Angelina, Translator for Explorers, born 16__, active 1712-1721

Angelina’s life flickers briefly through the shadows of history. Mentioned in five explorers’ accounts, she appears as a sage, translator, and healer among the Caddo people at the time of European contact. Sadly, we lack any record in her own words to impart her perspective or settle questions. How did she learn Spanish? Was she raised in Mexico, in a frontier mission, or in the woods of East Texas, where Europeans encountered her? Why did she translate for the newcomers?

With her wisdom and compassion, Angelina so impressed 18th century contemporaries that they named a river for her.1 The Angelina River still flows through East Texas today.

Quotations

In this village we found a woman named Angélique, who has been baptized by Spanish priests on a mission to their village. She spoke Spanish, and as M. de St. Denis too spoke that language fairly well, he made use of her to tell the Assaiais chiefs to let us have some guides for hire.—André Pénicaut, accompanying St. Denis, 17122

[The expedition] had recourse to a learned Indian woman of this Assaiais tribe, reared in Coahuila.—Father Espinosa of the Ramón expedition, 17163

Later the governor [Alarcón] proceeded to distribute clothing to all of the family of those baptized, among whom is found the sagacious Indian interpreter who at the persuasion of the said governor came to live with her entire family near the village.—Fray Francisco Céliz of the Alarcón expedition, 1718-17194

[A Spanish-speaking woman] served me all the best she had, and she had as much love for me as if I had been her child. . . . This Indian woman, called Angelica, had lived with the Spaniards since her childhood. That is why we understood each other so well.—Simars de Belle-Isle, a Frenchmen rescued by the Assaiais Caddo after suffering ill-treatment on the Texas coast, 17205

[Alongside the Caddo chief] was Angelina. . . . She served as the interpreter because she could speak the Castilian language as well as the Texas.—de la Peña of the Aguayo expedition, 17216

Graphic

Painting by Ancel Nunn. Courtesy Claude Smithheart, Lufkin.

Endnotes


3 Gabriel Tous, ed. and trans., The Ramón Expedition: Espinosa’s Diary of His Expedition into Texas in 1716, Preliminary Studies of the Texas Catholic Historical Society 2:5 (April 1933).


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