sup>

De León's diary and a letter to the viceroy, along with L'Archevêque and Grollet, were dispatched to Mexico City in the custody of Francisco Martínez, who had served as interpreter for the Frenchmen. Martínez arrived in the capital late in June or early in July where interrogation of the two captives began immediately. News of La Salle's death and the failure of his colony created a renewed air of optimism and quickened religious fervor. Indeed, the viceroy and his advisers viewed the disaster at Fort St. Louis as additional proof of God's "divine aid and favor."<sup>28</sup>

The viceroy submitted Father Massanet's suggestions for missionizing the Tejas to an advisory council, and that body likewise saw the failed La Salle episode as evidence of divine intervention. The junta recommended that Father Damián's proposal be accepted, and it ordered De León to file a report outlining suggestions about how to convert the Tejas.

In compliance with his orders, Governor De León drafted a report on August 12, 1689, that reflected his years of experience among frontier natives. Had his suggestions been accepted, the subsequent problems in East Texas might have been avoided. Don Alonso urged the construction of a series of presidios to bridge the gap between the Coahuila settlements and the proposed new mission field. Military outposts should be positioned on the Río Grande,



the Frio, and the Guadalupe, he argued, and a fourth garrison should be located at the mission site itself.<sup>29</sup> This sensible suggestion was ignored, primarily because officials in Mexico City operated on a limited budget and because they believed that a substantial military presence among the Tejas would impede spreading the Gospel.

Still, the matter of French intrusion into Spanish realms could not be ignored, especially in light of the War of the League of Augsburg (1689-1697) – known in the English North American colonies as King William's War – which again pitted France against Spain. Although resisting the notion of converting natives in an atmosphere of military might, officials in New Spain authorized De León to choose a sufficient number of soldiers to prevent further incursions of Frenchmen into Spanish possessions. Their objectives, in the words of one crown official, were "to destroy and flatten all vestiges that remained of the French nation and to extend the reach and favorable influence [of Spain] over all Indians from Coahuila to Texas." But the size of De León's military contingent, 100 men, would become a sore point with Father Massanet, who insisted that the governor was intent on arrogating personal and military ambitions over peaceful missionary goals. This issue sparked strained relations between the two, and it did not augur well for Alonso De León. He would suffer for the unpardonable sin of being right about the absolute necessity of military support for missionary endeavors. Nonetheless, in the capital "the projected enterprise was viewed almost wholly as religious rather than military in nature."<sup>30</sup>

To implement the conversion of the Tejas, royal officials in New Spain assigned responsibility to the Franciscan college at Querétaro and gave Massanet control over most aspects of it. In all, the college selected six priests for the Texas mission field. That number included Father Francisco Hidalgo, who would become the greatest champion of Franciscan missions in East Texas.

Early in 1690, the six friars made final preparations for their trip north toward Texas. Arriving in Coahuila, they experienced a delay because soldiers assigned to De León's command from other provinces had not yet arrived. On March 26 the expedition departed Monclova without waiting longer for the still absent troops.<sup>31</sup>

En route the main expedition was overtaken on March 30 by an assigned company of men from Nuevo León, and it crossed the Río Grande on April 6. The combined force forded the Río Nueces on April 9 and the Río Frio on the following day. On April 13 De León encountered Indians who knew of a Frenchman who had visited other nearby natives. Further investigation came upon a large encampment, where the Spanish commander distributed gifts of tobacco and biscuits in exchange for information. Don Alonso learned that two Frenchmen had been on the far bank of the Guadalupe River, and as proof of their presence, one Indian carried a French musket.<sup>32</sup>

On April 18 a detachment from the company spent part of the day looking for 126 horses that had stampeded during the previous night. The search proved fruitless, for the guide soon lost his way. De León, with a full

complement of men again intact, crossed the Medina River on the following day and proceeded toward the Guadalupe. On April 25, at the head of twenty troops, he again set out to reconnoiter the Matagorda Bay area and inspect the remains of Fort St. Louis. Arriving at the colony the following day, and "having ascertained from its form that it was as before," De León noted that "we burned the wooden fort."<sup>33</sup>

