

Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca:
Pioneer Historian, Ethnologist, Physician

By Donald E. Chipman

Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca is arguably the first European of historic importance to set foot on the soil of present-day Texas. In early November 1528, he and approximately eighty other Spaniards and an African slave named Estevanico landed on the Texas coast to the west of present-day Galveston Island. Over the next eight years, Cabeza de Vaca experienced hardships and misfortunes that would have defeated a lesser man. He not only survived incredible odysseys in Texas and Mexico, which he later recorded in his *Relación* (account), but also entered the annals of colonial Texas as its first merchant, geographer, historian, ethnologist, and physician–surgeon. He also experienced remarkable personal growth and came to accept Indians on their own terms. In the first book published on portions of the future United States of America, Cabeza de Vaca shaped our earliest impressions of the land that became Texas, and his subtle influence may still be seen in the contemporary Lone Star State, where he reigns as the "patron saint" of the Texas Surgical Society.

Cabeza de Vaca was born around 1490 to Francisco de Vera and Teresa Cabeza de Vaca in the small Andalusian town of Jerez de la Frontera. He was the fourth son of alderman don Francisco and dona Teresa. Spaniards of this day and age had considerable latitude in naming their offspring. Typically, the choice of surname was patronymic but not infrequently matronymic. For example, Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán, an early administrator and conquistador in Mexico who figures importantly in the story of Cabeza de Vaca, was the full brother of a Spanish diplomat named Gómez Suárez de Figueroa. Similarly, Spaniards at adulthood could select a surname to honor either their mother or father or both.¹

Cabeza de Vaca preferred and consistently used the more prestigious maiden name of his mother.² During the Spanish Reconquest (ca. 718–1492), Martín Alhaja, a shepherd and distant ancestor of doña Teresa, had been credited with helping secure victory for Christian forces at the historic battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212. Alhaja marked a little-known and unguarded pass in the Sierra Morena with the skull of a cow. Using this pass to

mount a surprise attack on Muslim forces, King Sancho of Navarre, the Spanish commander, was victorious; and in gratitude he bestowed the name "Cow's Head" on Cabeza de Vaca's matrilineal progenitors .3

After spending his youth in a town now famous for its excellent sherry, Cabeza de Vaca entered military service and was sent to Italy. There on April 11, 1512, he fought in the battle of Ravenna. Although the engagement was won by the French, Cabeza de Vaca was promoted to the rank of alferes (ensign) for bravery on the battlefield. Back in Spain by 1513, the young soldier served as an aide to the powerful Duke of Medina Sidonia. And he later fought in behalf of King Charles I, soon to be Emperor Charles V, whose authority in Spain had been unsuccessfully challenged in the revolt of the Comuneros (May 1520–April 1521).4

Cabeza de Vaca's alignment with factions that remained loyal to Charles no doubt stood him in good stead with the young monarch. Like many royal appointments in the 1520s and 1530s, don Alvar's selection on February 15, 1527, as royal treasurer to the Panfilo de Narvaez expedition may very well have been linked to his record during the Comunero movement. 5

When selected for service in the Spanish Indies, Cabeza de Vaca was approaching the age of forty. As an intelligent and keenly observant man blessed with an excellent memory, he had learned to read and write, become conversant with passages from the Bible, and familiarized himself with major historical events. He had also acquired a considerable load of "intellectual baggage," which accompanied all Spaniards who emigrated to the Indies. After the conquest of Mexico, completed just half a dozen years prior to Cabeza de Vaca's appointment, Bernal Diaz del Castillo commented on why he had participated in that venture. With remarkable candor, the great chronicler of New Spain remarked that he came to serve God and the king, and also to get rich. This combination of religiosity and ambition was high octane fuel that drove many Spaniards to risk life and limb as they sought to carve out careers in a New World that offered far more opportunities than did Old Spain .6

Spaniards also had wild notions of what they might find in the Americas. In a real sense, they viewed lands across the Atlantic

"through medieval spectacles." The great St. Augustine of Hippo had devoted an entire chapter of *The City of God* to the question of whether descendants of Adam and Noah had produced monstrous and bizarre offspring. Even the most unsophisticated conquistador had seen the facades of medieval churches that sprouted griffins, gargoyles, and a mixture of man and beast. Consequently, for many decades after the Columbian voyages, Spaniards, upon entering unexplored lands, expected to find giants, dwarfs, Amazon women, white-haired boys, human beings with tails, headless folk with an eye in their navel, and trumpet-blowing apes .7

Then, as now, literate men such as Cabeza de Vaca often read novels for entertainment, but in the case of Spaniards there was a thin line between fantasy and credulity. The most popular novel of the early sixteenth century was *Amadis of Gaul*. Indeed, *Amadis* was so popular that, like today, it called for a sequel under the title of *Las Sergas de Esplandian* (*The Deeds of Esplandian*). In that work one of the central characters is the Queen of the Amazons, named Calafia, who lived on a fabulously rich island called California. So the Golden State owes its name to an early Spanish novel. Later, legendary figures such as Queen Calafia beckoned Spaniards into unknown realms, including Texas. Explorers and conquistadors would look for the Seven Cities of Cibola, Gran Quivira, the Pearls of the Jumanos, and the Great Kingdom of the Tejas.8

