

SPANISH DISCOVERY OF THE SIERRA NEVADA

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The first European to sail a ship along the coast of what we now call California was Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo. In November, 1542 while close to shore a little south of San Francisco, he and his men beheld mountains "covered with snow to the summit, and they named them the Sierras Nevadas." These mountains were part of the Coast Range, but whether they were the Santa Cruz or the Santa Lucia mountains is not certain. When maps were made a little later, based accounts of this voyage, the name "Sierra Nevada" appeared at various points along the coast, even as far north as what was later named Cape Mendocino. In accordance with the map-makers' interpretations of the descriptions. At all events, Cabrillo never saw the mountains that are now called the Sierra Nevada. In fact it seems almost certain that no white man set eyes upon the great interior valley of California and its eastern wall until more than two centuries later.



The first overland journey in modern California, or Alta California, as it was then known, was in 1769, when Captain Gaspar de Portola's party discovered the Bay of San Francisco. Although its observations were limited to the vicinity of the coast, nevertheless this expedition led directly to a more definite knowledge of the region, for a presidio and a mission were established at Monterey in 1770 which greatly simplified the task of further exploration.



In November, 1770, and again in March, 1772, Captain Pedro Fages explored the region of San Francisco Bay. On the second journey, accompanied by Fray Juan Crespi, he reached a point near the junction of the Sacramento and the San Joaquin rivers. Crespi describes the sight which they there beheld:



Pedro Fages

"We made out that these three arms or three large rivers were formed by a very large river, a league in width at least, which descended from some high mountains to the southeast, very far distant, all that part of it which the eye reached descending from the east, and then dividing into three rivers."

On a quaint map drawn by Crespi at the time, the river is shown debouching from the mountains – undoubtedly the earliest pictorial representation of the Sierra Nevada.



Fray Juan Crespi

The effective discovery of the Sierra Nevada rests, however, with the Franciscan missionaries, Francisco Tomas Hermenegildo Garcés and Pedro Font. They not only beheld the range, but they mentioned it specifically, and Font placed it for the first time upon a map, for the portion of Crespi's sketch which relates to the interior is more in the nature of a diagram than of a map. Both Garcés and Font were members of the Juan Bautista de Anza expedition which marched overland from Sonora,



Francisco Garcés

Mexico, in 1775 – 1776, for the purpose of founding San Francisco. Font accompanied Anza to San Francisco Bay, and with him followed its eastern margin to the mouth of the Sacramento River.

“Looking to the northeast [from a point just south of Suisan Bay],” writes Font in his diary on April 2, 1776, “we saw an immense treeless plain into which the water spreads widely, forming several low islets; at the opposite end of this extensive plain, about forty leagues off, we saw a great snow-covered mountain range [*una gran sierra nevada*], which seemed to me to run from south-southeast to north-northwest.”

The next day they went a few miles farther eastward and climbed a hill near the present city of Antioch for a better view. “Looking eastward, we saw on the other side of the plain and about thirty leagues distant a great snow-covered range, white from crest to foot. It lies about southeast and northwest, and from the direction I made out for it, I judged that it possibly might have some connection to the southward with the *sierra nevada* which branches off from the *sierra madre de California* above the *puerto de San Carlos* [Pass of San Carlos, at the end of Cahuilla Valley] and runs northwestward as far as the mission of San Gabriel and beyond. However, we could not discover either end of the range.”

Meanwhile, Garcés had remained in the south, busy for the most part among the Indians of the Colorado River and the Mohave region. In April of 1776, accompanied by a few Indians, he set out from San Gabriel Mission to visit the tulares and the Indian Rancherias, concerning which he had heard reports from Fages. Crossing the Tehachapi range, very likely by way of Antelope Valley and Tejon Pass, he observed that the mountains continued toward the northeast and north. To all of these he gave the name Sierra de San Marcos. At length, on the first of May, he came to a large river, “whose waters, crystalline, bountiful, and palatable, flowed on a course from the east through a straitened channel.” This was Kern River, called by Garcés “Rio de San Felipe.”



