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BIRTHPLACES OF THE CONQUISTADORS *

by KARL A. BICKEL

EVER SINCE I started dabbling into the business of Spanish Conquistadors; particularly Balboa, Cortes, Pizzaro and our own first great tourist Hernando De Soto, I have been interested in looking more closely into the birthplaces of these men - a topic rather lightly treated by the greater historians - and trying to find after a fashion, some of the things that made them "tick." The thing that really started me off, however, was a paragraph in a book by Ruth Matilda Anderson of the Hispanic Society of America. The book is titled *Spanish Costume - Extramadura* and without question it covers its field in great care and detail, but far and beyond her studies into Spanish costume her book is the finest guide book ever written on the great province in western Spain - a province rich in history and extraordinarily beautiful which, despite good hotels and government motels, has been almost entirely neglected by the American tourist.

The paragraph reads: "Though Extremenians migrated to America in fewer numbers than did Andalusians, Castilians and Leonese, they furnished more than their proportion of the leaders most of whom came from the Guadiana basin - Vasco Nunez de Balboa, discoverer of the Pacific, Hernando De Soto, who reached the Mississippi, Pedro Valdivia, conqueror of Chile, and Hernan Cortes who turned the history of Mexico. . . . Evaluating the Extremenian Conquistadors, Unamuno has said 'He who does not know something of these people, apathetic in appearance, violent and impassioned in heart, can but poorly comprehend that epic in our history.' Their temperament reflected the dual nature of the land, shaped into mountain and plain with rivers narrow and swift or wide and tranquil."

"The Pizarros came from Trujillo beyond the divide where their houses exemplify their passage from obscurity to success."

* Mr. and Mrs. Bickel toured Spain last year. This report by Mr. Bickel on the birthplaces of four Conquistadors* was delivered at the annual Florida Historical Society banquet, McAlister Hotel, Miami, on March 29, 1957. The pictures illustrating the article were supplied by the author.

From the very start there was considerable confusion as to just where several of these Conquistadors were born. Historians were very casual. The birth place of Hernando de Soto was variously placed by different writers over the last 150 years as "at a village in western Estramadura" or "in the vicinity of Badajoz" or near "Villa Neuva de la Serena" and many placed De Soto's birth place in the village of Jerez de los Caballeros. Several asserted he was born near the old and at one time the great Roman city of Merida, not far from Badajoz. Through the cooperation of the Madrid bureau of the United Press and Miss Anderson, investigation developed that there was no apparent doubt that De Soto was born in the village of Barcarrota, about 18 miles South of Badajoz; that Balboa came from Jerez de los Caballeros, a somewhat larger community about 12 miles south of Barcarrota, that Cortes came from Medellin, a village about 30 miles east of Merida and about 50 from Badajoz while Trujillo, the home of the Pizarro's, lay over a low line of hills about 30 miles north of Medellin. It was immensely interesting to realize that these four great moulders of the history of the western world were all born within an area of about 70 miles north and south and 50 miles wide.

From there on the Spanish Tourist Commission, certainly one of the most effective institutions of its type in the world, took hold. An employee of the commission arranged for our car, and in response to my insistence upon an English speaking driver provided one that not only spoke English but also perfect "Tampnese." He had, he explained, been employed as a sailor out of Tampa Harbor back in the stirring days of the late 1920's, largely operating between Bimini Key and Tampa, and he quickly demonstrated that he knew far more of the twists and turns of Tampa Bay, Sarasota Bay, Lemon Bay and the Point of Rocks than any casual tourist. His business, he pointed out had been an exacting one and a knowledge of a "swash" that might, at certain hours of the tide, give him five feet of unexpected water, which others might not know about, was of exceeding value. He followed that interesting and at times exciting trade for seven years and not once, he remarked with a certain pride, had he ever had occasion to talk to the judge. Quite properly he felt that he had a bit of the blood of a Conquistador in his veins and he

surely knew the area better even than any of the Miruelo or Alaminos' boys, whose knowledge of gulf coast waters was so great an asset to so many of the explorers of the early Sixteenth Century.

