Adventures on the American Frontier

Brave Men of Early Texas

Revised Edition

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This book has been substantially edited, revised, and updated to retain the spirit of the original work but with a modern understanding of historical events and a more sensitive awareness of human equity.

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Cabeza de Vaca Crosses America

Forty men lay crowded on the rough deck of a small ship just off the Texas coast on the night of November 5, 1528. The hours dragged by. With every wave that hit the little thirty-three-foot ship, it groaned and creaked as if it would break apart. The moon that had lighted the sky early in the night had disappeared, but no man lifted his head to notice. Almost all of them were too sick to care. Some were even beyond hearing the groaning of the crude ship that they had built themselves near Mobile Bay in what is now Alabama.

The wind changed, and the ship shuddered violently. Captain Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, commander of the ship, struggled to his knees, grasping the splintery toprail.

He put his hand on the shoulder of the helmsman, who was slumped over the tiller.

"Listen!" de Vaca shouted into the helmsman's ear. "Hear that sound? That's not just the wind. It's the sound of waves breaking on a shore. We'll be on the rocks before we know it!"

The helmsman swung the tiller to head the ship out to sea and then dropped a weighted line into the water. "Seven fathoms," he reported.

De Vaca looked out across the water to the faintly graying horizon. Dawn would soon be breaking, and he would be able to see the coastline. With the water only about forty-two feet deep, they must be close to land. Whether it was a rocky coastline or a sandy beach, de Vaca had no idea. He looked at the dark forms of the men on the deck. All of them were weak from hunger and thirst; some were ill from the rolling of the ship as well.

De Vaca shouted, "Man the oars!" but only two men even lifted their heads. So he himself grabbed an oar to help move the ship away from land.

Suddenly, there was a great roaring sound. The oar was wrenched from de Vaca's grip. He felt the ship rising under him. He shouted as he felt himself flying through the air. Blackness came, and then everything went blank.

Not long afterward, de Vaca awoke to find himself lying in the ship. But the ship was still, no longer tossing about on the waves. It had been lifted by a giant wave and set onto a sand bar. By some miracle, not one man had been thrown into the sea. Now they were crawling from the ship onto

the beach, the first Europeans on Texas soil. De Vaca, too, climbed out and dropped to the sand.

As he lay there panting, his first thoughts were of gratitude that his men had been delivered from the sea. They were members of an exploring party that had known nothing but bad luck in the year and a half since they had left Spain.

There had been six hundred men in the company, led by Pánfilo de Narváez, sailing in June of 1527 in five swift Spanish ships. Narváez had planned to explore the land between Florida and Mexico and begin several settlements along the shore of the Gulf of Mexico. He was sure he could do better than Ponce de León had. The unfortunate de León had been killed in 1521 by Native Americans when he tried to start a settlement in Florida.

"That won't happen to me, Your Majesty," he had told the King of Spain when he'd asked for ships and men. Narváez had helped to conquer Cuba in 1511 and had lost an eye in Mexico in a conflict with Cortéz. As a reward for his service, King Charles had given Narváez Florida.

Cabeza de Vaca was the treasurer for Narváez's expedition and second in command over the men. Now, lying on the beach, he reflected bitterly on what had happened to Narváez's grand plans.

At their first stop on the island of Santo Domingo, one hundred fifty men had deserted. Then, going toward Cuba, the ships had been scattered by a hurricane, and sixty men and one ship had been lost. The four hundred or so remaining men spent the winter months in Cuba, sailing for Florida in the spring. The ships anchored in what is now Tampa Bay,

on the west coast of Florida, in April. Narváez took most of the men on foot from there, while small crews took the ships along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Narváez was going by land to find gold.

De Vaca clenched his fists, forcing the white sand between his fingers as he remembered that long march across the land. It seemed like a nightmare now. There had been battles with Native Americans in which some of the men were killed. The hard tack they carried for food had not lasted long, nor had the bacon. The last of the bacon had spoiled, but they had eaten it anyway.

Sick and hungry, the men marched on because Narváez was sure they would find gold. They found none—only the gold of pumpkins and dried corn that they stole from the huts of Native American villages. At last they headed back to the coast to get supplies from the ships. But day after day passed, and they saw not a single ship.

Narváez finally ordered the men to build ships. There were about two hundred men still alive, and they had five horses left from the two dozen or so that they had brought from Spain. While the men worked, the horses kept them alive, for one was killed every three days for food.

