

## IOWA AND THE SPANISH PIONEERS

It is commonly accepted that Marquette and Joliet were the first Europeans to see the plains of Iowa, but the finding of certain relics in Henry and Jefferson counties may indicate that long before the English founded Jamestown, Spanish pioneers had explored the Iowa country.

The story begins with the expedition of Juan de Oñate into what is now the central area of the United States. Oñate was born in Zacatecas, Mexico. His father was the owner of the richest mines in Mexico, and Juan was reared in luxury, but he preferred the strenuous life of an explorer rather than the ease which luxury gives.<sup>1</sup>

Following the brilliant Coronado's failure to plant a permanent colony in New Mexico, the Spanish government refused to bear the expense of further attempts at settlement or exploration. After years of negotiations, however, Oñate obtained permission from the Spanish Viceroy to colonize and explore New Mexico at his own expense. At a cost of two million dollars he organized an expedition to colonize and explore this unknown land. His expedition consisted of four hundred persons, men, women, and children, including two hundred soldiers and a number of clergymen<sup>2</sup> or priests. He also took large herds of cattle, horses, sheep, and hogs. He made the first permanent settlement in New Mexico in the vicinity of Santa Fe and this colony was made the base for exploring expeditions to different parts of the country. In 1600 Oñate led an expedition into the country which is now the State of Nebraska. He named the Platte River the river Jesus Maria. In 1606

<sup>1</sup> Lummis's *Spanish Pioneers*, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Hammond's *Founding of New Mexico*.

he led an expedition far<sup>3</sup> to the northeast. The records of this expedition have not yet been found. It is of record that Oñate returned, but the particulars of his explorations are not known.

It was the custom of these Spanish explorers to take with them a priest who was generally the historian of the party. If the historian's life should be lost, there was no record of the expedition. Even if the historian made his report, it was sent to the Spanish government in Spain, and might be buried in the archives.

It was this expedition far to the northeast that the writer believes left its mark in Iowa, but it is also quite probable that Coronado reached the borders of Iowa. When Coronado's expedition reached the Canadian River, in what is now Oklahoma, he sent the main body of his command back to New Mexico while he with thirty picked followers proceeded north for further explorations. The record is clear that he went as far as northeastern Kansas, and there are fragmentary reports<sup>4</sup> that at this point he crossed a broad river and entered a country where the soil was black and an abundance of wild fruit was growing. This may have been northwestern Missouri or southwestern Iowa. There is no proof that he penetrated into the interior of what is now the State of Iowa.

There is also a possibility that another expedition may have entered the territory of Iowa. When the Spanish learned that the English had founded Jamestown, the pioneers of New Mexico organized a force to march across the continent and drive the English into the sea. What became of this expedition the writer has not been able to determine. The entire force may have been exterminated or the scribe of the expedition killed. In this case, there

<sup>3</sup> Lummis's *Spanish Pioneers*, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> Lummis's *Spanish Pioneers*, p. 82, and Hammond's *Founding of New Mexico*, p. 138.

would be no record. As the histories of these explorations were always sent to Spain the record of this exploit may now be mouldering in some Spanish library.

But all evidence points to the fact that it was the explorer Juan de Oñate who left his mark in Iowa. Cedar Bluffs on Skunk River on the eastern border of Jefferson County appears to have been the terminal point of his journey. It would seem that in this locality, he was assailed by the aborigines. He took a position upon a high ridge where he could command the view from all directions. Here he erected some kind of a fortification to shield his followers. At the base of the ridge is a never failing spring of water where his comrades could renew their supply of water which the Spanish pioneers carried in abundance, a habit which they acquired in traversing the arid plains. The early settlers of this region claimed that there was evidence that some kind of a building had once been erected on the crest of this ridge.

Numerous lead balls, supposed to be from the Spanish harquebus, were found scattered over this field and continue to reveal themselves to the plowman.<sup>5</sup> Flint arrow points are equally numerous scattered over the same territory.

Just across the river from this battle ground, on the brow of the cliff that borders the river, three feet beneath the surface and under the roots of a large walnut tree, a Spanish ax was found.<sup>6</sup> The walnut tree had sprouted and grown within the stump of a giant oak that had long since perished and the ax was found beneath the roots of both. This ax was of bronze steel of peculiar form and in an excellent state of preservation. The writer recognized the ax at once as being of Spanish origin.

