

ECHOES FROM THE PAST

UNWANTED INTRODUCTIONS

The history of Northeastern Oklahoma abounds with stories related to the early encounters of Indians with white men, but possible one of the most interesting stories involve two conquistadores who became separated from Spaniard Francisco de Coronado's expedition through Kansas during the summer of 1541. Coronado's report indicates that after the two men became detached from the expedition, they wandered thousands of miles across Missouri, Oklahoma and other southwestern states. Miraculously, after a series of escapades involving Mother Nature, wild animals and savages, the men reached safety in Spanish settlements in Mexico! Our region is part of their story. Southern Missouri and Northeastern Oklahoma were part of a vast hunting range dominated by the Osage tribe and "outsiders" who trespassed were usually killed. However, an encounter with a band of Osage hunters, illustrates one of the miracles that the occurred during the perilous journey of the two conquistadores.

Osage tribesman hunting along a river in our region were startled one day when they discovered two strange white skinned men attempting to start a camp fire along a river bank. Having never seen a white man and after debating among themselves they decided to capture rather than to kill them. After tying them and examining their unusual clothing, the hunting party took them back to the village to let their chief, Wah-Ken-Tah, decide their fate. This was an unusual circumstance indeed and the perplexed chief contacted other tribal leaders. Eventually, the Indians and white men were able to communicate. While one option considered by the chiefs would be to keep them as slaves, another was to kill and eat them, not an unusual practice at the time. However, after considerable debate and discussion primarily regarding whether these men were gods or simply bad medicine for the tribe, the chief told them to leave and never to come into his country again. The captives departed quickly, grateful for their lives and their scalps. By their own account, this was but one of a number of escapades they eventually reported.

While these were the first white men of record the tribe encountered, it was only a few months later in the fall that a second band of Osage hunters heard a great noise passing through the forest. The Indians hid in the heavy foliage while the apparitions passed not wanting to be seen by the intruders. From their hiding places, the hunters observed strange white men riding on great beasts and wearing coats of iron. They also observed that they were carrying long sharp knives. The hunting party had undoubtedly stumbled on to a scouting party that consisted of part of the expedition led by Hernando de Soto. Historians believe de Soto's expedition wintered in the region near Ozark and Fort Smith, Arkansas. This was the same year of 1541-42 that the Coronado expedition was exploring further north seeking purported "cities of gold."

Returning to their village the hunters reported details of this amazing coincidence to their chief Wah-Ken-Tah, a second encounter with white men in just a matter of months. In the coming months and years other sightings of explorers

occurred, leading the great chief to label these strangers “The Long Knives”, a term Indians used to describe white men for centuries thereafter.

These first events, discovery of two white Spanish explorers seeking gold, would be the introduction of Indian tribes to Europeans. A short time later French explorers and traders would also be encountered. The way of life for Native Americans was about to change.