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THE Y'BARBO LEGEND AND EARLY SPANISH SETTLEMENT

by *Francis Edward Abernethy*

I am not by nature an iconoclast nor a revisionist. I have grown comfortable with the old gods, and I revere the myths and legends of my culture's past. In fact, as a folklorist of sorts I usually accept the spirit of a legend more quickly than I accept the reality of history. However, in my meanderings through East Texas history and folklore I have encountered a legend that has been so sanctified by repetition that it has almost crossed the threshold into history.

When I moved to Nacogdoches in the early 1940s one of the memorable stories I encountered was that the Spanish of Nacogdoches County were pure Spanish, with blood unsullied by any mestizo mixing. They came, I was told by both gringos and Rodrigueses, straight from Spain to Nacogdoches, and they were not diluted in their meanderings among the darker, primitive folk south of the Rio Bravo. It was a good story, culturally accepted, and a natural folk response to a Spanish ethnic ego that had been bruised by Anglo invasion and subsequent domination of their territory. This long-standing legend, and perhaps a misreading of a primary historical source, led R.B. Blake, Nacogdoches' most eminent historian writing in the 1920s, to make the following statement:

The Senor Marquis of San Miguel de Aguayo, before returning to Mexico in May, 1722, installed a garrison of one hundred men at the presidio of Los Adaes [This was the easternmost Spanish outpost, near present day Robeline, twelve miles this side of the westernmost French outpost at Natchitoches], but due to the difficulties of transporting supplies from Mexico City, the Spanish government determined to send colonists from Spain to San Antonio de Bexar and to Los Adaes, so that these colonists might produce food and supplies for the soldiers, as well as to further settle up Texas. [Here he footnotes the original political documents in Jose Antonio Pichardo's *Limits of Louisiana and Texas*, II, 104.]

In pursuance of this project, in the Spring of 1728, the government sent a group of settlers from the province of Andalusia, southern Spain, near the city of Seville, for the purpose of making a settlement near Los Adaes. According to the Ibarvo family tradition, this group of settlers was brought to New Orleans, which was then in what was known as West Florida. These settlers came up the Mississippi and Red River to Natchitoches, and on to the mission of San Miguel de Linares, on Los Adaes Bayou.

Among these colonists from Spain was Don Mateo Antonio Ibarvo and his bride, Dona Juana Lutgarda Hernandez. These were the parents of Antonio Gil Ibarvo, . . . who was born in Los Adaes during the following year of 1729.¹

This "group of settlers" includes the Y'Barbos that Blake reports

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— and legend supports — was sent to Los Adaes in 1728 from Andalusia is difficult if not impossible to verify. Aguayo did make a request for Texas settlers in 1729, a year later, for four hundred Spanish families, two hundred to be of straight Spanish stock, but only ten families arrived, and these were sent to and remained in San Antonio. And they did not get there until March 9, 1731.² Blake might have justified the Y'Barbo settlement legend on the basis of an incomplete reading of Pichardo's *Limits of Louisiana and Texas*. However the error crept in, we have no evidence of formal, government sponsored Spanish settlement of the eastern frontier after Aguayo's expedition of 1721.

The accounts of the earliest settlement of the eastern frontier of Texas indicate the ambivalence of the Spanish authorities toward this area. La Salle's misadventure at Matagorda Bay in 1685, abortive as it was, caused a general Spanish panic. They feared the further intrusion of the French, who later established themselves in Natchitoches in 1714 and wandered into Spanish territory whenever the mood struck them. But the road from Mexico to the eastern frontier was long and was beset with hazards, and they felt that this far distant frontier would be difficult to supply and defend.

The Ramon expedition of 1716, the first to establish bases in the easternmost part of Texas, established six missions, among which was the Mission San Miguel de Linares among the Adaes Indians.³ During the three drouth-plagued, ill-fated years of Spanish occupancy only seven families arrived at Los Adaes, and these left, along with the soldiers, at the military insistence of the French in 1719.

Despite the hasty retreat from Los Adaes and the loss of prestige and influence on the eastern frontier, there were those who understood East Texas' long-range importance, both as a buffer zone against the French and as a settlement area for the Spanish. One of these was Friar Esidro de Espinosa, who had been in East Texas during the bad years of 1716-1719. He retreated with the rest in 1719, but he left with a determination to return and to make a more stable and defensible settlement on the next expedition. His recommendation for another expedition into East Texas was successful in that it influenced the sending of the Marquis de Aguayo's expedition in 1721. His other recommendations were not quite as successful. Father Espinosa had urged that civilian settlers as well as soldiers with families be sent to the frontier and that necessary artisans and craftsmen be included. The settlers would be volunteers and would be given the equivalent of a soldier's two year's advance pay. They would also be deeded land that would be theirs and their heirs in perpetuity.⁴ Espinosa envisioned a strong, stable, and enduring Spanish settlement which would be the nucleus of a larger East Texas colony.

