

EARLY S.A. GROWTH MET MANY HURDLES

San Antonio Express-News
Web Posted: 07/19/2004 12:00 AM CDT

By Gilberto Hinojosa

Almost 300 years ago today, on July 19, 1714, a surprise visitor showed up at the doors of the Presidio San Juan Bautista, a soldier-settler garrison, town-and-mission complex on the Rio Grande (present-day Guerrero, Coahuila, below Piedras Negras, across from Eagle Pass). The unexpected caller was a trader from French Louisiana, Louis Juchereau de St. Denis.

Many historians say St. Denis changed the course of history, but there were larger forces that ruled the day – the ones that got him there in the first place and drove the settlement expedition he helped lead.

His venture into San Juan Bautista and the Spanish reaction to his presence demonstrate the limits of empire – both that of his native France and those of New Spain.

The French had been in North America since 1604 trading with Native Americans in Canada and through their networks in the Mississippi Valley from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. French expansion was dynamic and seemingly unstoppable.

But at the end of the century, an attempt to take their commercial and political empire westward into the silver producing areas of northern New Spain failed – and that should have been a signal that it had reached its limits.

Sending St. Denis to the Rio Grande was a sequel of sorts. It was a response, in part, to a letter the French received from Fray Francisco Hidalgo, a missionary at San Juan Bautista, asking them for help in converting the East Texas Indians.

Spanish friars had been to East Texas earlier when they joined the military entradas, or expeditions, launched to counter the initial French expansion. But, while the padres dreamed of conversions, Spanish officials judged expansion a venture into distant East Texas costly and unnecessary.

The officials were right, but Father Hidalgo's writing to the French in Louisiana and St. Denis showing up at San Juan Bautista forced their hand.

Not immediately, however. St. Denis was placed under house arrest for months until the frontier officials could receive

instructions from Mexico City. In the meantime, St. Denis married the Spanish governor's daughter.

Still, St. Denis, now apparently on the Spaniards' side (he may have been a double agent), joined the expedition to establish a settlement in East Texas. The goal was to employ the proven vehicles of expansion: planting missionary-led Indian towns (missions), establishing soldier-settler garrisons (presidios) and founding civilian towns.

As officials had predicted, the presidios in that far-flung region were too expensive to supply. The Indians there were already settled in their own villages and, understandably, turned down the missionaries' invitation to move into the mission towns.

The East Texas venture necessitated the settlement on the San Antonio River, which turned out to be quite successful. The area had sufficiently good farm lands for subsistence and thousands of wild cattle and horses that could be driven to the Saltillo or Monclova markets. And the nomadic Indians here readily joined the mission towns.

But there were problems. The garrison was underfunded and the Apache and Comanche menace loomed large throughout the 1800s. Bringing the Canary Island civilian settlers to this frontier was costly and, once here, they immediately competed with the missions and the soldier-settlers for the scarce resources.

Still, the expansion into the San Antonio River Valley seemed part of the ongoing process of the northward thrust from central Mexico – especially by comparison to the "leap" to East Texas.

That had been Father Hidalgo's dream, and it turned out to be as wild as St. Denis' dream of expanding French commercial and political power to the Sierras. These two colorful characters would end up as footnotes to San Antonio's foundation and development, which probably would have unfolded without them, though possibly later and more slowly.

Ultimately, expansion – then and today – needs dreamers, but it needs reality more.

GHinojosaEN@aol.com