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MINING AND PROSPECTING ON THE LOUISIANA-TEXAS FRONTIER 1713-1763

by Duane K. Hale

Prospecting and mining probably played a bigger role in the decision to occupy present East Texas than students of the Spanish colonial period have formerly realized. Although it was an apparent attempt at defensive expansionism which initiated the Spanish decision to establish missions and presidios along the Louisiana-Texas frontier in the 1690s, no doubt New Spain was also interested secondarily in the possibility of discovering mineral wealth there.

Both Spanish and French maps of the late seventeenth century had located the land of Quivira (Land of Gold) in present East Texas. There is much written evidence that the early Spanish historians believed the land to be somewhere along the Louisiana-Texas frontier. The Spanish historian Gómora wrote, "The Indians of Tiquex told Coronado that to the southeast of them was a very large river, which is the Santissima Trinidad (Trinity); minerals were found in its mines and rivers."¹ In 1630 Alonso de Benevides, custodian of the Catholic church in Santa Fé, wrote that the land of Quivira bordered on that of the Aixoa, which would place it in present East Texas.² Fray Nicholas López, a member of the Mendoza-López party which traveled from New Mexico into Texas in 1684, wrote a letter to the Viceroy stating that from the kingdom of Texas he had advanced a distance of twenty-five leagues to the confines of the Ajiados Indian nation which divided that kingdom from La Gran Quivira.³ Meanwhile the French map of Sanson d'Abbeville, published in 1650, had located Quivira in northern Texas; it was published by the cartographer to the French king.

Nothing has been located in the archival materials which indicates how extensively the search for Quivira was conducted between the years 1690-93 along this frontier of New Spain and French Louisiana, but the report of the Marquis de Aguayo of 1715 indicates that the first missionaries of the 1690s were at least cognizant of its possible existence there. De Aguayo reported that Joseph de Urrutia, who had been with Governor Alonso de Leon when the Spaniards abandoned the missions of East Texas in 1693, was one of those who remained for several years among the Indians. Carlos E. Castañeda wrote, "La Gran Quivira was thought to be somewhere in the country of the Tejas and Aguayo

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believed that Urrutia was the man best suited to discovering it because of his intimacy with these Indians."⁴

The French was also interested in discovering mineralized areas. The spread of the mining frontier along the borders of New Spain was well known to the French crown. There is evidence that the seizure of some of these mines was one of the motives for the colonization of Louisiana. A document located in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, written in the year 1700, reads:

The king wants settlers to move to this (Louisiana) country because there are gold and silver mines of Ste. Barbe (Barbara) and he wants to send ships which are going to leave soon.

The only thing I can tell you about this country (Louisiana) is that I do not see what we could use it for, except for the gold and silver mines that are to be found.⁵

Perhaps this is the same document which Francis Parkman had reference to when he stated that an unpublished memoir of the year 1700 stated that the seizure of the Mexican mines was one of the motives for the colonization of Louisiana.⁶

The French also expected to discover mines along the Louisiana-Texas frontier. Especially was this true after the year 1711, when the governor of Louisiana, D'Bienville, wrote: "We do not doubt that the Red River has mines according to the report of all Indians (all the upper part of this river is at war with the Spaniards and are acquainted with these mines)."⁷

Spaniards were again aroused by the vigor of the French of Louisiana due to the charter dated September 14, 1712, which granted Anthoine Crozat the right to discover mines in the whole of Louisiana.⁸ Perhaps France's renewed interest in discovering mines along this Spanish-French frontier had some influence on the decision to establish the Natchitoches post along the Red River in 1713. Apparently New Spain in turn renewed her efforts at defensive expansionism, for by the year 1717 six missions and the presidio of Los Adaes had been erected by the Spaniards along this international border. The post of Los Adaes was only eighteen miles west of the French post of Natchitoches.

Shortly thereafter Natchitoches was moved to a second location even closer to the Spanish post of Los Adaes and "on a site very important as consequence of its proximity to the mountains which, it is said, contain rich silver veins."⁹ José Pichardo quoted an account which governor Franquis (Don Carlos, former governor of Texas) gave of some silver mines which existed in La Gran Montaña, where witnesses located the boundary between Spanish Texas and French Louisiana.¹⁰ The letter is no longer among the *autos*, but an extract of it was quoted by Pichardo and

dated July 4, 1737:

It is not known for certain what reason moved Franquis to decide to imprison Sandoval . . . Whether it was because of the fact Sandoval had permitted the (French) . . . St. Denis, to build a presidio on lands of the presidio of Los Adays (Adaes) of his New Spain of which Franquis wrote with much zeal to your Excellency in a letter of September 30, 1736 . . . The large lagoon of Los Adaes (the bank of which is two leagues from this presidio), where our soldiers had taken specimens from the mineral veins they had found, and had made assays of their silver ores . . . probably fired the French to occupy that country.¹¹

Charles W. Hackett concluded, when he translated Pichardo's work, that since no confirmation of this fact had been discovered by later historians, Señor Franquis' information proved to be false.

