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Account of the Discovery
of the Buffalo, 1599

by Juan de Oñate

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ACCOUNT OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE BUFFALO, 1599¹

THE *sargento mayor* Vicente de Saldivar Mendoca, the *proveedor general* Diego de Cobia, Captain Aguilar, and other captains and soldiers, to the number of sixty, set out from camp² for the cattle herds on the 15th day of September,³ well provided with many droves of mares and other supplies. They reached the Pecos River on the 18th and set out from there on the 20th, leaving Father Fray Francisco de San Miguel of the Order of San Francisco as prelate of that province, and Juan de Dios, lay brother and interpreter of that tongue. That province is the one Espejo named Tamas,⁴ from which came a certain Indian named Don Pedro Oros, who died in Tlanepantla under control and instruction of the friars of San Francisco.

Having travelled four leagues they reached the place called Las Ciruelas, where there are very great quantities of Castilian plums, Almonacid plums of Cordoba.⁵ On the following day they travelled five more leagues, finding water after going three leagues, although they camped for the night without it. Next day they travelled two leagues to a small

¹ "Relaciones que envió Don Juan de Oñate de algunas jornadas," ff. 1-7 (manuscript in Lowery Collection, Library of Congress).

² At San Juan de los Caballeros. Villagrà gives an account of this expedition in cantos XVI.-XVII. He says that Zaldívar went to discover "the main herd of the cattle" (fol. 145).

³ The Ytinerario states that Father San Miguel and the Zaldívar party set out on September 16. See entry of that date.

⁴ See Espejo's narrative, p. 192, above.

⁵ "Ciruela almonaci de la cordoba." Almonacid de Toledo is a village in Spain twelve miles southeast of Toledo. Almonacid de Zorita is a village in Spain nineteen miles southeast of Guadalajara. Both are in Castile. The Indian Joseph declared that five or six leagues beyond the Pecos the Humañá party had encountered a great quantity of plums. This is an indication that Zaldívar went by the same route. ("Relacion que dió un indio.") See Villagrà, *Historia*, canto XVI., fol. 45.

stream¹ carrying but little water but containing a prodigious quantity of excellent fish, pilchard, sardines, prawn, shrimp, and *matalote*. That night five hundred catfish were caught with only a fishhook, and many more on the following day.² At that place four Indian herdsmen³ came to see him; they ordered that the Indians be given food and presents. One of them arose and with a loud voice called many Indians who were hidden and they all came to where the Spaniards were. They are powerful people and expert bowmen. The *sargento mayor* gave presents to all and won them over. He asked them for a guide to the cattle and they furnished one very willingly.

Next day they travelled six leagues and reached some rain water. There three Indians came out from a mountain, and, being asked where their *ranchería* was, they said that it was a league from there, and that they were very much excited because of our being in that land. In order that they might not become more excited by many people going, the *sargento mayor* went to their *ranchería* with but one companion, telling the three Indians to go ahead and quiet the people, and that he wished only to go and see them and to be their friend. He told them by means of an interpreter whom he had with him, named Jusepillo, one of the Indians who had been brought by Humayna and Leyba, and who had gone with them to a very great river to the east, in the direction of Florida. We all understand this to be the famous Rio de la Magdalena⁴ which flows into Florida, and that this was the route followed by Dorantes, Cabeça de Vaca, and the negro who came thence

¹ They were now eleven leagues—twenty-five or thirty miles—from Pecos. The stream was probably the Gallinas, near Las Vegas.

² The names here given by the writer to the fish evidently were incorrect in some cases. Villagrà says they caught forty *arrobas*—a thousand pounds—of fish in less than three hours, with hooks only. *Historia*, canto XVI., fol. 145.

³ *Vaqueros*.

⁴ The name Magdalena is given on the Martínez map to what is clearly the Canadian. Saldívar probably referred to the large river beyond the Arkansas reached by Humaña. The name Magdalena as applied to a stream flowing into the Gulf of Mexico dates from the Narváez expedition, in 1528. When at Aute (identified by Lowery as at St. Mark's, Florida), Narváez decided to go to the sea, whose proximity was suspected "from a great river to which we had given the name of the Rio de la Magdalena" (*The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca*, Bandelier edition, p. 33). The only large stream in that vicinity is the

to this land and to the rancherías and mountains of the Patarabueyes.

