

In Search of Cabeza de Vaca's Route across Texas: An Historiographical Survey

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Modern Texas history begins in November, 1528, when two makeshift barges bearing several dozen Spaniards landed west of Galveston island. Nearly eight years later, four survivors, destined to become famous as the four Ragged Castaways, arrived at Culiacán, a Spanish outpost near the Pacific coast of Mexico. If the overland route the four men traveled in traversing Texas can be determined with a high degree of certainty, the accounts written later by three of them will provide the earliest information on landforms, flora, and fauna in what was to become the Lone Star State. Historians, however, are in substantial disagreement over the path followed by the four Ragged Castaways across Texas. The purpose of this paper is to survey previous writing and to suggest the route interpretation that is most probably correct.

A brief outline of the circumstances that brought Spaniards to the Texas coast at that early date is essential to understanding events that transpired after the landing. The men were members of an expedition that had left Spain the previous year under the command of Pánfilo de Narváez. Narváez, a minor participant in the conquest of Mexico, had lost an eye and command of his army to Fernando Cortés, and in the early 1520s had returned to Spain seeking redress from the king. His efforts were finally rewarded with a royal patent to establish a colony in "Florida," a term applied to the Gulf coast stretching from the province of Pánuco in Mexico to the Florida peninsula. Don Pánfilo set sail from the mouth of the Guadalquivir River in Spain in June, 1527.

Narváez spent the fall and winter months in Cuba, where his expedition suffered losses as a result of desertions and a hurricane, and in April of 1528 he sailed with five ships and 400 men to the west coast of Florida, landing near Tampa Bay. There he decided to separate 300 men from the support ships and reconnoiter the land, despite protests from the expedition's treasurer, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who thought it foolish to leave the vessels. Narváez mistakenly believed that he was only a few leagues from the Pánuco River, when the actual distance was more than 1,500 miles via the coast. By mid-June of 1528, Narváez's overland expedition, in search of riches and an ideal location for a colony, had marched up the interior coast to northwestern Florida, where it remained for approximately three months. Faced with hostile natives and food shortages, Narváez elected to build improvised barges and to exit Florida by sea. His command, which had dwindled to less than 250 men, packed themselves into five craft and set out for Pánuco on September 22. The first month at sea went fairly well. Hugging the coast, the small flotilla approached the mouth of the

Mississippi river. On the thirty-first day, according to Cabeza de Vaca, troubles began. A storm caught the barges and tossed them like driftwood. Several days after passing the mouth of the great river, Narváez released his command with the advice that 'each must do as he thought best to save himself.' His own efforts, however, were insufficient: later his poorly anchored boat was blown into deep water off the Texas coast and presumably sunk. On November 6, 1528, the barge bearing Cabeza de Vaca and an undetermined number of other men landed near the western extremity of Galveston island. A second boat containing Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, his African-born slave Estevanico, Alonso Castillo Maldonado, and perhaps forty-five others had apparently landed nearby on the previous day, making them the first non-Indians in Texas.

There have been and are difficulties in projecting the path of the four survivors from the Galveston area to Culiacán—problems that will never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction, for no one can prove beyond a doubt the route taken on any part of the journey. It is the Texas portion of the odyssey, however, that has received by far the most attention. James A. Michener, for example, in his epic novel *Texas*, mapped the route of Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions from the Galveston area to El Paso, with virtually every mile of it in the Lone Star State. For purposes of fiction, Michener chose a nearly all-Texas route interpretation, one that is in agreement with an abundance of writing on the subject. But was the first leg of the overland trek, that from Galveston Bay to the environs of El Paso, wholly within the present borders of Texas, or did parts of it traverse northern Mexico? A totally trans-Texas route for the first segment of the overland march defies both logic and documentation. It defies logic in that the overall goal of the Narváez expedition from the time it left Florida was to reach Pánuco, not to explore the interior. It defies documentation in that it is frequently at variance with evidence in the two original accounts on which all route interpretations must ultimately rest.

Los Naufragios [Shipwrecks], as the work is generally known, was composed by Cabeza de Vaca, probably within two or three years after his trek ended in 1536, and published in 1542 at Zamora, Spain. A subsequent edition, with slight alterations, was printed at Valladolid, Spain, in 1555. A second document, commonly referred to as the Joint Report, or the Oviedo account, was drawn up in 1536 by Cabeza de Vaca, Dorantes, and Castillo in Mexico City for the Audiencia of Santo Domingo. It is presumed, since the original has never been found, that the version in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's *Historia general y natura de las Indias* is an amended account. A common failing among early students of the journey was to ignore the Oviedo account, or to disregard parts of both narratives and to send Cabeza de Vaca "where the route interpreter wanted him to go, not where. . .[he] plainly indicates that he went."

