

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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California Island Was A Lop-sided Cornucopia

The romantic history of California – Cabrillo, Sir Francis Drake, Sebastian Vizcaino, the explorations of the Jesuit missionaries, the discovery of gold, the building of the Golden State to its present position in World affairs – all present a colorful panorama of events that thrill historians and students.

But we wonder how many are familiar with the fabulous stories of early California – the California of the period when it was an island? The study of old maps is a most fascinating hobby. Perhaps you have also found some which picture California as an island. If you have not, go to the Old Custom House in Monterey and see several framed maps on the walls there, which have been gifts to the Monterey History and Art Association, and are on display.

The story of the island days is a curious one. In 1533, after the expedition sent out by Cortes had discovered Baja California, manuscript maps called Portolan charts were made of their discoveries. Early mariners used to refer to us as “The Californias,” or “The Islands of California.” However, in 1597 in an atlas by Wytfliet, California appeared as a blunt, and foreshortened peninsula fading vaguely into “Terra Incognita” the unknown land, at a point a little north of San Diego.

The definite idea of California as an island originated in the mind of a Carmelite priest, Father Antonio De La Ascension, from the tale of the pilot, Morena, who had told his tale to Sir Francis Drake. Father Ascension, in 1620, had drawn a map picturing his idea of the geography and sent it back to his headquarters in Spain.

On the long sea voyage the Spanish ship was overhauled and captured by Dutch pirates, and among other treasures taken was this chart. Strangely enough, the pirates thought it important and evidently carried it back to Amsterdam, then the center of the map-making world. Two years later an atlas was issued in Amsterdam with this printed chart showing California as an island.

Historians are sure that it must have been the stolen map of Father Ascension, due to the fact that certain names in Spanish appear here for the first time. One curious feature is that the name San Francisco is listed

as “Porto San Francisco Draco” – the word Draco being a weird blending of an unknown language.

The island of California was shaped like a lop-sided cornucopia, the wide end being in the north. The islands of Catalina and San Clemente are well marked and accurately drawn as is the Canal de Santa Barbara. And then just above San Francisco the island is bluntly ended. Between California and the main land a sea dotted with islands occupies the space which is now Arizona. The long, narrow sea was called “Mare Vermejo” the Vermillion Sea and retained that name as long as any sea was pictured.

In 1626, John Speed, who was probably the greatest of all English map makers copied the Dutch map. He located Plymouth with accuracy and outlines Sandy Hook perfectly, but by far the most outstanding feature of our American continent is the huge and top heavy Island of California.

This fabulous island was reported to be barren, craggy and literally strewn with gold and precious jewels. Upon it dwelt an amazing race of Amazons of whom the fairest and strongest was their queen, Calafia. These women were alleged to be tall, handsome, and extremely undomestic. As a hobby, they captured and raised griffins – great feathered birds, with blunt, ferocious beaks – which they rode in the manner of the Valkyries into battle.

Another of their curious customs, according to storied which have been written since the making of the maps, is related to the destruction of men, which we will relate tomorrow.