Aguayo's expedition reached the abandoned mission at Los Adaes in September, 1721. The French had sufficiently alarmed the Spanish with violations of the frontier that this time they came with a determination

to stay and with what they considered was an adequate defense and settlement force. Consequently, Aguayo built and settled a presidio at Los Adaes with one hundred soldiers, thirty-one of whom had families.⁵ These Spanish soldiers and their families are the beginning of the Spanish in East Texas, the founding fathers and mothers, as it were.

The much vaunted sanguinary purity of these nuclear settlers, however, is made suspect by a record of those who came with the Marquis to Texas. Most of them were not volunteers, as Espinosa had suggested. One conscription of which we have a record⁶ consisted mainly of convicts from Celaya, in the state of Guanajuato near Ciudad Mexico. A catalog of those who were drafted for the Aguayo expedition lists seventeen *mestizos*, twenty-one *coyotes*, thirty-one mulattoes, two *castizos*, one *lobo*, one free Negro, one Indian of Sapotlan, and forty-four Spanish. The terms used designate various degrees of negroidal, caucasoidal, and mongoloidal miscegenation, but even the Spanish were racially and ethnically suspect. Dark skinned Moors, both Caucasoid and Negroid, only recently had departed Spain, especially Andalusia and Seville, leaving behind melanistic genes in abundance among the Spanish. The fact that there was *one* volunteer was singular enough to be noted in the records; this young man was sent by his father. Not all of the Celayans were sent to Los Adaes, of course; some were left at San Antonio. But this mottled catalog does indicate the sort of settler and soldier that formed the beginning of the East Texas Spanish colony. These were the same sorts, by the way, as the British indenturees — our ancestors — who were shipped out of Newgate and similar houses of penury and correction to help colonize North America. "A true born Englishman" — or American or Adaesano — "is a contradiction," Daniel Defoe was saying at about this same time.

We safely assume that there was continual movement between Los Adaes and San Antonio and Mexico along the Camino Real from the time of the Aguayo settlement in 1721 and on. Some of the East Texas Spanish stayed on the frontier, adjusted themselves to a life in proximity with Frenchmen, Indians, and a new kind of wilderness, and prospered in a relative sort of way — or they at least survived. Others got lonesome, bored, and burned out, and went back to San Antonio or back to their homes in the interior of Mexico. Lured by God-knows-what, legal or illegal — or shipped out by irate fathers — others came to the frontier or were sent by the government. The situation was fluid in the 1720s.

We now return to Aguayo's — and Friar Espinosa's — plans for settlement during this decade of the 1720s. Aguayo had recognized the need for a stable settlement and recommended early on to the authorities in Mexico that more settlers be sent to East Texas. The result of this was that three royal orders — two in 1723 and one in 1729 — were issued for colonists to be sent from the Canary Islands, a Spanish colony off northwest Africa, to New Spain and to the eastern frontier in particular. The

order of 1729 was the only one that had any results — and that was the ten families that eventually settled in San Antonio in 1731.

Thus, we wonder how Blake arrived at his conclusion that Spanish settlers came to the Los Adaes presidio via New Orleans in 1728. Blake's discussion of the sending to Adaes in 1728 of the Old World colonists — including Mateo Y'Barbo and wife — is documented with a reference to Pichardo's *Limits of Louisiana and Texas*, II, page 104. On page 104 and on the following pages Pichardo does cite the various *cedulae* where Spanish settlement - four hundred families, in fact — is recommended for the presidios on the Texas frontier, but the culminating report (Pichardo, II, page 107) states that only the ten families from the Canaries came in 1731 and that they stayed in San Antonio. I can only deduce that Blake read the recommendations and took that to be adequate support for the Y'Barbo family legend. I have no idea how he arrived at the 1728 arrival date, unless it was to get Antonio Gil Y'Barbo born there in 1729.

I have been looking for information about early eighteenth century Spanish settlement and about Mateo Y'Barbo for fifteen years, off and on, but I have found frustratingly little information. We do have some records of Mateo. On May 8, 1738, he testified before a San Antonio court that he was thirty-seven years old, "more or less." Blake evidently got his birth year for Mateo as 1701 from his testimony. In *no* place does Mateo or the court records mention that he was from Seville or Andalusia.