Most Spaniards were also imbued with a sense of Christian superiority and a firm conviction that it was their solemn obligation to spread the Faith and convert the pagan. With no small amount of pride and arrogance, Cabeza de Vaca, as second in command of a major expedition, would experience a crucible forged in the American wilderness. Over time he shed much of his European frame of reference, especially with regard to Native Americans. For Cabeza de Vaca that transformation was permanent, and it created no end of troubles for him when he returned to the world of Spaniards that had remained largely unchanged.9

With his appointment as royal treasurer in hand and experiences formed solely in Spain and Italy, Cabeza de Vaca entered the service of a red-bearded and one-eyed captain who had been maimed in the conquest of New Spain. Panfilo de Narvaez, in command of a sizable army outfitted by Governor Diego de Velazquez of Cuba, had landed on the Mexican coast in early 1520. Narvaez was

specifically ordered to pursue and arrest Fernando Cortés, then in control of the Aztec capital, and to bring the Mexican venture under the direction of Governor Velazquez. From San Juan de Ulua (present Veracruz), don Panfilo marched a short distance to the Indian town of Cempoalla, where he headquartered his army. Because he held a numerical supremacy of four or five to one over Cortés' s divided army, about half of which had remained in Tenochtitlan, Narvaez ignored all overtures from the Conqueror. But in a brief skirmish, Cortés scored a dramatic victory over his challenger, and in the melee, Narvaez took a pike thrust in the face that plucked out his right eye.¹⁰

Cortés left Narvaez imprisoned at Villa Rica de la Veracruz, his base of operations throughout the Conquest of Mexico. After being released by Cortés in 1523, don Panfilo returned to Spain seeking redress from the king for his injury. In 1526 Charles finally awarded a patent to the unfortunate casualty of Cempoalla. Narvaez could settle "Florida," which at that time included the peninsula that had claimed the life of Juan Ponce de Leon in the early 1520s and the entire Gulf Coast region lying between Florida proper and the Panuco River to the north of Veracruz.¹¹

To carry out the terms of his patent, Narvaez assembled five vessels and approximately six hundred men. With Cabeza de Vaca serving as second in command, the flotilla cleared San Lucas de Barrameda, the sandbar near the mouth of the Guadalquivir River, on June 17, 1527. The Atlantic crossing to Santo Domingo was uneventful, and upon arrival Narvaez remained in port for about forty-five days. During that interval he acquired additional supplies and horses but lost 140 men to desertion. From Santo Domingo, Narvaez sailed to Cuba, arriving there in the early autumn. ¹²

Shortly after reaching the port of Santiago, Cabeza de Vaca was sent with two ships to another part of the island to acquire provisions. With the vessels anchored offshore, don Alvar traveled on horseback to a nearby town to arrange for the transfer of merchandise. But even as he left the ships the weather had begun to turn foul with "swirling winds and . . . heavy rainfall." Upon reaching the settlement, as Cabeza de Vaca noted, "the rain and the storm began to increase so much that it was just as strong in the town as on for all the houses and churches were blown down, and it became necessary for us to go about in groups of seven or eight

men locking our arms together so that we could keep the wind from blowing us away.² 13

After a terrible night in which Cabeza de Vaca and a few companions dared not stay near houses or trees for fear of being crushed beneath them, don Alvar surveyed the damage at first light. The hurricane had passed but left utter devastation in its wake. Both of the ships at anchor had been destroyed, with losses placed by Cabeza de Vaca at sixty Spaniards and twenty horses. One of the ship's boats was found in trees nearly a mile from the coast. In don Alvar's words, "It was pitiful to see the condition the land was left in, with fallen trees, the woods stripped bare, all without leaves or grass."² 14

Narvaez used the winter months to re-outfit his expedition, and in April 1528 five ships carried about four hundred men to a bay, perhaps Sarasota, on the west coast of Florida. Shortly after reconnoitering the land, Narvaez, despite the vigorous protests of Cabeza de Vaca, decided to separate about three hundred men from the ships and go farther inland. At that juncture, Spanish perceptions of Gulf Coast geography were so faulty that Narvaez believed the River of Palms to be only a short distance away, when the actual distance via the coast was more than fifteen hundred miles. 15

Within a matter of hours, the expedition was hopelessly separated from its support vessels and stranded on the Florida coast. By mid-June it had traveled up the inner coast and arrived in northwestern Florida, where it encamped for approximately three months. But food shortages and increasingly hostile Indians convinced the Spaniards that they must exit Florida by sea. Lacking boats, Narvaez and his men were forced to improvise. Although Anglo-Americans have long prided themselves on possessing a talent for improvisation-- often called "Yankee ingenuity"-- Spaniards stranded in the wilderness also coped admirably. On this occasion, they slaughtered their horses and lived on the meat; they jerryrigged bellows of deerskin and wooden pipes to melt metal from stirrups and bridle bits, which was then cast into saws and axes; they flayed and tanned skin from the legs of horses and fashioned it into fresh water bags. Finally, they constructed five boats of crudely sawed planks that were caulked with pine resins

and palmetto fibers; they used their shirts and trousers for sails; and they wove hair from the tails and manes of horses into rigging.
16