The Estremadura is a beautiful region. One of the least known of all of Spain's beautiful provinces, it has been largely "undiscovered." Approaching it from the south, leaving Seville in the morning it is easy to reach Merida or Badajoz by mid afternoon. The low blue hills that follow the nearby Portugese border, are on your left throughout the trip. The road itself, today a beautiful strip of blue-black asphalt, is a very ancient highway. Long before the Phoenicians scrambled up its rugged hills the Celtiberians had beaten it out, a long road leading from Cadiz through Seville and on its westward branch it touched Elvas and Lisbon while its eastern arm reached north to Toledo. Hasdrubal and Hannibal travelled it, Ceasar knew it well, as did Trajan and Hadrian, both Spanish born, and even today the frequent creeks and streams are crossed on high arched Roman bridges, still, two thousand years later, the finest stone bridges ever built. Columbus used this road in his wanderings between Spain and Lisbon, and he was on it when he was recalled by Isabella and told that he had Spanish royal backing to find the "New World" by the westward route. Amerigo Vespucci was a frequent traveller over it, as his business between Lisbon and Seville was such that frequent visits to both cities were necessary.

About 60 miles north of Seville there is a junction in the road at a point called Zafra, a mere division point, and you turn directly west and for fifteen miles you travel a sound, if narrow village highway, to Jerez de los Caballeros. The town, with a relatively small population, crowned by the towers of two obviously very old churches and several ancient military works, lies along the crest of the low frontier hills. A swift stream meets you at the eastern boundary of the community and the narrow streets of the town slope swiftly upwards towards the crest of the hills. Tourists are still a great deal of a novelty at Jerez de los Caballeros. Quite a group swiftly surrounded us but to our inquiry as to where the home of Nunez de Balboa was located there was, for a time, no reply. Then one man, obviously a farmer, remarked that he knew of Balboa Plaza. Off to the Plaza we went. No

dice. It was the local cow and horse market. Again a crowd gathered about and there was a steady swift flow of Spanish as Julian, our driver, and the local inhabitants discussed the matter of the birth of Balboa. Finally a youngster stepped up and spoke with apparent definiteness.

Julian turned to us, "He says he knows where it is but he won't tell me. He wants to guide us there himself."

"OK," I replied, "take him in if you think he knows."

It seemed to be quite a trip to the Balboa home under the leadership of our youthful guide. Up we travelled through narrow hilly streets. Then down again. Then again up. Finally, Julian called a halt.

"Look here," he said to the guide. "I'm on to you. All you want is an automobile ride. Now that's all over. Where's the Balboa house? Do you know?"

"Certainly I know," the youngster replied, "It's right next door to my house."

"Where's that?" said Julian.

"Right here," he said. "Just up this street about fifty meters. It's been a good ride too. It's the first time I ever rode in a Mercury."

The Balboa house is extraordinary in that despite the fact that it was built about 1460 and housed the Balboa's at the time of Nunez Balboa's birth in 1475 - it is still operating today, apparently without any significant changes or even any changes in room locations, windows or doors. To all intents the Balboa home today is the same today inside and outside as it was about 1500 when Balboa first left for the Western World. There is a small, and scarcely distinguishable plaque near the door stating that Balboa was born there in 1475. It is occupied now by a very nice family. The lady of the house generously allowed us to enter. She explained that no changes had been made in the house, that the walls, floors, mostly of stone, the room arrangement had never been disturbed. She took me into the tiny bed room up stairs in which Balboa was born.

"He was born," she said "in this bed."

"In that bed?" I asked. "Why not," she replied, "it is a very sound bed."

The photographs will give you a better idea of the home than any description of mine. We were shown the old brazier upon which the charcoal fires were burned in Balboa's day and were assured the same brazier is in use today.

Balboa was one of the great figures in exploration and discovery in the Western World. Here is a rather amazing example of preservation of one of the historic shrines in the history of both North America and Panama not to speak of all nations whose shores are lapped by Pacific waters. It would seem that some agencies in the United States, Panama, and Spain might unite on an effort to have the property purchased by the three nations, and certainly preserved for the future. It is not only a spot of keen historic interest to all people in the western hemispheres but it is likewise a most interesting survival of a medieval home. It has been protected and well preserved for over 400 years and its survival in equally good condition should be insured by governmental effort.

Fourteen miles to the north of Jerez de los Caballeros is the small village of Villa Nueva de Barcarrota. Here an imposing monument has been erected in honor of De Soto and the house itself, a rather important appearing home on a very narrow street . . . so narrow that it is almost impossible to take a good photograph of it, is the home of Hernando de Soto. The family, locally said to be descendants of the De Soto family, were in Badajoz the day we were there. We were told the home is kept up in good condition and it was obviously well cared for from an exterior view. A small sign states that the house is the birthplace of De Soto.