The two narratives, both of which were written from memory rather than field notes, deserve attention for several reasons. First, they are primary documents on the Indians of South Texas, for Cabeza de Vaca lived with natives of the region and survived to write about them. No other Spaniard was able to do this. He was also the only Spaniard to record the names of Indians in the area and to

locate them relative to each other. His accounts of the Mariames and Avavares, with whom he lived for about eighteen months and eight months, respectively, make them the best described Indians of southern Texas. In the words of T.N. Campbell and T.J. Campbell, "is cultural information quantitatively exceeds that of all his successors combined." Second, Cabeza de Vaca, Dorantes, Castillo, and Estevanico were the first non-Indians to set foot on the soil of the Lone Star State and the first to cross the North American continent. As noted above, if it can be determined *where* they went and *what* they saw, their experience can also supply valuable data on early Texas landforms, flora, and fauna. There are, for example, gross landscape features described in the narratives that ought to be identifiable. The initial landing was on an island off the Texas coast whose dimensions and location relative to another island and four successive streams were given; inlets (*ancones*) along the coast toward Pánuco were described; a river of nuts and extensive stands of prickly pear cactus were mentioned; a large stream comparable in width to the Guadalquivir River had to be crossed; and mountains near the coast that ran from the direction of the "North Sea" were observed soon after the river was forded. In reconstructing the most likely route on the basis of these narratives, one should be sensitive to the compatibility of biotic, ethnographic, and physiographic information. Not surprisingly, some writers have done a better job than others in correlating all the data.

First impressions in the United States of the Cabeza de Vaca journey came from translations of his narrative by Buckingham Smith (1851 and 1871), from a brief route interpretation by Hubert H. Bancroft (1884), and from the writings of Adolph Bandelier on the Spanish Southwest (1890). All three authors were generally vague in their assertions. Smith placed the initial landfall east of the Mississippi River in the environs of Mobile Bay. Bancroft did not give much credence to the narrative, regarding it as "fragmentary, disconnected, contradictory, and often unintelligible." But he positioned the first landing somewhere on the eastern coast of Texas, and he believed the overland passage started between Galveston and the San Antonio River, then continued "north-westward through Texas." Bandelier also regarded the narrative as confused and "unsatisfactory in precision and detail," not, however, because of intent to deceive, but because of adverse conditions that affected the writing. He believed the barges were grounded west of the Mississippi River on the coast of Louisiana, the castaways then wandered toward Texas and encountered the land of prickly pear cactus immediately west of the Sabine River. Bandelier identified four rivers crossed along an east to west route through Texas as the Trinity, Brazos, Colorado, and Río Grande; and he believed that the four pedestrians left the state at the junction of the Río Conchos and Río Grande.

Interest in the Cabeza de Vaca route was also reflected in the earliest issues of the *Quarterly* of the Texas State Historical Association. Beginning with volume 1 and continuing through volume 22, five route interpretations with a cumulative total of 319 pages of text were devoted to the topic. Later, in his presidential address to the Association, Thomas F. Harwood would remark that "no one subject [in Texas history] has inspired so many different local authors. . . ." After 1919 no other interpretative article on the Cabeza de Vaca journey appeared in

the Southwestern Historical Quarterly, but this did not mean that controversy had ended.

A substantial contribution to the Cabeza de Vaca route interpretation appeared in the *Quarterly* in 1898. Two undergraduates at the University of Texas, Miss Brownie Ponton and Bates McFarland, challenged the conclusions of “three eminent historians.” Ponton and McFarland gave credence to the Cabeza de Vaca narrative and believed that they could pinpoint the initial landing on the Texas coast. Cabeza de Vaca named the island where the barges first landed “Malhado” (Isle of Misfortune). Near Malhado and toward Pánuco were four successive streams, the second of which flowed directly into the gulf of Mexico without entering a bay. Ponton and McFarland believed Malhado to have been Galveston island and the waterways, Oyster Creek, the Brazos River, the San Bernard River, and Caney Creek. Their identification of the streams is beyond dispute. At no other place between the Río Grande and the Mississippi River is there even one river that flows directly into the Gulf.

After identifying the four waterways that were first crossed by the castaways, Ponton and McFarland admitted to problems in tracing the onward journey. They projected a trans-Texas route and believed the first mountains mentioned in the narratives to have been the southern limit of the Edwards Plateau on the San Antonio River, but they were unable to reconcile Cabeza de Vaca’s statement that information from Indians placed the mountains within fifteen leagues of the coast.