Five boats bearing slightly less than 250 men set out for the River of Palms on September 22, 1528. The first month at sea went well. But as the small flotilla approached the mouth of the Mississippi River, troubles began. On the thirty-first day, a storm struck and tossed the boats about like driftwood. Several days after passing the mouth of the great river, the situation became desperate. The Spaniards had run out of fresh water, because, in the words of Cabeza de Vaca, "the skins we made from the horses' legs rotted and became useless."² 17

After the first storm had abated, some fresh water was acquired from a stream entering the Gulf; however, a second disturbance began with a strong north wind blowing from land. carried the five boats well out to sea and after two days "each boat had lost sight of the others." On the evening of the third day, the boat carrying Cabeza de Vaca spotted two of the other craft. One of them contained Narvaez, and as Cabeza de Vaca's vessel neared, he asked the governor "to throw me a line so I could follow him, but he answered that it would be enough of a struggle for them to reach the shore that night themselves." Don Alvar asked what he should do, since it was impossible for him to keep up and carry out the governor's orders. With that Narvaez replied "that it was no longer necessary for any of us to give orders, that each of us should do what seemed best to save his life, since that is what he intended to do."² 18

Rough water whipped up by still another Gulf storm kept the boat carrying Cabeza de Vaca from reaching land for several more days. On board the Spaniards were so weak from hunger that "the men . . . had passed out, one on top of another, so near death that few of them were conscious and fewer than five were still upright." During the final night at sea, Cabeza de Vaca and another man took turns at the tiller. On the morning of November 6, 1528, don Alvar was awakened by the roar of breakers, and shortly thereafter "a great wave took us and cast the boat out of the water as far as a horseshoe can be tossed."² 19

Cabeza de Vaca and his companions had landed on an offshore island, which he named Isla de Malhado, or Isle of Misfortune. A second boat containing Andres Dorantes de Carranza, his African-born slave, Estevanico, Alonso Castillo Maldonado, and perhaps forty-five others had apparently landed on the same island on the previous day. Those named, later known as the "Four Ragged Castaways," were the only ones to survive the Texas portion of the Narvaez expedition.²⁰

Malhado was occupied by Karankawa Indians who soon appeared near the site of the landing. To Cabeza de Vaca and the other survivors it was a unnerving experience: "We were so scared that they seemed to us to be giants, whether they were or not. . . . We could not even think of defending ourselves, since there were scarcely six men who could even get up from the ground." Fortunately for the Spaniards, the Indians in sign language indicated that they would return in the morning and bring food, for they had none at the time. And the natives were true to their word, providing fish and some edible roots on the following day.²¹

After receiving food and water, Cabeza de Vaca and his crew attempted to relaunch their boat, but their efforts ended in disaster. The craft capsized, drowning three, while the rest of the men were enveloped in waves and cast ashore on the same island. In don Alvar's words, "Those of us who survived were as naked as the day we were born and had lost everything we had." Added to their misery was the cold of early November, which combined with their emaciated state left them looking "like the picture of death."²²

The miserable state of the Spaniards was such that the Indians sat down with them and began to cry, weeping and wailing for more than half an hour. For Cabeza de Vaca, it was an disturbing experience. "Seeing that these crude and untutored people, who were like brutes, grieved so much for us, caused me and the others in my company to suffer more and think more about our misfortune." In short, if the Indians felt sorry for them, with their notions of inherent Christian superiority, they were truly in dire straits.²³

After joining with the survivors of the other boat that landed on Malhado, the Spaniards, certain that after more than a month at sea they were very close to the province of Panuco, selected four robust men, all good swimmers, and sent them down the coast in the

company of an Indian guide. Among those who remained on Malhado, exposure, hunger, and dysentery had taken their toll by the spring of 1529, leaving only fourteen or fifteen men alive.²⁴ Throughout the winter months, Cabeza de Vaca had become a close observer of the Karankawa Indians, and he later recorded unique ethnographic information about them. He described those Native Americans as tall and well built, with weapons consisting only of bows and arrows. And he credited Karankawas with loving their children more than any other people in the world, for when a child died, parents, relatives, and indeed whole villages would mourn the loss for an entire year. Karankawas also accorded much consideration to everyone except the elderly, whom they regarded as of little use, since they occupied space and consumed food that was needed by children. Cabeza de Vaca also described marriage customs among the Karankawa and the role of in-laws in their society. He wryly commented that these Indians often went hungry, for food and firewood was scarce but mosquitoes were plentiful.²⁵ Against his better judgment, Cabeza de Vaca was compelled by the Karankawas to treat their ill. He noted that the Indians "wanted to make us physicians, without testing us or asking for any degrees." "Treatment" consisted of breathing on the patient, making the sign of the cross, and reciting prayers. The fact that these ministrations regularly improved the condition of the sick certainly suggests the presence of psychoneurotic afflictions among the coastal Karankawas.²⁶