It was getting late by the time we left Bacarrota. Merida is the tourist center of the area but the best road leads via Badajoz. Badajoz is an interesting old frontier fortress city. Wellington lived there for a time during the Peninsular Wars and it was one of his important supply depots during most of the long years of that struggle. Only six miles from Badajoz on the Portuguese border is the little old city of Elvas. This is the Elvas that was the apparent home of the mysterious "Gentleman from Elvas" who wrote one of the three noted relations of the discoveries and travels of De Soto. Badajoz and Elvas contributed several members of the De Soto expedition. Jerez dos Caballeros sent three

also. That night Mrs. Bickel and I stayed at Merida in an excellent government motel.

Medellin, like Jerez de los Cabelleros and Barcarrota, is a small village, tucked away in the shadow of a long hill, along whose crest rests the ruins of what, at one time, must have been a most imposing fortification. It was projected by low walls reaching the base of the hill and along these walls were the ruins of out posts that had evidently been designed to make the place, against the weapons of the time, almost safe from all attacks. The Guadiana river, very placid at this point, sweeps about the base of the hill, just below the village and to reach the town a very fine example of a Roman bridge must be crossed.

The Cortes home was destroyed many years ago. A village plaza has been built up about the site and in its center a rather imposing statue has been erected in Cortes honor. On the actual site of the house and, it is said, just over the spot where the bedroom existed in which Cortes was born, a smaller and even more ancient stone marker has been raised. Medellin, which is as quiet and as somnolent, in the mid morning sunlight, as any small Spanish village of the Estramadura watched our arrival and visit with no evidence of interest. A gracious local resident spoke to Julian and responded to questions. The village held an annual festival about the plaza in honor of Cortes, he said, and at that time many strangers came to the town.

Through Julian I asked about the great heap of chocolate brown ruins upon the fortified hill. Did they have any history, I asked. "No" he replied. He did not think so. They were, of course, very old and in the old times they had been a defence, against the Visgoths and latter against the Moors. His face lighted up.

"As Americans," he said, "you might be interested in this fact. Isabella, the queen who pledged her jewels to help Columbus get to America, spent many years of her childhood in the castle."

It was almost noon by the time we left Medellin. Trujillo, the site of the Pizzaro home with its small but beautiful cathedral and its famous flocks of storks that nest on each of the four corners of its tower, was about forty kilometers ahead of us, but it was the nearest place also where there was an established

restaurant and so off we went. It's a wonderful road between Medellin and Trujillo. The soft rounded hills that divide the basin of the Guadianna and the Tagus are no traffic obstacle but serve to heighten the interest of the trip. Great fields of golden orange, bright yellow and ochre, lay on all sides of us as the harvest for wheat, late oats and barley was on and threshing was in progress on all sides. In many fields the old Roman method, and for all of that it was probably old when the Roman came to the Estramadura, of beating the grain out with flails was in progress. In other fields a team of mules attached to a wooden sled like vehicle was driven round and round over the cut grain and the grain was thus beaten out. But, most interestingly, in immediately adjacent fields were American tractors driving modern threshing equipment. Progress, an important student of civilization once remarked, is never unilateral. But nevertheless Spain is progressing most amazingly, almost too swiftly you feel at times.

Trujillo, in the distance, looked like a great, white castle, peaked with towers and battlements, on the crest of a golden hillside. The crosses on the churches glittered in the sunlight and in the gulches and along the stream beds in the valley the silver grays of the olives and the darker greens of the encino and the cork trees framed the picture.

Arriving Julian stopped a traffic cop and asked about Pizzano.

"Prizzaro", said the policeman, "I don't know him."

Julian carefully and slowly explained that the Pizzaro desired had been dead several hundred years. This did not increase the officers interest. He scratched his head.

"Well," he said, "this street is named Pizzaro street but I never heard of the fellow. But I'll tell you. There is a little restaurant up the street a block or two, you can see it from here. There is a waiter in there and he knows all about old times in Trujillo. You ask him."

So we did. Julian asked a bystander about a waiter who knew about Pizzaro and where he was born. Before the man could reply the waiter came up.

"Were you asking about Pizzaro?" he said to Julian. "I was," said Julian. "Do you know where he was born?"