On that same day, April 26, De León made another trek toward the bay of Espíritu Santo, as the Spanish then called Matagorda Bay. From a distance he made an observation that would cast doubts on his judgement. Near the mouth of the San Marcos River, in Don Alonso's words, "we recognized in the bay what were apparently two buoys ... indicating the same channel." Lacking a canoe to investigate further and unable to find Indians "from whom to obtain information," De León could only report his suspicions to the viceroy. His failure to determine the nature of the objects, coupled with mounting friction between himself and Father Massanet, damaged his reputation.<sup>34</sup>

On the final day of April 1690, additional troops from presidios in Nueva Vizcaya, operating under express orders of the viceroy of New Spain, overtook De León and swelled the ranks of his soldiery. And at that juncture the commander bent his efforts toward finding "some Indians who could guide us and inform us whether there were any Frenchmen in these regions."<sup>35</sup>

Using gifts such as biscuits, handkerchiefs, tobacco, razors, and knives as inducements, De León succeeded in luring an Indian into his presence. The man informed the commander that he was a Tejas and that he would be willing to summon the governor of his people, "among whom were some Frenchmen." De León gave the Indian a horse and promised to await the result of his mission. Unfortunately, the Indian soon "returned to inform me that his horse had run away from him."<sup>36</sup>

On the next day, May 6, De León somewhat cynically noted that this same Indian, "greedy for the gift, told me that if I would give him another horse he would go to summon the governor of the Tejas and that he would leave his wife and a brother-in-law of his to guide us. So I sent him on this day." During the man's absence, Don Alonso received the first concrete news that there were indeed French youths among the Indian nations.<sup>37</sup>

Choosing eight soldiers and an Indian interpreter, Don Alonso marched nine leagues and then passed "through a forest of oaks and grape-vines [for] another five leagues." He discovered Peirre Talon, then age fourteen, near the edge of a wood. Two days later, on the morning of April 12, he rescued another French youth of twenty years named Pierre Meunier.<sup>38</sup>

Over the next ten days, De León followed a path described as northeast or northeast-by-north. As he entered the western edge of Tejas settlements, Don Alonso remarked on planted fields of corn and beans and commented that the Indians "had very clean houses and high beds in which to sleep." On May 22 he passed through groves of live oak and pines, passed "hills where there are veins of black and red stone," and finally arrived at "a valley thickly settled

with houses of Tejas Indians." Adjoining the houses were bounteous fields of corn, beans, pumpkins, and watermelons.<sup>39</sup>

About half-a-mile distant from the first valley, De León and company came upon a second valley, also thickly populated by Tejas Indians. There he met the Indian governor, who informed the commander that his house was nearby. And to that settlement, in De León's words, "we gave the name San Francisco de los Tejas." That afternoon, Don Alonso called at the governor's house where he was received by the man's mother, his wife, a daughter, and many other people. The host then brought forth "a bench on which to seat me and ... [gave] me a luncheon of corn tamales and atole, all very clean."<sup>40</sup>

Over the next several days De León and Father Massanet searched for a site on which to found the first Spanish mission in East Texas. During that time Don Alonso conferred a staff with a cross and the title of governor on the high Tejas official, whom the Spaniards would call "Bernardino." De León especially enjoined the Indian governor and his people to have respect for the priests, and commanded him to "make all his families attend Christian teaching, in order that they might be instructed in the affairs of our holy Catholic faith so that later they might be baptized and become Christians."<sup>41</sup>

Mission San Francisco de los Tejas and a residence for the padres took shape over a five-day period from May 27 to May 31. Upon completion of the work, De León gave possession of the mission to Father Massanet. Mass, with the Indian governor and his people in attendance, was celebrated there for the first time on June 1.<sup>42</sup>

While among the Tejas, De León learned that four Frenchmen had visited their villages recently. The Indian governor claimed that he had refused to receive them, for he professed friendship to the Spaniards, then en route to East Texas. The Frenchmen were undoubtedly members of Henri de Tonti's expedition, which had descended from Fort Saint-Louis on the Illinois River in 1689 to look for survivors of La Salle's colony. One of the men, described by the Indians as having only one hand, was almost certainly Tonti himself. Having been rebuffed by the Tejas, the Frenchmen had withdrawn eastward toward the Mississippi River. Don Alonso made no attempt to pursue the retreating Frenchmen, believing that the mission as an intelligence gathering outpost could monitor their activities.<sup>43</sup>

