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THE EXPEDITION OF 1682 TO THE GULF OF MEXICO

WHEN the caravan sets out on January 1, 1682, the spirited de la Salle, who for sixteen years had controlled his enthusiasm, can congratulate himself on the results achieved by his long patience. The three years from 1666 to 1669, he had spent finding his bearings, studying the country, the natives, and their languages. Then, between 1669 and 1672 come two preliminary expeditions: one from July 1669 to July 1671, in the course of which he descends the Ohio River; the other from August 1671 to December 1672 which brings him down the Illinois River and reveals to him the true course of the streams. Next comes into play the experience acquired at Fort Frontenac, then the long and painful manœuvres to obtain the support of Colbert; then, finally, the preparatory organization on the scene, which he carried out from 1679 to the end of 1681. These sixteen years of steady effort made towards the same end, with the help of Talon and Frontenac, will insure the triumphs of 1682.

It is from Fort Miami, on the southeast bank of Lake Michigan that the expedition starts on January 1, 1682. De la Salle has chosen his companions carefully and well. His two confidants are an officer, Tonty, and a Recollet, Father Zénobe Membré.

Tonty has been his second in command since July 14,

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1678, the date of the departure from La Rochelle. Prince de Conti, who knew him well, had introduced him to Abbot Renaudot, a member of the French Academy and of the Academy of Inscriptions, and a friend of Cavelier, to whom he recommended him.

Tonty was the son of an Italian banker and promoter of a system of loans to be paid in life annuities, called "Ton-tines." His son, Chevalier de Tonty, remained throughout his life the trustworthy, faithful, and devoted friend of de la Salle, like most of the men who took part in this expedition. All of them indeed were loyal, unselfish, and firm believers in the vast design of their leader. Tonty had lost a hand at war and had replaced it with an artificial iron hand, which he could use as a club. This fact, and the courage which he showed on every occasion earned for him the Indian nickname "Iron Hand." It may be said that Tonty identified himself with this colony, which soon took on the maps the name of "Colony of M. de la Salle." There he followed to the letter and in the spirit the principles of the colonial policy of de la Salle. He carried them out thoroughly and extensively for years, and when, in the early eighteenth century, Iberville, taking up again the task of de la Salle, came and settled at Biloxi, the capital of Louisiana, it was Tonty who rushed south to insure a liaison between Fort St. Louis, where he was still in command, and the new French establishment along the Gulf of Mexico.

Father Zénobe Membré, scarcely mentioned by historians, plays the same part in de la Salle's career that Marquette plays in Joliet's. But in the association Joliet-Marquette, the Jesuit Father is the leading spirit, while Zénobe Membré, although just as strong a character as Marquette, is eclipsed by the glory and brilliance of Cavelier de la Salle.

He must, nevertheless, remain in history as the histori-

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ographer, the adviser and the confidant of Cavelier, possibly his Father Confessor.⁸ He accompanies him on his expeditions of 1679–1680, 1681–1682, and 1684–1687. De la Salle, on the advice of Frontenac, had surrounded himself with Franciscans, and five Recollet Fathers were among his companions on his expeditions. But Father Zénobe Membré alone took part in the last three, of which he was more or less the chaplain and spiritual leader. He was murdered in 1689, on his way to Fort St. Louis, shortly after the assassination of de la Salle. Father Zénobe Membré was a very noble type of missionary, energetic, wise, self-sacrificing, a great admirer of the personality of de la Salle, devoted body and soul to the accomplishment of the latter's great design for which he gave up his life. "To succeed or to die" was his motto as it was that of his chief. In all fairness, historians will have to put him on an equal plane with Father Marquette. The latter, the Jesuit, died of starvation; the former, the Recollet, died tortured by the Indians.

Tonty and Zénobe are the best qualified witnesses of de la Salle's last expeditions, in so far as they took part in them: Zénobe in the last three,⁹ and Tonty in those of 1679 and 1681–1682.¹⁰ That is why their declarations must be considered before all others, and their accounts must be of first importance to historians.

Unfortunately Tonty did not take part in de la Salle's last expedition, that of 1684–1687. Father Zénobe was murdered in 1689, and the papers of Cavelier, after being taken ashore, seem to have been lost. That is why historians must, although with some reserve, rely on the accounts of the explorer's brother, the Sulpician, Jean Cavelier.¹¹

These are the documents which, taken in connection with those of the explorer himself, allow one to reconstruct the story of de la Salle's long voyage of discovery, and then his

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tragic last expedition. The account of Father Zénobe must be given all the more weight because it was he whom Cavalier de la Salle sent to Paris in the early months of 1683 to present to the Court the official report of the triumphal expedition of 1682.

Thanks to the authority and intelligence of the leader, the aim of the great expedition was completed in three months, with scanty resources and without bloodshed. Cavalier de la Salle, like Brazza later, conquered an empire for France through the prestige of his personality.

Tonty starts ahead on December 21, 1681, and de la Salle on January 1, 1682. According to Tonty, the expedition comprised twenty-three Frenchmen, eighteen Mahingan and Abenakis Indians, accompanied by ten women and three children. A relay post had been established by Tonty in a place which is called today Chicago, and which the French called "The Divine." It is the most southern point along the Great Lakes but it was not favorably situated for the establishment of a permanent fort. To reach it, one had to follow the watershed between the two basins and through this portage one could reach, by means of a sled, the fort. At this place the river does not freeze over.