G. Douglas Inglis, Consultant in Hispanic Documentation of the Texas State Library, assisted me in the research among Spanish documents. By "assisted" I mean that he located and translated the documents under review and wrote great letters about his research and his findings. Conclusions that he reached were included in his correspondence. Inglis stated that he would find it very unlikely that Spaniards would pass through French New Orleans in the mid-1720s on their way to the Los Adaes presidio, which had been established to front the French and defend the Spanish frontier against them. He goes on to say:

France and Spain were celebrating an uneasy truce at the time. France had lost its position of dominant influence in the Spanish court, especially after Jose de Patino came to power as the first minister in 1726. To have entered Texas via French Louisiana would have been a very suspicious move, and one which would have generated numerous documents in an effort to clarify the situation. Actually, the logical approach for anyone from Spain — if indeed they did come from Spain — would have been via Havana to Vera Cruz and hence northward going overland. This is somewhat the route of the Canary Islanders in 1731 (And I might add that the Canary Island project produced over a thousand pages of documents that are in the Archivo General de Indias.).⁷

I am afraid that I have said more about what I believe did not happen than what did happen. I feel that if someone creates a vacuum —

which both nature and scholars abhor — then it is up to him to at least attempt to put something in the cavity. Apologetically I can offer the frailest sort of hypothesis, but one that is based on the universal folkloric phenomenon of legendary blending.

The supposition is that the Y'Barbo legend is the result of a blending of Spanish and French legends that eventually became as confused historically as most legends become. In spite of aggressive Spanish and French governmental stances, the soldiers and settlers of Los Adaes and Natchitoches probably enjoyed a friendly intercourse, social and otherwise, that would have offered ample opportunity for an exchange of both legends and genes. The tales the French told of their coming to the New World accurately included stories of their landing at New Orleans and voyaging up the Mississippi and Red rivers to the fort of Natchitoches, twelve miles east of Los Adaes. During the eighteenth century the French continued to arrive from the Old World at New Orleans, and after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, a natural route for settlers and adventurers entering East Texas was through New Orleans and up the big rivers. Eventually some of the Spanish had been there so long that they forgot their ancestors' long trek on the Camino Real from Mexico and began to remember with some of their neighbors and in-laws that they came up the big rivers from New Orleans. It was a natural confusion, and after all, that route was the most logical and most used route to their part of the New World. Thus, through generations of cultural blending, this New Orleans immigration story became a part of Y'Barbo family legend — as well as of the Arriola, Montes, and Luna families — and later worked its way into history. When the real past is forgotten a new past will be created.

Y'Barbos, as well as many descendants of other Spanish settler families, are still scattered along the Camino Real in East Texas and western Louisiana. Many in Louisiana spell and pronounce their name *Ebarb*. In East Texas some call the name *Wy-Barbo*; some *E-Barbo*. Some are dark complected; one of Gil Y'Barbo's contemporaries stated that he was a mulatto.⁴ Most are as light as their Anglo neighbors. My Wy'Barbo student was a honey blonde. Some Nacogdoches Spanish are still circulating the New Orleans legend. Ross Pantalion of Swift, during a recent discussion of his family's origin, said, "I don't know where Daddy's family came from but Mama's family [She was a Y'Barbo.] came straight from Spain to New Orleans and then to Natchitoches." It's a good story and will continue to satisfy the curiosity of the Nacogdoches "Spanish" about their beginnings. I only hope that some scholar will in his academic peregrinations among musty Spanish archives find accurate records of the beginnings of the Spanish in East Texas and satisfy mine.

NOTES

⁴R.B. Blake Collection, S.F.A Special Collection LXVII, pp. 102-103.

²Mattie Alice Austin, "The Municipal Government of San Fernando de Bexar, 1730-1800," *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, VII, p. 284.

³For a brief history of the East Texas missions, see Father Marion A. Habig, "Spain in Texas, East Texas Area — Part II," *El Compañero* (June, 1971), II, pp. 1-5. This is a publication of Texas Old Missions and Forst Restoration Association.

⁴Eleanor Claire Buckley, "The Aguayo Expedition into Texas and Louisiana, 1719-1722," *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, XV, No. 1 (July, 1911), p. 24.

⁵Don Juan Antonio de la Pena, "Pena's Diary of the Aguayo Expedition," Rev. Peter Forrestal, trans., *Preliminary Studies of the Texas Catholic Historical Society* (January, 1935), II, p. 57.

⁶Buckley, "The Aguayo Expedition," p. 27.

⁷G. Douglas Inglis to F.E. Abernethy, September 7, 1982.

⁸Herbert E. Bolton, *Texas in the Middle Eighteenth Century*, (New York, 1962), p. 388.