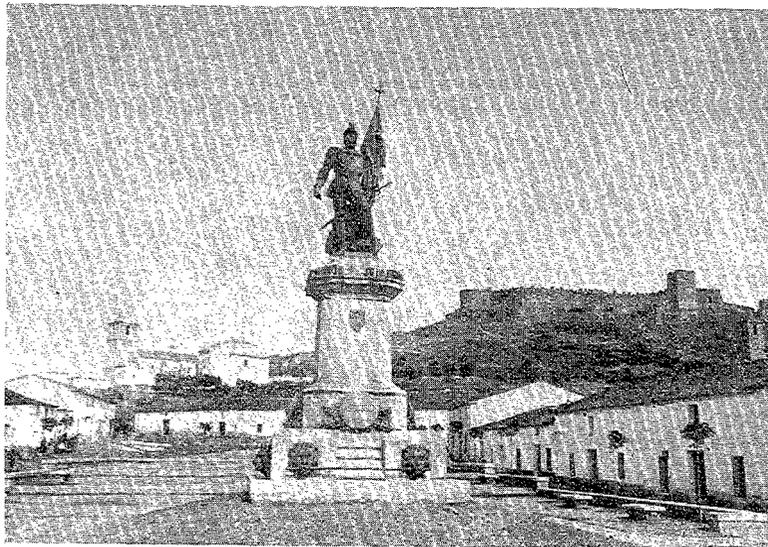
"Sure I know where he was born," he said. "I know all about Pizzaro. I know all about the whole family. I am the greatest

fan in Trujillo on the Pizzaro's. After all,' he said, "they are the only family we ever had in Trujillo that went out in the world, conquered a continent and brought back more gold than all the world has shipped into Spain since."

He accompanied us in our car until we reached the cathedral square where we parked the car in the shade and in the blasting sun of an early afternoon in Trujillo, we crossed the plaza and went around the Church upon whose roof corners the red legs and the long beaks of the storks threw a wonderful dash of color against the otherwise drab roof. Behind the church we stumbled up a hill, rock ridden and obviously unsafe for auto traffic. At the top he pointed to the three stone buildings resting there on a rocky ridge overlooking the valley of the distant Tagus.

"The center building is the Pizzaro home," said our guide. "The old door is still there. The roof is gone and the window is only protected by old board. You can't go inside and there is nothing there anyhow. I don't think any one has lived here in a century. The two buildings, one on each side, are old nunneries. One has two members of the flock still there altho' they are very old. The other is abandoned." He pointed to the pink granite shield above the door.

"That is the Pizzaro coat of arms," he said. "Two pigs trying to reach the fruit on a tree." Some people say they are not pigs but bears but I think they were meant to be pigs. Why not? The Pizzaros fed them and took care of them for a percentage on the in pigs. They not only dealt in pigs but they kept pigs for farmers who had them and did not have space or feed for them and the Pizzaro's fed them and took care of them for a percentage on the sale price. People say Francisco was a pig herder. Of course he was when he was a boy. That was natural. The family had pigs to keep and he herded them under the olive trees and other places and they picked up food. It was no disgrace in Spain then and it would not be now to be a pig herder. The important thing was that Francisco did not stay a pig herder. He fought to get to Panama. He sent more gold to Spain than Spain has ever received since. Emperor Charles V gave him a fine palace down on the square but he never lived in it much altho' the family did. He died in Peru. They murdered him, of course. It was inevitable. He just had too much money and power to be left



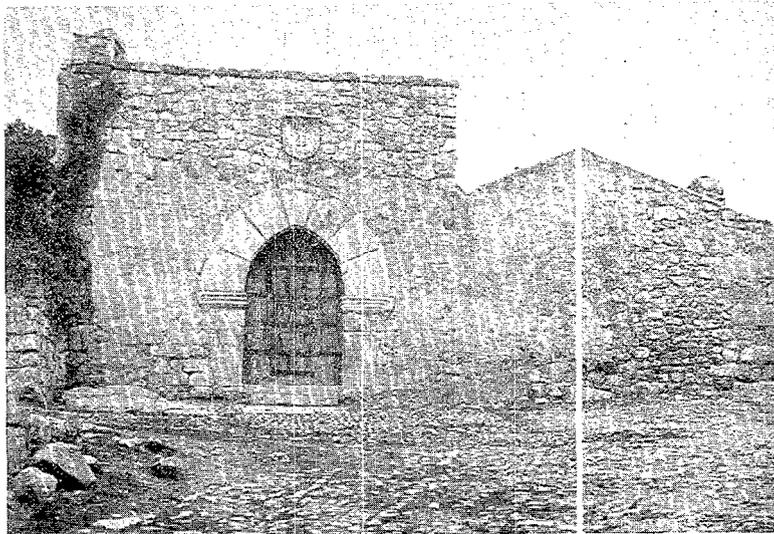
CORTES STATUE WITH MEDILLIN CASTLE IN THE
BACKGROUND



DETAIL OF THE PIZARRO FAMILY CREST



INTERIOR OF THE BALBOA HOUSE
JEREZ DE LOS CABALLEROS



THE BIRTHPLACE OF PIZARRO, TRUJILLO, SPAIN

alive. In Trujillo they don't think much about the Pizarro's now altho' they were a great family for a time. But you would think that they would care enough to put on a new roof, a new door and a floor on his birth place. Wouldn't you think they would care that much? But they don't - not yet."

