



# Looking for De Soto: A Search Through the South for the Spaniard's Trail

*Joyce Hudson*

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In 1984, Joyce Rockwood Hudson accompanied her husband, anthropologist Charles Hudson, on a 4,000-mile trek across the Southeast. His objective was to retrace and verify the route taken by Hernando de Soto four and a half centuries earlier. The effort would bring into question, and ultimately supplant, much of what was earlier thought to be the course of the Spanish explorer's journey.

This is the journal Joyce Hudson kept during that trip. A kind of scholar's version of *Blue Highways*, the book is a warmly humane and almost daily account of the people the Hudsons met, the places they saw, and the things they did as they searched for De Soto's trail beneath railroad tracks and two-lane blacktops, along riverbanks and mountain ridges. Thus it is largely a travel story about rural and small-town life in eleven states, from Florida to Texas. Descriptions of the region's everchanging terrain, vegetation, and climate fill the book—colored at times by Joyce Hudson's troubled musings about Americans' increasing disconnectedness from the land and irreverence for the past.

Conveying the rewards and frustrations of lives spent in painstaking scholarly inquiry, *Looking for De Soto* also offers a firsthand glimpse into the daily work of anthropologists and archaeologists: the exchanges of ideas, the ventures through swamps and down deeply rutted farm roads, the endless porings over maps, charts, and notes. As if writing a detective story, the author suspensefully paces the narrative with the accrual of geographical, artifactual, and documentary evidence, punctuating it with false leads and other setbacks, as mile after mile of the trail is redrawn. The story even has its villains—"pothunters" and private collectors; the builders of canals and dams that alter the courses of rivers and inundate ancient village sites; and the owners of corporate farms, who have leveled and eradicated ceremonial mounds with their massive agricultural machinery.

Finally, a sense of the headlong cultural collision between Europeans and Native Americans pervades the book. De Soto and his six hundred conquistadores were the first Europeans to explore the interior of the southeastern United States and the only ones to witness its aboriginal society at its zenith. Hudson's evocation of this encounter so central to the history of the New World may well send readers on their own excursions into the past.

*Looking for De Soto* is a fascinating journey through today's South, illuminated by a richly informed perspective on its earlier days.

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