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Cabeza de Vaca

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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

Cabeza de Vaca, Account

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (ca. 1490-1558) and the survivors of the disastrous expedition led by Pánfilo de Narváez were the first Europeans to cross the entire southeastern portion of North America. On April 15, 1528, 600 soldiers with the Narváez expedition landed near Tampa Bay, on the gulf coast of Florida. Only four were to return, completing an eight-year trek that stretched over 3,000 miles, from the coast of Florida to Mexico. After returning to Spain, Cabeza de Vaca began writing an account of his journey in an attempt to gain the governorship, or Adelantado, of either Florida or Río de la Plata in South America.

Born between 1488 and 1492 in southern Spain, Cabeza de Vaca inherited the distinctive surname from his maternal grandfather, Martín Alhaja; he also was the grandson of Pedro de Vera, a conquistador of the Cana



— Courtesy, Library of Congress

ry Islands. Cabeza de Vaca followed in his ancestors' footsteps, serving in Italy with Carlos V and under the dukes of Medina Sidonia in Spain, and later as Treasurer of the Narváez expedition.

The whole account of Cabeza de Vaca, and the ill-fated expedition for which he is

known, is based on three narratives which supplement each other. The first was written by a viceroy and eventually sent to the crown, but this account was lost. The second was jointly prepared by Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso del Castillo and Andrés Dorantes, then taken back to Spain in 1537 by Cabeza de Vaca and Alonso del Castillo. (An additional text has been lost, although some say that the original lies in Oviedo's Historia General y Natural de Indias.) The third was Cabeza de Vaca's personal narrative, which covered the voyage taken by Narváez, the perils of the journey, and close detail of his wanderings across the North American continent. Cabeza de Vaca published his narrative at Valladolid in 1542. The Naufragios, as the work is sometimes known (by its eighteenth-century title) was translated into English by Thomas Buckingham Smith in 1851; by Fanny Bandelier in 1905 (the version presented here); and most recently by Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz. Cabeza de Vaca's story has been made into a feature film, continues to be read today as a proto-anthropological work, and is considered to be a cornerstone of both Latin American and U.S. literatures.

Edited by Alisa Roberts, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

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Chapter Three: How We Arrived in Florida

That same day Alonso Enríquez, the Purser, set out for an island in the same bay where he called the Indians, who came and were with him a good while, and as exchange they gave him fish and a few pieces of venison. The following day was Good Friday and the Governor disembarked with the greatest number of people he could take with him in the skiffs he had. When we arrived at the Indians' buhios, or lodges, which we had seen, we found them empty and abandoned, since the people had left that night in their canoes. One of those buhios was very large, probably capable of holding more than three hundred people; the others were smaller. There we found a little golden bell among some nets.

The following day the Governor raised Your Majesty's standards and took possession of the land in your royal name, presented his credentials and was obeyed as Governor as Your Majesty commands. Likewise we presented ours before him and he acknowledged them, as provided therein. Then he ordered all the others to disembark, along with the remaining horses, which now numbered only forty-two, since the others had died because of the great storms and the long time that they had spent at sea. The few that remained were so skinny and fatigued that for the moment they were of little use to us.

The next day the Indians of that village came and spoke to us, but we did not understand them since we had no interpreter. They made many signs and threatening gestures and it seemed to us that they were telling us to leave that land. Then they left us and went away without hindering us.

Chapter Four: How We Entered the Land

The following day the Governor decided to go inland to explore and see what was there. The Commissary, the Inspector and I went with him, along with forty men. Six of them rode horses, but these were of little use to us. We headed north until, at the hour of vespers, we arrived at a great bay which we thought went far inland. We stayed there that night and returned the following day to where the ships and people were.

The governor ordered the brigantine to sail along the coast of Florida looking for the harbor which Miruelo, the pilot, had said he knew. But he had already erred and did not know where we were nor where the harbor was. The brigantine was ordered to find the harbor, and if unable, to cross back to Havana to look for the ship that Álvaro de la Cerda had, and to return to us with some provisions.

