The Villasur Massacre

It’s hard to know where to start because the roots of this incredible story originate all around the world.

That there were Frenchmen here long, long ago will surprise no one. The French arrived not long after the Sioux showed up—fur trappers, hundreds of them, and their dealers, men with largely unpronounceable names like Sioux City’s own founding father, Theophile Brugeiur.


But all of that was literally a world away.

Spain—that’s right, Spain—wasn’t pleased by all those Frenchmen swarming in, so they sent word to operatives in Mexico, then to Santa Fe, with demands to send dragoons up the Missouri to determine just how far those low-down French were coming and just how many there were.

All of this went on just a couple hours Sunday drive from here, 300 years ago—297 years to be exact. Siouxland fell host to a European rumble. Mid-June, 1720, the Spanish viceroy told New Mexico governor to commission an expedition to determine the relative strength of the French, who were, just then back in Europe, at war with Spain.

The Governor sent his own lieutenant, Pedro de Villasur along with royal troops (he took 42), a few civilians, a priest, and a force of sixty Pueblo Indian warriors, plus an interpreter because the governor believed Villasur would encounter the French. About that, they were mistaken—maybe.

What they discovered was a village of Pawnees on the move, Pawnees with guns, which meant they’d parleyed with the French. Villasur tried to parley with the Pawnees, but got nowhere; so he and his hundred or so men left the village and camped that night, 14 August 1720, where the Platte and the Loup Rivers meet. Going home.

Imagine the scene: that bunch of royal guards and their Native guides, not to mention an African-American named Naranjo, an almost mythical warrior from the great Pueblo revolt in New Mexico, plus a Catholic priest—all of them resting peacefully in tall-grass prairie, when suddenly, come dawn, they’re fired on by the Pawnees, and then massacred so that all but fourteen were left to flee and tell the horrid tale.

Among the victims were Villasur, the lieutenant governor, the priest, and that mighty black warrior, not to mention a third of the finest soldiers of the Santa Fe province. All dead.

That’s the story. To be truthful, it’s hard to know what’s the lead—that once upon a time the French and the Spanish went to war in Nebraska, or the sheer surprise of ambush, or the tally of dead.
Pawnee booty included horses, an entire herd, horses that changed the lives of every Native man, woman, and child out here on the Plains.

But there’s more. The massacre that happened in what became Columbus, Nebraska that August dawn was illustrated, painted on buffalo hides in pictographs Native people loved to do.

That’s right—there’s an actual visual record of the Villesur Massacre, impossible as it may seem, a series of drawings on animal hides that a Santa Fe priest named Father Segresser, just a few years later sent back home to his family in Switzerland, where those paintings stayed for 250 years, wonderfully displayed until an expert in Native American art happened through and identified the massacre in eastern Nebraska.

Today, the hides, all 17 by 4½ feet of them, hang in Place of the Governors, Santa Fe; or else see a bright replica at the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln.

It’s all there, the whole story. Spanish soldiers, naked Pawnees, Southwest Pueblos, a dying Priest and a slain Governor—a real multi-cultural horror right here in the neighborhood.

And, amazingly, some French.

Were there French at the massacre? None of the survivors ever said so, but French soldiers are on the painting. Politics. Just blame it on politics.

Today you can stand right there where it happened, Columbus, Nebraska, a horrible, bloody massacre. There’s a football stadium a half-block away, and a Dairy Queen across the street.

Go to Columbus sometime and have a Blizzard where Spanish troops and Pueblo guides met their maker 300 years ago. Right now, at the intersection of Hwys 81 and 30, it’s simply impossible to imagine.

Then keep going to Lincoln, where you’ll see the story—and then some--painted on hides.

It’s almost impossible to believe. But I’m not making this up.