So here is another suggestion for a reconstruction and preservation job in Spain. Possibly the Franco government and the government of Peru, joined perhaps by certain American historic interests, might associate themselves in the restoration of the Pizarro home on the high hill back of the cathedral in Trujillo. The long afternoon shadows were just pushing across the Plaza when we went back to our car and took our guide, the Pizarro fan, to his cafe on Avenida Pizarro. The last red of the sunset was fading into a deep cobalt blue when Julian dropped us off at the fabulous Castellano Hilton in Madrid. Three wonderful days with the Conquistadors of Spain.

For half a century before Columbus made his western voyage the Kingdom of Portugal, under the leadership of Henry the Navigator had thrilled all Europe with the daring and the speed with which its sailors had lifted the horizon lines of the medieval world and opened up the eastern edges of the Atlantic, discovered or re-discovered the Azores, the Canaries, the Cape Verde Islands, and worked around Cape Verde, passed Cape of Good Hope and finally found its way to the doorways of India. Wealth poured into the narrow little country. Doubtless some of it, perhaps a good deal of it trickled back to Elvas and the little villages along the Portuguese border. The boys from Elvas and the youngsters of Badajoz, the kids from Jerez de las Cabelleros, Medellin, Barcarota, hung out about Badajoz like youngsters do today and have always done and there they heard about the gold and ivory, the strange woods and the perfumes of Africa and the East. They heard too, of the profits in the Black Ivory trade that the Portuguese were just starting, at enormous profit, to develop in Portugal.

Hard money was desperately scarce in the farms along the Guadiana and the Tagus. A tiny silver piece would pay for a week's good time in Badajoz and the story was that there were sailors in Elvas, back from voyages around the Cape that had gold in their ears, gold in their noses and gold coin in their

pockets. How did they get it? Discovery, exploration, trade. So when the word worked up the long road from Seville, Palos and Cadiz that Columbus had "discovered the East" by sailing west and that new lands, piles of gold, wonderful birds with wonderful plumes, new woods and strange perfumes were to be seen in Seville, there wasn't a boy in all the long river valley that wasn't wild to go. That was what they talked about on their Saturday nights in Badajoz. Portugese boys coming over the line told them more and relighted the fierce fires of their interest. So they made their plans. It was a bitter fight to get aboard a Spanish ship bound west as it always is to get to treasure trove that's far away. But they fought to get the right or failing that they stowed away, in barrels and under bales. They worked their fingers to the bone, they starved, were sick and some times jailed. For Balboa it was terribly hard, often starvation and death looked him close into his eyes, yet he never ceased persisting, never once stopped going ahead. He hit his high point, discovering the worlds greatest ocean. But he did it the wrong way. He should have left it for his "Boss" and seen to it that his Boss got the credit and he, in turn, got what he wanted, which was gold. So Balboa lost his head and gained immortality, except for a non historical British poet who almost stole the prize for "stout Cortez".

Balboa got into the West Indies in 1501. He lead the pack. Cortez was in Panama in 1504 and yards and yards of the great map still remained to be unfurled. Pizzaro hit the beach at Panama in 1510 as broke as he ever was in Trujillo with his pigs. De Soto also "stony" did not reach Panama the great focusing point for opportunity, until 1519. By that time Amerigo Vespucci, a Florentine boy that had made good in Seville, and was probably the greatest navigator of the whole group of navigators then loose upon the "Main," had drawn better maps of north-eastern South America for Spain than any other nation would have for fifty years to come. De Soto and Pizzaro were distantly related. Balbo met De Soto in Panama. Cortes was known to all of them, but Cortes was not a part of the Panama crowd. Fortunately for De Soto his relationship with Pizzaro got him a good job in Pizzaro's Peruvian expeditions which sent to Spain so terrific a flood of gold and discovery. It was that gold that financed

De Soto's floundering about southeastern North America and lead him to his lonely death and grave on the banks of the Mississippi.

They were rude, rough, ugly tempered, but great men. They had the essential stuff in them. They knew poverty, they knew the curse of powerlessness. They felt and believed the New World was to be their land, their treasure trove and their crown of glory. And it was. For barefooted youngsters on the muddy shores of the Guadiana they went far.