

A Brief History of Cabeza de Vaca and *La relación*

Álvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca was born into the Spanish aristocracy around 1490. He took the title Cabeza de Vaca, meaning "head of a cow," from his mother's side of the family. (One of her ancestors--a shepherd named Martin Alhaja--had helped the Spanish Christians win a decisive battle against their Moorish oppressors in 1212 by marking an unguarded mountain pass with a cow skull. The Christians sneak-attacked, scoring a major victory, and Alhaja and his descendants were ennobled with the title Cabeza de Vaca.) Cabeza de Vaca's grandfather was Pedro de Vera, the sadistic conqueror of the Canary Islands. Cabeza de Vaca became a soldier in his teens, serving the Spanish army in Italy and at home until, as a respected veteran, he was appointed treasurer and second-in-command of the 1527 Panfilo de Narvaez expedition to the New World. Before it was over, he would also serve as a trader, doctor, and slave. It is fitting that on this expedition, one of the most disastrous in an era of grand Spanish successes and failures, Cabeza de Vaca would also become one of the greatest explorers of all time.

On June 17, 1527, the Panfilo de Narvaez expedition left Spain with five ships and 600 men, including Cabeza de Vaca. The mission was to establish a colony in "Florida," which stretched from the southern tip of modern-day Florida along the Gulf Coast to the Rio de las Palmas, north of the ill-defined province of Panuco. In mid-September, they landed on Hispaniola, where 140 men deserted. They were nearly wiped out by a hurricane in Cuba. After six months of wandering in Florida, fighting hostile Native Americans, malaria, and dysentery, they pushed to sea again, building five 30-foot barges and heading west along the Gulf Coast toward Panuco. On November 5 and 6, 1528, two barges and 80 men landed on either Galveston Island or an island just west of Galveston. The barges were soon lost, and all but 15 of the men, too, to cold, hunger, disease, drowning, injuries, cannibalism (among themselves), and violence at the hands of not-so-friendly Indians. After six years of living with both hostile and friendly native peoples, Cabeza de Vaca and three other survivors--Andres Dorantes, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and Esteban (Dorantes' slave, a black Moor from Morocco)--began their journey anew. They again headed south toward Panuco, then turned inland, living with the natives, eating straw, roots, worms, spiders, and bitter fruits and nuts, practicing the art of healing, and moving on, often accompanied by hundreds of Indian guides and well-wishers. In late January 1536, they met up with a party of Spanish soldiers on a slaving expedition and ultimately prevented their old countrymen from enslaving their new ones--their Pima Indian escorts. Finally, in July 1536, the four arrived in Mexico City to heroes' welcomes.

Cabeza de Vaca was the first Southwestern writer. His book about his adventures, *La Relación* (The Account), was originally written after his return to Spain in 1537 as a report to the king. It was published for the public in 1542. A second, slightly revised edition came out, combined with the story of the author's adventures as a governor in South America, in 1555. On one level, *La Relación* is a historical, anthropological

document--in Texas alone Cabeza de Vaca named and located 23 Indian groups and their clothes, language, eating habits, rituals, homes, and migrations. On another level, it is literature, with an understated style and a storyteller's nerve. *La Relación* is also a forerunner of much of the land's great literature. America has been a country of frontiers, and many of our greatest national and literary heroes have been wanderers and journeyers.

When Cabeza de Vaca, Dorantes, Esteban, and Castillo appeared out of the desert to the Spanish slave hunters, they might as well have been ghosts. The soldiers were speechless. The wanderers were not Indian, yet they weren't white either. More than seven years of living and wandering in the Southwestern plains and deserts had literally given them new skins.

But Cabeza de Vaca also wrote of other, less visible changes. This diligent son of imperial Spain--a career soldier and the grandson of a merciless conquistador--became an advocate of the humanity of the natives at a time when they had few defenders. For over seven years, Cabeza de Vaca lived with, fought with, traded with, preached to, was a slave for, healed, and observed closely alien peoples. By the end of his journey, Cabeza de Vaca had lost his conqueror's arrogance and found an empathy with the Indians, respecting them as human beings. He was appalled by the ruthlessness of the Spanish slave hunters (perhaps seeing in them a reminder of himself seven years before), and argued heatedly with them about enslaving their Pima escorts. His final act as a wanderer was to win the argument and thus stop the slave raids in Sonora and Sinaloa.

If the slave hunters had trouble accepting the castaways as Spaniards, the Pima escorts would have none of it. When the Spaniards tried to set the Pimas at ease by claiming the wanderers as their countrymen, the Indians scoffed. Among themselves and then aloud, the Pimas compared the noble wanderers to the hated soldiers: "We had come from the sunrise," Cabeza de Vaca remembered them saying, "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 and bestowed nothing on anyone."

(Text by Michael Hall. This originally appeared in *No Traveller Remains Untouched: Journeys and Transformations in the American Southwest*, a traveling exhibition sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and Southwest Texas State University, 1995.)