When the brigantine departed, we went inland again, this time with a few more people, skirted the shore of the bay we had found. Having gone four leagues, we took four Indians and showed them corn to see if they were familiar with it, since we had not yet seen sign of it. They told us they would take us to a place that had some. So they took us to their village at the head of the bay near there, and there they showed us some corn, which was not yet ready to be picked. There we found many merchandise boxes from Castile, each containing the body of a dead man. The bodies were covered with painted deerskins. This seemed to the Commissary to be a type of idolatry, and he burned the boxes with the bodies. We also found pieces of linen and cloth and feather headdresses which seemed to be from New Spain. We also found samples of gold. Through signs we asked the Indians where they had gotten those things. They indicated to us that very far from

there was a province called Apalachee, in which there was much gold, and they gestured that it had a great quantity of everything we valued. They said there was much in Apalachee.

Taking those Indians as guides, we departed. Ten or twelve leagues from there we found another village of fifteen dwellings, where there was a good plot of planted corn, ready to be picked. We also found some that was already dry. After staying there two days, we returned to where the Purser and the people and the ships were, and told the Purser and the pilots what we had seen and the information that the Indians had given us.

The next day, the first of May, the Governor took me aside with the Commissary, the Purser, the Inspector, a sailor named Bartolomé Fernández, and a notary named Jerónimo de Alániz. He told us that he wanted to go inland while the ships sailed the coast until they arrived at the harbor, which the pilots said and believed was very near there, on the way to the River of Palms. And he asked us to give him our opinion. I answered that under no circumstances should he leave the ships until they were in a secure and populated harbor, and that he should beware, for the pilots were uncertain and did not agree on the same thing, nor did they know where they were. Besides this, the horses were in no condition to be of use to us if we needed them. Furthermore, we were traveling without an interpreter, unable to speak to the Indians, and therefore had a difficult time communicating with them. I added that we did not know what we wanted from the land, and that we were entering a land for which we had no description, without knowing what kind of place it was, nor by what people it was inhabited, nor in which part of it were we. Moreover, we did not have sufficient provisions to enter an unknown land. Since little remained on the ships, each man could receive for the journey inland no more rations than one pound of biscuit and one of bacon. I said that I thought we should set sail and seek a harbor and a land more suitable for settlement, since what we had seen so far was as desolate and as poor as any that had ever been found in those regions.

The Commissary thought quite the contrary, saying that we should not embark except to go along the coast in search of the harbor, for the pilots said that it would be only ten or fifteen leagues from there on the way to Panuco, and that it was impossible not to come upon it if we kept to the coast, since they said that the harbor extended twelve leagues inland, and that the first to arrive should await the others there. He said that putting out to sea would be tempting God, because since leaving Castile we had experienced so many hardships, so many storms, so many losses of persons and ships before arriving there. For these reasons he said the Governor should go along the coast until he arrived at the harbor, and that the other ships with the other people should go the same route until they arrived at the same harbor.

Everyone there thought it fitting to do this, except the Notary, who said that before leaving the ships, the Governor should secure them in a known and safe harbor and in an area that was populated; and that having done this, he could then go inland and do what he wished. The Governor persisted in his way of thinking and went along with what the others advised him to do. When I saw his determination, I required him in Your Majesty's name not to leave the ships except safely in port, and I asked the Notary we had present to testify to that. He replied that he was satisfied with the opinion of the majority of the other officers and the Commissary and that I had no authority to make these requests of him. He asked the Notary to witness that, since that land had

neither resources for supporting a settlement nor a harbor for the ships, he was breaking camp and was leaving with the people in search of a better port and land.

Then he ordered that the people who were going with him be advised to prepare and to provide themselves with what was necessary for the journey. Having said this, in the presence of those who were there, he told me that, since I so opposed and feared going inland, I should remain and take charge of the ships and the people remaining on them, and that I should start a settlement if I arrived before he did. I declined this. After leaving there that very afternoon, saying that he could trust no one else for it, he sent word to me begging me to take charge of that matter. Seeing that I still declined although he greatly insisted, he asked me why I refused to accept. I replied that I declined to take charge because I knew and was certain that he would never again see the ships, nor the ships him, and that I thought this because I saw that he was going inland without any preparation. I said I preferred to risk the danger that he and the others risked and to endure what he and the others would endure rather than to take charge of the ships and give anyone cause to say that I was staying out of fear, since I was opposed to entering, and thus have my honor doubted, for I preferred to risk my life than to have my honor questioned. Seeing that he was getting nowhere with me, he begged many others to speak to me about this and to plead with me, but I gave them the same answer that I had given him. And so he provided that a Justice named Caravallo, whom he had brought, should be his lieutenant and remain with the ships.