On the day the mission was completed, De León began preparations for the return march to Coahuila. He proposed that fifty soldiers be left to guard the mission, but this suggestion was opposed unequivocally by Massanet, who would accept only three soldiers to remain with an equal number of priests. Before leaving the mission, Massanet secured a promise from the Indian governor that he would not mistreat the resident friars. Unfortunately, subsequent events revealed the hollowness of that pledge. In reality, as Franciscan historian Lino Gómez Canedo has observed, "the experienced and reasonable Alonso De León knew Indians much better than the visionary and impetuous Massanet."<sup>44</sup>

As De León's command reached the Guadalupe River, Don Alonso learned of additional French children living as captives among the Indians. He detached a small force from his troops and once again descended toward the coast. The thought of Christian children living among the heathen weighed heavily on the commander, and he was determined to rescue them at all cost.

For three days De León sought information about the exact location of the children, visiting one *rancheria* after another and distributing presents along the way. On June 21 he came upon Indians who held Marie Madelaine and Robert Talon – their faces and bodies covered with tattoos and paint in the manner of most Texas tribes. Terms of ransom for the girl, sixteen, and the boy, not yet six, were discussed, agreed upon, and paid. It seems, however, that De León had been overly eager in his bargaining, for it quickly occurred to the Indians that they had undervalued their human cargo. To De León's disgust, they then came to him "with a thousand impertinencies, begging of us all the horses, and even the clothing which we wore upon our backs." While wrangling continued, a third child of undetermined age, Lucien Talon, arrived in the possession of other Indians, and again De León was showered with impertinence by natives, brandishing bows and arrows and "begging exorbitant things." Demands soon turned to threats when the Indians insisted that they "would have to shoot and kill us all." In De León's words: "Their saying this and beginning to shoot were simultaneous, whereupon we attacked them, and, having killed four [Indians] and wounded others, they retreated." Don Alonso's actions, well justified in his own mind, drew harsh criticism from Father Massanet, who insisted that lack of discipline among the soldiers had provoked a clash that unnecessarily cost the lives of four people. It was yet another example of discord between the two men.<sup>45</sup>

After rejoining the main body of his troops at the Guadalupe River, De León marched without incident to the Río Grande. Arriving there on July 4, he found the river swollen by flood waters. For eight days his command waited for the current to subside, and during that time Don Alonso drafted his account of the expeditions. He once again painted a highly complimentary portrait of East Texas and its Indian inhabitants. Aside from the Tejas, he noted that to the east and northeast of those settlements were villages of the Kadohadachos, who also raised abundant crops and managed their food supply to last throughout the year. But the most ominous part of his report cautioned that Frenchmen were likely to mount challenges to the Spanish outpost in East Texas. He also noted that intelligence from coastal Indians suggested that a ship, presumably French, had stopped to pick up firewood and fresh water. To avert disaster, De León again urged the founding of permanent Spanish outposts – specifically, on the Guadalupe River and at Matagorda Bay. Don Alonso also requested that additional friars be sent to spread the faith among the infidel natives, and he recounted his recovery of five young survivors from La Salle's colony. Captain Gregorio de Salinas Varona, second in command on the expedition, accompanied by Pierre Meunier, carried the governor's reports to Mexico City. On July 12, 1690, Alonso De León left Texas for the last time and returned to Monclova.<sup>46</sup>

In September 1690 Father Damián Massanet filed a separate report with the viceroy. The padre requested fourteen priests and seven lay brothers for the Texas mission fields, and he supported De León's recommendation for settlements on the Guadalupe and at Matagorda. As for the Tejas, Massanet requested neither soldiers nor a presidio. Instead, he urged the recruitment of civilian craftsmen to build living quarters and chapels. Finally, Massanet suggested that Hispanicized Indian children in New Spain be sent to Texas to grow up there and mingle with the Tejas under the supervision and instruction of priests – all low-budget items that received a favorable reading by officials in Mexico City.<sup>47</sup>

