CALIFORNIA'S FRIENDLY COAST

Susan C. Dimitriou
Environmental Geology Program
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California 90007

Today, the area between Point Mugu and Point Conception is valued for its uncluttered beauty, fertile soil, historical heritage and the long expanse of coastline. Although man's effect on the land and shore is apparent, there still exists a feeling of openness and beauty to be appreciated by those who see it. The history of this region is unique because of these particular qualities of the land which were appreciated by its first observers.

In 1542, fifty years after Columbus left Spain for America, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo sailed up the coast of California noting descriptions of land and people as he went. When he reached the land between Ventura and Point Conception, his journals note a dense Indian civilization. He described the people as smiling and friendly with some type of political structure. The men of the tribes were good fishermen and canoers and they were adorned with shells and bones. Cabrillo was amazed at their great canoes which were caulked with asphaltum and carried up to five people. The queen of one village came on board Cabrillo's ship for two days as a gesture of good will. Women of the tribes were semi-clothed and the huts were arranged in small groupings. These descriptions indicate the Indians of this area were far more advanced than any other place in California. Other Indian groups were hostile and aloof and their living situations were much cruder.

Cabrillo explored the Channel Islands as well, and when he was returning to the mainland, storms lashed his ships about and he broke his arm. He tried to continue northward, but again, gale winds sent the ships to seek refuge at Gaviota Beach. Cabrillo soon died of his injuries and his men buried him in an unmarked grave on San Miguel Island. They then continued their voyage north along the coast.

There were other explorations sent to this area after Cabrillo, but the records of their voyages have been lost. The next recorded expedition was in 1602 by Don Sebastian Vizcaino who was sent on a sea expedition to locate a northern harbor for the Spanish fleet. On December 4th, he entered the channel between the offshore islands and mainland naming it for Santa Barbara whose name day it was. Strong winds made shore landing difficult, so Vizcaino only described the coastline. He noted many rivers and a great greeness to the area.

By 1769, Spain had launched an extensive expedition to explore and settle Alta California. Gaspar de Portola led the overland expedition from Baja California to San Diego Bay. There one of the priests in his group, Father Junipero Serra, decided to start the first mission. Portola continued his journey northward, accompanied by his band of soldiers, Indians and priests. One of the priests, Father Juan Crespi kept a diary of the trip, recording the route, description of the area and lifestyles of the Indians.

From Father Crespi's writings, the route of the exploration party is easily outlined. They traveled north along the shore until they reached the area near San Juan Capistrano. From there they turned northeast through Santa Ana and continued along the foothills northwest to San Gabriel. Their route then went north over what is now Sepulveda Pass through the San Fernando Valley to Newhall and Castaic.

© AAPG Pacific Section, 2009 - Santa Barbara Channel Region Revisited (1973)