An Uninviting Wilderness: The Plains of West Texas, 153+1821

Félix D. Álmaraz, Jr.

*University of Texas at San Antonio*

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AN UNINVITING WILDERNESS
THE PLAINS OF WEST TEXAS, 1534-1821

FÉLIX D. ALMARÁZ, JR.

Throughout the entire colonial period of Texas, except for brief periods of gallant exploration and practical reconnaissance, Spanish pioneers carefully avoided the Plains of West Texas as a potential area of permanent settlement. Essentially because of the absence of dependable water resources, an all-important consideration prescribed in the Recopilación de las Leyes de las Indias for the selection of occupation sites, Hispanics generally regarded the West Texas Plains with respectful awe and fearful apprehension. Spanish law prohibited settlers, notwithstanding personal initiative and the availability of land in great abundance, from occupying a region that lacked reliable sources of fresh water.¹

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the Spaniards' propensity to colonize adjacent areas of the borderlands—such as New Mexico's río arriba district or central and eastern Texas—downgraded the importance of the plains region, including the awesome Llano Estacado, to an imperial claim that explorers and veteran frontiersmen occasionally traversed with utmost caution. Such random expeditions, replete with resolve and valor, created a legacy of transitory Hispanic presence in the Plains of West Texas and eastern New Mexico.²

GEOGRAPHY OF THE LLANO ESTACADO

The Great Plains province of modern-day Texas embraces “a large section of the country” that forms “the southern extension” of an even larger “physiographic division” that stretches north from the Río Grande across the western American level lands into Canada. The “southern extension” of this expansive province that terminates in Texas includes several well-defined subdivisions, two of which—the High Plains and the Pecos Lowland—extend from West Texas across into eastern New Mexico. In turn, within this vast domain, the High Plains region itself comprises a broad physiographic
entity, bounded on the east by the Caprock escarpment, on the west and southwest by the Pecos Lowland, on the southeast by the emerging Edwards Plateau country, and on the north by "the wide and rather deep erosion groove" created by the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle.¹

The High Plains constitutes one of two prominent geographical components of the region immigrants of European descent called the Panhandle. In contrast to the Caprock, an escarpment of hard caliche or chalk crust that extends roughly in a north-south pattern, the West Texas Plains then possessed distinctive economic advantages—maximum utilization of rainfall, richness of the topsoil, and verdant growth of native grasses—that eluded the vision of Spanish travelers intent on other goals.⁴

In the course of multiple eons, nature produced on the West Texas Plains an area that according to Nevin M. Fenneman, reputable geologist in the early twentieth century, "is as
flat as any land surface” imaginable. Fenneman continued:

Many thousands of square miles . . . retain this flatness. In the Llano Estacado or Staked Plains of Texas and New Mexico an area of 20,000 square miles is almost untouched by erosion. North of that [landmark], the drainage from the mountains is directly eastward across the best of the High Plains and the original flat is preserved only between streams.5

For the Llano Estacado, geography fashioned “a land so level that the elevation differentiation” hardly exceeds “ten feet per mile.” What limited rain nature benevolently bestows on the Llano and the plains country of West Texas occurs “in the late spring and summer, with winter [being] the driest season.” In a cyclical pattern of several years, “below-average rainfall” results in severe drought. Conversely, at various times in a single year, “destructive” hail storms disrupt the monotony of the region. Such “capriciousness of moisture and warm temperatures” transformed the Llano Estacado and the adjoining terrain into a land of grass and scrub brush. The conspicuous absence of “vertical obstructions,” like hills and trees, permits the north wind to sweep across the Staked Plains and adjacent environment with tremendous velocity. In winter, “sub-zero air from the Rockies” can force temperatures to drop rapidly within hours. These “blue northers” escort “high winds and may carry moisture or may be dehydrated,” causing them to absorb “all available water” in their pathway. Another “storm characteristic” of the Llano in winter is a “catastrophic blizzard,” accompanied by extremely cold temperatures and strong winds that spread snow and ice across the flat landscape.6

SPANIARDS ENCOUNTER THE LLANO ESTACADO

In the first half of the sixteenth century, within two generations after Columbus’s voyage of encounter with the Americas, the Spaniards came into this vast grassland devoid of trees. An initial contributor to the legacy of sporadic Hispanic presence in the region was Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. Shipwrecked on the Texas coast, enslaved by nomadic Indian tribes, Cabeza de Vaca and three companions ultimately escaped from captivity in 1534. Meandering through the wilderness of Texas, these Spanish sojourners trudged in a northwesterly direction, guided by the sun and the stars, through the High Plains and the Llano Estacado.7

