

The Murder of La Salle • 1687.

Rene Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle, looked longingly out the gate of the makeshift post that he had built in what is now East Texas. It was January 7, 1687, and the French explorer and several of his followers were about to leave the place they called Fort Saint Louis to begin a long, overland journey. They hoped it would take them to the Illinois country and eventually to Canada.

La Salle and his men had sailed from France aboard several ships and landed at Matagorda Bay in 1685. They thought they had reached the mouth of the Mississippi River, which La Salle had discovered on a previous expedition in 1682. When, a few days later, his ship, the *Aimable*, was wrecked off the Gulf Coast, La Salle and about three dozen followers found themselves lost in the wilderness.

The stranded Frenchmen eventually realized that they were nowhere near the Mississippi. They built Fort Saint Louis to protect themselves from the elements and the Indians who lived in the neighborhood. Several attempts to find the Mississippi failed, and La Salle decided to try one more time to escape from this unfamiliar land.

As the party of seventeen men and five horses passed through the gates of Fort Saint Louis, the twenty people who would remain behind gathered to wish them farewell. With La Salle was his older brother, who was a priest, two nephews, several soldiers, a friar, a surgeon, and a couple of Indian guides and hunters. Historian Francis Parkman described the beginning of the journey in great detail in his classic book, *La Salle and the*

Discovery of the Great West:

It was a bitter parting, one of sighs, tears, and embraces,—the farewell of those on whose souls had sunk a heavy boding that they would never meet again. Equipped and weaponed for the journey, the adventurers filed from the gate, crossed the river, and held their slow march over the prairies beyond, till intervening woods and hills shut Fort St. Louis forever from their sight.

The travelers . . . wore the remains of the clothing they had worn from France, eked out with deer-skins, dressed in the Indian manner, and some had coats of old sail-cloth. . . . They suffered greatly from the want of shoes, and found for a while no better substitute than a casing of raw buffalo hide, which they were forced to keep always wet, as, when dry, it hardened about the foot like iron. At length they bought dressed deer-skin from the Indians, of which they made tolerable moccasins. . . . At night, they usually set a rude stockade about their camp; and here, by the grassy border of a brook, or at the edge of a grove where a spring bubbled up through the sands, they lay asleep around the embers of their fire, while the man on guard listened to the deep breathing of the slumbering horses, and the howling of the wolves.

When La Salle's party was a little more than two months out of Fort Saint Louis, wandering aimlessly through the region that lies northwest of today's city of Houston, the Frenchman began to worry. Several of his men had failed to return from a scouting party. (As it turned out, three of them, including one of La Salle's nephews, had been murdered by the others.) La Salle decided to look for them the following day. Accompanied by the friar and an Indian scout, he set out on March 19, 1687. The friar later wrote of the Frenchman's temperament during the journey:

All the way, he spoke to me of nothing but matters of piety, grace, and predestination; enlarging on the debt he owed to God, who had saved him from so many perils during more than twenty years of travel in America. Suddenly, I saw him overwhelmed with a profound sadness, for which he himself could not account. He was so much moved that I scarcely knew him.

As La Salle and his companions continued on their journey, they noticed a pair of eagles flying high above them. Believing that the missing men's camp was probably nearby, La Salle fired a shot into the air. When one of the missing men followed the sound to reach them, La Salle asked where his nephew and the others were. According to Parkman's account,

The man, without lifting his hat, or any show of respect, replied in an agitated and broken voice, but with a tone of studied insolence, that Moranget [the nephew] was strolling about somewhere. La Salle rebuked and menaced him. He rejoined with increased insolence, drawing back. . . while the incensed commander advanced to chastise him. At that moment a shot was fired from the grass, instantly followed by another; and, pierced through the brain, La Salle dropped dead. . . . The murderers now came forward, and with wild looks gathered about their victim. . . . With mockery and insult, they stripped it [the corpse] naked, dragged it into the bushes, and left it there, a prey to the buzzards and the wolves.

Thus, in the vigor of his manhood, at the age of forty-three, died Robert Cavalier de la Salle. . . . without question one of the most remarkable explorers whose names live in history.

The perpetrators of the crime were La Salle's surgeon, Liotot,

and a man named Duhaut. Apparently, both were frustrated by their leader's inability to rescue them from what they believed would be certain death in the wilderness of East Texas. The men's loss of patience cost France the life of the man who, only a few years earlier, had stood at the mouth of the Mississippi River and claimed its entire watershed for his king.

Later that year, La Salle's murderers were executed by other members of their party. The few remaining wanderers finally found their way to Arkansas Post, a small French fort at the mouth of the Arkansas River. The men left behind at Fort Saint Louis were killed by Indians or assimilated into their tribes.