CHAPTER III

The Spanish Assault

The white man’s assault on the Big Thicket region began as a small part of the great struggle between Spain and France for supremacy of the southern regions of what is now the United States. Prior to 1685, the area encompassing the region of present-day Texas was uninhabited by white men. Spain, who claimed Texas, had not attempted to colonize the region. Indeed, only a few Spanish adventurers, such as Cabeza de Vaca and Luis de Moscoso, had traversed even a small portion of the realm. However, in 1685, an event occurred that would drive the Spanish to establish permanent settlements in East Texas.

In that year, Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, established an ill-fated French colony of 180 settlers in Texas. The settlement was located on the banks of the Garcitas River about five miles inland from Matagorda Bay. Even the founding of this small colony in the vast unexplored region of Texas was an accident. La Salle had intended to plant this colony at the mouth of the Mississippi River, which he had explored just a few years earlier. Such a colony would have established French supremacy over the fur-rich Mississippi Valley. Unfortunately, a navigation error caused the French colonists, who were traveling by sea, to miss their intended destination and land on the wild Texas coast. The settlement, called Fort St. Louis, was immediately beset with hardships. A series of disasters left the
colonists without supplies, and the one ship that could have been used to relocate the colony was lost in a wreck off the coast. The situation seemed so hopeless that several men deserted the colony to live with the Indians of the area.¹

Faced with this situation, La Salle attempted to march overland from Fort St. Louis to Canada where he hoped to obtain the needed supplies to ensure the survival of the colony. La Salle made three attempts to reach Canada by this overland route. On one of these attempts he penetrated into the realm of the Tejas Indians living along the Trinity and Neches Rivers above the Big Thicket area.²

On his third desperate attempt to reach Canada, La Salle was ambushed and killed by some disgruntled members of his own expedition. The survivors of this third expedition then continued the journey. As had La Salle before them, these men reached the land of the Tejas Indians. Here, those associated with the assassination remained to live among the Indians. A few hardy souls pushed on and eventually reached Canada. Those who had been forced to stay behind at Fort St. Louis either perished from disease or were killed or captured by the Indians living around Matagorda Bay.³ Despite the pathetic demise of this little colony, it set in motion a vigorous reaction by the Spanish that would lead them to establish a series of settlements around the northern fringes of the Big Thicket region.

The Spanish in Mexico had learned of La Salle’s colony shortly after it was established. They first heard of the colony from Denis Thomas, a sailor who at one time had been a crew member on one of the four ships that carried La Salle and his colonists to Texas. A Spanish ship had captured Thomas’ vessel, the St. Francois, off the coast of Yucatan in 1685. Thomas told the officials in Mexico about La Salle’s colony, but he could not give them the precise location.⁴

Both sea and land expeditions were dispatched to discover and destroy the French intruders, but the colony could not be located. Six expeditions searched for the colony between 1686 and 1689, but to no avail. One of the sea expeditions found the wreckage of La Salle’s ship, but no colonists were sighted. Since they had been unable to find the settlement, the Spanish began to doubt its existence. Perhaps, they mused, it was noth-
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ing more than a manifestation of Thomas’ imagination. But then, Juan Enrique, a deserter from La Salle’s colony who had been living among the Indians, appeared in Coahuila, Mexico, and told the startled Spanish officials that Fort St. Louis did indeed exist.5

After hearing Enrique’s story, the viceroy of Mexico ordered Alonso de León, governor of Coahuila and captain of the presidio at Monclava, to mount another expedition to find the French interlopers. This time the Spanish discovered their long-sought goal, but they found Fort St. Louis completely deserted. While at the fort, de León received a group of Tejas Indians, who were down in this region hunting buffalo. These Indians informed de León that some survivors of the colony were living among them on the upper Trinity and Neches rivers. Father Damian Massanet, a priest accompanying the expedition, spoke to the Tejas, and managed to secure the Indians’ permission to establish a mission among the tribe.6

