

The Joy and Perils of Historical Research: A Short Story of Searching Out the 1559 Luna Expedition to la Florida

by

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In the many decades that I have been searching out the truths and details of the Don Tristán de Luna Expedition to la Florida, it has been my fortune to have experienced the many pleasures of visiting archives and libraries in the United States, Europe, Mexico, and the Caribbean. Such visits have proffered many adventures, meetings, conversations, and dining with other scholars and researchers as well as the “local peoples” of many wonderful cities and towns. It has truly been experiences I will treasure the rest of my life. In fact, some of these “experiences” have almost cost me that life! (Avoid “desolate” alleys and short cuts at all times, even in the daytime!)

But one of the most “memorable” research experiences took place back in my home town of Pensacola. It was when almost went blind.

Background

One of the volumes that I had The Library of Congress microfilm for me ca. 2003, was written by a Dominican fray in 1596.¹ It concerns the history of the Dominican Order in Mexico during the 16th century, and includes many chapters that relate to their activities in the exploration and proselytizing by the 1559 Luna Expedition around Pensacola. It is titled *Historia de la Fundación y Discurso de la Provincia de Santiago de México de la Orden de Predicadores por las vidas de sus varones insignes y casos notables de Nueva España*, The University of West Florida Special Collections has a 1625 edition that I had perused many times, but I had learned that one needed to go back to the original volumes as subsequent volumes could have printing errors. Such errors even included important phrases accidentally omitted by the “uneducated type-setters” in the printing houses.² The

¹ This volume was donated to The Library of Congress by the late 19th century-early 20th century scholar Woodbury Lowery. See *Spanish Settlements in North America*, two volumes.

² Dávila Padilla, *Historia*, 1596, *Errata*.

awkward attempts at translating the old Spanish gave clues that something was awry or missing. (The original microfilm copy cost me over \$800.00; subsequent copies of the copy, only around \$50.00). Eventually, I did a word for word comparison and translation of the relevant chapters to ensure the best accuracy possible. This experience—and several similar ones--also helped me realize that one must not just rely on translations, interpretations, or cites by both older and modern scholars, but that I must try to seek out original documents and printed volumes and re-check cites and translations when possible. And because many volumes I needed to peruse are printed in Spanish and were located in Europe and not yet available on the Internet or found in The Library of Congress, etc., it behooved me to purchase such volumes when possible, especially those containing thousands of pages sans an index to assist. In my many visits to Europe, etc., most of the time you can only afford to search out and procure copies of “suspect” resources--for the time to actually peruse and translate properly all the information could take weeks if not months. Thus, while my personal library of old and rare volumes grew, my bank account dwindled quickly.

The Event

Therefore, great care and a lot of time in “pulling the trigger” on purchasing expensive, suspect volumes is always a great challenge and sometimes takes years to make the ultimate decision. Risking \$5,000 on “suspect” volumes seems more like a game played in Las Vegas than the annals of historical research, but in reality, the costs associated to properly view the volumes in Paris or Madrid was much, much more. The relaxing atmosphere and unlimited time of reading or perusing volumes at my leisure back in my Pensacola home with a glass of wine a much better idea, and very cost effective in the long run. The results can only validate the choice.

Such was the case concerning five volumes written and printed between 1587 and 1619. They concern the history of the Dominican Order in Castile. One’s naive look at their titles would indicate that the volumes had no relevance to the Dominican Order in Mexico or North America and the lack of their existence in the Library of Congress or other New World libraries a good hint of their non-relevance. However, I had found out via another Dominican volume that once a fray professed in a convent in Spain, he was part of their history no matter where a particular fray traveled or ended up dying. And since most of the New World frays prior to 1555 and the opening

of the University of Mexico professed in Spain, it was probable that the pages of these volumes might reveal previously unknown information about particular frays and their participation in the settlement of the New World.

Around 2004, I had been able to first view these Spanish volumes in the Bibliotheque Francois-Mitterrand in Paris, but only for a few minutes, as my co-researcher--genealogists Jérôme Malache and I--had other more “important volumes” to tackle at the time. Once back in the United States, I was eventually able to find a set of these volumes for sale--via an international book site--located in a small bookstore in Paris, but at the price of \$4,000. With curiosity, I had Jérôme visit the bookstore and preview the volumes, especially their physical condition. If I was going to risk the purchase, at least the volumes needed to be in good condition and re-saleable. But as Jérôme is a native Parisian and did not speak or read Spanish well, the contents of the volumes were foreign to him. I thanked Jérôme for his visit and moved on to other research endeavors.

After several years and more successful visits to French archives and to Santo Domingo, my curiosity was piqued again about the Spanish volumes. This time, I just decided to go ahead and “pull the trigger.” My research was getting more intense and expansive, and not knowing what was in the volumes becoming a distraction. My research endeavors had been very successful and I felt like that I was on some sort of “Blues Brother Mission” and would not fail.³ I needed the volumes, so I sent the funds to the small bookstore and my newly purchased treasures soon arrived to Pensacola, safely packed and secure. Now it was time to see if my hunch was going to pay off or that I was just the proud owner of some rare Spanish books—or perhaps both if I was lucky. After only a few minutes of perusal, I realized I had struck gold and in a big way. The information and insight into Mexican frays and the events that helped shape their lives and interaction amongst the Mexican populace was invaluable in understanding the history of that period.

