Toward Rediscovering the Monterey Bay Region [1] and It's History

by Sandy Lydon

We did not find Monterey in the distance that we passed over; and I do not know whether it exists or not.

-Father Juan Crespí
San Diego, February 6, 1770. [2]

Discovery

On October 1, 1769, Captain Gaspar de Portolá and a small band of fellow Spaniards trudged up a small hill beside the present-day Salinas River and looked west. Weary, confused, their ranks riddled with scurvy, they were searching for the place called Monterey which the Spanish explorer Sebastián Vizcaíno have described in 1603 as a harbor "sheltered from all winds and on the shore are many groves of pine suitable for ships' masts, no matter what the size." [3] As recently as 1734, Spanish galleon pilot José González Cabrera Bueno had declared the bay to have a "famous harbor" with "many pines good for masts and lateen yards." [4] The Spaniards who stood atop the hill (later named Mulligan's Hill[5]) saw no fine harbor, and the only trees beside the water to the south were "scraggly, knotty, and with low branches," [6] unfit for a ship's mast.

As the Spaniards peered across the beach at the huge expanse of blue water which lay before them-Monterey Bay-they couldn't see it. It was right there, of course, within a stone's throw of where they stood, but for a myriad of reasons[7] they were unable to match the written descriptions with what they were seeing.

It was not until the following year that Portolá returned (after being ordered to do so by an impatient Fray Junípero Serra) and realized that the bay they had first seen from beside the Salinas River was indeed the one they had been seeking. Once the Spaniards settled in at Monterey in 1770 and set up their administrative system, they treated the county surrounding the Monterey Bay as a single administrative district, a practice which was generally continued by their Mexican successors after 1822.

When General Mariano Vallejo, one of California's most informed and learned residents, was asked to set up California's first counties in preparation for statehood in 1850, he proposed that the entire five thousand square mile region be included in one unit named Monterey County.[8] Sprawling from San Luis Obispo County on the south to beyond Pescadero on the north, Vallejo's original Monterey County reflected his understanding that the region surrounding Monterey Bay was (and is) a huge, living, breathing, organic whole extending from the farthest ridges of the Diablo range out to the edge of the deepest ocean abyss.

Vallejo's Monterey County lasted two short weeks. Fearful of being lost politically and culturally in such a huge Hispanic county, Yankee residents on the north side of the bay petitioned the state to form a separate administrative unit more suited to their interests. [9] The region was split into two counties[10] on February 18, 1850, beginning a process of administrative fragmentation which continued well into the twentieth century.

This regional balkanization has made the Monterey Bay region just as elusive for us as it was for the Spaniards who could not find it in 1769. Today the region encompasses three counties[11] and part of a fourth and is a bewildering patchwork of administrative jurisdictions. County and city boundaries overlap regional water management agencies, fire districts, Congressional and California state legislative districts. The writings of local historians have reflected the region's fragmentation. There have been many local and county-wide histories

written over the years, but few writers have attempted to consider the region as General Vallejo saw it. [12]

The causes of this regional myopia are intertwined in the region's natural and human history, and by highlighted some of the region's major historical themes we can see the underlying themes which not only affected the history but also obscured our ability to see the region at the same time.

Diversity of Landform and Resources

One reason the region has been difficult to see is that landforms contained within it are distorted by the San Andreas Fault system which bisects it. The region is extremely mountainous with approximately seventy percent of the land being either hills or mountains. [13] Because the landscape is geologically young, it is extremely rugged and irregular with rivers and streams bending and twisting, sometimes doubling back on themselves before deciding to make their final run to Monterey Bay.

These landforms combine with a relatively benign Mediterranean climate to create a multitude of microclimates which themselves lead to a huge diversity of native flora and fauna. From the dark, damp canyons which sheltered strands of huge redwood trees to the open marshes and sloughs of the Salinas Valley, the Monterey Bay Region is a patch-work quilt of biotic communities.