Having completed his task, de León returned to Mexico and reported his findings to the viceroy. After hearing the evidence, the viceroy decided to send de León on yet another expedition. The viceroy instructed de León to find the French survivors, and to assist Father Massanet in establishing a mission in East Texas to Christianize the Tejas. The mission was also to serve as a buffer against further French intrusion into Texas.7

On March 28, 1690, de León, leading an expedition of soldiers and priests, set out for the land of the Tejas. First, they stopped and burned Fort St. Louis to remove all traces of the hated French invaders. After accomplishing this task, the group resumed its march toward northeast Texas. Finally after an exhaustive trip, this little band reached the land of the Tejas in May 1690, but failed to find the reputed French survivors. On June 1, 1690, they established the Mission San Francisco de los Tejas on San Pedro Creek just six miles from the Neches River. Having accomplished his task, de León returned to Mexico, leaving three priests and three soldiers to man the mission. This frail outpost was the first of many missions that would be built just beyond the northern border of the Big Thicket.8

During the ensuing 131 years of Spanish rule, the pattern of settlement in East Texas followed the direction laid down by the viceroy in 1690. Missions and presidios were established only where Indians dwelled
or where the French attempted to penetrate into Texas. Inasmuch as Indians did not live within the Big Thicket, and because the French efforts to penetrate Texas occurred in areas north and south of the Big Thicket, the Spanish were never compelled to establish settlements within its confines. They did, however, erect a ring of settlements around the Big Thicket region.

Mission San Francisco de los Tejas survived only three years. The Indians did not readily convert to the Christian religion, nor were they pleased with the advances of the soldiers toward their women. In addition, the Indians blamed the priest for the failure of their crops. Faced with the mounting hostilities of the Indians, the priest burned the mission in 1693 and returned to Mexico.  

It was not until 1716 that the Spanish forces reoccupied the land of the Tejas. The reawakened interest of Spain was due to the aggressive commercial activities among the Tejas by the French from their newly established post at Natchitoches, Louisiana. The Spanish countered the French incursions by establishing six new missions. The two most important included Mission Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, near the site of present-day Nacogdoches, and Mission San Miguel de Linares in a region called Los Adaes near modern Robeline, Louisiana. The other missions, Nuestro Padre San Francisco de los Tejas, La Purisima Concepcion, Nuestra Señora de los Ais, and San Jose, were strategically placed to control the various Tejas tribes. The Spanish also established a presidio, garrisoned by a few troops, near Mission Nuestro Padre San Francisco de los Tejas to protect the priest and to serve as an additional bulwark against French interlopers.  

The missions and presidio lasted only a few years. In 1719, war broke out between Spain and France, and it spilled over to their colonies in America. When news of the war reached the French in Louisiana, the governor, John Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, ordered M. Blondel, commandant of Natchitoches, to attack the Spanish in northeast Texas. Actually Blondel, with a diminutive invasion force of six men, raided only the mission at Los Adaes. At the time of the raid, the post was almost deserted. Only one lay brother and a crippled soldier were manning the mission, and they were easily captured. However, the lay brother managed
to escape and warn the other missions and presidios. Unfortunately for the Spanish, the frightened lay brother exaggerated the size of the French force. In his hysteria, he declared that 100 well-armed men were marching from Louisiana. Since the Spanish could only muster a fighting force of twenty-five soldiers, most of them boys without guns, the commander decided to retreat. The priest followed the example of the soldiers, and once again East Texas was totally abandoned.¹¹

Spanish officials in Mexico were angered at this retreat and ordered the immediate re-establishment of the missions and presidio. The viceroy selected the Marquis de San Miguel de Aguayo to lead the task force. Aguayo’s expedition, consisting of 500 soldiers and settlers, 4,000 horses, 600 cattle, 900 sheep, and 800 mules, was the most ambitious undertaking by the Spanish to settle the eastern portion of Texas. Like his predecessors, Aguayo failed to penetrate the Big Thicket. He simply re-established the abandoned mission and established a strongly garrisoned presidio in the Los Adaes region near Natchitoches. He took no punitive action against the French, for peace had already been declared. From these vantage points, the Spanish were able to reduce French commercial activities among the Tejas, but they never completely eradicated French influence in the region.¹²