Oscar W. Williams offered a brief route refinement in volume 3 of the *Quarterly*. His article appeared without footnotes and was based primarily on personal knowledge of topography in southern Texas. Williams sought to establish the northern limits of prickly pear cactus stands and the southern boundaries of the buffalo range. The fruit of the cactus (tuna) was an important, seasonal staple in the diet of Coahuiltecan tribes; and it appears from the narratives that Cabeza de Vaca rarely encountered bison, for he mentioned seeing them only three times. Williams, like Ponton and McFarland, supported a trans-Texas passage, in the case based on floral and faunal evidence in the narrative.

In the same volume of the *Quarterly* there appeared a lengthy, four-part article by Bethel Coopwood. For the most part, Coopwood’s treatise on the journey of the castaways rambled badly, but in several instances he made significant contributions. Coopwood raised questions about Galveston island’s being Cabeza de Vaca’s Isle of Misfortune, for it is too wide and too long to fit the dimensions stated in the narrative; he deduced that trees along the river of nuts were pecan, not walnut as claimed by earlier writers; he was the first suggest that the large river crossed by Cabeza de Vaca and his companions was the lower Río Grande; he believed the first mountains encountered by the travelers to have been the Pamoranes of Nuevo León; and he established that the southern limits of the buffalo range extended into northern Coahuila. Once the castaways forded the Río Grande, Coopwood projected the possibility of two totally trans-Mexico routes. His preferred southern path has been labeled a

“bizarre scheme,” for it traversed virtually impassable mountains and denied that the men passed through Culiacán.

The flurry of publication on the Cabeza de Vaca route that had marked the first four volumes of the *Quarterly* then subsided for seven years. In 1907 James N. Baskett somewhat apologetically “ventured to submit yet another study of the journey.” Baskett recognized the importance of the shorter Joint Report as a complement to the Cabeza de Vaca narrative, arguing, as Oviedo had, that “the testimony of three, fresh from the scenes, is better than that of one, recorded some years later. . . .” Like Ponton and McFarland, he believed that Galveston island must have been the Spaniards’ Malhado.

After the initial landfall, two parties of Spaniards made their way along the Texas coast from the Galveston area toward Matagorda and Corpus Christi bays. Twelve or thirteen, including Dorantes, Castillo, and Estevanico, made the trek in the spring of 1529, followed by Cabeza de Vaca along a slightly more inland path in the winter of 1532-1533. Baskett, in tracing the first part of the overland journey, made an important contribution to route interpretation. From the Oviedo account he was able to differentiate Spanish terminology for bays, swamps, and inlets. The latter were then identified in sequence as Pass Cavallo, Cedar Bayou, and Aransas Pass. He also recognized the Guadalupe as the river of nuts where Cabeza de Vaca rejoined his companions, and he attempted an analysis of the complete route from the Texas coast to Culiacán. In dealing with the Texas journey beyond the Guadalupe River, Baskett lost focus. To his credit, he tried to correlate ethnographic information, but he was hampered by the dearth of reliable data on Texas Indians. He identified the Guadalquivir-like river as the Frio, and the mountains as the dissected Cambrian escarpment near Uvalde, Texas, dismissing Cabeza de Vaca’s remark that these mountains were fifteen leagues from the sea. In other instances when he could not reconcile the Texas landscape with the narrative, he hedged with statements such as: “I am inclined to believe that Cabeza [de Vaca] has erred here. . . .”

Following the appearance of Baskett’s article, a hiatus of eleven years ensued before the Southwestern historical *Quarterly* published a landmark, two-part study of the Cabeza de Vaca route by Harbert Davenport and Joseph K. Wells. “The First Europeans in Texas, 1528 – 1536” represented a synthesis of earlier works in the *Quarterly* and a careful correlation of *Nafragios* and the Joint Report; it was based on greater knowledge of the topography along the border of Texas and Mexico; and it incorporated the work of Herbert e. Bolton and his associates on Texas Indians. Davenport and Wells reconfirmed the first four streams crossed by the castaways and provided logical explanations for changes that had occurred in drainage channels over four centuries. They were the first to conjecture, correctly in this author’s opinion, that Cabeza de Vaca’s Malhado was a combination of present San Luis Island and Oyster Bay peninsula in the Brazosport area. Silting from the discharge of rivers and the impact of hurricanes, they argued, had turned what had been an elongated island in Cabeza de Vaca’s time into a peninsula. Once San Luis Island proper and Oyster Bay peninsula are connected, then the island described Cabeza de Vaca

as lying behind Malhado (toward Florida) becomes Galveston Island, and the reconstructed island is “just where Mal-Hado [*sic*] ought to be” relative to the four rivers.