For the next 45 days or so I was very excited and could hardly put the volumes down, wiping my excited sweaty hands on my knees. While wearing gloves would have “protected” the razor thin and delicate pages

³ *The Blues Brothers* is a 1980 American musical comedy film directed by John Landis. It stars John Belushi as 'Joliet' Jake **Blues** and Dan Aykroyd as his **brother** Elwood. The brothers—both ex-cons--are sent by “God” on a wild mission to financially save the Catholic orphanage they were raised from closing down.

from my perspiration, the books were now mine and turning the pages bare handedly was more secure from ripping pages than with an awkward glove. Besides, I was old enough to have had a small pox shot as well as many other immunizations against old diseases that might have lain dormant in the 500-year-old books. But of course, such rationalization is more of a joke or wives tale amongst scholars who have ever smelled aged documents being pulled out of storage boxes. The musty odor is, indeed, unforgettable, as one might experience opening an old, used casket.

After weeks of the intense research and writing down my translations into English, I was violently woken up from a deep sleep early one Thursday morning with the most piercing pain to my hands and my knees. It was crippling and the agony much, much more intense than when I had broken both legs in one accident. I do not remember how long my knees were forcefully bent and the fingers of my hands withdrawn into crumpled claws, but my screams easily woke up my wife who tried to provide some comfort. After a very long while the pain subsided and all appeared well. We just chalked up the mid-night fright show to a different kind of severe muscle cramps I occasional experienced in my “healed legs” while sleeping. (Almost twenty years later, I still experience such cramps.)

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday came and went with no further issues, much less even thinking about that night. Monday morning preparing for my workday, I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and headed into work. The only problem was that the temporary fuzziness that one can experience by over rubbing your eyes, did not go away. It appeared that I was looking out through a dirty car windshield, and it was definitely not getting better; and perhaps worse. But I was not experiencing any pain or discomfort; just a dirty windshield.

Business was slow that Monday, so by mid-afternoon my mind had begun to actually worry about what might be going on. Years earlier, I had opted for RK (Radial Keratotomy) to correct my vision and perhaps I had inflamed the scar tissue on the corneas of my eyes or caused some sort of damage. I called Doc David Casey’s office and was able to squeeze in a visit late that afternoon.

So around 4 p.m., I found myself in the eye doctor’s chair with Doc Casey’s nurse doing some of the normal preliminary tests including discerning the pressures in each eye. She was cordial as always and showed no signs of

having seen any problems. She concluded her assessment with just your typical, “The doc will be in shortly. Always, good to see you.”

Doc Casey is an older ophthalmologist having graduated from John Hopkins University medical school in 1964, and even practiced in 3rd world countries earlier in his career. He had confronted many eye diseases and I respected his experience and thoroughly appreciated his kind demeanor and friendship.

Doc Casey came in to continue the exam, and we chatted about what had happened that Thursday night and what I was now experiencing. He repeated the eye pressure test—as always—and when he was finished with the exam, he quietly asked me to go outside and bide my time in his patient waiting room. He would recall me in a few minutes. I followed his orders, sat down, and began to read the best I could through my dirty windshields. I thought it a little unusual that I was the only patient in the room much less in the office, but I waited by myself accordingly. After around fifteen minutes or so, Doc Casey—followed by an entourage of nurses and assistants—quickly burst into the waiting room carrying a garbage can in one hand and a paper cup full of a potion in the other. He made quick time to where I was seated and ordered that I drink the concoction immediately, and that I could use the trash can to throw up in if I needed it. Understanding the immediacy of Doc Casey’s command, I quickly drank the concoction in a few gulps and with no upheaval desires. Doc said to give it a few minutes and I should literally see some results. He was right, and the dirty windshield began to clear up. After a while and explaining to me what had happened over the course of the last four days, and what he had just done for me, I left with words of his caution and a follow-up appointment for the next morning, I was soon driving my way back to work as “my crisis” appeared to be abating. I was seeing much clearer.

The medical books basically refer to this ocular manifestation as open-angle glaucoma (POAG). Normally, the regularly produced intraocular fluid within the eye is allowed to drain via the pupil and the trabecular meshwork behind the cornea to adjust the pressure within the eye. When this fluid cannot seep out due to a “clog,” the pressure builds up, which can result in acute glaucoma. Without immediate treatment, severe damage occurs to the optic disc resulting in blindness within days.

The normal pressures in the eyes averages around 17 psi, but can range as high as 20 or more if you have thick corneas like mine. But in this particular

instance, the pressure in my left eye was over 60 and my right eye 37 and quickly going up. Without Doc Casey's quick assessment and action I had been just minutes from severe internal eye injuries and going blind.

To the best of Doc Casey's assessment, it was determined that I had had a severe rheumatoid arthritic event manifesting within my knees and hands. The result was the deposit of certain marker platelets within the blood stream that began to circulate through the body over the next four days. Such platelets eventual entered the eye where they clogged the cornea and caused the hike in pressures, and produced the cloudy eyesight.

We all agreed that the volumes I had been reading were responsible for the crisis, but it was never determined--through testing--if it was the books themselves with dangerous inks and paper, or perhaps centuries-old mold that had found a lasting home within, that was the causation. In any case, the volumes are now safely kept in a separate plastic container. Subsequently, I was able to supplant the original volumes with modern facsimiles printed some years later, which allowed continued investigations.

With old documents and books, one might tempt fate and "smell the small pox spores" if you dare, but caution and a pair of white gloves seems a more wise approach; not for just protection of the original historic materials, but for the opportunity for a researcher to keep on reading further. I was very lucky Doc Casey was there for me!