When he was about three-quarters of a league from his camp a great number of people came out to meet him, by fours and sixes. They asked for the Spaniards' friendship, their method of making the request being to extend the palm of the right hand to the sun and then to bring it down on the person whose friendship they desire. He made them presents also, and they importuned him to go to their ranchería, and although evening was approaching he had to comply so that they would not think he was afraid to go. He reached the ranchería and remained with them in great friendliness, returning to his camp very late at night.

Next day as he travelled many Indians and Indian women came out to meet him, bringing *pinole*.¹ Most of the men go naked, but some are clothed with skins of buffalo and some with blankets. The women wear a sort of trousers made of buckskin, and shoes or leggins, after their own fashion. He gave them some presents and told them by means of the interpreter that Governor Don Juan de Oñate had sent him that they might know that he could protect those who were loyal to his Majesty and punish those who were not. All were friendly and very well pleased. They asked him for aid against the Xumanas,² as they call a tribe of Indians who are painted after the manner of the Chichimecos.³ The *sargento mayor* promised them that he would endeavor to insure peace to them, since he had come to this land for that purpose.

Bidding them goodby, he left that place and travelled ten more leagues in three days, at the end of which time he saw the first buffalo bull,⁴ which, being rather old, wandered alone and ran but little. This produced much merriment and was regarded as a great joke, for the least one in the

Apalachicola, which it may have been. The name was later applied to various streams farther west, probably with reference to the stream mentioned by Cabeza de Vaca. See Lowery, *Spanish Settlements*, 1513-1561, p. 186; Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History*, II. 288.

¹ See Espejo, narrative, p. 178, above.

² Jumano. See p. 172, note 2.

³ See Bustamante's declaration, p. 145, note 4.

⁴ The party had now travelled twenty-seven leagues, or perhaps seventy-five miles, from Pecos.

company would not be satisfied with less than ten thousand head of cattle in his own corral.

Shortly afterward more than three hundred buffalo were seen in some pools. During the next day they travelled about seven leagues, when they encountered as many as a thousand head of cattle. In that place there were found very good facilities for the construction of a corral with wings. Orders having been given for its construction, the cattle went inland more than eight leagues. Upon seeing this the *sargento mayor* went on ahead with ten of his soldiers to a river six leagues from there, which flows from the province of the Picuries and the snow-covered range where they are,¹ and where the guide had told him that there were great numbers of cattle. But when he reached the river the cattle had left, because just then many Indian herdsmen crossed it, coming from trading with the Picuries and Taos, populous pueblos of this New Mexico, where they sell meat, hides, tallow, suet, and salt in exchange for cotton blankets, pottery, maize, and some small green stones² which they use.

He camped for the night at that river, and on the following day, on his way back to the camp, he found a *ranchería* in which there were fifty tents made of tanned hides, very bright red and white in color and bell-shaped, with flaps and openings, and built as skilfully as those of Italy and so large that in the most ordinary ones four different mattresses and beds were easily accommodated. The tanning is so fine that although it should rain bucketfuls it will not pass through nor stiffen the hide, but rather upon drying it remains as soft and pliable as before. This being so wonderful, he wanted to experiment, and, cutting off a piece of hide from one of the tents, it was soaked and placed to dry in the sun, but it remained as before, and as pliable as if it had never been wet.³ The *sargento mayor* bartered for a tent and brought it to this camp,

¹ They were now forty leagues—a hundred miles or more—from Pecos, and the river must have been the Canadian, near Alamosa. It issues from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

² *Chalehiquillos*. For an account of this trade see Espejo documents (*ante*) and Benavides, "Memorial," translation in *Land of Sunshine*, vols. XIII., XIV.

³ Villagr  makes almost exactly the same statement, indicating that he wrote from this account (*Historia*, canto XVII., fol. 151).

and although it was so very large, as has been stated, it did not weigh over two *arrobas*.¹

To carry this load, the poles that they use to set it up, and a knapsack of meat and their *pinole*, or maize, the Indians use a medium-sized shaggy dog, which is their substitute for mules. They drive great trains of them. Each, girt round its breast and haunches, and carrying a load of flour of at least one hundred pounds, travels as fast as his master. It is a sight worth seeing and very laughable to see them travelling, the ends of the poles dragging on the ground, nearly all of them snarling in their encounters, travelling one after another on their journey.² In order to load them the Indian women seize their heads between their knees and thus load them, or adjust the load, which is seldom required, because they travel along at a steady gait as if they had been trained by means of reins.