<sup>5</sup> See collection of musket balls owned by Frank Johnson, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

<sup>6</sup> See ax now owned by William Smith, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

To make sure of its relative age, he visited the museums of New Orleans and St. Augustine where many Spanish relics are preserved. In the oldest house in St. Augustine, now a museum, he found an ax of the identical pattern of the one found at Cedar Bluffs. This ax was used in founding St. Augustine which corresponds very closely to the time Juan de Oñate was exploring Iowa in the early years of the seventeenth century. Near the site where the ax was found, a lance head was uncovered in an Indian grave. This lance head is of the form and pattern of those used by Cortez in the conquest of Mexico. It is a matter of record that lances were a part<sup>7</sup> of the armament of the Oñate expedition to New Mexico. The lance head in question was<sup>8</sup> probably one of the trophies of the battle fought at Cedar Bluffs and was so highly prized by the Indian warrior that when he died the trophy was buried with him in the grave, as was the custom with many tribes. In the same vicinity several small articles have been found that may or may not be of significance — the image of a frog carved from stone with a cross upon its back, an image of the Virgin Mary, and some small iron crosses. Quite recently, a bronze coin was found, of Roman pattern or rather of a province of Rome. On the obverse side is the bust of the ruler of the province while on the reverse side is the Roman eagle.

The writer is not sufficiently versed in numismatics to know whether this is an original coin or a reproduction, but it has all the appearance of being original. There are, of course, many ways that these small articles could be lost in the soil of Iowa, but being found in close proximity to well-

<sup>7</sup> Hammond's *Founding of New Mexico*. Also artist's portrayal of Cortez armament in Goodrich's *History of All Nations*.

<sup>8</sup> See Juan de Oñate's contract with the Viceroy of Mexico in Hammond's *Founding of New Mexico*. Also lance owned by George Thomas, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

known<sup>9</sup> Spanish relics, it is reasonable to believe that they too are of Spanish origin.

On the same ridge, and not far from the supposed Spanish fortification, a stone grave was found by Herman Elgar of the Henry County Historical Society, and Frank Johnson, a resident of that locality. This grave was explored by the Henry County Historical Society. It was found to be different from any other grave ever seen in this part of Iowa. This grave was lined with flag stones and over the top flag stones were laid, and over this a mound of earth was raised. At the head a beautiful stone of peculiar pattern was erected. It is not believed that this head-stone is of artificial design, but rather the work of erosion, but it served well the purpose for which it was used. It has been suggested that this might be the grave of a Spaniard killed in battle.

When Oñate left his fortified position at Cedar Bluffs on his return journey, he went south down the river to the mouth of Big Cedar Creek which comes in from the southwest, and the river turns abruptly to the east. After ascending Big Cedar Creek for a few miles, he was again assailed by the Indians. In this engagement, the Spaniards appear to have lost heavily.

In a ravine on the hillside where erosion had cut a deep channel in the soil a gun barrel was found protruding from the earth. The position of this gun was such as to indicate that it had been buried for centuries and was only brought<sup>10</sup> to light by the deep erosion of the soil.

In the deep woods of the Big Cedar Valley some heavy irons, curiously wrought, were found by the early pioneers. These irons were a puzzle to the finders but were finally identified as being part of a gun carriage. It is a well

<sup>9</sup> Articles owned by Herman Elgar, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

<sup>10</sup> Gun found by Roy Barton, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

known fact that the early Spanish explorers always took with them one or more light cannon with which to defend themselves and terrify the Indians.<sup>11</sup> This gun carriage being disabled was, apparently, abandoned in the woods and all parts disappeared except the heavy irons.

On the top of the bluff near this battle ground two stone graves were found. These graves were opened more than fifty years ago by curious citizens and no scientific investigation was ever made. Recent careful examination by the writer reveals the fact that these graves were very similar, if not identical, with the grave at Cedar Bluffs. Such are the facts upon which we base our claim that the Spanish pioneers were the first white men to view the plains of Iowa.

It might be suggested that these Spanish relics might have been brought in the course of trade with the Indians. The writer is aware that the Indians carried on commerce with distant tribes, but it must be remembered that these were relics of the sixteenth century. There were no Europeans in what is now the United States at that date except the Spanish of New Mexico. Such a thing as a trade or commerce with the Spanish at that time was absolutely unknown to the Indian tribes.