Beside the level terrain, seemingly without end, their encounter with the cibola, an animal with “small horns like the cows of Morocco,” definitely impressed the wanderers. Núñez Cabeza de Vaca later described these animals in his published Relación. Their hair, he wrote, was “very long and flocky like Merinos’ [wool]” and their meat tasted “finer and better than the beef” of Iberia. Avowing that the numerous herds of cibola had migrated “from as far away as the seacoast of Florida,” Don Alvar noted that they grazed “over a tract of more than 400 leagues.”8

An oral tradition inspired by “four ragged castaways” about their adventures in the interior of the continent, reinforced later by the leader’s published Relación, describing fabled lands and civilizations, compelled Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza in Mexico City to consider seriously the obligation of investigating the truth of this wonderland. In search of seven Cities of Cibola, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado led a magnificent cavalcade of explorers through the arid lands of the Southwest and ultimately to the eastern edge of the Llano Estacado. Frustrated in their initial quest for great riches but motivated to discover a Gran Quivira, reportedly located east of the Rio Pecos, in the spring of 1541 the Captain General sent the main contingent of his army back to the Rio Grande while he and a small unit of cavalry, riding the best horses and guided by natives and a compass, entered an “essentially treeless but beleaguered land.”9

Accustomed to modest prairies in Spain, these explorers who felt uncomfortably confined by the wilderness were shocked by the
relatively flat terrain of the Staked Plains. Pedro de Castañeda, renowned chronicler of the expedition, described the vastness of the plains environment that simply overwhelmed them.

Now we will speak of the plains. The country is spacious and level, and is more than 400 leagues [1040 miles] wide in the part between the two mountain ranges . . . No settlements were seen anywhere on these plains.

In traversing 250 leagues [650 miles], the other [eastern] mountain range was not seen, nor a hill nor a hillock which was three times as high as a man. Several lakes were found at intervals; they were round as plates; a stone’s throw or more across, . . . The grass grows tall near these lakes; away from them it is very short, a span or less. The country is like a bowl, so that when a man sits down, the horizon surrounds him all around at the distance of a musket shot. . . .

As the riders approached the barrancas of the Llano Estacado, erratic depressions in the terrain created by countless years of gradual erosion, Castañeda complained about the region’s sparse natural resources.

There are no groves of trees except at the rivers, which flow at the bottom of some ravines where the trees grow so thick they were not noticed until one was right on the edge of them. They are of dead earth. There are paths down into these [barrancas], made by the cows [bison] when they go to the water, which is essential throughout these plains.
As Coronado's explorers penetrated the Great Plains province in search of Quivira, they frequently encountered immense herds of bison the chronicler off-handedly called "cows."

Another thing worth noticing is that the bulls traveled without cows in such numbers that nobody could have counted them. . . . The country they travelled over was so level and smooth that if one looked at them the sky could be seen between their legs, so that if some of them were at a distance they looked like smooth-trunked pines whose tops joined, and if there was only one bull it looked as if there were four pines. When one was near them, it was impossible to see the ground on the other side of them. . . .

The flatness of the terrain exasperated Casañeda: "It is impossible to find tracks in this country, because the grass straightened up again as soon as it was trodden down." Exasperation often turned to panic whenever members of the expedition became separated from the main party. Casañeda reported that . . . many of [the] men who went hunting got lost and were unable to return to the camp for two or three days. They wandered from place to place without knowing how to find their way back. . . . It must be remarked that since the land is so level, when they had wandered aimlessly until noon, following the game, they had to remain by their kill, without straying, until the sun began to go down in order to learn which direction they then had to take to get back to their starting point. . . .