Davenport and Wells agreed with Baskett’s identification of the inlets. They were also able to identify Mustang island and Corpus Christi Bay from the narratives and to confirm Baskett’s deduction that the Guadalupe was the river of nuts. From the Guadalupe River to the Land of Tunas the four men had traveled toward Pánuco for a distance of thirty or forty leagues, a journey that the Indian annually took along the coast near the end of May. The coastal route was favored by the Indians because they were able to drive deer into the sea and hold them there until they drowned. Significantly, after Cabeza de Vaca was reunited with Dorantes, Castillo, and Estevanico, the men planned their escape from the Land of Tunas at the end of summer, when the prickly pear cactus was playing out.

Location of the tuna region on the Texas coastal plain was therefore an important consideration. Davenport and Wells were aware that a great freeze in February, 1899, coupled with “root rot,” had thinned the prickly pear cactus stands just south of the Nueces River. Prior to 1899 a thick Land of tunas was located in the Texas counties of Kleberg, Jim Wells, Duval, Live Oak, and in a part of Nueces. South of this first region of tunas was a great sand plain not conducive to the growth of cactus. But beyond the sand plain a second stand of prickly pear cactus, even more abundant than the first, characterized vegetation along the lower Río Grande in Hidalgo, Starr, and Cameron counties.

As Davenport and Wells emphasized, to read the narratives is to be impressed with castaways’ determination to go forward toward Pánuco. It was to reach Pánuco that the Spaniards had built boats on the Florida coast, and toward that goal the survivors had moved down the Texas coast after landing near Galveston island. From the Land of Tunas, since the castaways were still intent on reaching Mexico, they must have crossed the Río Grande, the first river “in the direction of Mexico. . . which conceivably could be compared to the Guadalquivir at Sevilla.” And there is the matter of mountains, first observed soon after the castaways crossed a wide river. Indians informed the four men that these mountains were within fifteen leagues of the ocean. As mentioned earlier, Coopwood identified them as the Pamoranes, an outlying spur of the Cerralvo mountains in the Sierra Madre Oriental range.

The ethnographic information presented by Davenport and Wells is better than in previous route interpretations, thanks primarily to the work of Bolton on Texas Indian, but it is not convincing. In many instances, the Indian groups specifically named by Cabeza de Vaca were linked by the authors to later Indians of the coastal region on the basis of similar orthography and pure guesswork. The most notable contributions by the two men were to make plausible correlations with Texas land forms through a careful reading of *Naufragios* and the Oviedo account, and to stress the continued desire of the castaways to travel south toward the Christian community in Pánuco. Subsequent interpretations of the Cabeza de Vaca journey would have benefited from a careful consideration of

Davenport and Wells. Instead, writers over the next several decades followed a pattern already established in earlier volumes of the *Quarterly*. They traced a coastal route from Malhado to the Guadalupe River and then projected a westward journey across Texas, often without regard to topography or to the succession of facts stated in the narratives.

That trend received impetus in the 1930s from Robert T. Hill, a distinguished geologist, and Carlos E. Castaneda, an emerging Texas historian. Hill's work was triggered by publication in 1933 of *The Odyssey of Cabeza de Vaca*, by Morris Bishop. Bishop, a professor of romance languages at Cornell University, had been much impressed by Cabeza de Vaca's travels on two continents, and he had written a breezy narrative spiced with imaginary dialogue. The Cornell professor made no attempt to advance a new route interpretation but instead accepted the conclusions of Davenport and Wells, set forth some fourteen years earlier. The realization that a significant portion of Cabeza de Vaca's travels had been removed from Texas to Mexico proved intolerable for Hill.

Hill's talents and accomplishments in the field of Texas and Mexican geology and physiography were unexcelled. He had worked out the complex geology of the Austin area, giving name to the Balcones Escarpment in 1887, and had authored an impressive string of scientific publications. In 1931 Hill began a series of articles for the *Dallas Morning News*, commenting in Sunday editions on such a variety of topics as East Texas oil fields, archaeological sites, and alcoholic beverages. In 1933 and 1934 the noted geologist wrote twenty-two lengthy articles on the route of Cabeza de Vaca. At that time Hill was the retiring chairman of the cordilleran section of the Geological Society of America and was the elected president of the Texas Geographic Society. When he undertook the Cabeza de Vaca route interpretation he did so with the zeal of a true Texas nationalist.