Massanet's proposal was endorsed by the crown agent on October 10 and confirmed by the *Junta de Hacienda* (treasury) on November 16. Officials in the capital, however, deemed a military settlement on the Guadalupe to be premature, and in any event an expense that had to be approved in Spain by the king and the Royal Council of the Indies. Unless requested by the padres, no additional soldiers would be sent to Texas. Viceregal authorities did approve Massanet's request for eight missions in Texas – three among the Tejas, including San Francisco de los Tejas, four among the Kadohadachos, and one for tribes along the Guadalupe River. The fourteen priests and seven lay brothers proposed by Father Damián were likewise approved.<sup>48</sup>

De León did not fare so well. The suspected buoys near the mouth of San Marcos were of particular concern to the viceroy. He closely questioned Salinas Varona and Pierre Meunier about the suspicious objects. Salinas defended De León against charges that he had been remiss in not investigating the precise nature of the objects, for the commander did not have a boat or canoe. Nevertheless, the chief executive took immediate steps to outfit a sea expedition to Matagorda Bay. The expense of that undertaking, which disclosed that the suspected buoys were only upended logs embedded in silt, created still another black mark on the record of Alonso De León.<sup>49</sup>

As plans were laid in Mexico City for a new entrada into Texas, the viceroy and an advisory junta quickly removed De León from consideration as commander. It was suggested diplomatically that his continued presence in Coahuila was essential to the security of the province. In reality, Don Alonso had fallen into disfavor. He was blamed for not removing all traces of French occupation at Matagorda Bay, he was the target of Father Massanet's frequent complaints, and his frank and honest nature often offended governmental officials in the distant capital. A new governor for the province of Texas, Domingo Terán de los Ríos, received appointment on January 23, 1691. Within two months, Alonso De León died in Coahuila.<sup>50</sup>

In all, between 1686 and 1690, Alonso De León carried out five land expeditions, four of which entered Texas. His contributions in reconnoitering the land, naming rivers, gathering intelligence on Indian groups to the north of the Río Grande, and founding the first Spanish mission in Texas are often not fully appreciated in Texas history. His compassion for the French youths, who had witnessed the slaughter of their mother and other adults at Fort St. Louis

and who were otherwise condemned to live out their life among pagan Indians, touched his soul. De León also injected unwanted realism into the euphoria that surrounded the first mission in East Texas. Long before others would acknowledge it, he recognized that unsecured missions on a distant frontier in Texas invited failure and potential disaster. He stands unchallenged as the most able and dedicated soldier-administrator of early Spanish Texas and Coahuila.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Historia de Nuevo León con noticias sobre Coahuila, Texas y Nuevo Mexico, escrita en el siglo XVII por el Cap. Alonso de Leon, Juan Bautista Chapu y el Gral. Fernando Sanchez de Zamora* (Monterrey, 1961), pp. XVIII-XXIII. 3-15. Alonso De León, the elder, studied Latin, rhetoric, and philosophy under Jesuit instructors at the Real y Máximo Colegio de San Ildefonso de México.

<sup>2</sup>Carlos E. Castañeda, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas* (7 vols.; Austin, 1936-1958), 1, pp. 210-211; Donald E. Chipman, "In Search of Cabeza de Vaca's Route across Texas: An Historiographical Survey," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 91 (October 1987), pp. 144-146. Castañeda consistently misidentified the Río de las Palmas of colonial times as the Río Grande.

<sup>3</sup>*Historia de Nuevo León*, pp. XXVII, 140; Roberts S. Weddle, *Wilderness Manhunt: The Spanish Search for La Salle* (Austin, 1973), pp. 54-55.

<sup>4</sup>Weddle, *Wilderness Manhunt*, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup>*Historia de Nuevo León*, pp. 194-202.

<sup>6</sup>*Historia de Nuevo León*, pp. 202-204; Weddle, *Wilderness Manhunt*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>7</sup>Letter from Ambassador Pedro Ronquillo to the King (August 9, 1686), Archivo General de Indias (AGI), México 616. Associated with the expeditions led by Alonso De León were two others by land and a total of five by sea, all sent in search of La Salle's colony. For details, see Weddle, *Wilderness Manhunt*, pp. 44-158, *passim*.