Geological resources were just as diverse, ranging from impressive deposits of oil in the upper Salinas Valley to the clean, white, granitic sands of the Monterey Peninsula. Commercial granite quarries operated throughout the region, and even today the word "granite" adorns two of the region's largest private businesses, Graniterock and Granite Construction.

Human Diversity-Something for Everybody

Beginning with the Native Californians who lived around the bay, the diversity of climate and resources supported an equally diverse human community. The Esselen Indians adapted to the rugged, semi-arid inland valleys of the Santa Lucia while the Rumsen of the Carmel Valley relied heavily on seasonal visits to coastal granite points for abalone and mussels.

Beginning with the Spanish in 1769, immigrants came into the region from all over the world, each group bringing skills suited for some of the region's riches but not all. Chinese fishermen caught and dried squid, the Genovese caught bottom fish, Portuguese whalemen from the Azores hunted migrating cetaceans from coastal promontories, the Japanese dove deep for offshore abalone, while the Swiss set up a chain of dairies in the grass-rich Salinas Valley. Each immigrant group became the individual tile of the regional mosaic the overall patterns of which were sometimes difficult to see. The diverse politics of racism, which pitted older immigrant groups against newer, did not add to the sense of a regional identity.

Isolation

Another theme which helps explain the region's unique history is its physical isolation from the outside world. Tiny valleys and narrow coastal terraces, sandwiched between rugged mountain ranges, and an unforgiving, fog-shrouded sea with its persistent northwesterly winds, made it difficult to get into the region from either the land or sea. When the locus of political and economic power shifted from Monterey to the San Francisco-Sacramento axis, following the gold rush in 1849, Monterey was consigned to the role of the "Old Capital", a vestige of Hispanic California, and economic development on the south side of Monterey Bay slowed. Perhaps the greatest positive benefit of the region's slow economic growth in the last half of the nineteenth century was its ability to respond to the vacation and travel needs of the residents of the growing San Francisco Bay Area.

Because neither industry nor population had obliterated the landscape as it had done on the shores of the San Francisco Bay, the Monterey Bay Region was ready and able to provide a place of natural beauty and relaxation for the people of the San Francisco Bay area and interior valleys seeking relief from the increasing frantic and urbanized style of life. Tourists came into the area both as individuals and organized groups with many religious organizations establishing summer church camps around the bay beginning with the Methodist-Episcopal church camp at Pacific Grove in 1874.

With the completion of the Del Monte Hotel in 1880 the Monterey Peninsula became the region's leading tourist destination, a distinction which it still enjoys more than a century later. The twisted mountains to the north and south also slowed the process of urbanization, providing the gift of time to some of the resources and natural beauty which undoubtedly would otherwise have been obliterated by urban sprawl.

The Bay is Lost

Seaborne commerce kept the residents of the Monterey Bay Region focused on the bay into the twentieth century. The cities of Santa Cruz, Monterey and even Watsonville continued to campaign for municipal wharves and breakwaters. The Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, completed in 1914, was intended to be the Santa Cruz's primary connection to the outside world. It was the state's highway system (as tenuous as its connections were in the Monterey Bay Region), which eventually connected the region to the outside world, and slowly but surely, the local inhabitants turned away from the bay.

Fishermen and tourists continued to be sensitive to the bay and its moods, but for the most, the bay became "away" as in "let's throw this away." Wharves and piers collapsed and in their place were built sewer outfalls and garbage dumps. Fortunately, with submarine canyon and constant turning and churning, the bay was able to take the abuse.

The pace of attack on the bay quickened into the twentieth century. The steam-driven whaling industry centered at Moss Landing and the huge purse seiners put pressures heretofore unknown on the bay's resources. Local communities incorporated, flexed their political muscle and claimed sovereignty over their little part of the bay. The coastline (and indeed the region) became a checkerboard of warring principalities intent on exercising local control whether it meant pumping as much water as they wished out of the ground, or dumping trash into the bay if they so chose.