During that same first winter, Cabeza de Vaca recorded that five Spaniards had become separated from the larger group and were stranded on the mainland coast in cold and stormy weather. These men, whom he listed by name, became so desperate for food "that they ate one another one by one until there was only one left, who survived because the others were not there to eat him." When the Karankawas learned that those Spaniards had been so disrespectful of their own dead, they threatened to do great harm to the survivors on Malhado. The Karankawas' revulsion to this form of cannibalism stands as a meaningful counterpoint to often repeated but sparsely documented assertions of their appetite for human flesh.²⁷

In the late weeks of winter, Cabeza de Vaca crossed over to the mainland, where he became seriously ill. Believing rumors that don Alvar had died, all but two of the survivors decided to travel down

the coast toward Mexico. Cabeza de Vaca recovered, although for a variety of reasons he kept Malhado as his home base for nearly four more years. Cabeza de Vaca acknowledged that initially he was unable to follow his companions because of illness. But after his recovery, he was forced to stay with Indians who treated him poorly and worked him hard for more than a year. Don Alvar eventually escaped from captivity and fled to live among other Indians who dwelled farther inland. The new hosts, whom he called the Charruco, treated Cabeza de Vaca well enough, but his primary source of food was roots that grew under water among canes. In pulling these roots his hands became so sore "that a light brush with a piece of straw would cause them to bleed."² 28

Opting for a chance at a better life, Cabeza de Vaca again moved inland, where "he fared a bit better." There he became a merchant and trader supplying the needs of various Indians groups who themselves could not move from place to place "because of the continuous warfare that goes on." From the coast don Alvar collected seashells and sea snails. The former were especially valued by the inland groups who lacked tools for cutting mesquite beans. In the interior Cabeza de Vaca collected hides and red ochre, which was used for dye, flints for arrowheads, and canes for the shafts of arrows. He reported that he much enjoyed being a trader, because it gave him the freedom to travel where he wished; and it afforded him an opportunity to learn the land and search for a possible escape route to New Spain .29

Cabeza de Vaca noted that although he enjoyed the freedom of being a trader, it was still a life filled with peril, for he was frequently hungry, suffered from cold, and faced the wilderness alone. Because of the extremes of temperature, he did not carry out his business ventures in winter. During that season, he regularly returned to Malhado and followed this pattern for three consecutive years. Don Alvaro delayed following his former companions down the coast toward Mexico, for to do so would mean the abandonment of the two Spaniards who remained on Malhado. 30 One of these men eventually died, and the sole survivor, Lope de Oviedo, refused to leave the island. With a note of exasperation, don Alvar remarked: "To get him out of there, I would cross over to the island every year and plead with him for us to leave as best we

could in search of Christians. Every year he held me back, saying that we would leave the following year.² 31

In late 1532, Cabeza de Vaca finally convinced the reluctant Spaniard to leave the island and to accompany him down the coast toward Panuco, following roughly the same course that the party had taken four years earlier. Traveling with Oviedo was particularly challenging for Cabeza de Vaca, for don Lope could not swim. But the two men successfully crossed four rivers along the coast, only to be confronted by a wide inlet where Oviedo became increasingly frightened. Across this body of water were Indians who made contact with the two Spaniards. The natives reported that "farther ahead were three men like us and gave us their names." When asked about the other Spaniards who had also departed Malhado, the Indians replied that they were all dead—some having died of cold and starvation, while others had been killed "for sport" or because they had been the subject of bad dreams .32

When Cabeza de Vaca asked about the status of the three survivors, the Indians replied that they were badly mistreated because their captors "kicked and slapped them, and beat them with sticks." And, according to don Alvar, to convince them "that they had told us the truth about the mistreatment of the others, they slapped and beat my companion and gave me my share too." Following this abusive treatment of the Spaniards, the Indians then threw clods of dirt at them and held arrows to their hearts, threatening to kill them in the same manner as they had dispatched their companions. All of this was more than the faint-hearted Oviedo could endure. Despite the efforts of Cabeza de Vaca who "argued with him not to do it," don Lope in the company of some Indian women turned back toward Malhado and disappeared from history. 33

Two days after the departure of Lope de Oviedo, Cabeza de Vaca was reunited with his former companions, Andres Dorantes de Carranza, the African Estevanico, and Alonso Castillo Maldonado. The three men were astonished to see don Alvar, for they believed he had died several years earlier. They also were no doubt more than a little embarrassed that they had not verified his death before departing from Malhado. But Cabeza bore them no animus, remarking that "we thanked God very much for being together" and that the reunion was one of the happiest days of their lives .34