<sup>8</sup>Letter of Fray Damián Massanet to Don Carlos de Sigüenza, in *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest, 1542-1706*, edited by Herbert E. Bolton (Reprint; New York, 1963), p. 355.

<sup>9</sup>Letter of Fray Damián Massanet, pp. 355-356.

<sup>10</sup>Letter of Fray Damián Massanet, pp. 356-357; Weddle, *Wilderness Manhunt*, pp. 138-147.

<sup>11</sup>*Historia de Nuevo León*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>12</sup>See map of Alonso De León Expedition, 1689, AGI. Mapas y Planos, México 86. Reproduced in Donald E. Chipman, *Spanish Texas, 1519-1821* (Austin, 1992), p. 82.

<sup>13</sup>Itinerary of the De León Expedition of 1689, in *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest*, p. 390.

<sup>14</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1689, pp. 390-391.

<sup>15</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1689, pp. 391-394.

<sup>16</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1689, p. 394. De León indicated that a statue or painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe had been brought along as the expedition's protectress and that a likeness of her appeared on the royal standard. The location of La Salle's Fort St. Louis has been identified beyond reasonable doubt. It was at the Keeran Site on Garcitas Creek, Victoria Country, precisely at the place indicated by Herbert E. Bolton in 1915. See Kathleen Gilmore, "La Salle's Fort St. Louis in Texas," *Bulletin of the Texas Archeological Society*, 55 (1984), pp. 61-72.

<sup>17</sup>Letter of Fray Damián Massanet, p. 362; Itinerary of the Expedition of 1689, p. 398.

<sup>18</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1689, pp. 398-399.

<sup>19</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1689, pp. 399-401. Because Jean Géry demonstrated specific knowledge of the terrain and physical features associated with Fort St. Louis and served as De León's guide in the reconnoitering of Matagorda Bay, it seems probable that he was a member of La Salle's colony.

<sup>20</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1689, pp. 395-396.

<sup>21</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1689, p. 396.

<sup>22</sup>*Carta de Alonso De León al Virrey, dándole cuenta de su jornada a la Bahía del Espíritu Santo, donde hallaron destruida la colonia de los franceses* (May 16, 1689), in *Primeras exploraciones y poblamiento de Texas (1686-1694)*, edited by Lino Gómez Canedo (Monterrey, 1968), pp. 114-115; letter of Fray Damián Massanet, p. 364.

<sup>23</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1689, p. 403; Robert S. Weddle, "The Talon Interrogations: A Rare Perspective," in *Three Primary Documents: La Salle, the Mississippi, and the Gulf*, edited by Robert S. Weddle, Mary Christine Morkovsky, and Patricia Galloway (College Station, 1987), p. 216. Verification of the epidemic is lacking. Jean L'Archevêque later retracted his account of its occurrence.

<sup>24</sup>"Voyage to the Mississippi through the Gulf of Mexico," in Weddle, *Three Primary Documents*, p. 237. During the Domingo Terán de los Ríos expedition of 1691, Jean-Baptiste Talon and Eustache Bréman were recovered from Indians by Captain Francisco Martínez.

<sup>25</sup>Itinerary of the expedition of 1689, p. 403.

<sup>26</sup>*Carta de Alonso De León* (May 16, 1688), p. 114. For treatment of María Jesús de Agreda's alleged bilocations at the Franciscan convent of Agreda and among Texas Indians, see Carlos E. Castañeda, "The Woman in Blue," *The Age of Mary; and Exclusively Marian Magazine*, The Mystical City of God Issue (January-February 1958), pp. 22-24 and Castañeda, *Catholic Heritage*, 1: 195-203. For a critical biography of Sister María, see Thomas D. Kendrick, *Mary of A'Greda: The Life and Legend of a Spanish Nun* (London, 1967).

<sup>27</sup>*Carta de Alonso De León* (May 16, 1689), pp. 114-115.

<sup>28</sup>William E. Dunn, *Spanish and French Rivalry in the Gulf Region of the United States, 1678-1702: The Beginnings of Texas and Pensacola* (Austin, 1917), pp. 110-111.