Having returned to camp they had a holiday that day and the next, as it was the feast of Señor San Francisco, and on the 5th of October they continued their march so as to reach the main herd of the cattle. In three days they travelled fourteen leagues, at the end of which they found and killed many cattle. Next day they went three more leagues farther in search of a convenient and suitable site for a corral, and upon finding a place they began to construct it out of large pieces of cottonwood.³ It took them three days to complete it. It was so large and the wings so long that they thought they could corral ten thousand head of cattle, because they had seen so many, during those days, wandering so near to the tents and houses. In view of this and of the further fact that when they run they act as though fettered, they took their capture for granted. It was declared by those who had seen them that in that place alone there were more buffalo

¹ An *arroba* is twenty-five pounds.

² This is an excellent description of the *travois*. See also Castañeda, in Winship, *The Coronado Expedition*, p. 527.

³ They were now fifty-one leagues, or perhaps from one hundred and twenty-five to one hundred and forty miles from Pecos. This took them near to, if not beyond, the borders of New Mexico. Since they found cottonwood timber, they must have been near a stream, which, I infer, was the Canadian. Details of the construction of the corral are given by Villagrà, *Historia*, canto XVII., folios 150-151.

than there are cattle in three of the largest ranches in new Spain.¹

The corral constructed, they went next day to a plain where on the previous afternoon about a hundred thousand cattle had been seen. Giving them the right of way, the cattle started very nicely towards the corral, but soon they turned back in a stampede towards the men, and, rushing through them in a mass, it was impossible to stop them, because they are cattle terribly obstinate, courageous beyond exaggeration, and so cunning that if pursued they run, and that if their pursuers stop or slacken their speed they stop and roll, just like mules, and with this respite renew their run. For several days they tried a thousand ways of shutting them in or of surrounding them, but in no manner was it possible to do so. This was not due to fear, for they are remarkably savage and ferocious, so much so that they killed three of our horses and badly wounded forty, for their horns are very sharp and fairly long, about a span and a half, and bent upward together. They attack from the side, putting the head far down, so that whatever they seize they tear very badly. Nevertheless, some were killed and over eighty *arrobas*² of tallow were secured, which without doubt is greatly superior to that from pork; the meat of the bull is superior to that of our cow, and that of the cow equals our most tender veal or mutton.

Seeing therefore that the full grown cattle could not be brought alive, the *sargento mayor* ordered that calves be captured, but they became so enraged that out of the many which were being brought, some dragged by ropes and others upon the horses, not one got a league toward the camp, for they all died within about an hour. Therefore it is believed that unless taken shortly after birth and put under the care of our cows or goats, they cannot be brought until the cattle become tamer than they now are.

Its shape and form are so marvellous and laughable, or frightful, that the more one sees it the more one desires to see it, and no one could be so melancholy that if he were to

¹ Three such are specified in Oñate's letter, p. 219. It is evidently from here that Oñate gets his information.

² This would be more than a ton.

see it a hundred times a day he could keep from laughing heartily as many times, or could fail to marvel at the sight of so ferocious an animal. Its horns are black, and a third of a *vara* long, as already stated, and resemble those of the *búfalo*;¹ its eyes are small, its face, snout, feet, and hoofs of the same form as of our cows, with the exception that both the male and female are very much bearded, similar to he-goats. They are so thickly covered with wool that it covers their eyes and face, and the forelock nearly envelops their horns. This wool, which is long and very soft, extends almost to the middle of the body, but from there on the hair is shorter. Over the ribs they have so much wool and the chine is so high that they appear humpbacked, although in reality and in truth they are not greatly so, for the hump easily disappears when the hides are stretched.

In general, they are larger than our cattle. Their tail is like that of a hog, being very short, and having few bristles at the tip, and they twist it upward when they run. At the knee they have natural garters of very long hair. In their haunches, which resemble those of mules, they are hipped and crippled, and they therefore run, as already stated, in leaps, especially down hill. They are all of the same dark color, somewhat tawny, in parts their hair being almost black. Such is their appearance, which at sight is far more ferocious than the pen can depict. As many of these cattle as are desired can be killed and brought to these settlements, which are distant from them thirty or forty leagues, but if they are to be brought alive it will be most difficult unless time and crossing them with those from Spain make them tamer.²

In this region and on this road were found some camps and sleeping places made by Leyba and Humaña when they left this land, fleeing from the men who were coming from New Spain to arrest them.³

¹ That is, the Asiatic buffalo, or wild ox.

² The copy has *aman*, where *amansen* seems to be intended.