Once united, Cabeza de Vaca and Dorantes were in agreement that they should press on toward Mexico at the first opportunity. The other two men had theretofore been reluctant to do so, because they could not swim and greatly feared the rivers and bays they would have to cross. After assuring the non-swimmers that they would be helped en route, the four men agreed on the absolute necessity of keeping secret their plans for escape, for they believed the Indians would surely kill them if their intentions were discovered. 35

The Four Ragged Castaways decided to wait six months before attempting to flee, because at that time the Indians would gather at another land farther south and strategically closer to New Spain to feast on the fruit of the prickly pear cactus. And at that juncture Cabeza became the slave of Indians who also owned Andres Dorantes. Those natives were a hunting and gathering group called the Mariames, while a neighboring group known as the Yguazes claimed Castillo and Estevanico. During their captivity, the four men learned the fate of many of their former companions. Some had died of exposure and hunger; others had been the victims of violence perpetrated by Spaniard on Spaniard. Once again, the last survivors had temporarily kept themselves alive by eating the flesh of their countrymen. But in the end, there were only the Ragged Four-- three Europeans and an African. 36

As a captive, Cabeza de Vaca again revealed the trained eye of an ethnologist by memorizing the things that he saw and by asking good questions. For example, he observed that the Mariames regularly killed infant daughters and fed their bodies to dogs. When asked why they would do such a seemingly cruel and irrational act, the Indians replied that it was "an unseemly thing to marry them to relatives"-- an option no doubt proscribed by incest taboos. The alternative was to marry daughters outside the group, but since the Mariames were surrounded by more numerous and powerful tribes with whom they were constantly at war, married daughters would bear children that strengthened their enemies .37

Don Alvar also remembered interesting details about the Yguazes. He described them as well-built archers. But their principal food came not from hunting. Rather, they dug two or three varieties of roots, which were hardly ideal foodstuffs in that they caused severe bloating. Furthermore, the roots were difficult to dig, required two

days of roasting, and were bitter to the palate. The Yguazes occasionally supplemented their diet with deer and fish, but they were often so hungry that they ate "spiders, ant eggs, worms, lizards, salamanders, snakes and poisonous vipers." Their diet also included dirt, rotten wood, and even deer dung. Besides these named foods, the Yguazes consumed "other things" that Cabeza de Vaca could not bring himself to record. One may well wonder what these "unmentionables" might have been! Don Alvar added a concluding thought that "my observations lead me to believe that they would eat stones if there were any in that land."² 38

Cabeza de Vaca found the Yguazes to be lacking in character, given as they were to thievery, drunkenness, and prevarication. He also recorded his profound distaste for sodomites among this hunting and gathering culture, who were "so abominable that they openly have another man for a wife" and so effeminate that they "do not understand a thing about men but perform every activity pertaining to women." On the other hand, don Alvar marveled at other Yguaze men with astonishing physical stamina, which permitted them to pursue deer on foot, for they could "run from morning to night without resting or becoming tired." In times when food was plentiful, such as during the harvest of prickly pear cactus, he described the Indians as especially merry, "because they are not hungry then and spend all their time dancing." Not surprisingly, these Indians suffered terribly from plagues of mosquitoes, which Cabeza de Vaca with the eye of a naturalist discerned as three distinct species. To ward off the insects, the Indians burned damp firewood because it emitted a lot of smoke. The downside to this means of insect repellent, as campers can attest, is eyes that water all night, and the Spaniards and Estevanico also found their sleep interrupted by a sharp kick or beating by an Indian when it was time to gather more firewood. Despite the best efforts of the Iguazes, Cabeza de Vaca described those who suffered the most severe reaction to mosquito bites as resembling lepers or the Biblical Lazarus. 39

During this captivity, Cabeza de Vaca mentioned seeing buffalo, the first account on record of these wild bovines. He called them "cows" and remarked that they were about the same size as Moorish cattle in Spain, although bison had longer hair. Don Alvar observed that the animals had small horns, that their skins were like fine blankets, and that the Iguazes used the hides to make shoes and shields.

According to Cabeza de Vaca, buffalo "have more and better meat than cattle . . . in Spain."² 40

At the end of six months when the Indians had congregated to gather the prickly pears, the Castaways' plans to escape went awry. When they were about to flee, their Indian masters got into a hot dispute over a woman, which ended in blows with sticks and fisticuffs. Their masters became so angry that they marched off in different directions, forcing their slaves to accompany them. Consequently, all plans to flee toward New Spain were placed on hold for another year. 41

The intervening time was one of great suffering for Cabeza de Vaca. His life was made miserable by constant hunger and mistreatment. On three occasions, he attempted to escape, but each attempt ended with his recapture and threats to kill him. At the end of the year, the Indians again congregated to feast on the fruit of the prickly pear cactus. The Castaways, after some difficulty, were united again and finally made their escape in mid-September of 1534. They attributed their reunion to "God's will," and remarked that it was "their obligation . . . as Christians . . . not to live such a savage life, so far from the service of God."² 42