Pedro Font

From this point, a few miles above the present city of Bakersfield, Garcés traveled northward, crossing Poso Creek and advancing as far as White River. Along these streams he found numerous Indian villages, and at each Rancheria he strove to interest the inhabitants in the salvation of the soul. Whatever failures may have attended his efforts in that direction, he at least succeeded in winning the friendship of the Indians by his exemplification of the true Christian spirit in humbly ministering to the sick.

From Indians who came from the north Garcés learned of a river in that direction three times as large as the San Felipe. He greatly desired to visit it, but felt that he had been gone long enough from his companions, and reluctantly turned back. In his journal at this point there is inserted a note in which his observations are linked with those afterward reported by his colleague Fray Pedro Font. Dr. Elliot Coues, in his translation of the Garcés diary, gives the following paraphrase of this passage, rendering the meaning more intelligible through the use of present-day nomenclature:

“This San arcos range is the Sierra Nevada which Font, when he was with Anza’s expedition on the Bay of San Francisco, saw at a distance of about forty leagues across the San Joaquin Valley; and though here where I am the Tulares have no such breadth, I could see them widening northward till the San Luis Range [Coast Range] ends and there is left on the Sierra Nevada.”

The descriptions of Font and Garcés, supplemented by the maps that Font prepared in the following year, would seem to be leading us to the threshold of a thorough knowledge of the interior of California and to a delineation of the extend of the Sierra Nevada. On the contrary, however, we find this to be the end of exploration in that direction for the remainder of the century. Not until 1800 was a further contribution made to knowledge of this territory, so near to the Spanish activities along the coast, yet so remote from their interests. Even then, and to the close of the Spanish and Mexican domination of California, there is scarcely anything from Spanish sources to add to what Garcés and Font reported. The lofty forests and vast granite gorges of the Sierra remained undescribed and, so far as we know, unvisited, until the coming of the American trappers at the beginning of the second quarter of the nineteenth century.



Juan Bautista de Anza

To the Spaniard this region presented no attraction. He was neither a fur-trapper nor a hunter of game; he suspected nothing of the golden treasure that lay hidden in the foothills; there appeared to be nothing that he could take from the interior that would benefit him in his settlement on the coast. The very appearance of the inner valley repelled him; he was therein nothing but swamps and barren deserts. As yet there was no pressure of restriction to drive him to a discovery of its marvelous resources and abundant fruitfulness. If it had not been for the Indians he would surely have left it utterly alone.

The Indians, nevertheless, made contact with the interior a necessity and led to discovery of the rivers of the San Joaquin Valley, just as later on they were lead to discovery of the great cañons of the Sierra. The Indians stole horses and harbored refugees. For that reason it became necessary to pursue and punish them. The horses could seldom be retrieved, because Indians stole horses not for use as livestock but for their flavor as meat. Once in possession of such tempting flesh, the tribe lost little time in consuming it. The refugees were deserters from the military ranks, or Indian backsliders from the mission fold.

The Franciscan missionaries also visited the Indian villages at the foot of the Sierra, searching for possible mission sites or hoping for wholesale baptisms. In a few instances the missionaries went alone, but usually they accompanied the military expeditions. In November, 1804, Fray Juan Martín journeyed across the Coast Range to the Tulare region, but without important results. In July and August, 1806, Fray José María Zalvidea accompanied a military expedition as far as the Kern River near Bakersfield. Describing the region east of Tulare Lake, Zalvides remarks in his diary that “in the vicinity of these hills there is a pine-covered mountain range.”