Chapter Five: How the Governor Left the Ships

On Saturday, the first of May, the same day on which this had occurred, the Governor ordered that each of the men who were to accompany him be given two pounds of biscuit and half a pound of bacon. And so we departed to go inland, taking a total of three hundred men, I among them Commissary Friar Juan Suárez, another friar named Juan de Palos, three clergymen and the officers. Those of us going with them on horseback numbered forty.

We traveled for two weeks with those provisions, finding nothing else to eat except palmettos like the ones in Andalusia. During this entire time we found no Indians nor dwellings nor settlements. Finally we reached a river which we crossed with great difficulty by swimming and on rafts. We spent one day crossing it, for it had a strong current. When we reached the other side two hundred Indians, more or less, approached us. The Governor went up to them and spoke to them by signs. They indicated by signs in such a way that we had to fight with them. We captured five or six of them, who took us to their lodges about half a league from there. There we found a large amount of corn ready to be picked. We thanked our Lord deeply for having come to our aid when we were in such great need, for besides being very tired we were weakened by hunger. On the third day after our arrival, the Purser, the Inspector, the Commissary and I joined in asking the Governor to send a party to search for the coast in the hope of finding a port, since the Indians had told us that we were not far from the sea. He replied that we should not even talk about such things because the coast was very far from there.

Since I was the most insistent, he told me to go on foot with forty men to search for the coast and to look for a harbor. So the next day I left with Captain Alonso del Castillo and forty of his men. We walked until midday, when we arrived at sandbanks by the sea, which appeared to go far inland. We walked on them about a league and a half in knee-deep water, stepping on oysters that cut our

feet severely and caused us a lot of hardship, until we arrived at the river we had already crossed, which ran into that same inlet. Since we could not cross it because we were so ill-equipped, we returned to camp and reported to the Governor what we had found. We told him we would have to cross the river again to explore the inlet and verify whether or not there was a harbor there. The next day he sent a captain named Valenzuela with sixty men on foot and six on horses down to the sea to determine if there was a harbor. Valenzuela returned after two days of exploring the inlet, saying that it was a shallow, knee-deep bay without a harbor. He also said that he had seen five or six Indian canoes going from one side to the other, and that the Indians were wearing feather headdresses.

Hearing this, we departed the next day to continue our search for the province the Indians called Apalachee, taking as guides the Indians we had captured. We walked until the seventeenth of June without seeing any Indians bold enough to wait for us. Then a man appeared before us carrying on his back an Indian cloaked with a painted deerskin. Many people accompanied him and he was preceded by some playing cane flutes. He approached the Governor and spent an hour with him. By signs we told him we were going to Apalachee, to which he replied by signs that seemed to indicate that he was an enemy of the people of Apalachee and that he would go with us to help us against them. We gave him beads, little bells and other trinkets, and he gave the Governor the skin that he was wearing. Then he turned back and we followed his route.

That night we came to a very wide, very deep and swift river, which we did not dare cross on rafts. We made a canoe and spent the better part of a day getting across. If the Indians had wanted to attack us, they could easily have kept us from crossing, for even with their help the crossing was difficult. A horseman named Juan Velázquez, native of Cuéllar, entered the river without waiting, and the swift current knocked him off his horse, but he held on to the reins, and both he and the horse drowned. The Indians of that chief, whose name was Dulchanchellin, found the horse and told us where we could find the man downstream. They went for him, and his death greatly saddened us because he was our first loss. The horse fed many men that night.

Leaving there, we arrived at that Chief's village the following day and there he sent us some corn. That night someone shot an arrow at one of our men at the place where we got water, but by the grace of God he was not wounded.