In South Texas they were accepted as free men by the Avavares, another hunting and gathering group. There the Castaways were fed venison, which they had not eaten before and did not recognize. At that juncture, Castillo gained in stature, because he was able to alleviate severe headaches among their Indian hosts by making the sign of the cross and reciting prayers. Although free to move on if they wished, the approach of winter persuaded the Castaways to postpone their plans to reach Mexico. But the prickly pear harvest had played out, and food was scarce. While foraging for sustenance, Cabeza de Vaca lost his bearings and nearly died of hypothermia. He saved his life by finding a burning tree, probably ignited by lightning, which he stoked for warmth. Over the next five days he carried firebrands and dry sticks with him, since there was no other relief from the cold for a man traveling "naked as the day I was born."² 43

During his ordeal, Cabeza de Vaca again revealed his deep commitment to God, commending Him for not allowing the north

wind to blow, for by his own admission he could not have survived a norther. Upon reaching a riverbank on the fifth day, don Alvar was reunited with friendly Indians and his companions. The natives had several sick persons among them, but once again the ministrations of Castillo worked wonders. He commended the ill to God, and miraculously they were all well on the following morning. Being a "timid physician," Castillo shied away from treating the more seriously afflicted. And at this juncture don Alvar moved into the forefront as a master healer. He allegedly saved one Indian who had no pulse and "showed all the signs of being dead." With his fame spreading, various Indian groups brought their sick children to Cabeza de Vaca, and his ministrations again proved salutary. Nevertheless, he again credited God with restoring the health of his patients. The Castaways remained with the Avavares for eight months, tracking time by phases of the moon. During this interval and because the Indians insisted, Dorantes and Estevanico, who had not attempted to treat the ill, joined Castillo and Cabeza de Vaca as healers. But Cabeza de Vaca was "the boldest and the most daring in undertaking any cure." ³ 44

Aside from his curative powers, don Alvar again took up the mantle of ethnologist. He remembered the legends of the Avavares, noting that they had been terrorized in the past by a man they called "Bad Thing." This demonic being had terrorized the Avavares by pulling arms out of sockets and cutting out portions of their entrails. When asked where "Malacosa" dwelled, the Indians claimed that he lived beneath the ground. This story amused the Spaniards, but they took pains to inform the Indians that if they would worship the Christian God they need no longer fear Mr. "Bad Thing." ² 45

Before detailing the Castaway's journey beyond the confines of Texas, Cabeza de Vaca offered a summary of the Indian groups he had come to know. Even though the cultural information contained in his account "quantitatively exceeds that of all his successors [in Texas] combined," readers of the *Relación* always find themselves wishing that he had set down more detail. Nevertheless, Cabeza de Vaca documented universal practices of the Karankawas and various hunting and gathering groups that were found from the Galveston area to the lower Rio Grande Valley. All males abstained from sleeping with their wives from the first indication of pregnancy until the newborn reached the age of two-years old. Those who cling to

the idyllic notion of a pre-Columbian Eden in which Native Americans loved all living things, including each other, should avoid reading Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*. Don Alvar stated categorically that "all these people wage war." In his view the Indians were as resourceful in guarding themselves against their enemies as though "they had been reared in Italy in a time of continuous war." In short, Indians with their vices and virtues were like all human beings on this planet. It was a lesson that Cabeza de Vaca never forgot. And later on he, himself, did a great deal to convince Indians that all Spaniards were not the same .46

After leaving the Avavares, the Castaways crossed the lower Rio Grande into Mexico. Shortly after departing Texas, they saw the first mountains they had encountered on the North American continent. Instead of continuing down the coast toward the River of Palms and the province of Panuco, the wayfarers chose to turn inland toward the sierras that seemed to descend from the North Sea. Their decision was prompted by intelligence obtained from Indian friends that the coastal groups were very bad, and that lands to the interior contained friendlier people and more abundant food. 47

While crossing northern Mexico, Cabeza de Vaca performed the first surgery by a European in what would become the Spanish Southwest. An Indian had been wounded some time before by an arrow that entered the right side of his back. The arrowhead had lodged over the heart, causing great pain and suffering. With a knife don Alvar opened the chest of the native, extracted the projectile, and closed the incision with two stitches. He then staunched the bleeding with hair scrapped from the skin of an animal. Although he probably exaggerated the time of recovery, claiming that the stitches were removed on the following day and that the "Indian was healed," it was nonetheless a remarkable piece of surgery that has earned recognition for Cabeza de Vaca in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*. 48

The Castaways' journey across northern Mexico eventually brought them back to Texas at the junction of the Rio Grande and Rio Conchos near present Presidio, Texas, and Ojinaga, Chihuahua. At La Junta de los Rios, the four men encountered the first agricultural people living in fixed houses. These Indians, apparently Jumanos, were labeled "cow People" by Cabeza de Vaca, because they left their settlements once a year to hunt bison to the north. 49

From La Junta de los Rios, the four men ascended the Rio Grande on the east or Texas bank for seventeen days. Some seventyfive miles downriver from present El Paso, they struck overland toward the Pacific Coast, crossing northwestern Chihuahua and northeastern Sonora. On that portion of the journey, the Castaways heard of Indians who lived in a land to the north with populous towns and great houses set among lofty mountains. Five green arrowheads, perhaps of malachite rather than turquoise, which the Indians of northern Mexico had acquired from that distant land and used in ceremonial dances were acquired by Cabeza de Vaca. Although he eventually lost these semiprecious objects, recollections of them later on would help stir interest in New Spain of lands that lay mas alla. 50

