

## Historical Background

In 1774, Spain's hold on *Alta California* was tenuous at best. Although sparsely populated, the lower portion of California – *Baja California* – had a growing number of missions and pueblos. But in *Alta California* – from San Diego north – five inadequately staffed missions and two presidios were all that guarded these remote Spanish holdings from potential takeover by Russian or English forces. Even more troubling, these distant bastions of the Spanish crown were dependent on immigration for future growth. They were staffed almost exclusively by priests and soldiers, most of whom had not yet brought their families north from Loreto (in Baja California) and the mainland. Although a few women had made the trek up from Mexico and some of the Spanish soldiers were marrying local American Indians, the *Alta California* frontier was still primarily male-dominated. Coupled with these population constraints, *Alta California* was not self-sufficient. They were very much dependent on older, and more established, portions of the colonies of New Spain for essential supplies. Although some of the settlements, such as mission San Gabriel, had shown remarkable success at growing crops and raising livestock, *Alta California* was still a long way from self-sufficiency. Annual supply shipments from Mexico were an essential part of life in *Alta California*. After two and a half centuries of Spanish rule, less than 170 Spaniards called *Alta California* home by the end of 1774.

Living on the frontier, Juan Bautista de Anza was familiar with the challenges of life on the edge of an empire. Born in about 1736 near the presidio at Fronteras on the Sonoran frontier, he knew the important role the Spanish military outposts played in helping to protect civilians living in remote areas. Although Spain had established a significant presence in northern Sonora over a century before Anza's birth, the deserts to the north and conflicts with the indigenous tribes in the area made further northward settlement difficult and dangerous. Anza's father had been an early advocate for creating a land route to *Alta California*, but he died at the hands of the Apaches when Anza was about three. Anza followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a military officer. He quickly rose as a member of the Spanish military establishment, entering the militia as a volunteer at the age of 16. By the time he was 20, he was a Lieutenant in the cavalry, and at 24, he was Captain at the Presidio of Tubac. He became quite familiar with the area along the northern frontier, the indigenous tribes that lived there, and the challenges that needed to be faced when trying to cross it. When the time eventually came to seek out a route across the deserts to bring colonists to California, Anza was well positioned to lead the expedition.

With the permission of the Spanish Viceroy in Mexico City, Anza organized and paid for an exploratory trip to see if an overland passage would actually be possible. In 1774, he successfully traveled a route from the presidio at Tubac across the Sonoran Desert to the Colorado River with a small group of soldiers, priests, and translators and a native of *Baja California* named Sebastián Tarabal. Along the way, he established what would develop into a long lasting



A clean-shaven Juan Bautista de Anza  
Graphic: David Rickman



The route of Anza's second expedition (1775-1776) to *Alta California*.

Graphic: NPS

relationship with Chief Palma of the Quechan people at Yuma, creating the framework for support that would prove crucial for the second expedition. After a failed attempt to cross the desert through the Imperial Sand Dunes, he successfully navigated a southern route through the desert.

Making his way through the Santa Rosa Mountains, he arrived at the newly created mission in San Gabriel, showing the feasibility of his plan. With his small band of soldiers, he rode to the Presidio at Monterey to become better acquainted with the route for the ultimate colonizing expedition. On his return to Mexico City, he scouted the Gila River area, an important corridor if thirsty cattle and a large group of colonists were to be brought to *Alta California*.

Once he knew the route was possible, he sought permission from the Viceroy for an overland expedition accompanied by families. After permission was granted from *Viceroy Don Antonio María Bucarelli y Ursúa*, he began the task of assembling the families to settle in the San Francisco Bay Area. Seven presidios in what is now Sonora, Mexico each offered a soldier to establish the new garrison at San Francisco. All were told to bring their wives and children. More were recruited and trained as soldiers by Anza. Beginning in Culiacán, Sinaloa, Anza swept north in the spring of 1775 recruiting a total of 30 families to take part in the expedition. They came from many settlements, as well as from a variety of backgrounds. Some were descendants of families from Europe, descendants of Spaniards who had immigrated to the New World. Most had ancestors who were indigenous people of Mexico, or were the descendants of the African slaves who had been brought to work in New Spain. In short, they were a diverse assemblage of Spanish citizens, subjects of the kingdom of Spain living in Sinaloa and Sonora in the later half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They were a mixture of races and cultures, and their ancestors had lived in New Spain for over 250 years.

