RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Juan Bodega Story, Chapter 3, Heading North Into the Unknown

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It's March 1775, and Lieutenant Juan Francisco Bodega y Quadra of the Spanish Navy has taken command of the schooner Sonora, as it accompanies the much larger ships, the Santiago and the San Carlos, northward from San Blas, New Spain (now, Mexico).

San Blas was a relatively new and rudimentary port on the Pacific Ocean. It was located south of Baja California and 195 miles north-west of Guadalajara, at 21˚ 32' N latitude. The ships' orders were to drop off the San Carlos, with its supplies and personnel, at Monterey, and the Santiago and the Sonora were continue up the northwest coast to the 65th parallel, to Alaska and the Bering Sea, looking for evidence of Russian incursion into Spanish territory, and making a landing to plant a cross and officially claim the land for Spain.

The Santiago was the largest ship built in the shipyard of San Blas. Its first journey up the Pacific northwest coast in 1774 under the command of Juan Perez was successful in that the ship and sailors made it up to Queen Charlotte Island (52˚ 39' N) and back, but unsuccessful in its primary mission of enacting a ceremony of possession-taking. It had not approached the coast for fear of crashing, so there was little exploration.

Earlier Spanish explorers had only made their way as far north as San Diego in 1542 (Carillon) and Monterey in 1602 (Vizcaino). The 1775 expedition promised to broadened the Spanish knowledge and understanding of the vast territory that it claimed as its own.

Since the Santiago was so large, and thus difficult to bring in close to land, the much smaller Sonora was added to the second northward expedition as an escort vessel because it could more easily get close to shore.

The expedition set off on March 16, with Juan Bodega initially as second-in-command of the Sonora, but after Manrique, the captain of the San Carlos, had a nervous breakdown just days out of San Blas and was returned to port, Juan Bodega was elevated to the commander of the Sonora - his first command at sea!

It soon became apparent that the Sonora was not well suited to ocean sailing, being slower and less maneuverable at sea that expected. As a result, she delayed the expedition to the point of exasperation. Bruno Hezeta, the commander of the expedition and of the Santiago, ordered that the Santiago tow the Sonora, which slowed down the Santiago.

Despite adjusting the sails and the cargo, little improvement was made to the speed of the Sonora. To test the spirit of his crew, Juan Bodega put on as much sail as he dared, but "such was the fear that they felt ... that they pretended to have some ailment in order to be transferred to the frigate." The same fear of Sonora's inadequacies were shared by the crew of the Santiago; Hezeta threatened them with transfer to the Sonora as punishment for misdeeds.

Juan Bodega showed great kindness to his crew. He encouraged them to persist, giving them small presents and reminding them of the glory they would obtain on their return. During one heavy windstorm at night, when he had gone below to get some rest, he learned the mainsail had been lowered and reefed to slow down the ship. Annoyed, Bodega rushed up on deck and ordered the reef removed and the sail hoisted. He admonished his crew that the conditions would only get worse as they reached more northern latitudes, that they had to be brave, and he assured them that he was "their companion in their labours." This exhortation apparently did some good, and Bodega saw a new spirit in them, a desire to please him, and a resolve to follow him to any destiny whatever.

The journal of Father Miguel de la Campa tells the tedious tale of a journey at sea. Days of wind so slack that little progress was made; nights with winds so strong, that with the sailors' working of the ship and the heeling of the vessel, there was little sleep. Considering that Father Campa was on the 225 ton, 82 foot Santiago, and not on the 32 ton, 37 foot, Sonora, the sailing experience on the Sonora must have been felt so much more strongly!

"April 10. Most of the day we were becalmed, and the slight wind that did blow was northwest. We were at 17° 35'. At night the wind, though mild, was favourable and we made a good board, almost north." The ships initially headed south when they left La Paz, possibly because towing the Sonora threw them off course, and because Hezeta believed they would catch better northward winds farther out to sea.

"April 15. The wind freshened a good deal and although it blew us a little off our course we gained somewhat in latitude, to 18° 20'. Today the topmast showed signed of splitting in two places and it is now three pieces patched together. We lost headway in making repairs."

