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Lore vs. fact: Grandfather's silver mines were just caves

By Larry Clark

Historical fact and local tradition do not always match. I found this out at the Fort San Juan excavation last week.

My grandfather was the second-youngest child of a whole passel of kids. His mother was his daddy's third wife. By the time my grandfather came along, the family had fallen on extremely hard times.

So, as family lore goes, my grandfather – a lad of 9 or 10 – would spend some of his time scraping around in the old Spanish silver mines in far western North Carolina. He didn't find much, but there was enough that he could buy a little food for the family.

This is the same grandfather who had a full-time job in a logging camp when he was 11 and his own team of horses – supplied by the lumber company – about the time he turned 13.

Dr. Christopher Rodning of Tulane University (formerly of UNC-Chapel Hill) and Dr. David Moore of Warren Wilson College were at the historical marker dedication at the Fort San Juan site. Moore was the archaeologist for the state Archaeology Division's western office for 18 years before joining the faculty at Warren Wilson.

Moore and Rodning are deeply involved in the excavation site on the Berry farm, the location of the major native American settlement called Joara and the fort.

I asked Rodning if any silver had been discovered there. No, he replied. Iron, lead and pottery – what you'd expect from a site dating to the mid-1500s. But no silver.

Then I found out from Moore that the Spanish didn't come to the Foothills or proceed into the area encompassing what is now Cherokee County in search of treasure. I just knew that's what Capt. Juan Pardo and his men were looking for: Gold and silver. After all, that's what most of us would surmise, considering what we think we know about the exploits of Cortez, Coronado and Pizarro.

But Pardo and Hernan de Soto, his contemporary and superior, weren't after riches. They were ordered to find an overland route to Mexico so the Spanish could avoid the pirates in the Gulf of Mexico.

Moore called the Spanish silver mines a common misconception. “They did not actively mine or search for silver,” the professor said. He agreed it is possible that some of the Spanish soldiers briefly investigated caves in the mountains, and they could have scratched out some silver if it was readily visible.

But Pardo and company followed orders. They were looking for an interior passage from Mexico to the South Carolina coast. The Spanish had already established their continental capital, Santa Elena, on what is now Parris Island.

The problem with the quest is that longitude had not been invented. Calculating latitude was a snap to voyagers at the time. They could figure out where they were running north and south. Longitude, however, is dependent on real time, so explorers used “by guess and by golly” to estimate east and west.

Well, when Pardo got to the Blue Ridge Mountains, it was late in the year and there were snow-covered peaks. He congratulated himself on finding the Rockies. Nobody at the time had any idea the land was so big. The fort at Joara was established, and Pardo moved westward to find Mexico. He built forts all the way into eastern Tennessee.

Pardo was on a visit to Santa Elena when Indians from several tribes got together and decided to get rid of the Spanish. Pardo’s gang had brought gifts to the Indian leaders, but the deal was really one-sided in favor of the Europeans. Pardo also claimed the land for Spain and let the Indians know they were subjects of the king, something that chafed those free people.

The historical record – part written and part archaeological – suggests all the forts were attacked at the same time. The coordinated assault resulted in the eradication of the Spanish soldiers. Only one escaped. It is believed he had taken up with a local woman and was allowed to return to Santa Elena. Too, the Indians wanted the Spanish to know exactly what happened and that they were no longer welcome.

Pardo simply vanished from history. Nobody really knows what happened to him. The Spanish gave up on the Mexico road, abandoned Santa Elena and withdrew to their strongholds in the Caribbean and Florida. That effectively opened what would become the United States and Canada to the English, Dutch, Germans and French.

Remnants of Fort San Juan and other Spanish outposts remain. What once was considered speculation is now fact, thanks to the archaeological labors at Joara and other areas in North Carolina and Tennessee. Fort San Juan is a treasure beyond compare. It is not giving up treasure in the form of precious gems and metals, but the riches of knowledge and heritage. It is the oldest European settlement in the interior of the continental United States.

Now, back to family lore.

Two things are certain: My grandfather found silver in mountain caves, and the Spanish explored all over the area. The local folks in 1901 believed the Spanish mined the caves, deducing that’s why so little silver was found there.

The historical and archaeological records indicate otherwise. It is logical to postulate Spanish soldiers gave many caves a cursory inspection for future reference. Taking new riches to the king and the church was a good thing back then. But Pardo’s soldiers were on a different mission.

If the Spanish believed silver was abundant enough to warrant mining, we may infer they would have considered sending an army back to the area even after scrapping the idea of building a fortified road. But they didn’t.

Still, it is a significant moment in our history, even though the invasive foreigners left the Indians fragmented

and exposed to brand new diseases that took a terrible toll on the native populations. Joara did not survive for long after the land was scoured of the Spanish army in 1568.

My family story will now reflect my grandfather, when he was a mere boy, scrounged for silver in caves in far western North Carolina. Spanish explorers once tried to settle the area. They built forts. They were killed by the Indians. It was many years before Europeans returned to the mountains.

Here's a reason why history is so fascinating. Those later settlers did not know the story of Capt. Juan Pardo. But the Indians remembered. That explains why my grandfather and his generation knew the Spanish had been there, and that's why our non-Hispanic ancestors – who thought they were the first Europeans in the western territory – were surprised the Indians were familiar with foreigners.

And thereby hangs a compelling story that is still being read on a farm in Burke County.

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