According to a letter written by Anza to Viceroy Don Antonio María Bucareli y Ursúa on October 20, 1775, two babies were born along the trail between Culiacán and Tubac. In Anza's roster of the same date, at least six children were under six months of age. Some must have been born in Horcasitas, while others must have been born en route to the final staging area at Tubac. Aside from the soldiers and colonists, additional people were hired as muleteers (to pack the mules) and *vaqueros* (cowboys).

While an exact count of the people on the expedition is still under debate, we can say that of the 200 or so colonists that set out from Tubac, about 40 were men, about 40 were women, and about 120 were children. For example, Señora Gertrudis Duarte had joined the expedition with her three children at the mining town of Álamos, wanting to be united with her husband,



The composition of the Anza expedition with soldiers, families, pack mules, and cattle.

Graphic: Bill Singleton

corporal Alexo Duarte, who was already serving in the Spanish army at Mission *San Antonio* in *Alta California*. Another woman, Feliciano Arballo, was a widow, about 25 years old, with a four-year-old daughter and a month old baby; her husband, José Gutiérrez, had died in an Indian attack a month or so before the expedition left. In all ways, this was a journey of families.

We cannot be sure what motivated the colonists to join the expedition, but we do know they were volunteers. New laws enacted in 1772 made it possible for men who joined the army to gain title to land and other benefits. The people who found the opportunity most attractive generally belonged to the frontier's lower and middle economic groups. Anza wrote that he started his

recruitment in the poorer part of New Spain, in Culiacán. Most settlers had backgrounds in ranching and farming, and many had some knowledge of mining. Some may have been poor and others were not, but all came because it offered a chance to better their lives.

When the expedition finally gathered at Tubac in the Fall of 1775, nearly 300 soldiers, vaqueros, tradesmen, women, children, and priests assembled to begin the trek that would take them to their new home. Almost 200 of these travelers would eventually make their permanent home in *Alta California*. In his diary for October 23, 1775, Juan Bautista de Anza writes, “All the foregoing having been arranged and noted; Mass having been chanted with all the solemnity possible on the Sunday preceding for the purpose of invoking the divine aid in this expedition, all its members being present; and the *Most Holy Virgin of Guadalupe*, under the advocacy of her Immaculate Conception, the Prince Señor *San Miguel*, and *San Francisco de Assís* having been named as its protectors, at eleven today the march was begun toward the north.”

The expedition was like a moving city of humanity making its way across the desert. The normal functions of life did not stop as the expedition headed west. Clothes were washed, children were born. On the first night out, the group suffered its only death en route when María Ignacia Manuela Piñuelas Féliz died from complications after childbirth. Her son, José, lived and made it to California, as did her husband, Vicente, three other sons and three daughters. Later in the journey, two other mothers gave birth to healthy babies. Although the expedition averaged about fifteen miles a day, Anza did allow extra time for rests during periods of sickness and after births. But even then, the families needed to tend to, and care for, the nearly 1000 horses, mules and cattle that accompanied them along the way. They needed to be fed, clothes had to be mended, and water and firewood sought.

For their spiritual needs, they turned to the expedition’s priest, Father Pedro Font, who was assigned to give daily services and moral guidance. Using a quadrant, he also took readings of the altitude of the sun that allowed him to calculate the latitude of many of the places on the journey. Font, as well as Anza, also filled the role as trip journalist. They took time out daily to keep diaries documenting their progress, spiritual dilemmas, and interaction with the many indigenous tribes they encountered along the way. These journals paint a picture — albeit through their eyes — of life on the frontier that captures the images of Arizona and California as they were explored and as new cultures were contacted. The expedition provided new challenges daily, but life on the Spanish frontier had prepared them.