A closer look at the documents which relate to this early Spanish-French rivalry over East Texas and the Red River has revealed that both the Spanish and French settlers had discovered and were attempting to work mineral veins. As early as 1718 Guillaume Dëlisle's map, which was published in Paris, located two lead mines on either side of the Trinity River in Texas, some fifteen miles southwest of Mission San Francisco de Los Tejas, which was established in 1716.¹² This would be near present Malvern, Texas, in Leon County. As late as 1750 Vaugondy's map still located the lead mines in that same area.¹³ Carlos E. Castañeda recorded that a Spaniard had defected to the French at Natchitoches in 1725; he told them about a supposed silver mine near the Trinity River. When a band of Frenchmen failed to locate the mine, it was assumed that it did not exist.¹⁴ Most likely the lead mines and the silver mine were located in the same area along the Trinity.

A second East Texas mission which experienced some prospecting nearby was Mission Nuestra Señora de los Dolores de los Ais, established in 1717. The *Solis Diario* for June 1, 1767, reported that the gold (near Dolores) was situated in a red soil in a country "likely to abound in gold ore."¹⁵ The existence of some gold ore in that area was established as fact in the year 1837, when the *Telegraph and Texas Register* stated, "Gold has been found in considerable quantities near the Old Mission about one mile below San Augustine."¹⁶

Although there are extensive iron ore deposits in present East Texas, it has been well established that precious metals only exist in limited amounts in that Cretaceous formation, but this was not known in the early eighteenth century. Each mineral

discovery, no matter how limited in amount, fired the hopes of colonial New Spain.

Meanwhile the French looked upon Spanish Texas as a new mining frontier. According to French records it was thought that the Spaniards were trying to conceal their mining attempts in Texas due to their proximity to the French. For example, a letter dated July 20, 1721, written from Bienville to the Navy Council stated:

They (the Spaniards) have named this post San Antonio and I have been assured that they have found a considerable silver mine in the vicinity but the viceroy has forbidden (them) to work it because of the proximity of the French.¹⁷

Bienville continued by stating that he was going to garrison St. Bernard's Bay (Matagorda Bay) because it was the most convenient place to maintain a commerce in silver with the Spaniards. Bienville's plans were never developed, for the Spaniards under the Marquis de Aguayo in May of 1721 had established a military post and mission at St. Bernard.¹⁸

The reason for removing the post of Natchitoches to the west bank of the Red River in 1735 was probably its proximity to the silver deposits near Los Adaes; Los Adaes had been abandoned several years earlier. Evidence of prospecting near the new site of Natchitoches by the French was cited in a letter dated June 17, 1732, written by a storekeeper at Natchitoches named Duplessis. Duplessis described the area further up the Red River as being rich in lead and silver mines.¹⁹

Evidently there was an attempt to work this silver deposit by 1734. M. Le Page Du Pratz, a colonial historian of Louisiana, reported that a silver mine had been discovered near one of the Cadoan villages above Natchitoches.²⁰ This was found to be rich and very pure metal, in a stone of chestnut color. A map accompanied Du Pratz's work which labeled the mine as "The Silver Mine of Duplessis."²¹

The document in the Paris archives carrying the date 1732 written by Duplessis reads:

Lands are said to be much richer at the Cadadakioux, mostly in the plains. The mountains start thirty or thirty-five miles from this post and I think they have a lot of metals, since there are Spaniards who tell us that we have silver mines at our doorstep. I send you stones which were found to have pure silver in them. I have already made two tests. It would be necessary to send some tools to dig inside these mines. Mr. de St. Denis has strongly advised the soldiers of this post to go and visit the mountains and to

bring back stones of every kind. I am told that there are lead mines in the Cadadakioux, which would be very advantageous for us because it is near the other mines and large quantities of lead are necessary to melt other metals.²²

Although history has failed to record whether the Duplessis Mine was later worked extensively and profitably, it is known that interest in mining near the new site of Natchitoches continued until the date 1759, for in that year a mining grant was issued for a six-year period at Natchitoches.²³

The French discovered other mines further up the Red River in present southeastern Oklahoma. A memoir dated July 12, 1734, noted that silver mines had been located on the Red River, where contact with English traders had been made.²⁴ This was probably near the confluence of the Kiomichia and Red rivers, for Pichardo stated later, "Many years before the French ceded Louisiana to Spain in 1762, the French had erected a small fort on the Red River, and they were mining in that area." Pichardo also stated:

The Kiomichia, called by the French La Riviere la Mine or Mine River, is 150 yards wide and its waters are navigable from the Red for 60 miles, to the silver mine, which is on the bank of the river. The ore appears in large quantities, but up to the present, no one knows how rich it is.²⁵

Although none of the mines along the Louisiana-Texas frontier were apparently extensive enough to warrant development, the interest of Spanish Texas and French Louisiana in mining helped to stimulate the settlement of East Texas. Later East Texans found their land of Quivira, or land of mineral wealth, when extensive iron ore and petroleum deposits were discovered in East Texas. French interest in mining along the eastern border of Texas ended by 1763, when Louisiana had been pawned off to Spain shortly before the close of the French and Indian War. Spanish miners then concentrated on the valuable lead deposits of Upper Louisiana (Missouri), forgetting about the earlier attempts to work mineral deposits along the Red River.

