

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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California's Place Names

Many of the place names in California can be traced to Spanish grants. There are or were 666 Spanish and Mexican land grants in what is now the State of California. Many of the California Indian names were preserved in the titles of these grants, according to a valuable little book published by the University Press and bearing the title "1,000 California Place Names." The paper-bound book contains the story behind the naming of the important mountains, countries, rivers, cities, lakes, capes, and bays in California. Erwin G. Gudde is the author of the book published about 1950.

The very first listing in the book is Abalone, (ab-a-loh-nee). The name of a very large California mollusk valuable for its meat and its shells is given to a number of points, rocks, and coves along the coast

The first name listed applying to Monterey County is Aromas. The name is derived from the name of the land grant Aromitas y Agua Caliente (little odors and warm water). The aromas or aromitas referred to the odors of sulphur water.

Asilomar, (a-see-lo-mar). The artificial name coined from the Spanish asilo (refuge) and mar (sea) was given by the national board of the YMCA in 1913.

Big Sur River, (soor). From the Spanish Rio Grande del Sur, (big river of the south), of Monterey.

California, California like El Dorado Quivira, and the Seven Cities of Cibola, was the name of one of the utopias which originated in the imagination of the people after the discovery of America had revived the age old dream of a paradise on earth. The mystical realm was apparently created by the Spanish writer Montalvo in the romance "Las Sergas de Esplandian" (The Exploits of Esplandian) and endowed with beautiful black Amazons and gold and pearls. The name is a fanciful creation; none of the many explanations of the meaning of California can be substantiated. Golfo de la California and Cabo California appear on the maps of 1562. In 1569 the name was applied to the peninsula of what is now lower California: on later maps it often was extended to include the entire Pacific Coast. From 1769 to 1846 the area which is approximately included in the present state was termed Alta (upper) California and Nueva (new) California.

Carmel is Included in the book. It is pronounced Kar-mel. The river was discovered by Vizcaino on Jan. 3, 1603 and called Rio del Carmelo, probably because three friars of the Carmelite order were with the expedition. The Bay also was named in Spanish times; Mt. Carmel was named by the Coast Survey in 1856; the modern Carmel-by-the-Sea was so called to distinguish it from Carmel Valley which was some 10 miles inland. The Spanish spelling was used until the 1860's.

Chalone was named for an Indian tribe which lived east of Soledad Mission. The name is mentioned in 1816 as Clerro Chalon and is on the map as of the San Lorenzo land grant.

Chaparral, shap-a-ral. The original Spanish word for a thick growth of scrub oak. In California the name applies to dense, sometimes impenetrable thickets of shrubs covering the hillsides and appears in many geographical terms.

Chopines Creek, choo-pee-nes. A place named Chopines was recorded in 1828 and an Arroyo de Los Chopines in 1834. Probably from the Mexican chopo (black cottonwood) a native tree of that region.

Del Monte, del mon-tee. The name, meaning "of the grove" first was applied to the Hotel in 1886, suggested probably by the beautiful grove of trees nearby.

Gabilan Range. The mountain named for the Spanish gavilan (sparrow hawk) and has been known by that name since 1828. Gabilan Peak is popularly known as Fremont Peak because Fremont defied the Mexicans by raising the American Flag there in 1846.

Gonzales. The railroad station was named in 1873 by Teodoro Gonzales because it was built in his extensive grant.

Jolon (ho-lohn). The place, probably a Salinan Indian rancheria, was recorded in the early 1800's. The name was applied to the post office about 1860.

King City. The station was named, by the Southern Pacific in 1886, for C. H. King, owner of the Rancho San Lorenzo.

Monterey. The bay was named in 1602 by Vizcaino in honor of the Count of Monterrey, then viceroy of New Spain. The town developed around the Presidio established by Portola in 1770, the first Spanish military establishment in California. The county was created and named in 1850.

Mesa (may-sa). The Spanish word for a fiat-topped Hill is generally used in the American Southwest but it has not replaced the corresponding English word "table hill." There are more than 20 mesas in the state together with a number of towns so named.