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Don Jose Bandini Was There

Friends of the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley have this year sponsored their third publication, Jose Bandini's "Description of California in 1828." This keepsake, limited to an edition of 400 copies, is being distributed to members only. The edition is beautifully printed and bound and is an important contribution to the literature of California. George L. Harding is the chairman of the committee from the members of the "Friends," who are responsible for the gift book.

Doris Marian Wright of the Bancroft Library staff is the editor of the edition and she is the author of the introduction. Two portraits add to the interest of the book. The frontispiece is a copy of an early painting of Don Jose Bandini, loaned for reproduction by the Los Angeles Public Library and the second is a likeness of Dona Ysidora Blancas de Bandini.

Half of the edition is an English translation of the Spanish version of Bandini's "Description of California in the Early 1800s" and the second half is in the original Spanish language, just as this Spanish sea captain wrote it. There are notes, a glossary of Spanish words and an index at the back of the book – all of which adds greatly to its value.

When Bandini landed in California sometime in the 1820s after retiring from the sea, he decided to make his home in the little village of San Diego. From there he surveyed the region with a careful eye and noted down what he observed. "Historians today may write of that decade with greater accuracy and far less bias, but they cannot possibly say, as Bandini could, 'I was there'," notes Doris Marian Wright in her introduction.

He saw the land so new that its name was still in doubt; some people called it New California, others Upper California, and a few others referred to it as New Albion. The boundaries had not been established, and the rich natural resources of this Mexican output – such as gold, silver, etc. – had not been found or developed when Bandini wrote his impressions. It would be still another twenty years even before the Gold Rush came upon the quietness of this great west coast.

Bandini discussed in detail many of the understanding [?] features of his new home and country. He described

the pueblos and presidios; the missions, the mountains and lakes and the great Tulares – the tule covered plains; the inhabitants, in particular the Indians with their strange and wonderful customs; and a great many other things of interest to any reader. He wrote: "Since nature had been so lavish with her gifts, only hard work was needed to make the region amount to something. But unfortunately, industry is unknown in California."

Bandini believed that the government should do more to encourage settlers, so that towns would develop, but his greatest concern was with the sea trade, naturally because of his seafaring background. It seemed to him to be in obvious and urgent need of reform. More commercial vessels, he explained, visited California for the sole purpose of collecting hides and tallow. If the captains and the supercargoes knew what they were about, they did not attempt to buy these products with money. Instead, they brought with them a variety of articles wanted by the Californians – such as dress materials, agricultural equipment, and a thousand other things required for the aid and comfort of the frontier settlers.

These goods could be traded mostly through the missions up and down the coast of California, but mostly only for the hides and tallow which was the country's chief product and principal export. The Russians bought most of the wheat for use in their settlement at the north. It worried Bandini according to the report he wrote, that the Mexican government had placed so many unwise regulations upon the territory. He feared that "vessels would stop coming to these coasts; supplies needed by the residents would no longer be brought in; the people would sink back into apathy and indigence; and foreigners, who were the only ones with any business ability, would move away. Reforms must be introduced, or California would be ruined."