

Old King's Highway Joins Present to Romantic Past

Conceived by Adventurous Frenchman as Bond of Trade Union Between Richest Colonies of France and Spain in New World, It Was Actually Established as Means to Keep Apart.

The following historical sketch dealing with the events woven about the establishing of the old King's highway, or El Camino Real, one of the most famous highways of the Southwest, was written by Rev. George Louis Crocket, rector of Christ Church, San Augustine, Tex. The old Texas town of San Augustine itself lies in a part of East Texas that has figured in an intimate way in the trend of events that mark the passing of history since the early days of pathfinders and trailbreakers.

BY GEORGE LOUIS CROCKET.

The King's highway, El Camino Real, stretches across the state of Texas from Eagle Pass on the Rio Grande to the old mission of Adaes near Robeline, La., a distance of some four hundred miles. It also stretches back into the past for 200 years in a right royal period of romance and adventure, and was trod by chevaliers and dons, monks and missionaries, representing the conflicting claims of two of the greatest kingdoms of the time. It was conceived as a commercial bond of union between the richest colonies of France and Spain in the new world, but was actually established as a means to keep them definitely and forever apart. It has witnessed the solemn ceremonial of ecclesiastical processions and the pomp of religious ritual intended to win the hearts of the aboriginal savages, and has also resounded to the tramp of armed legions calculated to overawe their hostility. Along its course have swept back and forth revolution and repression, the rudely armed levies of liberty and the trained soldiery of tyranny, wrestling for the possession of one of the fairest provinces under the sun. Over it have passed both devoted self-denial in the service of the cross and licentious rapine in the pursuit of pleasure and lawless gain. And finally it became the artery of peaceful commerce and of the social intercourse of a civilized people.

Frenchman Proposes Route.

In 1714 Sieur Louis Juchereau de Saint Denis, a Frenchman of noble birth, who had led an adventurous life on the upper Mississippi and the Great Lakes, was engaged in the service of Antoine Crozat, the newly appointed governor of Louisiana. Crozat had received the governorship as a commercial venture, having been granted a monopoly of the trade of Louisiana for fifteen years. He therefore listened willingly to the proposal of Saint Denis to open an overland trade route from the Mississippi River to the Spanish province of Mexico, and gave him a commission to explore the route and negotiate a treaty

with the Spanish authorities. Saint Denis, after spending some time in preparation for his journey, finally sailed up the Red River to the new post of Natchitoches, and from there struck out boldly across the uncharted wilderness in a search of his goal, with a company of twenty-four men under his command. He appears to have spent about six months with the Texas Indians on the Angelina River, where he found memories of La Salle's presence in that region some thirty years before, and also of Father Hidalgo, a Spanish monk who had spent several years among the Indians and to whom they were very much attached. At last in the autumn of 1714 they took their departure, accompanied by a troop of Indians, in search of Father Hidalgo, who was reported to be at the mission of San Juan Bautista on the Rio Grande. After passing the Brazos they encountered a band of hostile Indians and defeated them, after which most of the party turned back, while Saint Denis, with a few companions pushed on and reached the Rio Grande early in 1715.

Goes to Interview Viceroy.

The commandante at San Juan Bautista, Don Diego Ramon, must have been considerably amazed at this sudden apparition of a vivacious Frenchman dropping almost miraculously out of the wilderness. He was compelled by the Spanish law to put him under arrest, but he seems to have been not unfriendly to his project and permitted him to go to Mexico City to interview the viceroy. We can not go into the details of Saint Denis' adventures in Mexico. Suffice it to say that his main proposition was soon abandoned, because the Spanish government held a jealous monopoly of all trade in Mexico and was unwilling to admit a rival. However, he so impressed the authorities as to induce them to establish a combined mission and military post on the Louisiana border, where they might keep watch on these indomitable French explorers. Captain Domingo Ramon, son of the commandante, was placed in charge of the expedition. Saint Denis, like a true adventurer of romance, had fallen in love with the beautiful granddaughter of Don Diego and had married her, and now went with the expedition as guide to pilot them to the land of the Texas. With them went twelve friars from the rival colleges of Queretaro and Zacatecas, the latter under Father Antonio Margil de Jesus and the former under Father Hidalgo, who was happy in the approaching realization of his long cherished dream of evangelizing the Indians. The rest of the company consisted of two married men with their families, thirteen unmarried men, seven married women, probably wives of the soldiers, one girl and two smaller children, one negro and five Indians—a complete colony in embryo.

Gifts Are Exchanged.

The departure from the Rio Grande was made on the 27th of April, 1716, and after a tedious journey of two months the cavalcade arrived on June 30 at the spot on the Neches where Father Hidalgo had labored in 1690, where they were met by a delegation of Indian chiefs. There appears to have been much flaunting of banners and firing of salutes, after which they smoked the pipe of peace and received gifts of maize, watermelons and tamales in return for cloth, hats and dishes. The result of this powwow was the establishment of six missions—four among the Texas, one in the allied tribe of the Aias at the present town of San Augustine, and one among the Adaes near Robeline, La.

The Texas missions were San Francisco on the east side of the Neches near the present town of Alto, La Purissima Concepcion near the Linnwood crossing of the Angelina, and San Joseph on one of the tributaries of Shawnee Creek near the northern line of Nacogdoches County. These three missions

were assigned to the Queretaran friars, and were abandoned in 1727, so that no trace of them remains today. The other mission of the Texas Indians was that of Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe at Nacogdoches. These four were established during the autumn of 1716 before the winter season compelled a suspension of

activities. In the early spring of 1717 the mission of Nuestra Senora de los Dolores de los Aias was established on the Ayish Bayou near the present town of San Augustine, and a little later the mission of San Miguel de Linares was planted near Robeline, La., within about seven leagues of the French post of Natchitoches. In 1718 the mission of San Antonio de Valero was established on the San Antonio River to serve as a supply station between San Juan Bautista on the Rio Grande and the distant settlement near the eastern border. Thus everything was settled to the eminent satisfaction of all parties. The Indians had been honored by the establishment of the missions; the Spanish had assumed possession of the territory; and the French had so maneuvered that their opponents had opened the overland route which Saint Denis had proposed, and had planted a settlement with which they might trade even though they must do it clandestinely.

No Settled Trail for Years.

It would be an error, however, to conclude that the highway was laid out and established by these journeyings to and fro. From the river to San Antonio to the Rio Grande there seems to have been but one route, probably an Indian trail leading to the pass on the river. At the other end of the road between the Neches and Sabine and on as far as the Adaes were Indian trails from village to village, which the traveler naturally followed. But between the Neches and the San Antonio there was no settled trail for many years. A few years after the establishment of the missions the French during a brief war with Spain made a raid from Natchitoches which so terrified the colonists that they scuffled off incontinently to the shelter of the mission at Bexar. When the Marquis de Aguayo two years later led an expedition to re-establish the abandoned missions he traveled far north of the highway, as it was afterward defined. Other travelers seem to have gone each a different route. It is probable the section between San Antonio and the Neches was settled by custom along the trail which was afterward known as El Camino Real or the Royal road. As the years went on, however, it became a well-defined trail, and the boundaries of old Spanish grants in the beginning of the last century were marked by its trace. It was not a road in the proper sense of the word, but was a mule trail, winding around hills, over valleys and across prairies, and crossing the streams at the most accessible fords and ferries. Along its course would wind the long trains of pack mules bearing supplies from Mexico to the lonely missions in the East; their loads containing provisions for the priests

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*No historical value.
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