Inasmuch as the Spanish had developed a commanding position in northeast Texas, the French shifted their attention to the Indians dwelling along the southern rim of the Big Thicket. As had occurred in the north, this French activity led to a reaction by the Spanish and the ultimate establishment of Spanish settlements in the southern regions. By 1745, rumors of French intrigues among the Indians of the lower Trinity River region became so strong that the governor of Texas ordered Captain Joaquin Orobio y Basterra, commander of the presidio at La Bahia, to investigate the reports.¹³

Orobio y Basterra visited the Bidai and Akokisa villages located on the Trinity River. Although he found no French settlement, Orobio y Basterra observed signs of French commercial activities among both tribes. He then returned to La Bahia and sent his report to the governor. Apparently, Basterra had impressed the Akokisa Indians, for tribal representatives journeyed to La Bahia and requested that a Spanish mission be
established in their land. Subsequently, Orobio y Basterra was ordered to explore the region and select a suitable site for a mission.\textsuperscript{14}

He left La Bahía in May 1748, and followed a course approximately fifteen miles inland from the coast. He arrived at the Akokisa village on the Trinity River on June 13, 1748. At the camp were Akokisa chiefs from villages further east on the Neches and Sabine Rivers. These chiefs invited Orobio y Basterra to continue his explorations eastward, and he consented. The Indians guided him along a trail that they claimed ran from the Trinity to the Sabine River and beyond. The first two leagues along the trail followed open and level country. Subsequently, the group encountered a region of heavy pine trees and thick underbrush. The Indians announced that the remainder of the journey would be through similar vegetation until the troop reached an area about one day’s march east of the Sabine River. Faced with the prospects of such a harsh journey, Orobio y Basterra turned back, but not before noting that the country was swampy and unfit for settlement.\textsuperscript{15} Orobio y Basterra had just encountered the southern extension of the Big Thicket.

Although Orobio y Basterra recommended the establishment of a mission among the Akokisa, typical Spanish procrastination forestalled settlement in the region for years. Finally in 1754, renewed rumors of French activities among the Akokisa Indians spurred the governor of Texas to dispatch Lieutenant Marcos Ruiz to investigate. This time the rumors proved to be true, and Ruiz captured a Frenchman, Joseph Blancpain, two white associates, and two black slaves. This little group had built a cabin on the lower Trinity River and were engaged in a brisk fur trade with the natives. Blancpain informed his captors that there were plans to establish at least fifty French families close to the mouth of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{16}

To suppress any such plan, the Spanish established a mission and a presidio just two leagues from the mouth of the Trinity in 1756 or 1757. Collectively the two outposts were called El Orcoquisac after the Akokisa Indians. Fifty settlers were sent to populate the area. El Orcoquisac was a hell-hole. Lack of a proper source for drinking water and the mosquito-infested swamp near the outpost made life intolerable. On several occasions, plans proposing to move the settlements to a place known as El Atascosita, about nineteen leagues further north on the Trinity River, were
submitted to the authorities, but for various reasons the move was never approved.\textsuperscript{17}

Although the Spanish authorities never sanctioned a government-sponsored outpost at Atascosita, settlers moved into that region in the late 1750s or early 1760. They were probably settlers from the Orcoquisac region searching for a more salubrious environment. Atascosita became the first Spanish settlement within the Big Thicket region. Eventually in 1831, Atascosita’s name was changed to Liberty.\textsuperscript{18} Thus in 1760, Spain could only boast of a string of missions and presidios north of the Big Thicket and one inconsequential settlement resting on its southwestern flank.