Chief Palma and the Quechan tribe ensured the safety of the expedition as they crossed the Colorado River at Yuma.

Graphic: Wade Cox

Often using the major river ways as travel corridors, the expedition slowly made its way to the ultimate destination in Monterey. Using the Santa Cruz and *Gila* Rivers as guides across the Arizona desert, they reached the Colorado River where they were supported by *Chief Salvador Palma* and his tribe. His people helped the expedition cross the river where they were forced to make the difficult trek across the Colorado Desert. Slowly but surely, they worked their way across the desert, through the canyons covered with a layer of winter snow, and up over the mountains to the *San Gabriel* Mission. From this point north, they followed the path that would eventually become the *El Camino Real* and link all of the missions. With stops at the *San Luis Obispo de Tolosa* and *San Antonio de Padua* Missions, the group finally came to rest at the *Monterey Presidio* on March 10, 1776, six months after they had left Tubac.

As the expedition rested and became acquainted with Monterey, Anza set off to determine the location of the new San Francisco presidio and mission. Joined by Font, Lieutenant José Joaquín Moraga, and a small group of soldiers, they traveled to San Francisco and surveyed the area. He quickly determined the best sites for the presidio and mission and left San Francisco to explore the East Bay. Directed by the *Viceroy* to determine if there was a river flowing into the bay, they followed the shoreline south to the tip of the bay (now Alviso, north of San José) and then up the eastern shore. Arriving at Carquinez Strait, they continued east along the shoreline, unable to determine whether there was indeed a river flowing into the bay. As his men became increasingly bogged down in the tules, Anza abandoned the quest and headed south, to return to Monterey. From there, Font, Anza and ten of his core soldiers from Tubac, and one dissatisfied couple, made their way back to Mexico along the trail. Anza left Moraga in charge of the expedition.



A depiction of Lt. José Joaquín Moraga  
Graphic: David Rickman

In June, the settlers moved from Monterey to San Francisco. Aided by members of the supply ship, *San Carlos*, they built the beginnings of the presidio (for protection) and began construction of the first simple structures that would become the *Misión de San Francisco de Asís* (Mission Dolores). Shortly after the expedition reached San Francisco, several of the expedition's women gave birth. Within a year, some families moved south to establish the settlement and missions in San José and Santa Clara. The Anza Trail effectively doubled the Spanish population of *Alta California* in 1776.

The next major movement of colonists along the trail occurred in 1781 with the establishment of the new pueblo of Los Angeles by Capitán Fernando de Rivera y Moncada. With the route having only been opened for five years, this expedition would be the final major Spanish migration along the Anza Trail. The goodwill that Anza had built up with Chief Palma and the Quechan at Yuma dissolved quickly during Anza's absence. Anger over a variety of issues led to open hostility between the *Quechan* people and the Spanish citizens living at the mission that had been built at Yuma. With the deaths of a number of the soldiers and priests at Yuma in 1781, Spain would never again use the Anza Trail as a means of bringing colonists and

livestock to *Alta California*. But by this point, with the added people from the Anza Expedition and Capitán Rivera y Moncada's group helping to build and establish the growing number of presidios, missions, and pueblos, the main goal of the Anza Trail had been achieved. The trail succeeded in bringing a sufficient number of settlers to *Alta California* to provide the resources necessary to firmly establish a Spanish foothold on the edge of the empire.

### Like Lewis and Clark or Very Different ?

Some people have compared the Anza Expedition to the Corps of Discovery journey led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark for the American government. They really were quite different expeditions. While these American explorers made their journey from St. Louis, along the Missouri River and over the Rocky Mountains, to Oregon and the Pacific Ocean, they did so some thirty years after Anza, and they did not take over 240 colonists (including families, women and children), 695 horses and mules, and 355 head of cattle with them.