The men melted all the bits of metal they could find, including stirrups and spurs, to make nails, saws, and other tools. Pine trees furnished lumber and pitch to seal the seams between the boards. Ropes were made from the manes and tails of the horses. Shirts became sail material. Forty men died while they worked. Native Americans killed ten more who went hunting for food beyond the camp. But after many days of hard work, when there were no more horses to eat,

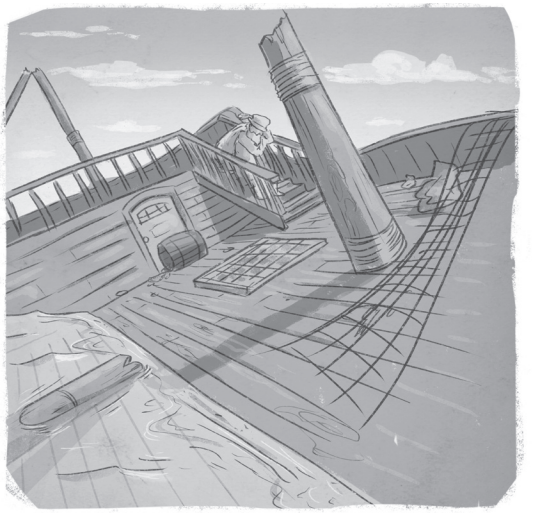
there were five little ships. They were more like rafts than ships, but they would have to do.

Narváez appointed a leader for each ship and divided the men into groups of about fifty to man each one. De Vaca was one of the captains. On September 22nd, the little fleet headed westward to try to follow the Gulf Coast to Mexico.

After only a day or two, thirst became a problem. Each ship had a water bottle made of horsehide, but the hides leaked and rotted, for they had not been properly tanned. To go ashore for fresh water was to take the chance of running the ships aground. The men watched for rivers emptying into the ocean and saw the Mississippi River. But a strong north wind blew them away from shore, and with their poor little ships, they couldn't get into the river to get fresh water. The wind brought bad storms, too, and the ships were separated. That was the last that de Vaca had seen of any of the other ships.

Now, lying on the beach at dawn on that November day, de Vaca shuddered. A cold north wind was sweeping down upon the men. He got to his feet and saw that four other men were standing. The helmsman had walked to the top of a gentle rise and was waving his arms for the others to come. "There's a place for shelter here!" he called.

De Vaca went to the top of the rise. From there he could see a small ravine rimmed with wind-bent shrubs. Soon all of the men were in the ravine, and those who could walk were gathering driftwood and twigs for a fire. De Vaca went back to the ship and found that the last of their food, a sack of dried corn, was still there. If they only had water, they could make the corn into cakes or gruel.



"Halloo! Halloo!" he heard faintly above the wind, and he saw the helmsman again pointing to something. He had found a pool of rainwater. Soon every man who was strong enough was on his knees beside the pool, bending over to drink. De Vaca stayed on his knees long enough to say a prayer of thanks. Then he went to the ship for the wooden bucket that one of the men had made and took water to the weakest of the men. Before long, all of them were feeling better.

De Vaca walked back to the ship. It was deep in the sand, and the wind was piling more sand around it. But by some miracle, there didn't seem to be much damage. An hour or so of work and the ship could be afloat again. They could go on their way to Mexico. Or perhaps it would be better to travel by land if they were near enough to Mexico. He needed to learn what he could of their location.

"Oviedo!" he called to one of the stronger men. "Climb that tree, and tell me what you see."

Oviedo climbed up the trunk until he was in the swaying branches at the top of a lone pine tree at the end of the ravine. Soon he was back down.

"We're on an island, Captain," he reported. "I could see a shallow lagoon not far beyond the ravine, and then more land beyond the lagoon. It appears to be gentle country, were it not for this infernal wind. But just over yonder I saw more trees with a small village of huts in them. They must belong to the native people here."

"Go there," said de Vaca. "Take this knife as a gift for them, and get us some food."

Oviedo set off, climbing a low ridge and then dropping from sight. When he had not returned in fifteen minutes, de Vaca sent two men after him. But they had only gotten to the top of the ridge before they called, "Here he comes!" There were three Native Americans walking behind him. Oviedo seemed to be trying to get them to follow him.

At last Oviedo appeared at the top of the ridge carrying a clay pot filled with fish. He turned and waved a beckoning arm to the three Native Americans who followed him before he came down the slope. After a few minutes, the Native Americans appeared at the top of the ridge, but they would come no nearer. They sat down as if waiting for something. De Vaca became uneasy.

"Oviedo," he asked, "what are they waiting for?"

"I don't think they've ever seen white men before," said Oviedo. "Maybe they're afraid of us."