For some years Hill had been convinced that all previous route interpretations by historians had been wrong. Why? Because "I personally was familiar with the geographic and geologic features of the countries throughout which the party traveled and the historians were not so." In his opening article, Hill likened the heresy of moving Cabeza de Vaca out of Texas to landing the Pilgrims in Canada or to placing John Smith and Pocahontas in Ohio. To accept the trans-Mexico route, he railed, was to take away "Cabeza's Texas citizenship," and he chastised the citizens of his adopted state for allowing themselves to "sit complacently by and see the very beginnings of our history taken from us, the scene of its story wrongly transferred across the Río Grande into a foreign country, Mexico. . . ." With great passion, Hill announced his goal in the forthcoming articles: "If there was but one thing left to do in this life for me, it would be to endeavor to relocate the scene of Cabeza's route upon the Texas map where it justly belongs, and from where it was most unjustly and wrongfully removed." The record, he vowed, must be set straight, and Cabeza de Vaca must be restored among the pantheon of heroes." That Hill succeeded in his mission is beyond dispute; that he could tell a difficult story in nearly two dozen

segments over ten months “so plain that even a child who runs may read it” was another matter.

Hill’s articles were occasionally learned discoursed on the geology of a particular region with little mention of Cabeza de Vaca and his companions, and they reflect a man who did not suffer indecision in advocating a trans-Texas route. Malhado, the coastal rivers, and the river of nuts, as accepted by Davenport and Wells, gave Hill no cause for concern. From the Guadalupe River, however, he projected a more northern route than had other writers. The factors that had determined the path of the castaways, Hill insisted, were physiographical, sources of water being the primary one, although he paid some attention to flora and fauna. He placed the Land of Tunas on the Washington prairies near the town sites of Washington, Brenham, Hallettsville, La Grange, Karnes City, and Helena. The large river like the Guadalquivir may have been the Colorado near Austin or the Guadalupe north of New Braunfels, and the first mountains were the Balcones Escarpment. In projecting a route close to Austin, Hill could not resist chiding the “learned professors” at the University of Texas who daily viewed a portion of Cabeza de Vaca’s journey, yet insisted that it lay in “distant Mexico.” From Austin or San Marcos, according to Hill, the path led to San Antonio, then westward to the mouth of Devils River, where it turned northward. Hill placed the first crossing of the Río Grande just west of the Chisos Mountains, followed by a quick recrossing of the river from the south at Presidio, Texas. Thus a tiny portion of the route identified by Hill did cross Mexican soil. Several months after his concluding article on Cabeza de Vaca, Hill offered a self-serving assessment of his own work. The lengthy title for his valedictory, probably chosen by the newspaper itself, was “Cabeza de Vaca Comes Back to Texas. This Time to Stay. His Texas route as Set Forth in The News is approved and vindicated.” The source of Hill’s elation was correspondence from an unnamed but “able professor of Latin American history at the University of Texas.” Professor X had informed the famous geologist that his route interpretation had been accepted by the department of history and was being taught in its classes. That news, confessed Hill, “filled my old heart with joy and excitement that it sent me to bed for twenty-four hours.”

Hill’s route interpretation was plausible, especially if one chose to ignore portions of the narratives and to concentrate on geographic and geologic determinants. The unspecified professor at the University of Texas was undoubtedly Charles W. Hackett, a Bolton-trained scholar. Hackett later directed the M.A. thesis (1939) of Albert C. Williams, entitled “The Route of Cabeza de Vaca in Texas: A Study in Historiography.” Williams accepted Hill’s route interpretation, regarding it as “fundamentally unitary in nature, being based upon the geological evidences primarily.” But the young student was somewhat troubled, admitting “that the route given by Davenport and Wells most nearly avoids contradiction of the literal wording of the *Relation*. . . .”

Another scholar at the University of Texas, soon to attain the rank of associate professor in the department of history, was Carlos E. Castaneda. In the first volume (1936) of his massive work, *Our Catholic heritage in Texas*, Castaneda

acknowledged the Davenport and Wells analysis as “the most detailed and scholarly.” Like Hill, he accepted their route interpretation as far as the Guadalupe river. For the remainder of the trek to el Paso, however, Castaneda essentially followed the journey as outlined a few years earlier in the *Dallas Morning News*. The fact that two scholars at the University of Texas had accepted the conclusions of Robert T. Hill was of great importance to the historiography of the Cabeza de Vaca odyssey. Hill’s articles have never been very accessible to scholars or the reading public, but Hackett and Castaneda have had a tremendous impact on the teaching and writing of Texas history. Through their lectures and publications, the blatant Texas nationalism of Hill influenced history textbooks read by thousands of Texas school children. And there was worse to come.