In western Sonora, the four men came to a village of friendly Indians that offered them six hundred deer hearts as food. From that settlement, appropriately named Corazones by the Spaniards, the Castaways soon reached the Pacific Coast, probably near present Hermosillo. They arrived at the Rio Yaqui around Christmas 1535, about seven months after departing the Avavares in South Texas. 51

South of the Rio Yaqui, Castillo spotted an amulet tied to the neck of an Indian. The object was a small sword belt buckle with a horseshoe nail sewn to it, unmistakable evidence that it had come from a Spaniard. Castillo took the amulet from the Indian, and the Castaways with feigned indifference inquired as to its source. The native replied that it had come "from some bearded men like us." Initially, the wayfarers were concerned that the buckle and nail had come from members of a sea expedition and that they were still in a land uninhabited by Europeans. But as they moved down the coast the four men saw additional evidence of Spaniards, such as tracks of horses and abandoned campsites. 52

Anxious to make contact with his countrymen, Cabeza de Vaca in the company of Estevanico forged ahead of the other Castaways. He soon came upon a slave-raiding party to the north of Culiacan, a Spanish outpost near the Pacific Coast. The mounted slave catchers, adherents of Governor Nuño de Guzman of New Galicia, were so astonished by the appearance of Cabeza de Vaca "that they were not able to speak or ask me questions." A prominent Texas

historian with a flair for the dramatic once described this encounter as a meeting of traditional Spaniards and "a bearded, ragged, nearly unclothed, burned scarecrow . . . [who was] as welcome as an illegitimate child at a family reunion." Humorous but hardly the case. The slavers quickly escorted Cabeza de Vaca to a place nearby where he met with their captain. 53

This historic confrontation between Castaways separated from European society for more than seven years and their countrymen was in fact less traumatic for them than for the Native Americans who had accompanied the wayfarers. Those Indians' perception of Cabeza de Vaca and his companions, in contrast to the reputation of Guzman's slave raiders, underscores the transformation that had occurred in the former. Their native friends protested "that we had come from the East and they had come from the West; that we healed the sick and they killed the healthy; that we were naked and barefoot and they were dressed and on horseback, with lances; that we coveted nothing but instead gave away everything that was given to us and kept none of it, while the sole purpose of the others was to steal everything they found, never giving anything to anybody."⁵⁴

Separated from their Indian associates, the former Ragged Castaways were taken to Culiacan where they received a warm welcome from its alcalde mayor, Melchior Diaz. While resting there, the Christian Castaways summoned rebellious Indians of the region into their presence. Diaz told the Indians that the "Christians had come from heaven and had traveled through many lands," and that these same Christians had "had come here to tell others not to harm, annoy, nor kill Indians so they could settle in their towns and believe in God and build churches." This encounter may have had a temporary, pacific influence on the Native Americans.⁵⁵ From Culiacan, the Castaways were escorted to the town of Compostela for a meeting with the governor of New Galicia. Don Nuño de Guzman was a gracious host, providing the refugees from the wilderness with articles of clothing from his own wardrobe. Newly outfitted, the four men were soon sent on their way again to Mexico City, where an audience with the recently arrived viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza, awaited them. They arrived in the capital on July 24, 1536, and on the following day must have felt at home as they attended a bullfight celebrating the Feast of St. James, the famed warrior saint Santiago of the Spanish Reconquest .⁵⁶

In the following days and weeks, the four men told and retold stories of their experiences to eager audiences. Against long odds, they had survived nearly eight years of danger from the elements and unfriendly Indians. Cabeza de Vaca and his companions, since fleeing from the Mariames in September 1534, had traversed an estimated twenty-five hundred miles, with most of the journey made on foot. With the possible exception of truth, their stories of lands "mas alla" lost little in retelling, for they quickly stirred romantic interest in the legendary Seven Cities. Cabeza de Vaca's accounts of seeing evidence of precious metals such as gold and antimony in the mountains of northwestern Mexico also touched off fevered excitement in the capital, and powerful men soon vied to led follow-up expeditions into the north country. 57

Despite their glowing accounts of potential wealth in lands they had seen, not one of the three Spaniards was willing to retrace a single step of their odyssey. Estevanico, however, was not given a choice. He was loaned or perhaps sold by Dorantes to Viceroy Mendoza, who prevailed over several competitors in sponsoring a reconnaissance to the north. 58