DERIVATION OF "LLANO ESTACADO"

The name Llano Estacado, which Coronado's explorers ostensibly applied to the physiography, has eluded precise interpretation. Herbert Eugene Bolton, founder of the Spanish borderlands school of historiography, suggested that as sixteenth century explorers descended from the highlands of present-day eastern New Mexico, they viewed in the distance an "imposing line of rampart-like cliffs" that projected upon the "vast land expanse ahead of them" the visual effect of a Llano Estacado or Stockaded or Palisaded Plain. Anglo Americans at a later time incorrectly translated Llano Estacado into "Staked Plains," which completely missed the subtle point of the Spaniards' designation. Another explanation, provided by Noel M. Loomis, alluded to a practical solution to the worrisome problem of safeguarding the army's horses. Normally in a region of varied geographic environment, Spanish pioneers secured their remounts "with the aid of the topography," but in the flatness of the Plains they used stakes to tether their horses.16

Still a third authority, H. Bailey Carroll, persuasively reasoned that differences had evolved over the meaning or application of the word estacado, which he interpreted "as staked, enclosed with stakes, palisaded, or possibly stockaded." The significance of Carroll's perspective is that Spanish contributions to place-name geography across the Staked Plains emanated from New Mexico rather than Texas. Not without merit was his explanation that the original nomenclature might have been Llano Destacado, destacada being the past participle of the verb destacar, "to detach from the main body of which it is a part." As applied to the Llano Estacado or Staked Plains, a more pragmatic definition seemed appropriate: "to emboes, to elevate, to stand out, or to raise." Admittedly, as Carroll conceded, while the application of destacar or destacada was not, strictly speaking, an acceptable literary form, to Hispanic explorers or wanderers, confronted by the reality of the cultural geography, the outcome was functional frontier Castilian. In popular usage, New Mexican sojourners, inclined to slur the initial consonant "d," altered the term to estacado.17

Finally, a fourth explanation, attributable to Casañeda of the Vásquez de Coronado expedition, stemmed from an ingenious method used by the Indians they called Teyas to guide the army across the Llano Estacado on its return trip from the nonexistent Gran Quivira.
Their method of guiding was as follows: early in the morning they watched where the sun rose, then, going in the direction they wanted to take they shot an arrow, and before coming to it they shot another over it, and in this manner they traveled the day . . .

LATE COLONIAL EXPLORATION OF THE LLANO ESTACADO

The termination of Vásquez de Coronado's entrada into the northern wilderness effectively closed the Age of Aggressive Conquest, and was followed by a half century of slow, methodical exploration, colonization, and expansion in the central corridor of colonial Mexico, bordered by the eastern and western ranges of the Sierra Madre.

Before the close of the sixteenth century, other Hispanic entradas (Rodríguez-Sánchez Chamuscado in 1580; Antonio de Espejo in 1581; and Gaspar Castaño de Sosa in 1590) approached the western slope of the Llano Estacado by way of the Tierra Blanca Creek route. In varying degrees each expedition blazed new trails, demonstrating in the process the existence of three corridors of ingress and egress with sources of water: 1) the Canadian River route; 2) El Paso del Norte over to the Río Pecos and east to the Edwards Plateau country; and 3) through the Bosque Redondo by way of present-day Portales, New Mexico, to the Staked Plains.

Regardless of the avenue of approach, when these intrepid explorers reached the Plains of West Texas, the levelness of the Llano Estacado made a profound impression upon their awareness of the cultural geography. “These were not ordinary men,” concluded Frederick W. Rathjens, “but were men of experience—urbane explorers.” As evidenced by extant written records, the semiarid nature of the West Texas Plains did not startle their urbanity; rather, it was the vastness of the terrain, the incredible levelness of the topography, the innumerable herds of bison, and the Indians of the Plains that elevated the Spaniards’ sensitive awareness.

By the transitional years inaugurating the seventeenth century, Spanish frontiersmen out of New Mexico, knowledgeable from experience about the location of infrequent watering places, crossed the West Texas Plains in pursuit of elusive goals that did not include permanent settlement. Don Juan de Oñate, colonizer of New Mexico, emulating Vásquez de Coronado except in fanfare and pageantry, entered the High Plains region in 1601 in search of the mythical Gran Quivira. Oñate’s entourage comprised more than seventy men, carefully “picked and well-equipped,” a remuda in excess of seven hundred horses and mules, six carretas plus two additional carts loaded with four artillery pieces, all drawn by mules, and sufficient teamsters to oversee the transport of “necessary baggage.” In an official report to the government, Oñate recalled that

At the entrance of the plains called Cibola, . . . we found it hard to move the carts, but crossed this difficult pass without trouble through the skill of the good soldiers in charge and reached some very extensive and delightful plains, where we could not even see any mountain range like those we have passed.