The most notable of these visits to the upper San Joaquin, was the first to add permanently to the nomenclature of the Sierra Nevada, was a military expedition led by Gabriel Moraga in September and October, 1806. The incidents of the journey were set down in a diary by Fray Pedro Munoz, chaplain of the party. That the route was not entirely a new one for Moraga is indicated by reference to a journey of

the preceding year, in which the San Joaquin and the Kings rivers were given the names they now bear. It is not known positively that Moraga was the leader of the earlier journey, but it seems likely that such was the case. Some light is thrown upon the date of the journey through the name of Kings River. It was the custom of the Spanish explorers to select names for places along their route from the church calendar. Thus, when they gave the name *Rio de los Santos Reys*, or “River of the Holy Kings,” it might be inferred that they were at that river on the 6th of January, the day of Epiphany, sacred to the memory of the three kings or magi who brought gifts to the infant Jesus.

Moraga’s expedition in the fall of 1806 marched from San Juan Bautista over the hills to the San Joaquin plain. Crossing the San Joaquin River, the party came to a place which they name Mariposas, the Spanish word for “butterflies,” on account of the swarms of butterflies that flew into the men’s eyes and ears. One division of the party went north from this point, discovering and naming the Merced River (*Río de Nuestra Señora de la Merced*), and crossing others presumed to be the Tuolumne, the Stanislaus (*Río de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*), The Calaveras (*Río de las Calaveras*), and the Mokelumne (*Muquelumnes*). There may have been some attempts to ascend the streams or to reach observation points in the mountains, but it is most unlikely that anyone advanced very far.



Gabriel Moraga

Returning to the Merced (*El Río de Nuestra Señora de la Merced*), Moraga and the entire party proceeded south to the San Joaquin, reaching it at a point in the foothills. Some of the men followed the river into the mountains to an Indian Rancheria called Pizacache, finding forests of pine and redwood. The redwood mentioned was doubtless cedar or fir; the sequoia groves were too far away to be reached in the one day specified in Moraga’s diary. At the Rancheria the chief, whose name is give as Sujoyucomu, informed them that soldiers like themselves had come across the Sierra from the east twenty years before and had dilled many Indians. A few days later, at a similar Rancheria on the Kings River, this story was repeated.

Moraga’s party learned a little more of the region at the foot of the Sierra before crossing the head of the valley to the Tejon Pass. They visited many populous Rancherias along the streams between the Kings and the Kern and fond evidences of Zalvidea’s visit earlier in the year. Thus, for the first time, the Spaniards had explored up and down the base of the Sierra Nevada from one end of the San Joaquin Valley to the other. During the next few years missionaries and soldiers made repeated visits to the Indian villages, but without contributing further to the knowledge of the country.

Moraga having now ascertained definitely the sources of the San Joaquin, continued his explorations in another direction and proceeded to examine those of the Sacramento. In the fall of 1808 he journey from Mission San José to the San Joaquin River near Stockton. He ascended successively the Calaveras, the Mokelumne, and



the Cosumnes, searching for sites upon which to establish missions, but without finding anything that appeared suitable. Continuing his exploration to the north, he examined the lower courses of the American and the Feather rivers, and he may have ascended the Yuba and thence have crossed over to the American. He revisited the Tuolumne and the Merced, and returned to the Mission San Jose after a month's absence.

One more contribution to the knowledge of the Sierra Nevada is found among the journals of the Spanish explorers. In May, 1817, Lieutenant Luis Antonio Argüello, accompanied by the missionaries Ramón Abella and Narciso Durán, explored the waters of the Sacramento and the lower San Joaquin by boat. Durán's diary contains several passages that sum up the knowledge of the interior possessed by the Spaniards at that time. He comments upon the junction of the two rivers that enter the Bay of San Francisco, and continues as follows:



“One comes from the north and northeast and is called the Sacramento (*Río del Santísimo Sacramento*), and the other from the east and southeast and is called the San Joaquin, and the two, united at their mouth, appear to be the river which the maps put down under a single name, Rio de San Francisco. I call them the only two rivers, because it seems that the many streams or branches which are formed by numerous little wooded islands and tule-patches, as well as some other rivers farther up, all discharge their waters into these two rivers; so that, although the western slopes of the Sierra

Nevada may form some rivers, as they say, yet all lose their identity and mingle with the two principal rivers already mentioned.”