The viceroy's interest led to the preliminary expedition of Fray Marcos de Niza in 1539. In early March with Estevanico serving as his guide, Niza left Culiacan and headed up the Camino Real, as the road to the north was then known. At the Rio Mayo on March 21, a fateful decision permitted the African to scout well ahead of the friar and his support party. Soon separated by several days' travel, Estevanico apparently made excessive demands on the Indians he contacted, and he entered towns without the permission of his Franciscan companion. Estevanico was killed at Hawikuh, the southernmost of the Zuni pueblos in present western New Mexico-- known collectively as Cibola. On his return to New Spain, Fray Marcos reported seeing a rich land that contained seven golden cities, the smallest of which was larger than Mexico City. Niza's accounts of the north country and hopes of finding the legendary Seven Cities of Cibola led immediately to the follow-up expedition of Francisco Vazquez de Coronado (1540-1542). When Coronado captured Hawikuh and learned the true nature of it as well as other nearby pueblos, he was easily enticed into a fruitless search for the wealth of Gran Quivira. That undertaking crossed the Texas Panhandle en route to southern Kansas. And when the failed

expedition returned to New Spain in the spring of 1542, it temporarily dampened expectations about the riches of the far north country and delayed the impetus for its settlement for half a century. 59

In the meantime, Cabeza de Vaca returned to Spain in 1537. There he sought reward for his services from the Emperor Charles V by requesting a patent to settle Florida. But Charles granted that honor to Hernando de Soto, already rich and famous from his exploits in the land of the Inca. It appears that don Alvar then busied himself composing his historic *Relación*, first published at Zamora in 1542. The manuscript was probably completed by early 1540, for in March of that year Cabeza de Vaca received a consolation appointment from the emperor. He was awarded the titles of Adelantado, given to early conquistadors in America, and Governor and Captain General of the Rio de la Plata in South America. 60

In late 1540, Cabeza de Vaca again negotiated the sandbar at San Lucar de Barrameda, this time as first in command. After a difficult five-month voyage, he and approximately 250 men landed off the coast of Brazil on Santa Catalina Island. His destination, however, was Asuncion on the Parana River in Paraguay. Unwilling to wait several months for an opportunity to board an ocean-going vessel, which would take him to Asuncion by way of Buenos Aires, don Alvar elected to lead 250 men on a one thousand-mile march through uncharted lands. En route, he was the first European to view the majestic Iguazu Falls; and, he again proved to be one of the most remarkable of pedestrians, having crossed substantial portions of both North and South America. On the latter trek, he had lost only two men-- one drowned crossing the Parana River and a second was fatally mauled by a jungle cat. 61

As governor of Asuncion, Cabeza de Vaca gave special attention to Indians under his jurisdiction, decreeing that those who were mistreated by their masters be placed under more gentle hands. He also placed restrictions on Spaniards who held Indian women in concubinage and on the illegal purchase of Indian slaves. However, Cabeza de Vaca could do nothing about the institution of slavery itself, for the New Laws of 1542-1543, which abolished Indian servitude, had not been promulgated in the Americas .62

Don Alvar's progressive policies, and above all the compassion he demonstrated for his native charges-- a sympathy nurtured in the wilds of Texas, where he had himself been enslaved and mistreated-- earned him the enmity of many unreconstructed colonists at Asuncion. His benign nature also made him a poor judge of character, as evidenced by the selection of unreliable and disloyal subordinates. Those persons and his own retinue soon favored a local strongman, Domingo Martinez de Irala, who had been elected as interim governor prior to the royal appointment of Cabeza de Vaca. 63

Continued dissatisfaction with the policies of Governor Cabeza de Vaca, which included the collection of fair and equitable taxes from Spaniards, culminated in a revolt against his authority and his arrest in April 1544. Like Columbus, Cabeza de Vaca was sent back to Spain in chains, arriving at Seville near the end of August 1545. There he faced long legal proceedings, even by Spanish standards, in which he was accused of various crimes, maladministration, and the enactment of visionary policies. Initial litigation continued for six long years. On March 18, 1551, Cabeza de Vaca, then about sixty years of age, was perpetually banished from the Americas under penalty of death and exiled to Oran in North Africa for five years. At some point he had married, although little is known of his wife. But she mounted a determined defense of her husband's reputation, resulting in additional litigation that expended all her personal property. While he remained under a legal cloud, Cabeza de Vaca probably worked on a revision of his *Relación*, which was published at Valladolid in 1555. On September 15, 1556, Charles V, in one of his last acts as emperor, authorized a payment of 12,000 maravedis to Cabeza de Vaca and named him to the post of Chief Justice of the Tribunal of Seville. His date of death and place of internment are not known. 64

Cabeza de Vaca had little direct or lasting influence on the history of colonial Texas. More than 150 years would pass before Alonso de Leon and Father Damian Massanet attempted the permanent settlement of Spaniards in the future Lone Star State. But Cabeza de Vaca's adventures in Texas and his strength of character remain inspirational, as does the remarkable literary document he left as his legacy. Perhaps the best eulogy to him came from the great naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison, who wrote: "Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca stands out as a truly noble and humane character.

Nowhere in the lurid history of the Conquest does one find such integrity and devotion to Christian principles in the face of envy, malice, treachery, cruelty, lechery, and plain greed"-- strong words from the "Admiral's" pen about a good Spaniard! 65

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