Awed by the countless bison, Oñate, like explorers of a half century before, expressed amazement at the environment.

Proceeding on our way . . . we saw the first of the monstrous Cibola cattle, [of] which, although they are extremely fleet, we . . . killed four or five bulls, which caused great rejoicing. On the following day, marching ahead, we saw large herds of bulls and cows. From there on we found so many of them that it will be difficult for anyone who has not seen them to believe it, for according to the guess of everyone in the army, wherever we went we saw as many cattle every day as one finds on the largest cattle ranches in New Spain. They were so tame that unless chased or frightened they stood still and did not run away.
Scion of a Zacatecas family, where silver mining and cattle raising were complimentary enterprises, Onate described the cibolo in great detail.

The meat of these cattle is far superior to our own beef. These animals are very fat, particularly the cows. We learned by experience that one does not tire of their meat as of ours, nor is it in the least harmful.

These cattle are all brown in color, . . . their shape is so amazing that we cannot help but believe that it is the result of the crossing of different animals.24

With the conclusion of the Onate expedition, a lengthy period of Spanish exploration in the northern borderlands ended. Their experiences, recorded in a corpus of documentary sources, constituted a frame of reference that succeeding generations could consult.

CHRISTIANIZATION AND ECONOMIC RECONNAISSANCE

Throughout the seventeenth century, other expeditions, less magnificent than Onate’s but all the same led by redoubtable frontiersmen, continued traversing the High Plains and the Llano Estacado. In 1629, for example, in response to solicitations from Jumano Indians of the lower Texas plains, Franciscan missionaries from Isleta in central New Mexico resolved to explore the region east of the Pecos for the purpose of enticing natives to exchange a nomadic existence for the security of structured pueblo life. Consequently two missionaries, Friars Juan de Salas and Diego López, accompanied by three soldiers, followed Jumano emissaries to their tribal homeland along the Río Concho to recruit neophytes for Mission San Isidro in New Mexico. Within the short span of three years, the Jumano neophytes abandoned the routine of mission life and migrated back to the Texas plains. In 1632, hoping to persuade at least a few Jumanos to return to Mission San Isidro, Friar Salas briefly visited the Río Concho basin before retreating to New Mexico. Another friar, Juan de Ortega, showing a bit more determination, stayed six months among the Jumanos before returning to the sedentary native cultures of the Río Grande. For the next eighteen years, Franciscan missionary contact with the Jumanos of Texas remained a dormant issue with leaders of church and state.25

Meanwhile, unrelated to Spanish attempts to convert the Jumanos, in 1634, Captain Alonso de Vaca led a troop of soldiers out of Santa Fe and traveled eastward for approximately three hundred leagues in search of Gran Quivira. Using the Canadian River as a route of penetration, de Vaca meandered across much of the Llano Estacado, subsisting mainly on cibolo meat. Disappointed and exhausted, Alonso de Vaca’s party headed back to New Mexico.26

After 1634 New Mexican leaders, preoccupied with more demanding problems of defense and survival, generally ignored the mystery of the Llano Estacado. During a lull in frontier administration in 1650, Governor Hernando de la Concha assigned two army captains, Hernán Martín and Diego del Castillo, to conduct exploration of the Río Concho basin at the “southern extension” of the Great Plains province. Accompanied by soldiers and Christian Indians, the captains blazed a different route than that of previous expeditions until they arrived at the Concho, homeland of the Jumanos, where the Spanish New Mexicans found pecan trees along the river banks and shells in the water containing pearls of modest quality. Inspired by dual motives of curiosity and economics, the Martín-Castillo group followed the Río Concho for a distance and then plodded eastward to the humid timberlands inhabited by the Tejas Indians who practiced a combination of planting and hunting. Their curiosity satisfied, the explorers retraced their route to the Concho and then traversed the lower Plains back to Santa Fe.27