The following day we left that place, without having seen any Indians, since all of them had fled. Proceeding on our way, some Indians ready for battle appeared. We called out to them but they did not want to return nor wait, withdrawing instead and following us. The governor left some men on horseback to ambush them along their way. As the Indians went by, our men attacked them and captured three or four of them, which we took on as guides from that point forward. They took us through country that was very difficult to cross and marvelous to see, filled with large forests 12 and amazingly tall trees. So many of the trees were fallen that they hindered our progress, making us go around them with great difficulty. Of the trees that were still standing, many had been split from top to bottom by lightning that strikes often in that land, a place of many mighty storms and tempests.

With these hardships we walked until the day following St. John's day, when we came within sight of Apalachee without being noticed by the Indians of that land. We thanked God heartily that we

were so near, thinking that what the Indians had told us was true and that the hardships which we had suffered would come to an end. Our distress had been caused by the long and difficult march and by great hunger. Although we sometimes found corn, most of the time we traveled seven or eight leagues without finding any. And many of our men, besides being very tired and hungry, had sores on their backs from carrying their armor and suffered in other ways. But having arrived where we wanted, where they had told us there was so much gold and food, much of our affliction and weariness seemed to disappear.

Chapter Six: How We Entered Apalachee

When we were within sight of Apalachee, the Governor ordered me to enter the village with nine men on horseback and fifty foot soldiers, which the Inspector and I did. Once in it, we found only women and children, as all the men were out of the village at that time. Soon afterwards, while we were still in the village, they began to shoot arrows at us. They killed the Inspector's horse and finally fled. There we found a large quantity of corn ready to be harvested and a lot of dried corn in storage. We found many of their deerskins and a few small woven blankets of poor quality, which the women use to cover parts of their bodies. They had many vessels for grinding corn. In the village there were forty small, low dwellings in sheltered spots to protect them from the great storms that continually occur in that country. The buildings are made of straw and are surrounded by very dense forests, great groves of trees and many swamps, where there are obstructions caused by many very large fallen trees, so that one can go through there only with great difficulty and danger.

Chapter Seven: What the Land Is Like

From the place where we landed to this village and land of Apalachee, the country is mostly flat, the soil sandy and firm. Throughout it there are many large trees and open woodlands in which there are walnut trees and laurels and others called sweet-gums, cedars, junipers, live oaks, pines, oaks and low-growing palmettos like those in Castile. Throughout it there are many large and small lakes, some of them very difficult to cross, partly because they are so deep and partly because there are so many fallen trees in them. They have sandy bottoms, and the ones we found in Apalachee are much larger than any we had encountered on the way. There are many corn fields in this province, and the houses are as spread out through the countryside as those of the Gelves.

The animals that we saw in those lands were three kinds of deer, rabbits and hares, bears and lions and other wild animals, among which we saw one which carries its young in a pouch on its belly. While they are small they carry them in that manner until they can get their own food. If they happen to be out of the pouch searching for food when people approach, the mother does not flee until she has gathered them all in her pouch. The country there is very cold and has good pastures for livestock. There are many kinds of birds: very many geese, ducks, large ducks, royal ducks, ibises, egrets and herons and quail. We saw many falcons, marsh hawks, sparrow hawks, goshawks and many other birds.

Two hours after we arrived in Apalachee, the Indians that had fled from there returned peacefully to us, asking us for their women and children. And we returned them, except that the Governor

held one of their chiefs, which angered them. The following day they came back ready for battle and attacked us so boldly and swiftly that they were able to set fire to the lodges we were in. But as we sallied they fled and took refuge in some lakes very close by. For this reason and because of the large corn fields there, we could do little harm to them, except for one that we killed.

The following day Indians from a village on the other side came and attacked us just as the first group had done. They escaped in the same manner, and one of them died too. We stayed in this village twenty-five days, during which we went into the countryside three times. We found the country sparsely inhabited and hard to cross because of its difficult terrain, its forests and lakes.

We asked the chief we had captured and other Indians that we had brought with us (who were their neighbors and enemies) about the country, settlements, quality of people, food and all the other things we wished to know. Each one answered that the largest village in the entire land was Apalachee, and that further on there were fewer and poorer people; that the country was sparsely settled and the inhabitants scattered about; and that further ahead there were large lakes and dense forests as well as large areas that were empty and uninhabited. We then asked them what village and food would be found to the South. They said that a village called Aute would be found after a nine-day march towards the sea. They said that the Indians there, who were their friends, had a great deal of corn, beans and squash, and that they caught a lot of fish because they were so near the sea.