A few days later, approaching the site of Sacramento, Durán records that “At about five o’clock, looking to the northeast through a gap in the grove of the river bank, we discerned the famous Sierra Nevada. The white part of this Sierra seemed to all to be all snow, although, as they say, it also has a species of white rock which looks like snow.”

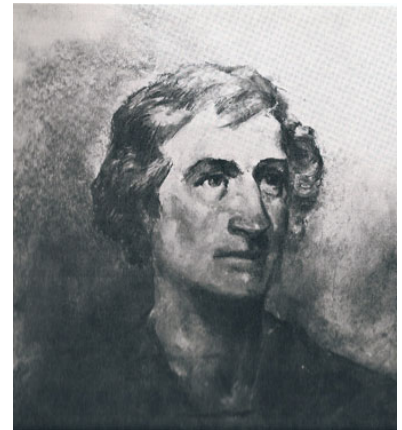
At the turning-point of the river voyage, perhaps near the junction of the Feather River, Durán remarks that “The course of the river from here on could be followed better by land than by water, and the vast lands to the end of the Sierra Nevada be examined, which lands, it is likely, may be settled by innumerable natives. Once the pass of the Sierra is discovered, which the said end seems to offer, we would be able to ascertain the truth of what the Indians have told us for some years past. That on the other side of the Sierra Nevada there are people like our soldiers. We have never been able to clear up the matter and know whether they are Spanish from New Mexico, or English from the Columbia, or Russians from La Bodega.”

These references to foreigners beyond the Sierra remain a perplexity. Certainly the Russians never penetrated very far inland from their settlements near the Russian River and could not have been on the eastern side of the Sierra at any time. The most plausible explanation appears to be that the reports arose

from the presence Spanish traders and adventurers from New Mexico in the Utah country. Escalante's expedition of 1776 must have made a profound impression upon the tribes of the Great Basin, and it is known that for many years thereafter there were unofficial expeditions into this region. Although none of them came anywhere near the Sierra Nevada, nevertheless it is not unreasonable to suppose that accounts of the strange white men would travel from tribe to tribe until the matter became a common subject of remark throughout the West.

After turning back down the Sacramento, some of Argüello's party rowed up the San Joaquin, visiting the Indian villages in the tules. "Here they again told us the stories of there being civilized people on the other side of the Sierra Nevada (from which we should be ten leagues distant), without being able to verify the statements, as has been said on May 20th." A band of natives was encountered, part Yatchicomnes and part Muquélemnnes. "Most of these natives live on the mainland, and one may visit them on horseback, if, perchance, it should be necessary to do so. They reach to the slope of the Sierra Nevada, and inform us that that which appears white is rock and not snow. Although it most certainly seems that the Sierra contains snow as well as white rock which looks like snow." Thus may one today in clear weather behold the brow of El Capitan from the plains of the Merced and be in doubt whether it is truly the great rock or a patch of snow.

The character of the Sierra Nevada had by this time begun to take definite shape in the records of civilization, even though no white man was known to have attained its summits or to have passed over its crest. It was known to be a massive mountain several hundred miles long, with rivers of considerable volume emerging from its heights to form two principal streams, the San Joaquin and the Sacramento; it had been found to be extremely rugged and difficult of access; it had been observed that above the barren foothills there were extensive forests, and that higher still there were rocks that looked like snow and summits unmistakable covered with snow. Beyond this, knowledge ceased, and incentive for further exploration was lacking so far as the Spaniards were concerned. The genius and energy which had led them over uncharted seas and across desert and mountain, river and cañon, were by this time spent. Ten years later there came a new wave of exploration, from another direction, soon to become a flood-tide of immigration. In the spring of 1827 the vanguard of American trappers, led by Jedediah Smith, entered the San Joaquin Valley from the south. On his return to Great Salt Lake, Smith with two companions forced his way across the mountains through the snow, the first known crossing of the Sierra Nevada by white men.



Jedediah Strong Smith



View at El Portal – Entrance to Yosemite Valley