The report of the Martín-Castillo entrada, personally carried to Mexico City by the robust captains and Franciscan leader Fray Antonio de Aranda, greatly stimulated the interest of vice-regal officials. Within a relatively short period,
uncharacteristic of bureaucratic momentum, Viceroy Luis Enríquez de Guzmán, Conde de Alba de Liste, instructed Governor de la Concha to dispatch a new exploratory entrada to assess “the country, its people, and its resources.” Accordingly, in 1654, a sizeable contingent of thirty soldiers and two hundred Christian Pueblo auxiliaries followed Sergeant Major Diego de Guadalajara over the same route blazed by the Martín-Castillo expedition to the Río Concho. After establishing temporary field headquarters among the Jumanos, Guadalajara sent a smaller patrol to explore the surrounding territory. Commanded by Captain Andrés López, the subordinate unit consisted of twelve Spanish soldiers and a number of Pueblo warriors and Jumano allies. Moving east from the Concho the party confronted native resistance at a ranchería inhabited by aggressive Cuitaos who blocked the Spaniards’ advance. In an ensuing battle, Captain López’s superiority of weapons and manpower defeated the Cuitaos who promptly surrendered. In the form of reparations, the López party seized “many bundles of deer and buffalo skins” and rejoined Guadalajara at the Río Concho.

The principal objective of the expedition having been fulfilled, the sergeant major, fearful of an Indian response, ordered his soldiers and Pueblo auxiliaries to prepare for the return trip to Santa Fe, leaving behind the Jumanos at their tribal grounds of the Río Concho. Notwithstanding their brevity, the two expeditions provided the Spaniards of New Mexico with better understanding and knowledge of the land and of the Jumanos and their distant neighbors, the Tejas.

Conceivably during the decades of the 1660s and 1770s, although documentary records are unavailable, Hispanic New Mexicans sporadically maintained contact with the Jumano Indians. Quite plausibly the Hispanics who frequented the Río Concho basin for trade and friendship conducted their visits in relative safety. These expeditions, small and unimpressive in comparison to wilderness pageants of earlier years, served as important barometers, according to Frederick W. Rathjen, of both Spanish exploration skills and Spanish knowledge of the region. The thoroughness of the Spaniards’ geographic understanding “is indicated by the fact that in order to cross the Llano Estacado, knowledge of fresh water holes was imperative—and the Spaniards crossed the Staked Plains at will.”

**MILITARY EXPEDITIONS**

In the following decade, the violence and destruction of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 temporarily ruptured Spanish contact with the Plains of West Texas. In 1683 a baptized Jumano Indian, Don Juan Sabaeta, arrived at El Paso del Norte, capital of New Mexico’s colony-in-exile, requesting Hispanic assistance for his people. Besides missionaries, Sabaeta asked Governor Domingo Cruzate for trade and military protection against hostile Apache foes. The next year a joint military-missionary entrada (directed by Captain Juan Domínguez de Mendoza and Fray Nicolás López) reopened contact with the Jumanos of the Concho River in the Edwards Plateau region. Unfortunately, Spanish officials viewed a sudden French encroachment on the Texas coastlands during the midpoint of the decade a higher priority than assistance to the Jumanos and responded to the French challenge by establishing a network of Franciscan missions in central and east Texas.

Meanwhile, on the northern extremity of the borderlands, it was not until Don Diego de Vargas reconquered New Mexico in 1692, suppressing the final embers of Pueblo insurrection in 1696, that Spanish authorities once more could devote partial attention to the High Plains region. Diego de Vargas’s completion of the reconquest of New Mexico, on the threshold of eighteenth-century Bourbon rule in Spain, constituted a dramatic shift in colonial claim and control of the Staked Plains. Although the shift required several years before Hispanic frontier leaders discerned the change, its modified but permanent character emerged by 1700 in the form of “an odd dichotomy” of beneficial trade counterbalanced by aggressive defensive warfare.
Admittedly, the “odd dichotomy” originated in the seventeenth century, but it generated the greatest concern for frontier Hispanics in the eighteenth century with a combination of French intrusion and Indian aggression fomented by Comanches who appropriated the South Plains as their tribal territory. Pushed out of the Panhandle Plains, Lipan Apaches, who depended on the cibolo for subsistence, migrated eastward and southward until their hunting forays brought them into contact and conflict with Spanish settlements in Texas and Coahuila.33

Aside from punitive campaigns against hostile Indians, such as the retaliatory warfare New Mexico Governor Pedro Rodríguez Cubero directed against Apache strongholds in the Panhandle, Spaniards stayed away from the Staked Plains country. Notwithstanding the New Mexicans’ limited successes against their Native opponents, the sporadic conflict continued. Compounding the situation for Hispano leaders in both New Mexico and Texas was the threat of Comanche warfare. In fact, the severity of Comanche raiding intensified throughout the middle decades of the eighteenth century, accentuated occasionally by periods of erratic peace during which Native raiders traded stolen goods and human captives at concealed contact points along water courses and eastern canyons of the Llano Estacado as well as other locations in West Texas.34