We saw that the country was poor and heard the bad news about the population and all the other things the Indians told us about. The Indians continually waged war against us, wounding our men and horses at the watering places, attacking from the lakes and with such impunity that we could not harm them. From the lakes they shot arrows at us and killed a gentleman from Texcoco named Don Pedro, who accompanied the Commissary. Therefore we decided to leave to find the coast and the village of Aute described by the Indians, and we departed twenty-five days after our arrival. The first day we crossed those lakes and swamps without seeing any Indians, but on the second day we reached a lake that was very difficult to cross because the water was chest-high and there were many fallen trees in it. When we were in the middle of the lake, we were attacked by a large group of Indians who had been hiding behind the trees and by others who were on the fallen trunks. They shot arrows at us, wounding many men and horses and capturing our guide before we could get out of the lake. When we were out of the lake, they turned to pursue us, wanting to block our way so that it would be of no advantage to be out of the water and so that we would be forced to do battle with them. They would go into the lake and from there wound our men and horses. Seeing this, the Governor ordered the horsemen to dismount and attack them on foot. The Purser got off with them and they attacked the Indians by turning and going after them in the lake. It was this way that we were able to secure the trail.

In this skirmish some of our men were wounded in spite of their good armor, which was not enough to protect them. We had men who swore that on that day they had seen two oak trees, each as thick as a man's lower leg, pierced from one side to the other by Indian arrows. This is not so surprising in light of the strength and skill they have in shooting. I myself saw an arrow penetrate the base of a poplar tree one xeme deep. All the Indians we had seen in Florida to this point were archers, and since they are so tall and they are naked, from a distance they look like giants. They are quite handsome, very lean, very strong and light-footed. Their bows are as thick

as an arm and eleven or twelve spans long. They shoot their arrows from a distance of two hundred paces with such accuracy that they never miss their target.

After crossing this swamp, we came to another one a league further on. It was much worse because it extended for half a league. We crossed it freely and without any hindrance from the Indians, since they had used up all their arrows in the previous attack. The following day, while crossing a similar place, I found the trail of people going ahead of us, and I sent word of this to the Governor, who was in the rearguard. And so, although the Indians attacked us, they could not inflict damage because we were prepared. When we came out to open ground, they continued pursuing us. We attacked them from two sides and killed two Indians. They wounded me and two other Christians, but we could inflict no further damage on them since they fled into the forest.

We marched in this manner for eight days and no Indians appeared from the aforementioned swamp until we had gone one league and arrived at our destination. While we were still on our way, Indians came out without being noticed and attacked our rearguard. A nobleman named Avellaneda turned around and went to aid them when he heard the shouts of his servant boy. The Indians hit him with an arrow on the edge of his breastplate and the wound was so deep that most of the arrow came out of his neck. He died there and we carried him to Aute.

It was a nine-day journey from Apalachee to Aute. When we arrived we found all the people of the village gone, the village burned and much corn, squash and beans, all ready to be harvested. After resting there for two days, the Governor asked me to go find the coast, which the Indians said was very near. On the way we had already found the sea by going down a very large river we discovered, which we called the Magdalena River. The following day, I set out to find the coast with the Commissary, Captain Castillo, Andrés Dorantes, plus seven horsemen and fifty on foot. We walked until the hour of vespers, when we reached an inlet where we found many oysters, which greatly pleased the men. And we gave great thanks to God for having brought us there. The following morning I sent twenty men to reconnoiter the coast and notice how it lay. They returned the following night, saying that those inlets and bays were very large and went so far inland that they hindered their passage to reconnoiter, and that the seacoast was very far from there.

When I found this out and saw how poorly prepared and outfitted we were to explore the coastline, I returned to the Governor. When we arrived we found him and many other men sick. The night before, Indians had attacked them and caused them great hardship because of the illness that had afflicted them. The Indians also killed one of their horses. I gave an account of my reconnaissance and of the poor condition of the country. We remained there that day.