<sup>29</sup>*Carta de Alonso De León al Virrey exponiendo sus planes sobre el poblamiento de Texas* (August 12, 1689), in *Primeras exploraciones*, pp. 123-129.

<sup>30</sup>Report of the Fiscal de Hacienda to the Viceroy (November 30, 1716), Archivo del Ministerio de Hacienda (Madrid), Tomo XXVII, 1st quotation; Dunn, *Rivalry*, pp. 116-117; Weddle, *Wilderness Manhunt*, pp. 207-209, 2nd quotation on p. 207.

<sup>31</sup>Father Francisco Hidalgo did not accompany the De León – Massanet expedition of 1690. He and a second priest remained at mission San Salvador de la Caldera. See *Primeras exploraciones*, p. xvii.

<sup>32</sup>Itinerary of the De León Expedition of 1690, pp. 406-407. See map of Alonso De León Expedition of 1690, AGI, Mapas y Planos, México 88. Reproduced in Chipman, *Spanish Texas*, p. 90.

<sup>33</sup>Diary of Alonso De León (1690), AGI, México 617. The fort was allegedly burned by Massanet, but De León recorded that "we burned the fort" in his entry for April 26.

<sup>34</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1690, p. 409.

<sup>35</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1690, p. 410.

<sup>36</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1690, p. 411.

<sup>37</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1690, pp. 411-412.

<sup>38</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1690, pp. 411-412; Weddle, "The Talon Interrogations," p. 215.

<sup>39</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1690, pp. 414-415. Watermelons were not indigenous to the Americas, but the seeds of European crops were often popular trade items among Native Americans who lived in lands beyond Spanish control.

<sup>40</sup>*Diario del general Alonso De León en su entrada a Texas desde Coahuila* (March 26 to July 11, 1690), in *Primeras exploraciones*, p. 144.

<sup>41</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1690, p. 416.

<sup>42</sup>Itinerary of the Expedition of 1690, pp. 417-418. The site of the first Spanish mission in East Texas has not been confirmed by archaeological evidence. Its likely location was near present-day Augusta, Texas, in northeastern Houston County. A commemorative site near Weches, Texas, was established in 1936 on the occasion of the Centennial of the Texas Republic.

<sup>43</sup>Weddle, *Wilderness Manhunt*, pp. 210-211.

<sup>44</sup>*Primeras exploraciones*, pp. xviii-xix. The three priests left in East Texas were Miguel Fontcuberta, Francisco Casañas de Jesús María, and Antonio Bordoy.

<sup>45</sup>Weddle, "The Talon Interrogations," pp. 215; Itinerary of the Expedition of 1690, pp. 420-421, quotations; Weddle, *Wilderness Manhunt*, pp. 211-212. The Indians who held the French youths have not been definitely identified.

<sup>46</sup>*Alonso De León informa al virrey sobre su nueva visita a la Bahía del Espíritu Santo y la Fundación de San Francisco de los Tejas* (July 14, 1960), in *Primeras exploraciones*, pp. 153-158.

<sup>47</sup>*Carta del padre mazanet al Conde de Galve, informándole sobre su viaje a Texas y exponiendo sus ideas sobre su población e incremento de las misiones* (September 1690), in *Primeras exploraciones*, pp. 159-165.

<sup>48</sup>Castañeda, *Catholic Heritage*, 1: 360-361.

<sup>49</sup>Testimony of Efforts to Remove Buoys (January 24, 1691), AGI, Mexico 619. Discovery of a map drawn in 1691 by Manuel Joseph de Cárdenas allowed Bolton to establish the site of Fort St. Louis. See Herbert E. Bolton, "The Location of La Salle's Colony on the Gulf of Mexico," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 2 (September 1915), pp. 165-182. See Map of Manuel Joseph de Cardenas, 1691, AGI, Mapas y Planos, Mexico 89. Reproduced in Chipman, *Spanish Texas*, p. 95.

<sup>50</sup>*Primeras exploraciones*, pp. xxi-xxii; Castañeda, *Catholic Heritage*, p. 362.