

TRAGEDY AT SAN SABA

(What went wrong?)

BUILDING MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Part One

In April, 1757, soldiers under Colonel Diego Ortiz de Parilla and five priests set out from San Antonio for the San Sabá. Here, in the heart of what was considered Apachería, the mission was built of logs, surrounded by a palisade, and the presidio erected a few miles away. This expedition seemed to have three purposes. One was to convert the Lipans, to reduce and remove a great threat to settlement; another was to extend Spanish power further out from San Antonio. A third hope is explained by the persistent rumor of rich silver mines in the vicinity—a rumor of the Lost San Sabá Mines that has never entirely died away. Supposedly, some silver was mined and freighted on muleback to San Antonio. But then and later, no conclusive evidence ever existed. Coronado was not the last man to believe in mythical treasures.

The Lipan Apaches had been meek enough in Béxar, but now, in their own country, they put the Spanish off. They stated they could not congregate just yet; it was the hunting season. Later, it was something else. The priests persisted, and hopefully, kept the mission open. The Indians seemed to be waiting for something, and the Spanish, with very limited intelligence of what was actually happening on the far frontier, decided to be patient.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE INDIANS GONE?

Part Two

A few months after the San Sabá mission was established, a friendly Indian brought word of a terrible calamity that was going to befall. Worried, the Spanish alerted their entire frontier—but when nothing happened during the summer and fall, they relaxed. Winter passed, the grass sprang out green and lush across the plains to the north, and early in March, 1758, the moon waxed huge and full. Both priests and soldiers were delighted with the ephemeral beauty of the land. Neither knew Comanches—or that when the grass was full and thick, and the moon threw light to ride by, Comanche warriors could range a thousand miles.

Then, something happened. Every uncooperative Lipan Apache suddenly disappeared. No one saw an Indian—but one morning, there were shrieks and shouts, and a rush of horsemen swooped down on the Spanish horse pasture, between the mission and the fort. Sixty horses disappeared.

Colonel Parilla put all his men on the walls, and he sent a messenger requesting the padres to move at once to the presidio. The padres refused. Parilla waited a few days—but nothing happened. He went personally to the mission and argued with Padre Terreros, the priest in charge, to seek safety, and to bring all the sacred articles in the mission with him.

Terreros halfheartedly agreed to move the following day; he told Parilla it was incredible that any unseen Indians would wish the padres harm. Parilla left seventeen soldiers with the priests, and departed.

SOMEONE IS HAVING A BAD MORNING.

Part Three

Early next morning, March 16, Padre Terreros conducted the usual Mass; he was determined that the orderly routine not be disturbed. But before the Host was lifted, there was a booming yell outside the palisade.

The soldiers ran to the walls and cocked their muskets. Padre Terreros and another priest, Padre Molina, climbed to the parapet. What they saw made them speechless. Two thousand Comanches, all on horseback, were deploying slowly around the mission walls. Molina was frightened, and now said so. But his superior stammered that these men must be friendly—the priests had done no one any harm.

The soldiers waited to fire, but Terreros refused to give the order. He seemed hypnotized by the barbaric splendor of the savages, who were painted black and red—war paint, though the Spanish did not recognize it—and wore impressive headgear of buffalo horns, deer antlers, and eagle plumes. All were armed with lances and bows, and at least a hundred carried French-made muskets.

LET'S HOPE THAT THIS WORKS!

Part Four

A Comanche warrior boldly walked up to the palisade gate and opened it, while Padre Terreros hesitated. After that, it was too late—the Indians poured inside the compound. Terreros and the other priests began to bring out gifts of tobacco and beads with shaking hands.

In the sign language, the Comanches now demanded that Terreros send a message to the presidio, that it be opened to them, too. A quaking friendly Indian translated, and a message was written out by Terreros for Colonel Parilla. A large party of Comanches took the message and rode off.

UH-OH! SO SORRY.... THEY'RE ALL DEAD!

Part Five

But meanwhile, another mission Indian had seen the Comanches arrive and had fled to tell Parilla. The colonel immediately ordered a detachment of troops to reinforce the mission. These men mounted and rode off. They rode directly into the party of Comanches coming from the mission with Terreros' message. The Comanches charged; the Spanish never had a chance. In a few seconds every soldier was shot or lanced. Only one, badly wounded, was able to crawl away.

At the mission, the Indians had thrown off all restraint. They no longer waited for gifts to be offered, but began to sack and wreck the Spanish storerooms. The Europeans gathered in a little knot in the middle of the enclosure.

When the party that had killed the soldiers returned suddenly, yelling and waving fresh scalps, the killing began. Before they could even fire, the Spanish soldiers were shot down or filled with arrows. One priest was stabbed; and his head cut off. Two Comanches seized Terreros and started to carry him off, probably for torture. Fortunately for him, another Comanche shot him dead with a musket as he was pulled away.

Padre Molina was able to break away, and with a few others hid in the *padre presidente's* quarters. Now, the Comanches set fire to the mission, and Molina, wounded, soon had to come outside again, smoking and gasping for air. By a miracle, as he thought—the Indians were too busy burning, looting, and celebrating, to notice—Molina's few survivors reached the mission church, which was made of green logs and did not burn. Here they remained, cowering and praying, until the last whooping Comanche rode away.

Sometime after midnight that night, Molina and the others reached the presidio. It was only three days later, when scouts reported that the Comanche horde had left the area, that Parilla and Molina returned to San Sabá. Terreros and the others were found and given Christian burial. After that Parilla retreated to San Luís, and asked for help.