**COMMUNICATION LINKS ACROSS THE LLANO ESTACADO**

Although the Treaty of Paris of 1763, which changed boundaries in North America, eliminated France as a colonial power, conceding to Spain the territory west of the Mississippi River plus the city of New Orleans, the Hispanics’ problems with Indian hostilities in the borderlands remained unresolved. In an arc that stretched from New Mexico to Texas the villas of Santa Fe and San Antonio de Béxar constituted terminal points in the defense structure. Prominently located within were the High Plains and the Llano Estacado. Hispanic leaders generally acknowledged the necessity of establishing communication linkages between the two provinces; they also perceived the Comanche barrier as a threat to the prospect of opening another branch of el camino real to connect Santa Fe with San Antonio.35

Beginning in 1786, to demonstrate that the Comanche barrier could be penetrated, Pedro Vial, a Hispanicized Frenchman, conducted three expeditions “designed to establish direct routes” between the two provinces. A contemporary participant, José Mares, a retired corporal from New Mexico, traversed the Llano Estacado in an effort to shorten the trail Vial had blazed earlier. Other Hispanics also approached the Staked Plains country in the twilight years of the eighteenth century and the initial decade of the nineteenth century—not to search for settlement sites but to explore potential routes of travel between New Mexico and Texas. For instance, cavalrmen Santiago Fernández and Francisco Xavier Fragoso, accompanied by three New Mexicans, escorted Pedro Vial through the Llano Estacado on a return trip from Santa Fe to San Antonio. In 1808, to reinforce frontier defenses of Spanish Texas, sexagenarian Captain Francisco Aman­gual, commanding a force of two hundred men on a tour of peace, traveled around the eastern slope of the Llano Estacado to the Canadian River and ultimately arrived in Santa Fe.36

The foregoing expeditions illustrated that Hispanics possessed a great deal of applied knowledge of borderlands geography, particularly about the West Texas Plains and the Llano Estacado. José Mares apparently was the first Hispanic New Mexican to penetrate the Llano since the Martín-Castillo entrada of 1650. A span of 137 years to the contrary, the Llano Estacado continued to intrigue but not to discourage a new generation of Spanish frontiersmen.37

**CORRECTING THE MYTH OF HISPANIC FAILURE**

At various times throughout the colonial period, Hispanics, with discretion, traversed the vast expanse of the West Texas Plains. To be
sure, they never established permanent settlements, but not because they lacked initiative, imagination, or courage. Rather, they avoided the uninviting region because of the absence of dependable and plentiful sources of water and on account of the exposed, unprotected nature of the terrain. In contrast to Frederick W. Rathjen, who acknowledged both virtues and failings of Spanish frontier folk in the West Texas Plains, Walter Prescott Webb and other scholars have not been so sensitive. In his celebrated treatise, The Great Plains, Webb unabashedly proclaimed:

In surveying the Spanish activities in the Great Plains region from 1528 to 1848, the end of the Spanish-Mexican régime, it becomes clear that the Spaniards enjoyed unusual success as explorers, but that they were notably unsuccessful as colonists. Their lack of success has often been attributed to conditions in Europe or to some defect in the Spanish colonial system. A reexamination of the evidence seems to indicate that the Spanish failure to take and hold the Great Plains may be attributed . . . to the nature of the problems found within the country, and not to the European situation . . .

Regarding the Spaniards' response to Indians, Webb concluded: “At the end of the Spanish régime the Plains Indians were more powerful, far richer, and in control of more territory than they were at the beginning of it. The problem of subduing them had to be solved by another race.”

Another writer, J. Evetts Haley, conceded to Spanish frontiersmen one lone virtue, a lusty vigor that derived from their dependence on red meat.

Before the coming of the cowboy, before the buffalo hunters straggled in, and even before the earliest Anglo-American explorers came, the Panhandle of Texas was known to the Spaniard and the Mexican. To the plains, the Spanish buffalo hunters or ciboleros came annually from the little New Mexican vil-

lages shut off from the rest of the world, and hunted, not with high-powered rifles, but with betasseled lances and fleet ponies. Thus they put up their winter's meat, and at times brought hard-baked loaves of bread and other articles to trade with the Indians. But the more extensive trading was the work of the Indian traders—the Comancheros.