The transfer of Louisiana to Spain in late 1762 foreshadowed the demise of the missions and presidios in East Texas. The removal of the French threat, coupled with the generally unsuccessful attempts to convert the Indians of East Texas, reduced the need to man the region. However, the final blow to their existence did not fall until three years later. In 1765, the Marques de Rubi, a Field Marshall in the Spanish Army, received orders from King Charles III to inspect all presidios in the Viceroyalty of New Spain. After the inspection, Rubi was to report on the conditions of the presidios and make any recommendations to improve frontier defense. Upon receiving his orders, Rubi immediately left Spain, arriving in Mexico in February 1766. Fortunately, Nicholas de La Fora, a captain of engineers accompanying Rubi, maintained a diary of the trip that included a description of their route.\textsuperscript{19}

Rubi first inspected the presidios in California, Arizona, and New Mexico. He finally reached the presidios of northeast Texas in 1767. After inspecting these sites, he set out for the Orcoquisac presidio on the lower Trinity River. Instead of taking the trail leading around the western edge of the Big Thicket, Rubi followed a course that carried him through the center of the Thicket. From Nacogdoches, he struck out due south. For the entire journey he stayed between the Trinity and Neches Rivers: the heart of the Big Thicket.\textsuperscript{20} In his diary, La Fora described the hardships they encountered in the Thicket. He wrote,

On the 5th [Oct. 1767] we traveled twelve leagues southwest along a middle course over ground like the preceding. At four
leagues is La Parida. For the eight remaining leagues we traveled through thick woods that were almost impenetrable on account of the great amount of chaparral which chokes up that narrow path. The way is obstructed by fallen trees and branches lying across it, making passage very difficult because one has to avoid the brush and climb over the trunks. To this inconvenience another was added. At intervals the rain fell all day until five in the afternoon. At that hour the downfall became steady and the road impracticable, and we were forced to make camp on an almost imperceptible and nameless rise.\(^{21}\)

At this time, Rubi’s expedition was approaching the area east of the present-day city of Livingston in Polk County. Traveling further south, La Fora exclaimed that flood waters reached the bellies of their horses. Continuing their southerly excursion, La Fora mentioned that on October 8 they camped at a place called El Atascoso (Atascosita), the site of a small rancho. Finally on October 9 the weary group reached El Orcoquisac.\(^{22}\)

After completing this arduous inspection tour, Rubi submitted his recommendations to the King. His report called for the abandonment of all the missions and presidios in East Texas. Rubi’s report documented several reasons for his recommendations. With the French threat from Louisiana removed, Rubi maintained that Spanish troops in East Texas could be more profitably used against the Comanches on the West Texas frontier. A small force in Natchitoches would be sufficient to maintain a Spanish presence among the Indians of the region. Rubi also wished to consolidate the defense line of the frontier of New Spain. He envisioned a string of presidios stretching from the California coast, through Arizona, New Mexico, and across the southern half of Texas, terminating at La Bahia. The East Texas missions were far outside this defensive perimeter, and, therefore, were useless from Rubi’s point of view.\(^{23}\)

In 1772, the King of Spain issued the order to abandon East Texas. By 1773, all missions and presidios in East Texas were closed, and the settlers around Nacogdoches and Atascosita were forced to move to San Antonio. East Texas, both north and south of the Big Thicket, was now uninhabited except for the Indians and a few stoic settlers who decided
to live among the Native Americans instead of obeying the imperial order.\textsuperscript{24}

Some settlers who had been forced to withdraw from northeast Texas were unhappy in San Antonio. Led by Gil Ybarbo, they petitioned the governor to allow them to return to their farms. At first the governor refused, but in 1774, he allowed them to establish the village of Bucareli at the junction of the San Antonio Road and Trinity River in the upper portion of present-day Walker County. The experiment with Bucareli was a disaster. The hostility of the Comanches coupled with the ravaging flood waters of the Trinity River doomed the little settlement. In 1779, under the direction of Gil Ybarbo, the settlers abandoned Bucareli and returned to the area around Nacogdoches. Nacogdoches prospered, and by 1790, boasted a population of 480 people.\textsuperscript{25}

The purchase of Louisiana by the United States in 1803 transformed Nacogdoches into one of the most strategic cities in the Spanish Empire. Now the town served as the first barrier against the spread of American influence into Texas. The Louisiana Purchase also spurred the re-establishment of Atascosita in the south. By 1805, a number of settlers, many of them Frenchmen from Louisiana dissatisfied with the transfer of their homeland to the United States, had moved into the region around Atascosita. Spanish troops were sent to re-enforce the settlement and to guard against American encroachment into southeastern Texas.\textsuperscript{26}