In 1940 Cleve Hallenbeck, a nonacademic historian, published the first book-length study of the Cabeza de Vaca route. His work consisted of three parts. Part 1 narrated the journey from Florida to Culiacán and Mexico city; Part 2 presented a new route interpretation across Texas; and Part 3 assessed the routes “traced by others.” Hallenbeck claimed firsthand knowledge of Texas topography and biota, and he argued that the castaways followed established Indian trails across Texas. His trans-Texas route was based on astonishing conjecture—suppositions that no one else had dared to make. In the introduction, for example, he speculated that the four “could have” erected piles of stone marking their path, making it possible to trace the route after four centuries; inscriptions “could have” been carved on soft sandstone and limestone cliffs in West Texas; a walking staff “arbitrarily scaled into uniform graduations, easily could have been prepared,” in order to determine latitude by the length of the shadow cast at noon; and animal skins, “one to the man, would have permitted them” to map their route across the North American continent. Never mind that skins were so lacking that Cabeza de Vaca at times described his wretched condition with such words as “I wended my way naked as the day I was born.”

In projecting his trans-Texas route, Hallenbeck insisted that Galveston island was Cabeza de Vaca’s Malhado, the river of nuts was the Colorado, and the Land of Tunas lay immediately south of San Antonio. After fleeing the Mariames, the castaways traveled north by northwest from San Antonio to big spring, Texas. The wide river the four men waded was the Concho; the first mountains were the Davis and Guadalupe of West Texas; Cabeza de Vaca’s statement that the first mountains he was near the coast and ran from the direction of the North Sea was attributed to imperfect communication with the Indians and consequent misunderstanding.

In short, the first book on the subject contradicted many of the initial landmarks of the journey that had been accepted for over twenty years. As one critic of Hallenbeck has remarked, his work was “an incredible series of errors in geography, travel time and distance, Indian customs, distribution of native plants and animals, etc. . . .” Regrettably, the Hallenbeck route interpretation has gained wide circulation and acceptance, even among academic historians.

Since 1940 three scholars, all anthropologists, have undertaken a careful reexamination of the Cabeza de Vaca journey. The pioneer in this endeavor was Alex D. Krieger, ably supported by the careful research of T.N. Campbell and T.J. Campbell. All have failed to attract the attention they deserve. Krieger's doctoral dissertation, submitted in Spanish to the faculty of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (1955), has never been published. A précis in English of the dissertation (1961) was published in Mexico, but it is not well known in the United States. The Campbells' cooperative work (1981) suffers from a title, *Historic Indian Groups of the Choke Canyon Reservoir and Surrounding Area, Southern Texas*, which contains not a clue that it relates to Cabeza de Vaca.

Any detailed analysis of the Cabeza de Vaca journey requires a booklength monograph, for the route interpreter must carefully coordinate the texts of Naufragios and the Joint Report with all available data—physiography, time and distance of travel, ethnographic information, biota, geographic knowledge, geographic *perceptions* of the castaways, and the overall objective of the trek, which, to repeat, was to reach Pánuco on the gulf coast of Mexico. The problem with too many route interpretations has been the lack of objectivity, or a somewhat myopic concentration on only one or two indices. Fueled by Texas nationalism, for example, writers have sought to prove that Cabeza de Vaca waded a specific river, crossed this or that arroyo, saw a particular mountain, or trod the site of a modern town; or they have concentrated on geology or Indian trails, which, coupled with a loose reading of the documents, makes it possible to project an almost limitless number of routes across Texas and Mexico.

Alex D. Krieger's route interpretation meets the criteria of thoroughness and objectivity. His approach was systematic, breaking the journey into ten chronological segments. It is well to remember, as Krieger emphasized, that the castaways did not wander in the wilderness for eight years. In reality, they were only on the march during the last twenty-two months of their odyssey (September, 1541 – July, 1543), and only in the last thirteen months were they "continuously" on the move. Krieger calculated actual days of progress at 230 – 238 over a distance of 2,480 – 2,640 miles. Second, Krieger studied the *entire* route from the Texas coast to Culiacán and Mexico City, making full use of Naufragios and the Joint Report. Third, he carefully analyzed previous route interpretations, coordinated topography, ethnology, and biota, and illustrated every mile of the journey with twelve maps. His route interpretation for the portion of the overland trek that lay near the Texas-Mexico border is essentially a refinement—an important refinement, to be sure—of that advanced by Davenport and Wells in 1919. Because of firsthand knowledge of border topography, Krieger was able to dovetail convincingly the Mexican part of the overland trek with the Texas route. His placement, however, of the Land of Tunas in Texas has been challenged by the Campbells.

It seems certain that the castaways crossed the lower Río Grande into Mexico, where they soon encountered the sierra de Cerralvo in northern Nuevo León. Cabeza de Vaca described the peaks with the words *sierras*, while the Joint Report rendered them *cordillera*, but in either case, "mountains." It can be

argued that Cabeza de Vaca knew the difference between hills or escarpments and peaks. He was familiar with mountains along the coast of his native land in southern Spain, which rise to 6,000 feet, and his narrative was composed *after* he had seen the Sierra Madre Occidental of western Mexico, one of the most formidable mountain ranges on the North American continent. Further, as Krieger noted, the Sierra de Cerralvo runs roughly north-south, precisely as described by Cabeza de Vaca, and at the southern end these mountains are "almost exactly" forty-five miles, or fifteen leagues, from the coast.