The expedition descended the river southward by canoe. On February 6, 1682, they reached the Mississippi at latitude 38°. Then, on the 13th, the mission found on the right an enormous river, with raging currents, the Missouri. Then they pass islands for a distance of sixty leagues. Keeping to the right, they conjecture that another river flows into theirs from the left; but they cannot see it and suppose that it is the Ohio.

De la Salle describes in the distance a great village, the main center of the Akansas, a short distance above the mouth of the Akansas River, since called the Arkansas. He

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goes there, and is well received; he asks the chief to place himself under the protection of the King of France. The latter accepts, and one of de la Salle's first political acts is accomplished. On March 13, 1682, in the presence of the assembled tribesmen, he takes possession "of the country of Louisiana and all its territories, provinces, lands, peoples, and nations" situated in the basins of the Mississippi and of the Ohio. Thus de la Salle raised the flag of Louis XIV after whom the new territory was named.¹²

Spring changes these southern regions into an earthly paradise. De la Salle and his companions were awe-struck. They spent three days among the friendly and well-mannered natives, amid peach trees in full bloom, in an atmosphere of sweetness and fragrance. Then they went to the tribe of the Tansas, friends of the Akansas, then further south, among hostile tribes, that is, the Natchez and the Koroa, whose chief, says Tonty, "gave de la Salle and his company a splendid banquet." Tonty reckoned as many as thirty-four villages on the right bank and forty on the left, each bank waging war against the other.

On April 6, 1682, the boats reached the three channels of the mouth of the Mississippi. On the 7th, Cavalier explored the right channel, Tonty the middle one, and d'Antry the left one. On April 9, 1682, the solemn ceremony of the foundation of the new empire took place. Cavalier de la Salle felt the importance of the occasion and sensed the tremendous possibilities it opened. Thinking, perhaps, of his Norman compatriot, William the Conqueror, taking possession of England, he takes solemn possession of all the territories which he had explored or merely seen from afar. He dons his imperial cloak of scarlet with gold braid. He orders the Notary of Fort Frontenac, Jacques de la Métairie, to draw up the official act of possession for posterity. His

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second in command, Tonty, sums up the ceremony in his report: "So that on April 9th a cross bearing the arms of France was planted in its place, and after we had chanted the Te Deum and the Vexilla, M. de la Salle took possession, in the name of the King, of the Mississippi River and all its tributaries and all the nations within its basin. Then, amid volleys of musketry, a lead tablet was buried in the ground bearing the arms of the King and the names of all those who had taken part in the discovery."

The ceremony was celebrated at the junction of the three channels of the Mississippi at latitude 26°. Baron Marc de Villiers thinks that he has identified the exact spot where the ceremony took place.¹³ The official document relating the solemn act of taking possession bore the words: "I have taken and do take possession in the name of His Majesty and the Successors to his Crown, of this country of Louisiana, from the mouth of the great river St. Louis, otherwise called the Ohio, in the east, and this with the consent of the Shawanoes, Chickasawa, and other populations dwelling in it and who have become our allies, as also along the River Colbert or Mississippi and the rivers which discharge themselves thereinto, from its source beyond the country of the Sioux and the Nadouessioux, and also with their consent, as far as its mouth at the sea or Gulf of Mexico, at about 27° elevation of the North Pole . . . upon the assurance we have had from the nations that we were the first Europeans who have descended or ascended the said River Colbert."¹⁴

On the lead tablet, buried in the ground at the foot of the cross, the following inscription is supposed to have been engraved, on one side "Ludovicus Magnus regnat, nono aprilis 1682" and on the other "Robertus Cavalier cum domino de Tonty, legato, R. P. Zenobio Membré, Recollecto, et viginti Galli, primus hoc flumen inde ab Illineorum pago enavigavit ejusque ostium fecit perium, nono aprilis anni 1682."

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The very next day, April 10, lacking food supplies, de la Salle starts on his way back. During the night he was attacked by a tribe, the Quinipissas, whom he had to fight for two hours, killing ten of their men. From the 10th of April to the 1st of May, "we suffered from hunger," says Tonty. On the 1st of May they reached the Koroas, found their cache of grain and were saved. As they were nearing Fort Prudhomme, Cavalier fell ill; his condition grew worse, he had to be carried to the fort and sent Tonty ahead with the main part of the expedition which he brought back to Fort Miami, where de la Salle, after recovery, soon joined them.

In the autumn of 1682 he sets out again for the country of the Illinois. He had not been able to complete the installation of his main post in that region before his great expedition. He realizes the importance of doing so all the more because it is his chief relay post between the Great Lakes and the new territories. He spends the winter of 1682-83 there and erects a stockade, strongly fortified, north of Fort Crèvecœur. This was Fort St. Louis, built on a rock, called today "Starved Rock," which is just opposite the present town of La Salle. It was six hundred feet high; it overlooked the river and the immense fertile plain, which de la Salle termed "the best land in the world, all ready for the plow," the granary of the future. Fort St. Louis henceforth becomes the main outpost facing the south, "the key to a country where one may establish a powerful colony," surrounded by allied Indian tribes. De la Salle, after having thus firmly established his bases, entrusts the command of his colony and Fort St. Louis to Tonty and leaves for France.

He comes to present to the King, as Garneau says, "the richest country in the world, a land watered by innumerable rivers, dotted with magnificent forests," which, added to the Great Lakes region and New France, constitutes the new French Empire in America.