Convincing his government, his church, his people and native peoples he met along the way, Anza accomplished one of the great pioneer treks to the Pacific Coast. Keep in mind that Anza's expedition left Tubac eleven months before America's founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence. If upon their return from exploring the Pacific Coast, Lewis and Clark had organized a military colony of hundreds of people in St. Louis and led them back across the Plains and Rockies to hold the mouth of the Columbia River against the Russian and English empires, then they would have accomplished a feat comparable to Anza's.

### After the Anza Expeditions

On his return, Anza took Chief Palma and three other Quechan Indians (together with an interpreter of Yuma) to Mexico City where they were baptized on February 13, 1777. While there, Anza was made commander of all the troops in Sonora and was assigned to the Presidio of *San Miguel de Horcasitas*. By 1778, he was Governor of New Mexico. In 1779, with over 600 men and several thousand horses, he led an expedition across present-day New Mexico and Colorado to engage the Comanches under the command of Chief Cuerno Verde. The campaign resulted in the chief's death, and that of several other head men. Anza later summoned all the remaining Comanche and Utes chiefs to Santa Fé and negotiated the longest lasting peace treaty ever signed by the Comanches with any government (including Spain, Mexico, and the United States). This peace made it much easier for the U.S. to later settle its western frontier. Anza also led a successful expedition in 1780 to discover a route between Santa Fé, New Mexico, and Arizpe, Sonora. The uprising at Yuma in July of 1781 led to Anza being used as a scapegoat by several of his superiors, even though he had strongly recommended careful and fair treatment of the Quechan to prevent such a diplomatic failure. Under pressure to resign as governor, he asked the King of Spain to be re-assigned, and, in the Fall of 1788, he was appointed commander of the Presidio of Tucson. Unfortunately, he did not serve in that post for long; traveling to Arizpe, he died suddenly on December 19, 1788, and is buried there in the cathedral.