Statements such as the foregoing definitely compounded the myth that Hispanics lacked determination and fortitude to succeed as settlers on the Staked Plains. Admittedly during the Spanish colonial period, settlers either out of Texas or New Mexico manifested a reluctance to occupy land in the region, owing to the desolate isolation, lack of reliable water, and in the later decades of the eighteenth century, Comanche hostility. Notwithstanding such hesitance, their resolve to crisscross the Llano Estacado left ample evidence of their transitory presence in other ways. “The most obvious remnants of Spanish occupation in the Southwest,” avowed Andrés Tijerina, “are the artifacts, words, and customs.”

While words and customs may vary from one generation to the next, geography retains a clear measure of the Hispanic past in such names as: Agua Corriente (running water), Alamocitos (little cottonwoods), Cañón Casas Amarillas (yellow cliffs like city walls canyon), Cañón de la Punta de Agua (source of water canyon), Cañón de Rescate (ransom negotiations—between Indian traders and Hispanos—canyon), Cañón Frío (cold water draw), Cañón Tierra Blanca (white earth draw), Laguna Plata (silvery reflection in water), Los Escarbados (diggings or scrapings), Los Tules (reeds) Canyon, Palo Duro (hard or dry wood) Canyon, Sierrita de la Cruz (little hill of the cross), Tascosa (actually Atascosa, a boggy or muddy place), and several others.

Indicative of the colonial activity that contributed to place-name geography was an “old Spanish armor” found near the western slope of the Llano Estacado in 1870. U.S. Army Captain John G. Bourke, recipient of the artifact, speculated on its origin: “This armor was simple in style and construction and no doubt once
covered the body of a Spanish or Mexican foot-soldier, who must have lost his life while on some expedition of discovery or war, years and years ago.” Bourke concluded:

The age of his armor I never could learn; it was of the style used by the infantry in the 17th and 18th century, but may have been of any period prior to our occupation of Texas and New Mexico. Its preservation from rust is attributable to the extremely dry climate of the staked plains, where rain falls so seldom.\footnote{Bourke, "The Land," 1973, 2: 90.}

### The Beginning of Permanent Hispanic Settlement

Shortly after the end of the American Civil War, the national government assigned cavalry units to placate Indians in the Trans-Mississippi West. As the threat of Indian hostility subsided, Hispanics out of New Mexico began to migrate into the High Plains and the Llano Estacado of West Texas, first in search of grazing land and then as permanent settlers. Coincidental with the arrival of Captain Bourke and his soldiers in New Mexico, signaling the advent of peace, the Cabeza de Baca brothers, Aniceto, Pablo, and Simón, from Upper Las Vegas, descended the highlands, crossed the Río Pecos, and ascended the Llano Estacado with their combined flocks of “half a million head of sheep in the 1870s.”\footnote{Bourke, "The Land," 1973, 2: 90.} Thus began the serious occupation of the West Texas Plains by Hispanic homesteaders. By the turn of the century, Hispanic presence in the region denoted survival of a hardy people who, like José Ynocencio Romero, represented the next generation of sheepmen to remain on the Staked Plains.\footnote{The author wishes to express his deep gratitude to Professors Frederick W. Rathjen and Garry L. Nall of West Texas State University at Canyon for their helpful assistance with perspectives and materials for this essay.

11. Ibid., pp. 5-6.
12. Ibid., pp. 5-6.


23. Expedition to the North, 1601: Faithful and True Report of the Events that took Place on the Entrada Made by the Adelantado and Governor, Don Juan de Oñate, in the Name of His Majesty, from These First Settlements of New Mexico Toward the North in this Year of 1601, in Hammond and Rey, Don Juan de Oñate (note 22 above) 2: 749-50.

24. Ibid., p. 750.


27. Ibid., pp. 204-5.

28. Ibid., p. 206.


30. Ibid., p. 68.


35. Loomis and Nasatir, Pedro Vial (note 16 above), pp. 461, 534.

36. Rathjen, Texas Panhandle Frontier (note 21 above), pp. 77-81.


44. Henry Charles Miller, “The Role of Water in the Settlement of the Llano Estacado” (Master’s the­sis, University of Texas at Austin, 1960), p. 179.