"April 21. The calm continued, with some cat's-paws which were hardly propitious. It was very cloudy, so observations could not be taken. At night there was a little wind and we made some progress." ["Cat's paws" is a nautical term for ripples on water caused by a light breeze or gust of wind. Sailors use the term to indicate that wind is about to blow.]

"May 5. The wind was even stronger, there was a rough sea. We were at 28° 36'. The wind continued but no longer so strong, nor was the sea so restless. At night the wind dropped, the sky filled with clouds, and in rained enough to hinder the sailors. Beginning today we have felt the cold keenly."

"May 11. The wind continued brisk and more favourable in the morning. We were at 32° 8'. In the afternoon the wind slackened, but at nightfall we had a somewhat brisk southeast blow. Today two men showed signed of scurvy. God grant that this adversity may not continue." [Scurvy is a disease caused by a severe lack of vitamin C. Common symptoms of scurvy are weakness, bleeding gums, and skin bruising.]

"May 13. A south wind arose, the first we have had on this voyage, but very mild. We therefore went on slowly but succeeded in gaining latitude and in getting nearer to land, which is very far from us. We are at 34° 7'."

"May 21. Dawn came with rain and at 8 a.m. a northeast wind blew on our bows. In order that we should not lose distance a few sails were set. We were at 37° 1'. The same wind continued, very cold."

Finally, by May 21, they ascended to a position parallel with Monterey, but well out to sea. Hezeta was ready to throw in the towel and have all of the ships go to Monterey, but Juan Bodega was steadfast in sticking to his orders to sail to 65° N. He wrote to Hezeta: "I am of the opinion that on no account should we put into Monterey. The reasons which compel me to hold this view are solely dictated by service to the King and the better fulfillment of our mission."

Juan Bodega lamented the arduous nature of the voyage, given the small size of the Sonora, its poor handling, and slow speed, but said it's too late now, he and his crew were resigned to their fate. He was relieved to find no water in the hold of the boat, and despite the rough sailing, there had been no accidents. He closed with: "In the final analysis, God encourages and aids great actions and when fortune is so adverse that nothing can be done about it, it is glory for posterity for each one to die doing his duty and [to die] for the King."

Swayed by Juan Bodega's passionate sense of duty, Hezeta sent the San Carlos off to Monterey, and the Santiago and Sonora continued northward.

Maps were a critical component to the success of early explorers. Some maps were created by cartographers half a world away, such as Jacques-Nicolas Bellin of France, who created his maps by meticulously compiling information from various sources like navigational journals, explorer accounts, missionary reports, and astronomical observations, prioritizing accuracy and functionality over decorative elements; he often referenced existing maps and then added new details based on the latest discoveries and expeditions.

Using a Bellin map, Juan Bodega believed he was close to land, and signs of land became visible by June 7. The Sonora ventured close to shore, seeking a good harbor, and finding one, on the 9th the two ships anchored in modern-day Trinidad Bay, California (41° 03' N).

The native Yurok peoples came out in canoes to greet the ships, and in a friendly manner, traded deer skins and sea otter pelts for knives, beads, and other small gifts, yet they seemed uninterested in European clothing.

Hezeta, together with officers, chaplains, and crew, landed and took possession of the harbor in the name of the Spanish Crown. It being June 11th, day of the Feast of the Holy Trinity, they named the bay "Trinidad". The traditional cross was placed on a prominent vantage point overlooking the bay, and Fathers Miguel de la Campa and Benito de la Serra chanted a hymn of gratitude. The cross was still there when George Vancouver came through many years later.

For the next ten days the Spaniards explored the harbor, carried out latitude and longitude observations, and mapped the region. They took on wood, water and fresh fruit, and made repairs to the Sonora in hopes of increasing her speed. The officers and chaplains took formal leave from the Yurok by paying one last visit to their village, and the ships set sail from Trinidad Bay, heading north, on June 19, 1775. ■