

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future

Portola trek our first European visitors?



By Mark James Miller, September 10, 2017

It is widely believed the first Europeans to pass through the Central Coast were those of the Portola Expedition.

Setting out from San Diego on July 14, 1769, they marched north to present-day San Francisco and back again, returning in January 1770. But were they actually the first Europeans to come here?

There are some tantalizing clues that suggest otherwise, and they form part of the larger story of why Gaspar de Portola, the newly appointed governor of California, set out with 74 priests, soldiers and engineers to explore Alta California in the name of the king of Spain, Carlos III.

Spain, then at the height of its empire, had claimed California in 1542. But for more than two centuries Spain paid it little attention. Only when the rival empires of England and Russia began to show interest did Spain decide to establish its authority over its most faraway colony.

By the late 18th century King Carlos had begun to fear that Britain, having only recently wrested Canada from France, might now attempt to extend its influence in North America into the lands ruled by Spain. But it was the Russian empire that caused the king the most concern. Having long since

established themselves in Alaska, the Russians were now moving steadily south, and by the 1760s Russian trappers and explorers were known to be operating around present-day San Francisco.

One of the tasks of the Portola Expedition was to drive out any Russians they encountered in California, and to establish forts along the coast to guard against any further Russian encroachments. So old is the rivalry between Russia and the West.

On Aug. 6, as the expedition neared Ventura, Franciscan monk Juan Crespi recorded that the Native Americans “told us also that in other times bearded people, clothed and armed as they saw the soldiers, had come into their country...” On Aug. 24, with the expedition now close to Point Concepcion, they once again received evidence that other Europeans had been there before them. Native Americans showed them glass beads “of European make,” that they had obtained from “the north.”

The expedition continued, bestowing names on landmarks they encountered or places where notable events took place, names that still exist — Pitas (Whistles) Point was given its name because the natives “kept us awake playing all night on some doleful pipes or whistles,” wrote an irritated Crespi. Pushing on, they encountered a native settlement they named “Carpinteria,” or “Carpenter’s Shop,” because the people were busy building canoes, according to a young officer named Miguel Costanso. Soon after, a soldier killed a gaviota — seagull — and the area was named Gaviota after the dead bird.

By Sept. 2 the expedition had reached San Luis Obispo County. Coming upon a small lake, and encountering a “skinny bear” close by, they named the lake “Oso Flaco,” Skinny Bear.

On Sept. 7 they entered a valley wherein they encountered “troops of bears.” Costanso marveled at the “fierceness of these animals” and at their speed, “more rapid than one might expect from the bulk and awkwardness of such brutes.” They called this valley “Los Osos,” The Bears.

The next day Crespi observed “to the north we saw a great rock in the form of a round morro” — Morro Rock.

Regardless of whether the Portola Expedition brought the first Europeans to the Central Coast, it made a lasting mark not only here but from San Diego to San Francisco. The Portola Expedition helped make us what we are today, and its influence will be felt into the future as well.

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