Once Cabeza de Vaca and his companions encountered the mountains, they decided to turn inland rather than head eastward toward the gulf coast. That decision, which contradicted their original intent to travel toward Pánuco, was probably based on several considerations. Friendly Indians reminded them that the shoreline groups were "very bad," while those in the interior were better disposed and possessed more food. Krieger also argued logically that the four men believed the Pacific ocean could be reached at about 105° west longitude, and that it was not further away than Mexico city. Here, perceptions of geography must be kept in mind. When the Narváez expedition set out in 1528, its leaders knew of Pacific coast settlements in Mexico as far north as the state of Jalisco, where the coast lay at roughly 105° west longitude. But they had no way of knowing that the coast of Mexico above Cabo Corrientes plunges northwestward at a nearly 135° angle toward the gulf of California. In reality, at the latitude where the four men turned westward, the Pacific coast was actually situated at approximately 110° west longitude. Finally, as Cabeza de Vaca admitted, by traveling inland they also had an opportunity to discover new lands and collect important information.

The path of the castaways across northern Mexico is convincingly analyzed by Krieger, but is beyond the defined limits of this paper. In their travels the four men again struck the Río Grande, this time near its confluence with the Río Conchos in eastern Chihuahua. Almost every route interpreter has placed contact by the travelers with Indians who lived in fixed houses at La Junta de los Ríos, near Presidio, Texas. Krieger believed the castaways ascended the Río Grande on the east, or Texas, bank for some seventeen days, recrossed the river about seventy-five miles downriver from El Paso, and then turned westward toward the Pacific coast.

The later work of T.N. and T.J. Campbell at the University of Texas may be properly called a refinement of the Krieger interpretation for a portion of the Texas route. Their contribution was essentially new in that they went through all the relevant primary Spanish documents with a fine-tooth comb and sorted out all information about each named Indian group. The synthesized Indian data were used, along with terrain and biotic data, as criteria for their route evaluation. Once this was accomplished, it became apparent to the Campbells that those who advocate a totally trans-Texas route must move the Texas Indians contacted by Cabeza de Vaca to parts of the state "where they obviously never lived."

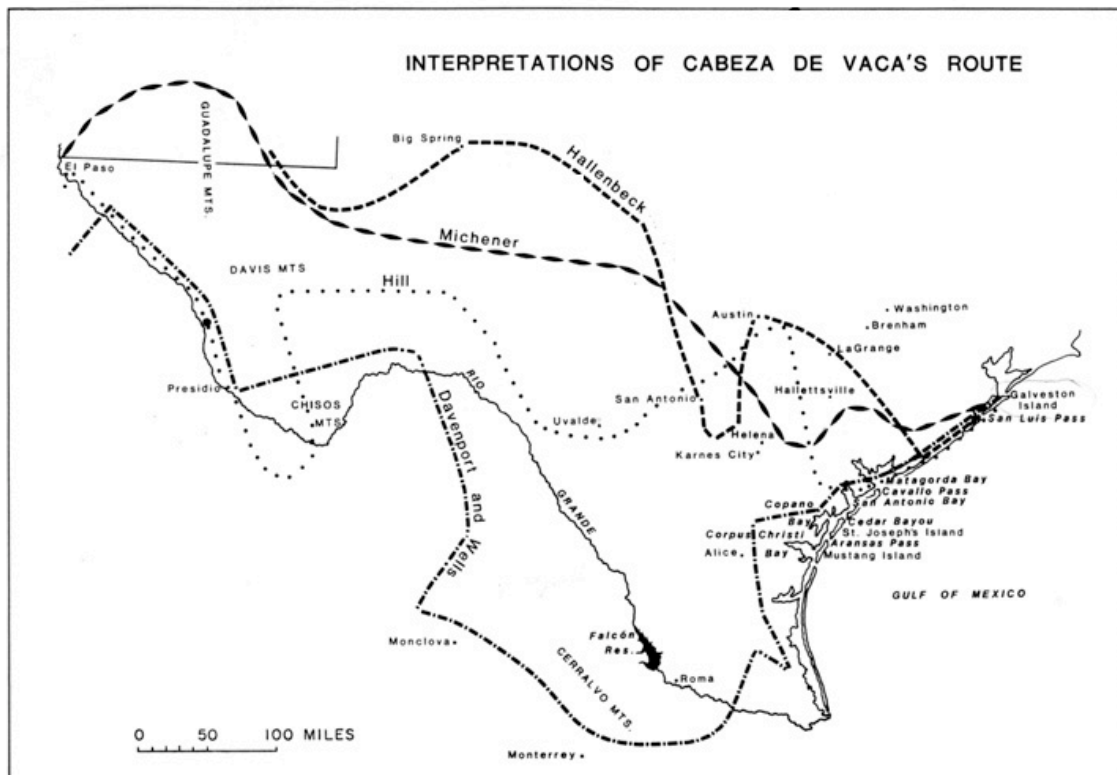
As the Campbells cautioned, it will never be known precisely where Cabeza de Vaca encountered each Indian group in South Texas. But, of the twenty-three Texas groups named by Cabeza de Vaca, "all of them can be linked with the outer part of the Texas coastal plain, extending from the vicinity of Galveston island to the vicinity of Falcon lake, and overland distance of some 300 miles" six of these groups lived east of the lower Guadalupe River: the Capoques, Chorroco, Doguenes, Hand, Mendica, and Quevenes. The remaining seventeen were situated between the lower Guadalupe River and the Río Grande. Four of this number, the Guaycones, Quitoles, Camoles, and Fig People, were shoreline Indians located between the Guadalupe River and San Antonio Bay. Eleven groups occupied the inland region between the lower Guadalupe and lower Nueces. The northern groups of them regularly moved southwestward in the summer to the prickly pear region. Arranged roughly in order of their locations along a northeast-southwest axis they were the Mariames, Yguazes, Atayos, Acubadaos, Avavares, Anegados, Cutalchuches, Maliacones, Susolas, Comos, and Coayos. The remaining two groups mentioned by Cabeza de Vaca, the Arbadaos and Cuchendados, appear to have lived west of the sand plain of Brooks and Kenedy counties.

