

ECHO'S OF THE PAST

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WHERE IN THE WORLD WAS HERNANDO de SOTO?

One of the earliest Old World explorers reported to venture into the region now known as western Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma was Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto. Supposedly one of the richest men in the world because of earlier conquests and acquisition of gold in Central America, de Soto financed his own expedition of 620 volunteers, landing on the coast of southern Florida in 1539. His mission was to follow up on rumors of gold and to determine if there was an inland water route through the continent to China.

Florida, and its inhabitants, and what is now the southeastern United States, proved to be very unkind to de Soto and his party. As he and fellow conquistadors encountered various Indian tribes, no holds were barred when it came to interrogation. Beatings, torture, and murder, reportedly of tens of thousands of Indians became the norm and, of course the Indians retaliated. However, de Soto and his entourage held one advantage. Despite the treatment they received and because of the armor the Spaniards wore, their weapons, and horses they rode, most tribes regarded these intruders as gods.

As the expedition lurched forward wandering up through Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee and back south through Mississippi, they were plagued not only by hostile occupants, but by disease, insects, and inhospitable terrain. However, by accounts they reached the Mississippi River sometime during the spring of 1541 where records indicate it took about a month for the 400 remaining members to cross this formidable barrier. Proceeding slowly, they reached the banks of the Arkansas River during the summer of 1541 and, encountered numerous delays, courtesy of their reputation, the terrain and hostile inhabitants. Early signs of winter made it clear that further travel westward, at least until spring would be extremely difficult. So, forage parties were sent out to find a compatible and defensible camp site.

Historians disagree on the expeditions' ultimate campsite, and there is good reason. While the magnetic compass had long been in use by sailors and explorers, measuring distance was another matter and no standard had been established. The acceptable measurement was "the league." Webster defines "the league" today as ranging from 2.4 to 4.6 miles. In earlier times "the league" was defined as the distance a man or horse could walk in an hour. The obvious fallacy in the measurement could be defined by the question, walk where? Uphill, downhill, through dense forest or over open spaces...all would create variations. And so it was in the time of de Soto, explorers knew what direction they were going, they just didn't know exactly how far they traveled. Consequently, the de Soto winter camp debate.

Some have determined the camp to be around Branson, Missouri, others Ozark, Arkansas, some historians place the camp on an island at the confluence of the Canadian and Arkansas Rivers while others suggest today's Hot Springs, Arkansas.

So, WHERE IN THE WORLD WAS HERNANDO de SOTO when he reached our territory?

Perhaps the best answer lies in Osage Indian lore. According to their account, an Osage hunting party near three rivers (Three Forks near Muskogee?) returned to their village north of today's Nevada, Missouri and reported "hiding in the brush while shining men (in armor?) with long knives rode by on horseback." Was this a forage party exploring and hunting for food? If so, the expeditions campsite must have been in the vicinity

So, we'll never know for sure whether de Soto or any of his party actually set foot in northeastern Oklahoma, but we do know what happened to him soon after. When spring arrived after a particularly severe winter, de Soto had become convinced that there was no gold in the area and the Arkansas was not "the waterway to China." During the return down the Arkansas he contracted fever and died May 21, 1542 near present day McArthur, Arkansas. Because he had encouraged natives to believe he was a "sun god" his men concealed his death. They hid his corpse in blankets weighted with sand and sank the body in the middle of the Mississippi River. We don't know where de Soto spent the winter of 1541 – 42, but we do know where he ended up the following summer.

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