Each time I need to drive north to the bay area I almost always have a quick debate in my head about the wisdom or enjoyment of heading north on Highway 1 along the ocean or just taking Highway 17 with 35,000 other frantic drivers. The coast often takes longer, but unless it’s foggy, is so much more enjoyable and a whole lot less crowded. You have all of that Pacific Ocean to look at, and even though I’ve driven that road hundreds of times there is often something new or unexpected along the way. The first Spanish explorers, however, didn’t see the journey up the coast quite the same way. If fact it was the journey from hell by the accounts in their journals. And why was that you might ask?

Today you can easily drive 45 or 55 miles per hour most of the way to San Francisco, unless of course there is someone creeping along in front of you. What you don’t usually notice from your car is that each of the many stream valleys or that emerge from the coastal hills on their way to the shoreline is crossed by an embankment or fill that the highway (and the railway) passes over. There are a number of these stream that you just zip right across without giving them a second thought, Wilder Creek, Majors Creek, Laguna Creek, Yellow Bank Creek, San Vicente Creek, to name a few.

In 1769, 250 years ago now, Captain Gaspar de Portolá and his tired and scurvy-ridden traveling companions were working their way up the north coast with horses and mules from what was to later become Santa Cruz. The Portolá expedition was heading north from San Diego to find the wonderful harbor named Monterey by Sebastian Vizcaíno, who had seen it from a ship in 1603. The “harbor” was named after the Count of Monte Rey, the Viceroy of Mexico at the time who had sent the Vizcaíno expedition.

While the Portolá party had camped at the mouth of the Salinas River and climbed a hill there looking for the harbor, neither Portolá nor any of his men saw anything through the fog that looked remotely like a harbor. This is why they found themselves bushwhacking their way up the Santa Cruz north coast, searching for an anchorage for Spanish galleons returning to Acapulco from Manila.

But the route across each of those steep, brush covered stream canyons along the north coast was next to impassable. As they struggled along the route you drive effortlessly over today, they had to work their way down the steep side of each canyon, through poison oak, willows, madrone and oak trees, cross the creek, and then drag their horses and heavily-laden mules up the opposite side. They weren’t happy campers and I’m sure that at least a few of them experienced the added discomfort of poison oak.
Portolá and his men reached the mouth of Waddell Creek on October 20, 1769, and as they looked ahead they saw steep cliffs plunging to the sea and no obvious or easy way across. Many of the men were sick with survey having not yet realized that they needed to be eating citrus or drinking fresh organic orange juice every day to stay healthy. They decided to camp along the creek for two days while their engineers explored the bluffs and did what they could to find a route across this obstacle.

Eighty years later, there was still no easy route across the bluffs at Waddell and the only way was to time your trip at low tide where there might be some beach exposed. Justo Veytia, a Mexican citizen, set out on horseback for San Francisco via the North Coast in November of 1849. He wrote in his journal as he passed the Waddell Bluffs:

“Two days of this expedition were the most difficult. The second day on the road one has to travel along the beach very close to the water and this can only be done when the tide is low… Neither Arana nor I knew the road so when we went onto the beach we figured it was all right because when a very big wave came up, it only reached the horses’ hooves. So we rode on about 300 varas (about 300 yards), experiencing two very bad spots because of some rocks, when the very rough sea began to wash over us up to the pommel of our saddles. We didn’t deliberate in making a decision—to go back was clearly dangerous because the rocks were now under water and we couldn’t see the openings between them, so we resolved to continue forward…for the waves had us pinned against a fairly high cliff. We went on walking for about 200 varas until we found a foot path to ascend and as soon as we were safe we undressed completely to put our clothes to dry because the waves had knocked us down three times, horses and all, so we had to dismount and pull them forcibly.”

To be continued.