Our Ocean Backyard—Santa Cruz Sentinel columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth Sciences, UC Santa Cruz

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Searching for Monterey Bay

While Sebastián Vizcaíno was given the authority to map the California coast in detail during his voyage north from Mexico in 1602, the map that I included in my last article was not in fact prepared by Vizcaíno. Had I looked carefully at the legend on the map I would have noticed that it was not drawn until 1791, almost two centuries after his voyage. My sincere thanks to a good friend, Toby Goddard, for pointing this out.

While Vizcaíno’s earlier mapping of the Monterey Bay area was no doubt important in drawing this map, the Spanish had developed a policy of secrecy regarding their early explorations, leaving Vizcaíno more or less obscure regarding his early mapping of the California coast. Spain finally realized that their claims to sovereignty of this area were under threat from both the British and the Russians and began to publish their own maps. But it was the Spanish names given first by Cabrillo, and then Vizcaíno, that have remained today for many of the state’s coastal features.

Although Vizcaíno spoke highly of the California coast and Monterey Bay as a good port for galleons returning from Manila, he was not allowed a return visit, and Alta California was ignored for over a century and a half. Change was underway in Spain, however, and a new king, Carlos III, decided in 1767 to expel the Jesuits from the Spanish dominions in retaliation for supposed high level political intrigues. In New Spain (Mexico) and Baja the job fell to José de Gálvez, the Visitador or inspector general. He recruited a veteran army commander, Gaspar de Portolá, to carry out the expulsion of the Jesuits from Baja and enlisted a replacement religious order, the Franciscans, led by Father Junípero Serra, to take over the missions.

With the Jesuits effectively removed, Gálvez, Portolá, and Serra together with the Viceroy were already planning to establish missions to the north of Baja. In January 1768 their plans were confirmed by a royal order to expand the Spanish frontier, occupy Monterey Bay, and begin colonizing Alta California as a bulwark against the supposed foreign incursions.

To help guarantee success, Gálvez made the decision to send men by land and sea through a campaign named the Sacred Expedition. In the spring of 1769, two expeditions, one commanded by Portolá and a second by Captain Fernando Rivera, set out from Baja California to prepare for the military occupancy of Alta California. One important objective was to reach Vizcaíno’s famed Monterey Bay harbor. The threat of Russia and England along the coast was much stronger at this time, which provided an additional catalyst for the expedition.
The plan was for the land expeditions to meet with three ships in what Vizcaíno had named San Diego Bay. When they met in San Diego in early July, however, one ship had vanished along the way. Most of the crew on the other two ships were sick with scurvy, and half of the men on the expedition had died. This was not a great start for the Sacred Expedition.

Portolá proved to be a resourceful leader, however, and sent one ship back for supplies and additional men while he started north with the healthiest men. Unfortunately, neither he nor anyone else at that time realized that scurvy was due to a vitamin C deficiency. It was generally assumed that about half of the sailors on any long distance voyage would die of scurvy. It wouldn’t be until 1795 that the lack of vitamin C was recognized as the source of this malady and soon the British began routinely giving lemon juice to sailors.

The Portolá expedition, with 63 men and 40 mules carrying their supplies, left San Diego on July 14, 1769, and headed north along the coast. Some men rode horses but many were walking. After passing the Santa Barbara area on August 19, they reached the southern end of the rugged Big Sur coast near present day San Simeon on September 13, but realized that this section of mountains posed an impassable barrier. They were forced to make a difficult detour inland through the Santa Lucia Range to the Salinas Valley. Following the river downstream towards Monterey Bay they reached an area near the coast Marina on October 1, where they camped.

Portolá and a small group of soldiers headed towards the Salinas River mouth. They climbed a low mound of sand, known today as Mulligan Hill, near the mouth of the present day Salinas River, but failed to see or recognize Vizcaíno’s harbor “sheltered from all winds”. Mulligan Hill is actually a large stabilized sand dune, and like much of the rest of the central and southern Monterey Bay shoreline, the extensive dune fields bear evidence to a long history of strong onshore winds.

A scouting party headed south and explored the Monterey Peninsula, but didn’t find the protected harbor there either. They were also eagerly anticipating meeting a ship, the San José, which was carrying supplies, but which never arrived. A number of additional men were now incapacitated from scurvy and were being carried on litters, which didn’t help matters or morale. This was not an easy trip.

They continued north, reaching the Pajaro (bird) River, which they named after a large straw-stuffed bird that was left behind in a deserted Indian camp. After camping at Pinto Lake, the expedition reached the area of present day Santa Cruz on October 18, 1769, three months after leaving San Diego.

There is more to this story, but the inspiration for recounting the expedition was my recent reading of a truly wonderful book, *Alta California*, by Nick Neely, in which he chronicles his 12-week hike tracing the 650-mile route taken by the Portolá expedition 250 years ago. In some ways this trip was more challenging for him than what the Portolá party experienced. Portolá had dozens of mules and horses to carry their supplies; Nick
carried his on his back. Although, to be clear, there were grocery stores and fast food outlets along much of Nick’s route.

Where the early explorers found fresh water streams, an uninterrupted route and safe places to camp at the end of each day’s march, Nick found dry concrete channels, fences, freeways, No Trespassing signs, gated subdivisions, off-limit military bases and suspicious residents, often making it difficult for him to find a safe place to pitch his tent or roll out his sleeping bag.