The Louisiana Purchase also ignited a boundary dispute between the United States and Spain which would rage for fifteen years. President Thomas Jefferson proclaimed that the western boundary of Louisiana was the Rio Grande River. Jefferson based his claim on La Salle’s exploits in Texas. To his line of reasoning Texas had belonged to France and now it belonged to the United States. The Spanish, of course, disputed this claim, and announced that the boundary between the two nations was actually several miles east of the Sabine River.\textsuperscript{27}

Neither country was willing to abrogate its claim to the disputed territory; however, the two nations managed to cope with the situation by establishing a modus vivendi for the contested ground until the issue could be permanently settled. Don Simon de Herrera, commandant of the Louisiana frontier, and General James Wilkerson, commander of the United States
Army in the West, signed this so-called “neutral ground” agreement in 1806. According to this document, the Sabine River on the west and the Arroyo Hondo and Calcascieu River on the east were to serve as the boundaries for the neutral ground. The agreement stated that neither Americans nor Spanish troops could penetrate the neutral ground. However, civilians of both nations were free to settle in the disputed area. Since forces from neither sovereign were allowed to enter the area, it became a hideaway for all manner of unlawful enterprises. Outlaws, filibusters, and fugitive slaves all used the neutral ground for their sometimes-nefarious purposes.  

While the diplomatic maneuvering between the United States and Spain to resolve the boundary dispute was in progress, Spanish officials were once again forced to react to a new French threat in Texas. In 1817, a group of disgruntled and defeated Bonapartists originated a grand scheme to re-establish an empire in the New World. This band, formed by Charles and Henri Lallemand, French generals who had fought with Napoleon, planned to establish a colony in southeast Texas. This colony was to serve as a springboard for an invasion of Mexico. These visionaries believed that if they could conquer Mexico, then Napoleon would be released from St. Helena and join them in their new domain.  

The promotional literature in the French press masked the true purpose of the colony. The newspapers claimed that the colony was to offer French military and political exiles an opportunity to pursue a pastoral life in the New World. The first shipload of these so-called colonists, numbering approximately 150 people, reached Galveston Island on January 21, 1818. Here they met with Jean Lafitte, the infamous buccaneer who used Galveston Island as a base of operation for his raids on Caribbean shipping. From Lafitte, the soldier-settlers received some supplies and several small boats. These Bonapartists then rowed thirty miles up the Trinity River and established a fort, which they called Champ d’Asile, near the Spanish settlement at Atascosita. These freebooters were ill-equipped for the rigors of frontier life in Texas. Discipline was almost nonexistent, and disputes frequently ended in duels. A chronic shortage of supplies forced the men to reduce their rations to one biscuit per day.  

Spanish officials soon heard of the settlement, and they dispatched a force under Captain Juan de Castaneda to expel the interlopers. The French,
learning of the approaching Spanish troops, fled to Galveston Island seeking refuge with Lafitte. Some joined the forces of the buccaneer while others returned to France or sought a new life elsewhere. The attempt to re-establish the grandeur of Napoleonic France in the New World lay crumbled in the undergrowth of the Big Thicket of East Texas. Champ d’Asile existed only five months. With this last French threat removed, the Spanish devoted their full attention to the solution of their boundary dispute with the United States.

Eventually, in 1821, the United States Senate ratified the Adams-Onis Treaty, which settled the territorial dispute between Spain and the United States. Under its terms, the Sabine River was established as the border between Louisiana and Texas. With the entire neutral ground now under American control, many of the lawless elements drifted across the border into Texas. Doubtless some sought refuge in the Big Thicket.

Eighteen twenty-one was a propitious year in Texas history. The eastern border was firmly established, and Mexico, newly independent from Spain, now exercised jurisdiction over Texas. Spain’s assault on the wilderness had ended. The 131 years of Spanish rule had scarcely touched the Big Thicket. Only the struggling settlement of Atascosita remained as a monument to Spain’s attack on the Thicket.