In regard to the stone graves, there is room for a difference of opinion. It is well known that the Indians of the Hopewell Culture sometimes buried their dead in stone graves. Some of these graves were found in Ohio and adjacent States, and many of them were found in Tennessee, but not to the writer's knowledge has any grave been found in Iowa that corresponds to the grave on Cedar Bluffs. A stone grave has recently been discovered in western Oklahoma identical with the graves of Iowa. This grave was

<sup>11</sup> See Oñate's armament in contract with Mexican Viceroy in Hammond's *Founding of New Mexico*.

found on the trail of Coronado when he visited northeastern Kansas. This grave is hundreds of miles from any known grave of the Hopewell Culture. If these Iowa burials are not of Spanish origin, it is a curious coincidence that they are found adjacent to what was apparently a Spanish battle ground, and that the corresponding graves in Oklahoma are on the Coronado trail a thousand miles from any other graves of that kind.

The writer has tried to identify the Iowa burials with the Spanish burials in the fifteenth or sixteenth century in New Mexico, but little could be found about the manner of disposing of the dead. Enough was learned, however, to indicate that the Spanish settlers laid the body close to the surface, covered it with stone, and then heaped dirt upon the stone.<sup>12</sup>

In studying these early Spanish expeditions, it should be clearly borne in mind that they were carefully organized, efficiently officered, and sent out under strict orders from the Spanish crown. The reports of these expeditions were made either directly to the Spanish court or through the Viceroy of Mexico and were retained in Spain. For almost three hundred years, the history of the Oñate expedition was unknown to the people of America. In recent years, an American scholar engaged<sup>13</sup> in historical research uncovered in the archives of Seville the full report of Oñate's march to New Mexico. This report was complete in every detail. It included an inventory of all the property taken with the expedition and a record of all the soldiers enlisted, how they were armed, their names and the names of their fathers, their stature, and even the color of their hair and eyes. A similar description was given of the men, women, and children who went as colonists.

<sup>12</sup> Given on the authority of the Bishop of Santa Fe.

<sup>13</sup> See Hammond's *Founding of New Mexico*.

In still more recent times a French historian brought to light in Paris a complete history of the destruction of Vellasar's Spanish army on the Platte River by the French and Oto Indians in 1720. Only traditions of this expedition<sup>14</sup> had previously been known.

In view of these facts, may it not be possible that before many years some scholar, engaged in historical research in the libraries of Spain, will bring to light the full history of Oñate's expedition through the territory of Iowa?

In setting forth the foregoing facts and the claim that the Spaniards were the first to explore the Iowa country, the writer is well aware that he is disputing the records of historians for several generations. Historians have written history from all the available records they had at their command in regard to Iowa and the public has accepted these writings as facts and is loath to believe that these time honored stories are not complete.

However, when new facts and new records are brought to light the true historian must modify his view and aid in keeping history straight. To impress this view upon the public the writer makes the following summary.

The records show that Juan de Oñate's soldiers were armed with light artillery, muskets or harquebuses, lances, and axes. Specimens of these implements of that date are still preserved in the museums.<sup>15</sup> It is of record that Oñate made an expedition far to the northeast of Nebraska. The history of this expedition has not yet been found, but the fact that he left the implements of the Sixteenth Century scattered along his trail and the musket balls still revealing themselves on the field of his defence are more positive proof of his explorations than any written record could possibly be. The proof is as positive that the Spaniards

<sup>14</sup> *Nebraska History*, January-March, 1923.

<sup>15</sup> See specimens in the Vatican Museum at Rome and the British Museum at London.



were here as it is positive that the mastodon was here and left his bones in the alluvial valleys of Iowa.<sup>16</sup>

O. A. GARRETSON

SALEM IOWA

<sup>16</sup> [The conclusion reached by Mr. Garretson in this article is based on the assumption that certain weapons found in Iowa were brought here by the Spanish previous to 1673. Most historians and archaeologists would not, we think, accept the presence of Spanish weapons in Iowa as *conclusive* proof that Spanish soldiers carried these weapons into the Iowa country.

Even in times pre-historic, articles belonging to one culture frequently found their way into distant areas occupied by other cultures; and so the finding of isolated weapons or implements in a particular area is not considered indisputable proof that the original owners had themselves carried such weapons to the place where they were found.

It is, of course, possible that Spanish soldiers did penetrate as far to the northeast as the Iowa country, and the records of such an expedition may some time in the future be unearthed; or other evidence may be found to corroborate the theory that the Spanish were the first white men to visit the Iowa country. Until such records or other evidence have been brought to light, it would appear that the discovery of the Iowa country by the Spanish, while possible, can not be accepted as an indisputable historical fact. — THE EDITOR]