FOOTNOTES

¹Charles W. Hackett, *Pichardo's Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas*, 4 vols. (Austin, 1934), II, 377.

²Alonso de Benevides, *Memorial 1630*, trans. Mrs. Edward Ayer (Albuquerque, 1965), 64.

³Charles W. Hackett (ed.), *Historical Documents Relating to New Mexico, Nueva Viscaya, and Approaches Thereto, to 1773*, (3 vols; Washington, 1923), III, 362.

⁴Carlos E. Castañeda, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas* (7 vols; Austin, 1936), II, 122.

⁵Voyage of the Ronommee in 1699 and 1700 in Mississippi, *Bibliothèque Nationale, fonds français*, 9097: 108, 1700.

⁶Francis Parkman, *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West* (Boston, 1910), 349.

⁷Dunbar Rowland and Albert Sanders (tr. and ed.), *Mississippi Provincial Archives 1701-1729* (3 vols; Jackson, Mississippi, 1929), III, 163.

⁸Henderson Yoakum, *History of Texas* (New York, 1855), 47.

⁹Hackett, *Pichardo's Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas*, IV, 18.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 20.

¹²Issac Joslin Cox (ed.), *Sieur de la Salle* (2 vols; New York, 1905), II, 1.

¹³Carl I. Wheat, *Mapping of the Trans-Mississippi West* (7 vols; San Francisco, 1957), I, 140.

¹⁴Castañeda, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas*, III, 255.

¹⁵Peter P. Forrestal (tr.), "The Solis Diary of 1767," *Preliminary Studies of the Texas Catholic Historical Society*, I, 33.

¹⁶*Telegraph and Texas Register* (December 6, 1837), 3; Fray Juan Agustin Morfi, *History of Texas 1673-1779*, in two volumes, translated by Carlos E. Castañeda (Albuquerque, 1935), I, 213, says gold was found near Mission Delores in East Texas; Charles W. Hackett, "The Marquis of San Miguel de Aguayo and His Recovery of Texas from the French, 1719-1723," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XLIX, No. 2 (October, 1945), 195, says gold was discovered near Los Ais; Carlos E. Castañeda, *Our Catholic Heritage of Texas*, IV, 36, quotes the Solis Diary.

¹⁷Rowland and Sanders, *Mississippi Provincial Archives 1701-1729*, III, 304; Hackett, *Pichardo's Treatise of the Limits of Louisiana and Texas*, II, 106, cites a letter written about the Aguayo expedition on February 14, 1729, which states, "The distance between San Antonio and the first mission of Los Tejas, is uninhabited . . . For without said families (the Canary Islanders) it seems difficult for that province to be maintained . . . It is one of the best in America, and rich, alike in all kinds of crops, and in cattle, as well as in mines which may be worked."

¹⁸Yoakum, *History of Texas*, 74.

¹⁹Duplessis to Salmon, Memoir on Natchitoches, *Archives des Colonies*, Paris, France, C 13, 13:145, June 17, 1732; Weston Arthur Goodspeed, *The Province and the States* (7 vols; Madison, Wisconsin; 1904), I, 183, states that La Harpe (Bernardo de) had learned from a Nassonite chief of the existence of metallic ores in the mountains thirty leagues north of the Red River post in 1719.

²⁰M. Le Page Du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana* (London; 1774), 151. Du Pratz's work was first printed in Paris in 1758.

²¹*Ibid.*, 152, 195.

²²See also, Lamothe Cadillac, Governor of Louisiana, to Pontchartrain, Minister of Marine, Letter on Mississippi, *Archives des Colonies*, Paris, France, C 13, 2:671, May 2, 1712, which states, "Mr. Renault would be in charge of Louisiana under the condition that he provides the King with lead and copper mines . . . I answered that I was very sure about the lead mine."

²³Supplement to the memoir on the New Louisiana Company, presented to the Minister of Marine by Bertrand, *Archives des Colonies*, Paris, France, C 13 c, 1:195, 1759.

²⁴Memoir in form of a journal of events at Fort Charles, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris, France, 8:46, July 12, 1734.

²⁵Hackett, *Pichardo's Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas*, II, 71; See also, Louise Barry, *The Beginnings of the West* (Topeka, Kansas; 1972), 317, which states that Jesse Chisholm and a party of lost mine hunters failed in 1836 to locate a mine along the Arkansas River, depicted on M. Le Page Du Pratz's map of 1757; J. Frank Dobie, *Coronado's Children* (New York; 1930), 273. Dobie stated that a lost lead mine was near Caddo Lake in East Texas, present Cass County, but his account was strictly based on Oral History.