



DE SOTO NATIONAL MEMORIAL

Camp Ucita

Camp Ucita was built in the Fall of 1973 and opened formally, December 9, 1973. There are three basic areas of interest for the visitor; the crossbow range and display, the living area and garden and the blacksmith shop. The camp is partially surrounded by Spanish bayonet and yucca plants. The Spanish found these to be a crude but effective defense against surprise attacks.



The Crossbow Range

The crossbow was probably introduced to the European armies by the Normans at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 A.D. By the 13th or 14th Century, this weapon was in great demand by the military and some sports-minded people.

Early versions of the crossbow were made entirely of wood with a few metal or horn parts. They ranged in size from the smaller sporting models to the huge weapons mounted behind the walls of castles and other fortifications for defense against attacking armies.

De Soto and his men used the sophisticated 16th Century military crossbow. This version had a stock made of beech or some other type of close-grained hardwood. The bow was usually made of tempered steel

while the groove was of brass or horn. Bow-strings were made of pure flax or hemp and coated with beeswax to make them weatherproof. This weapon had a point-blank range of 65 and 70 yards while the maximum range was 380 yards when held at a 45 degree angle. The crossbow weighed between 12 and 16 pounds with up to a 1200 pound pull.

Depending on the strength of the bow, either a "goat's foot lever," a "craniquin," or a "windlass" was used to set the bowstring on the revolving nut. A bolt or quarrel (crossbow arrow) was then placed in the groove. The crossbowman raised the weapon so that the end of the stock rested on top of his shoulder. As he placed his hand around the stock, his thumb rested in the groove of

the sight. He sighted down his thumb knuckle to the target and squeezed the trigger upward, which released the bolt. De Soto's men soon found that an Indian with a longbow could easily riddle them with five or six arrows in the time it took to ready one crossbow shot.

The crossbow was a simple but expensive weapon. Its size, weight and tedious manipulation were its main drawbacks in open battle. Its heavy bolt, great power and accuracy and its convenience for the defense or attack of fortifications were its advantages. By the end of the 16th Century the crossbow had been replaced as a military weapon by hand guns and cannon. It was and still is being used in sports competition.



The Living Area

The Spanish brought most of their food with them from Spain and Cuba. Unfortunately, their dreams of quick riches were way off-target time-wise and they were soon forced to begin living off the land. The Indians' main crop was corn and the Spanish quickly learned how to cook it in a multitude of ways. One of their favorite "recipes" involved heating the corn kernels until they turned brown and crunchy. This "parched corn" was then easily tucked into pockets and supply bags to be eaten along the way.

Wild plants were another source of food. The prickly pear cactus with its red fruit could be eaten raw or cooked into jams. Flowers from the yucca plant, wild berries and sea grapes were other welcome additions to the Spaniards' diet. Fish and shellfish were caught whenever the Spanish were near water.

The metal utensils used by the conquistadors both on the expedition and in Camp Ucita soon rusted in the hot, humid Southern air. The men were able to carve their own spoons and ladles with the help of native woods and shells. Forks



had been invented but were not in general use yet. Cooking pots were hung on forked wooden sticks notched at varying levels to provide different temperature settings. A drying rack or "barbecue" as the Spanish called it, dried and smoked surplus meats for future consumption. The wooden mortar and pestle were used for grinding the corn fine enough for the corn cakes the Spanish enjoyed.

Shelters built for the men were made of native materials; palm trunks for the supports and palm fronds for the thatching on the roof and sides. The makeshift beds inside were probably covered with mattresses made of burlap and stuffed with Spanish moss.

The conquistadors' garden included corn, peppers and squash. The corn (or maize) and squash were Indian crops but the peppers may have grown from the seeds the men carried with them from Spain. Although the conquistadors were interested primarily in gold and other riches they did bring crop seeds just in case a settlement was established.

The Blacksmith Shop

The Spanish brought 220 horses with them and innumerable pieces of metal body armor and weapons. With so much metal to take care of they needed the blacksmiths and farriers who came along on the expedition.

Our blacksmith shop is a combination of 16th Century and 17th Century tools and fixtures. The forge and bellows are modelled after woodcuts of a 16th Century German blacksmith shop. The anvil is later than 16th Century. Anvils of earlier years were usually double-horned. Camp Ucita's "conquistadors" use the blacksmith shop to demonstrate the techniques of working with a variety of metals.