Juan Bautista de Anza from an unsubstantiated French painting Bolton

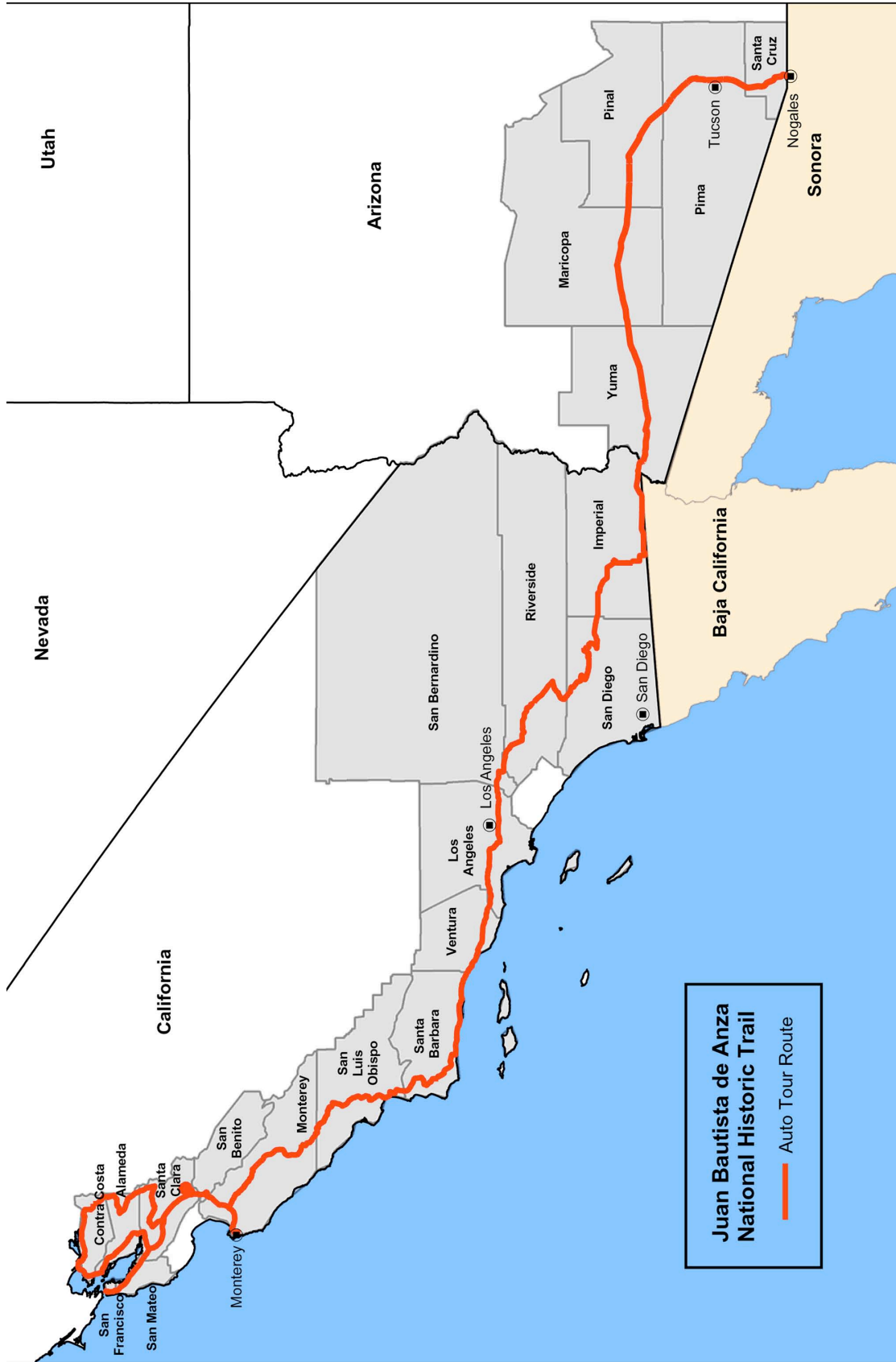
Meanwhile, back in *Alta California*, the presence of those brought to California on the Anza trail radically altered the course of Spanish colonization. Cut off to a large degree from the colonies to the south, the children and grandchildren of Anza's colonists created a unique culture and began to refer to themselves as "*Californios*." To this day, many of their descendants still refer to themselves as such. The Juan Baustista de Anza expeditions of 1774 and 1776 not only fundamentally changed the nature of California, they allowed for the founding of San Francisco and San José, and the beginning of eighty years of Spanish *Californio Rancho* culture.



Painted tiles at Monterey's Customs House Plaza near the Pacific House depicting the life of Anza's colonists during the Mexican Period.

Photo: Greg Smestad

Spanish rule in California yielded to Mexican rule in 1822. Mexico gained its independence in 1821, and the mission lands were *secularized* (transferred to private ownership) during the years 1834-1836. Calls for independence from Mexico in the state of Texas led to tensions, and finally the Mexican-American war. In response, Commodore Sloat raised the American flag in Monterey, California, in July of 1846 claiming formal possession of *Alta California*. California has been in American hands ever since. In 1848, the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildalgo ended the Mexican-American War and promised to protect the rights of all of California's inhabitants. Gold was struck in 1848, nine days before the treaty was signed, and a flood of immigrants poured into California heralding a new age. A land commission was set up to prove ownership of the vast Spanish and Mexican land grants that encompassed California. Many of the Californios could not speak English, nor understand the legal and social customs of the "Yankees" that came from the east hungry for land. Many lost their land to speculators, lawyers or squatters. Like it had when the Spanish arrived in California in 1769, a cultural upheaval had again taken place in *Alta California*. The tide of immigrants to California and Arizona has continued to this day, adding layer upon layer of people, culture and technology to these places. Now, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is fitting to look back to the roots of these states, and the west, to try to gain an appreciation about the lessons that can be drawn from those early days.



Graphics: NPS