Aside from the substantial contribution in supplying ethnographic data for route interpretation, the Campbells also provided a logical and defensible location for the Land of Tunas. As implied earlier, it is here that they differ with the route interpretation of Krieger. Krieger positioned the tuna area south of the Atascosa River, some thirty to forty miles due south of San Antonio. But he was troubled by the Oviedo account, which suggests a more coastal location. Indeed, Krieger acknowledged the possibility of an "alternate" route for this portion of the journey. The Campbells offered convincing evidence that Krieger's "alternate" route should be his "preferred" route. They placed the prickly pear area near the Nueces river, west and northwest of corpus Christi Bay. Cabeza de Vaca and his companions intended to escape toward Pánuco when their captors, the Mariames, were at the tuna collecting grounds. If the prickly pear areas were not south of the lower Guadalupe, they would have attempted escape from the river of nuts. Second, the Oviedo account made reference to a communal deer hunt en route to the Land of Tunas. Deer were drowned by driving them into the waters of a coastal bay as the Indians skirted its shorelines. The Campbells believed this body of water to have been Copano Bay. Third, escape plans of the four were laid for the end of the prickly pear season (September), when the Mariames would be returning north to their winter range. As this occurred, the castaways would flee south in the opposite direction. Finally, like Davenport and Wells before them, the Campbells pointed to the fact that prickly pear cactus grew in super abundance near the lower Nueces River until 1899, when a severe freeze reduced its stands. They placed the tuna gathering area in the general vicinity of Alice, Texas, in Jim Wells County.

Once the Land of Tunas is located in Jim Wells County, the route projected by the Campbells for the men's escape from the Mariames and for their later

departure from the Avavares is supported nicely by the documentation. Their path toward the Río Grande was probably southwestward, thereby avoiding both the barren sand plain and hostile coastal Indians. Like Krieger, the Campbells postulated a Río Grande crossing in the area of Falcon Lake.

This essay is intended to provide historical perspective on interpretations of Cabeza de Vaca's route in Texas. It will not "solve" the problem of determining precisely where three Spaniards and an African traveled on an odyssey that began in Texas and ended in Mexico city some 450 years ago. But a careful reading of the literature on the subject, especially the work of Davenport and Wells, Krieger, and the Campbells, suggests that those who persist in advocating a totally trans-Texas route for the first leg of the overland journey should reassess the soundness of scholarship on which it rests. Historical accuracy is important in itself; moreover, a more precise route interpretation contributes to a better understanding of early Texas ethnography, geography, and biology. And, in any case, the possibility that a sizable portion of the Four Ragged Castaways' route lay across northern Mexico hardly denies their importance to the history of Texas. They were, after all, the first non-Indian pioneers of Texas, and lived continuously for nearly seven years in the areas that would become the Lone Star State.



Four interpretations of Cabeza de Vaca's route across Texas and Mexico.