Our Ocean Backyard

Article No. 315

Crossing the San Lorenzo

The first European land exploration of Alta California, the Portolà expedition, first named the San Lorenzo River 251 years ago. Gaspar de Portolà had trekked north after leaving San Diego on July 14, 1769, with 27 foot soldiers, seven volunteers from Catalonia, 15 Christian Indians from Baja California, engineer Miguel Costanso, Lieutenant Pedro Fages, Sargeant Jose Ortega, and two priests, Francisco Gomez and Juan Crespi. Well, and then there were 100 mules loaded with provisions.

The party covered about 5 to 10 miles a day, depending upon the terrain, and usually rested every 5th day. After the 400-mile hike from San Diego, they finally reached Monterey Bay, which was their destination. They didn’t recognize it on their first trip, however, as the perfect harbor that had been described by Sebastian Vizcaino from the sea 166 years earlier. They continued their search, however, walking north around the bay.

The local natives fled and left behind a bird filled with straw when they saw the party approaching the present site of the Pajaro River. For this reason, the Portolà party named the stream *Rio de Pajaro*, or River of the Bird. A few miles further on, near a small lake, the Spaniards encountered their first redwood trees – “high trees of a red-colored wood” *palo colorado*..” according to Juan Crespi’s diary. At a time when few men could read or write, he kept a very interesting and detailed account of their journey.

On October 17, 1769, the expedition, many of whom were now sick with scurvy from lack of Vitamin C, camped and rested beside another large river. It was St. Lawrence’s Day by the Catholic calendar, and in typical fashion, they named the river for the saint, the *San Lorenzo*. They were quite taken by this spot with the groves of large redwood trees, the flowing river with the wooded mountains in the background, and proclaimed the beauty of the place by naming it *Santa Cruz* (Holy Cross).

On that day 251 years ago, Crespi wrote in his journal “Toward the end of this day’s journey, we turned to the westward, and not very far from the sea we came to a river of much water, which we crossed. It was about 54 feet wide and in the middle, the water reached to the bellies of the animals. It is the largest stream we have seen in all of the journey. In its bed there are many poplar and alder trees, and has very good patches of land that can be sown and irrigated. The stream is not distant from the beach…”.

There was a second Portolà party the next year, that also walked from Dan Diego, determined to find the perfect harbor sheltered from all winds. These two expeditions became the forerunners of the development of northern California. It would be 22 more years, however, before Mission Santa Cruz was established, and 80 years before Santa Cruz County was created.

While the first European expedition crossed the river on horses and mules, bridges were built later to connect those parts of the city on opposite sides of the river. The first railroad bridge across the San Lorenzo was built in 1875, at the same location near the mouth where it stands today. The Seabright area in the early years were considered to be out in the country, although by 1904 there was a trolley that connected Santa Cruz to Seabright and then continued all the way to Capitola.

For many years there was a rickety footbridge that crossed the San Lorenzo River a short distance upstream from the railroad bridge that linked the Seabright area to Santa Cruz. Because of the frequent high winter flow, however, the footbridge was taken down each fall and then was reconstructed in the spring after the winter high water and floods has passed.

During the winter months when the footbridge was down, residents of Seabright walked across the railroad bridge when they were in a hurry to get to town, although this involved a certain level of danger. One woman was crossing the railroad bridge when she noticed the train coming. She tried to climb out onto a crosspiece, fell and broke her hip. This led Southern Pacific to agree to constructing a sturdy footbridge connected to the railroad trestle, if the Seabright residents would raise $600. Over a hundred years later, another new and wider footbridge has now been built connected to the railroad bridge.