Chapter Eight: How We Left Aute

The following day we left Aute and marched all day until we got to where I had been. The march was extremely difficult because we did not even have sufficient horses to carry the sick nor did we know how to cure them. It was very pitiful and painful to see the affliction and want that was on us. When we arrived we saw that there was little we could do to continue onward, because there was no place to pass through. Besides, even if there had been a good passage, our men could not have gone on because most of them were sick, and there were too few able-bodied men. I will not talk about this at great length here, since each person can imagine what we went through in this

land that was so strange and so bad and so totally lacking in resources either for staying or for leaving. We nevertheless never lost confidence in the idea that God our Lord would provide the surest relief.

Something else happened that made our situation worse still: the majority of the cavalymen began to leave secretly, thinking that they could save themselves. They abandoned the Governor and the sick men who were totally weak and helpless. But among them there were many noble and well-bred men who did not wish to see this happen without reporting it to the Governor and to Your Majesty's officers. Since we decried their objectives and set before them what a bad time this was to desert their captain and the sick and weak men, and especially to leave Your Majesty's service, they agreed to stay and share everything without abandoning one another.

When the Governor saw this, he called them all and one by one requested their advice for leaving that awful country and seeking some help, for there was none to be found in it. Since a third of the men were quite sick and with every passing hour more were succumbing to illness, we were certain that we would all get sick and die, and the situation was made more serious by the place we were in. Seeing all these and many other obstacles and suggesting many solutions, we all agreed on one, very difficult to carry out. It was to build boats in which we could leave. It seemed impossible to everyone because we did not know how to build them and had no tools, iron, forge, oakum, pitch, rigging, or any of the many things needed for it, and we especially lacked someone to provide expertise. Worst of all, there would be nothing to eat while the vessels were being built nor skilled men to do the job. Considering all this, we decided to think about it at greater length, and the discussion ceased that day. Each man commended the situation to God our Lord, asking him to lead it so that he would be best served.

The following day God willed for one of the men to come forth saying that he would make some flues from wood and several bellows from deerskins. Since we were in such a situation that anything that had the appearance of relief seemed good to us, we said that it should be done. And we agreed that we would make nails, saws, axes and the other necessary tools out of our stirrups, spurs, crossbows and other iron items we had, since we had such a great need for this. To relieve our lack of food while we were doing this, we decided that four forays to Aute were needed, with all the men and horses that could go. We also said that on the third day we should slaughter one of the horses to divide it among the sick and those who were working on the small boats. The forays were made with as many men and horses as possible, which yielded about four hundred fanegas of corn, although not without struggles and fights with the Indians. We had many palmettos gathered to use their fiber and covering, twisting it and preparing it to use it instead of oakum for the boats. The sole carpenter in our company had begun constructing the boats. We worked so diligently that we began on August 4th and had finished five boats by September 20th. Each one measured twentytwo cubits, and was caulked with the palmetto fibers. We caulked them with a kind of pitch from resin, made by a Greek named Don Theodoro from some pine trees and the palmetto fiber. From the horses' tails and manes we made rope and rigging; out of our shirts we made sails; and from some junipers near there we made oars, which we thought were necessary. And that land to which we had been brought by our sins was such that it was very difficult to find stones for ballast and anchors. Nowhere in it had we seen any. We skinned the legs of the horses in one piece and cured the hides to make skins for carrying water.

Twice during this time, while some of our men were gathering shellfish in the coves and inlets of the sea, the Indians attacked and killed ten of them within sight of our camp, but we could not go to their aid. We found them shot right through with arrows. Although some of them had good armor, it was not enough to withstand the arrows that they shoot with such skill and strength, as I said above.

According to the sworn statement of our pilots, we had traveled about 280 leagues from the bay we called La Cruz to this point. In all this land we did not see any mountains nor did we hear of any at all. Before we set sail-not counting those killed by Indians-more than forty of our men had died of illness and hunger.

By the twenty-second of September we had eaten all but one of the horses. That day we embarked in the order: forty-nine men went in the Governor's boat; in another that he gave to the Purser and the Commissary went an equal number; the third he gave to Captain Alonso del Castillo and to Andrés Dorantes with forty-eight men; another two captains named Téllez and Peñalosa with forty-seven men. After we loaded provisions and clothing, there was no more than one xeme above the water line. Besides this, we were squeezed in so tightly that we could not move. So great was our hardship that it forced us to venture out in this manner and to go out into such rough seas, without having anyone with us who knew the art of navigation.