Rediscovering the Region – The Sanctuary

The harbinger of a modern regional impulse came in 1972 when California passed Proposition 20 establishing the Coastal Commission and bringing, for the first time since General Vallejo, a macro view to counter those provincial ones which had become terribly micro. Local interests struggled against the intrusion into what they saw as their God-given prerogatives (nobody is going to tell us what we can do with our property!), but slowly, the people of Monterey Bay began to look up and rediscover the region.

When the United States Department of the Interior announced plans to lease the coastal shelf for oil exploration in 1977, the coastal communities (and even their inland neighbors) began to talk to one another again. Beginning in 1978, local and regional politicians began to reconnect the region and mount a campaign to turn the forces of the federal government back on itself. The end result was the designation of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary in September, 1992.

During the two years since the sanctuary designation there have been several efforts to create regional alliances among the natural scientists and educational institutions. The campus complexes planned on the Fort Ord property are attempting to weld connections between the

region's educational institutions. Whether they have the necessary centrifugal force to counter the internecine rivalries remains to be seen.

It is now time for historians in the Monterey Bay Region to elevate their sights and begin to take General Vallejo's view once again. Monterey's history and Santa Cruz's history are interconnected and intertwined; one cannot be told without the other. The connections are everywhere. Redwood timbers from Corralitos still hold up the roofs of the now-quiet mine tunnels at New Idria in southern San Benito County. Watsonville residents summered at Arroyo Seco and Tassajara and owned property there. Parkfield was settled by folks from Santa Cruz. We need to begin communicating with each other more, sharing information and ideas and dropping the provincial competitiveness which has separated our cities and counties for so long.

And, by finally taking a regional historical view, we can undergird the efforts to reunite and protect the Monterey Bay Region's human and natural resources.

Yes, Father Crespí, the Monterey Bay does exist, and it is up to the historians to lead the way to its discovery.

1. The word region is being used intentionally here to distinguish it from earlier usages of the phrase "Monterey Bay Area." For the purposes of this essay, the Monterey Bay Region is defined as the counties of Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito together with the southern part of the Santa Clara Valley which is drained by the Pajaro River. For another definition see Gordon, Burton. *Monterey Bay Area: Natural History and Cultural Imprints*, 2nd edition, Pacific Grove, Calif.: Boxwood Press, 1977, pp 3-5.
2. Bolton, Herbert Eugene. *Fray Juan Crespí: Missionary Explorer on the Pacific Coast*, 1769-1774, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1927, p. 26.
3. Letter from Sebastián Vizcaíno to the King of Spain, May 3, 1603.
4. Bolton, *Crespí*, p. 236 note.
5. Clark, Donald T. *Monterey County Place Names*, Carmel Valley, Calif.: Kestrel Press, 1991, p. 347.
6. Bolton, *Crespí*, p. 42.
7. Probably the most important reason they did not see Monterey was that they were looking with the eyes of land-based soldiers rather than those of seaborne sailors. For an analysis of the Portolá expedition "missing" Monterey Bay, see Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft*, Volume XVIII, San Francisco, Calif.: The History Co., 1884, pp. 152–155.
8. Coy, Owen C. *California County Boundaries*, California Historical Survey Commission, Berkeley, 1923, pp. 2-4.
9. California Senate *Journal*. January 16, 1850, p. 92.
10. Monterey and Branciforte. Branciforte County was renamed Santa Cruz at the request of its residents in April, 1850. See Coy, Owen C. *California County Boundaries*, California Historical Survey Commission, Berkeley, 1923, pp. 2-4.
11. San Benito County was formed out of Monterey County in 1874.
12. Not surprisingly, the first modern effort to take a regional perspective was written by a geographer, Professor Burton Gordon, in his 1974 classic, *Monterey Bay Area: Natural History and Cultural Imprints.* Op. cit.
13. The percentage has been derived from Storie, Earl R. et al. *Soil Survey: The Santa Cruz Area California*, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., 1944, p 4.