Life in Camp Ucita must have been a combination of many different feelings for the men left there. Frustration at being "left behind" coupled with battling unfamiliar elements and Indians probably did little to help Captain Pedro Calderon keep his men settled. Reports, tentative at best, suggest that many of the men deserted, others were killed by Indians and still others went to live with the natives.

De Soto called for his house-keeping detachment in November, 1539, about 6 months after he first landed in Florida. When the men left their little camp they took what provisions they could carry and gave the rest as gifts to the Indians. Ucita's real inhabitants re-occupied their village immediately after the Spanish left. The odd Spanish tool or barrel left behind was soon the only evidence of the "white-faces" intrusion.



Begin to Imagine...



Feel . . .

It is a hot day in May, 1539. As you step from the long-boat into the salty waters of the Bay de Espirito Santo you can feel the sweat pricking behind your eyes and running down between your shoulder blades beneath your thick woolen shirt and chain mail jacket.

Look . . .

The land in front of you is flat and covered with an unbreakable line of strange trees and other vegetation. You and your companions are the only human beings in sight — but you feel you are being watched. You follow the column that marches slowly from the shore to the interior — gripping your halberd you peer cautiously around you.

The swamp, for that is what the thick greenery conceals, catches at you with almost every step. You stop to pull up your tall leather boots — they are your only protection against the clinging undergrowth, insects, and slithering, rattling snakes.

Remember . . .

Three days later — a shout, running, screaming. You are in the middle of your first encounter with the native Americans. You barely have a chance to level your halberd and it is over. You continue marching to the village of **Ucita** where you and your companions burn down the meager palm-thatched huts and begin construction of your own makeshift shelters.

Wait . . .

When De Soto leaves two or three days later you are one of the 100 men and 30 horses left behind with Captain Calderon to guard the little camp and the provisions carried in from the ship. It is not easy to be left behind and you eagerly anticipate the arrival of the messenger who will return from the north and tell you it is time to rejoin De Soto. Until he comes you must stay in "Camp Ucita," guarding the provisions and yourself from the Indians

and trying to adapt to the new land with its strange vegetation and climate. You keep in fighting trim on the crossbow range you and the others have set up. You help the blacksmith set up his anvil and build a forge so weapons and armor can be repaired. It is not a pleasant or easy existence but thoughts of gold and other riches keep you going. Others have already deserted, but you stay — waiting and hoping.



They were men who openly mourned De Soto's death even after three years of leadership that brought them nothing but fighting, disease and death. And, living as they did in a cruel world — they were men who were harsh in turn to the native Americans they encountered. Their 4000-mile sweep throughout the Southeastern United States would pave the way for future European explorations and settlements, but it would also leave behind a path of broken promises, hatred, suspicion and fear that would last well into the 19th Century.

Over 400 years have passed since De Soto's expedition. Myths and legends have passed down through the centuries in written and verbal form. The men of De Soto's expedition were conquistadors, but we cannot forget that they were also simple human beings struggling to survive the only way they knew how.

When Don Hernando De Soto landed on the west coast of Florida in May, 1539, he brought with him 600 men, 220 horses and 1500 years of Spanish history and customs. The men and the horses would not survive, but the mark left by the "white-faces" would carry through the centuries to present-day Florida.

Who were the conquistadors? Conquerors by definition, they were men from many walks of life; professional soldiers, gentlemen of leisure, carpenters, blacksmiths, servants, slaves. They sailed with De Soto because they believed in him and because they wanted the adventures and riches to which they were certain he would lead them.

De Soto National Memorial is on Tampa Bay, 5 miles west of Bradenton, Florida. The Memorial became part of the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, in 1948. The Visitor Center auditorium presents a 22-minute documentary film on the De Soto expedition every hour. Exhibits of 16th Century arms and armor are in the lobby. A 1/2-mile interpretive trail begins east of the Visitor Center and winds in a closed horseshoe around the beach, through the mangrove swamp and into De Soto Cove. Interpretive signs along the trail point out the many plants and animals encountered by De Soto and his men. A superintendent, whose address is Box 1377, Bradenton, Florida 33506 is in immediate charge of the Memorial.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States — now and in the future.

While visiting Camp *Ucita*, please observe these safety pointers:

The blacksmith forge, the cooking fire and the barbecue rack are hot — please watch yourself and your children when you are near them.

A rope barrier will be set up for every cross-bow firing demonstration. Please stay behind it.

Have a safe and pleasant visit.