They soon learned what the Native Americans were waiting for. Suddenly, silhouetted against the sky on the top

of the ridge, about a hundred men appeared, all armed with bows and arrows. De Vaca jumped to his feet. Motioning his men to stay back, he walked cautiously toward the Native Americans. One of them also came forward. He seemed to be the chief.

The chief was a big man with powerful muscles. As he drew near, de Vaca saw that he and his warriors were tanned to a deep bronze and that their upper lips were pierced with a piece of cane. De Vaca motioned that he came in peace, and the chief waved a signal back to his warriors. Just the same, they remained ready to draw their bowstrings, with arrows in place.

"Oviedo!" de Vaca called back to his trusted helper, who stood ready to come to the aid of his leader if necessary. "Bring gifts for our new friends."

The chief looked over the bright cloths, metal hatchets, and tinkling bells that de Vaca's men brought to him and called back to his warriors to lower their arrows. Then he sent a few of his men for more food for the hungry explorers. The men returned with some roots and more fish.

"We'll stay just long enough for our men to get stronger," de Vaca told the chief, making him understand through hand signs. "Then we'll sail away again in our ship and leave you, our new friends."

A few days later, he gave the chief a fine cape and said goodbye. The forty Spaniards put all of their belongings and a supply of food and drinking water into their small ship.

"Strip off your clothes, and put them into the ship," de Vaca ordered the men. "We'll have to push her out into deep

water before we go on board, and we'll need something dry to put on afterward."

The men had dug away the sand that half-buried the little craft. Now, naked and shivering, they pushed and lifted until at last they had the ship afloat. Swimming alongside it and pushing it, they moved it out into open water. Then they scrambled aboard and seized the oars to keep the ship from being washed back onto the sand bar. The wind had become stronger in the last minutes of their struggle, and the men were blue with cold, but there was no time to get into their dry clothing.

"Hold on, men!" the helmsman shouted. "There's a big wave coming!"

The men leaned hard on the oars. De Vaca turned and saw the great wave rising higher than the deck of the ship. On it came, a wall of water, with an even greater wave following not far behind it.

The first wave crashed over the deck, and several men washed overboard. De Vaca saw the next wave drawing nearer and felt the ship rock and rise. "Every man for himself!" he shouted.

This time the ship was not carried safely to a sand bar. With a horrible shudder, it broke into splinters. The land that someday would be called Texas (from the Native American word *tejas*, meaning "friendly people") was not going to let these Spaniards leave.

Soon thirty-seven men huddled together in the same ravine that had sheltered them before. Three who had tried to hold onto the ship had drowned. Those who had reached

shore dug into the sand to keep warm, for all of their clothes had been lost with the ship.

There the Native Americans found them once more. They led the shivering men to their village, took them inside their small, round huts, wrapped them in robes, and let them warm themselves around their fires.

But the Native Americans were not the friends that de Vaca had thought. They danced all night to celebrate, for the Spaniards had lost the magic of their guns and metal swords and were now prisoners. As prisoners, they would be slaves of their Native American captors.

Two days later, de Vaca and Oviedo, with a Native American guard, walked back to the beach to see if any of their belongings had washed ashore. They found only a few planks.

"I don't know how we'll ever get to Mexico now," said de Vaca. "They won't let us just walk away, and even if they did, we couldn't go far in this winter weather without food."

They pulled their buffalo robes closer around them as they climbed back up the ridge. At the top, Oviedo turned to look back up the beach, and something caught his eye.

"Look!" he cried, grasping de Vaca's arm. De Vaca turned. Oviedo's voice carried excitement and hope. "Those must be some of our men from another one of the ships!"

The Native American guard turned and ran back toward the village. Here were more of the strangers, and these had guns and swords. The tribe would no longer be able to hold the white men as prisoners.

De Vaca and Oviedo ran to greet their friends. Soon they learned that the newcomers' ship had been forced ashore just a little way up the beach. It was not badly damaged.

"We'll make it to Mexico, then," said de Vaca.

Among the new arrivals was the strongest man of the whole company. His name was Estevan, and he was a North African man who had been sold to the Spanish as a slave. He towered above both the Spaniards and the Native Americans. Estevan led in the work of getting the ship repaired, and it was he whose strength gave it the last push it needed to set it afloat.

The men loaded all of their goods onto the ship, and the crews of both ships climbed aboard. They shoved off into deep water, and the wind filled the patchwork sails. But something was wrong.

"She's sinking fast!" one of the men shouted. They just had time to leap from the ship as it sank beneath them. Their hope of escape went to the bottom of the ocean with their ship.