³ Noting this statement in Zaldívar's declaration, Oñate had him make a more explicit statement under oath, on February 17, 1599, and attached it to the declaration of Jusephe (see p. 201). He states that the first camping place of Humaña was encountered about twenty-four leagues from San Juan Baptista,

These cattle have their haunts on some very level mesas¹ which extend over many leagues, for, after reaching the top of them by a slight grade, as of low hills, thirty leagues were travelled, continuously covered with an infinite number of cattle, and the end of them was not reached. The mesas have neither mountain, nor tree, nor shrub, and when on them they were guided solely by the sun. To the north in their highest part flows a medium-sized river, which appears to be a marvel, for at that point it is higher than at its source, and seems rather to flow up than down. It contains many fish and crustaceans. At the base of these mesas, in some places where there are glens or valleys, there are many cedars, and an infinite number of springs which issue from these very mesas, and a half league from them there are large cotton groves.

The Indians are numerous in all that land. They live in rancherías in the hide tents hereinbefore mentioned. They always follow the cattle, and in their pursuit they are as well sheltered in their tents as they could be in any house. They eat meat almost raw, and much tallow and suet, which serves them as bread, and with a chunk of meat in one hand and a piece of tallow in the other, they bite first on one and then on the other, and grow up magnificently strong and courageous. Their weapons consist of flint and very large bows, after the manner of the Turks. They saw some arrows with long thick points,² although few, for the flint is better than spears to kill cattle. They kill them at the first shot with the greatest skill, while ambushed in brush blinds made at the watering places, as all saw who went there, and who in company with the said *sargento mayor* consumed in the journey fifty-four days and returned to this camp on the 8th of November, 1598, thanks be to God.

In the pueblo of San Juan Baptista, on the 23d day of the

and the second about thirty-six leagues further on. He based his opinion on the statement of Jusephe, who went with them as a guide and interpreter ("Relación que dió un indio de la salida que hicieron Umana y leyba del nuevo Mexico").

¹ A *mesa* is a tableland. The term is commonly used in the Southwest, and stands for a definite natural feature.

² He evidently means the spear.

month of February, 1599, before Don Juan de Oñate, governor, captain-general, and *adelantado* of the provinces and kingdoms of New Mexico, conqueror, settler, and pacifier of these lands for the king our lord, etc., Vicente de Saldivar Mendoza, *sargento mayor*, captain, and commander of the companies of the said kingdoms and army of his Majesty, presented this account of the journey which he made by order of his Lordship to the buffalo; and the said Señor governor, in order that to his Majesty and his audiencias and viceroys it may be evident and known that it is all true, ordered that it all be read to some of the captains and soldiers who went with the said *sargento mayor* and who were present, and that they all should respond and sign with their hands. For this purpose the said governor had them all take oath in the name of God and by the sign of the cross, in legal form. They did so, and promised to tell the truth. They were the said *sargento mayor*, Vicente Saldivar de Mendoza, the Proveedor and Captain Diego de Çubia, Captain Pablo de Aguilar Inojosa, Captain Marcelo de Espinosa, Ensign Domingo de Liçama, Marcos Cortes, Juan de Pedraça, Alonso Sanchez, Hernando Inojosa, Esteban de Sosa, Juan de Olague, Juan de Salas, Diego Robledo, and Diego de Ayerde. To all of them, as has been said, I, the undersigned secretary, read the foregoing account word for word, and one and all replied and said that all contained therein is correct and true and what happened in their presence in the said journey to the cattle; and it being read to them, under charge of the said oath which all had taken, they ratified it, and those who knew how signed it, they being those whose signatures appear herein. And I, the said secretary, testify that all the foregoing took place before me and was witnessed by the *contador* of the Real Hacienda, Juan Ortiz, Juan Velasques de Cavanillas, and other persons, Don Juan de Oñate, Vicente de Saldivar Mendoza, Diego de Çubia, Pablo de Aguilar Inojosa, Marcello de Espinosa, Domingo de Liçama, Alonso Sanchez, Esteban de Sosa, Juan de Pedraça, Diego Robledo, Juan de Salas. Before me, Juan Gutierrez Bocanegra, secretary. And I, the said Juan Gutierrez Bocanegra, captain for the king our lord and government secretary of New Mexico and of its kingdoms and provinces, was present at the aforesaid with the said governor, who herein

signed his name; and upon his order I made this copy, which is correct and true, and has been corrected by the original, which remains in my possession. In witness whereof I signed it.

JUAN GUTIERREZ BOCANEGRA, secretary.