The Letters Of Jacob Baegert, September 11, 1752
Jacob Baegert
Travels From Mexico City to Baja California

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"The Letters of Jacob Baegert, 1749 - 1761: Jesuit missionary in Baja California"
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Now, coming back to my plans. On the 16th of November [ sic] 1750, I departed from Mexico City in the company of seven German Fathers, one Mexican and one Spaniard; everybody on horseback, or better to say, everybody on a mule. [66] We had twenty of these animals to carry the luggage, others for changing; Indians and others as servants - all together twelve.

On the 19th of December I arrived in Guadalajara; on the 17th of January 1751 at Tepic, not far from the blue ocean; on the 29th at Rosario under the tropic; on the 26th of February at Culiacan; on the 8th of March at Sinaloa; on the 19th at the settlement called Los Alamos or Los Frayles; on the 28th at Tórim, a mission on the river Yaqui, situated some miles inland from the Sea of California. [67]

With the word "river," I mean here and in the future that which the Latin-speaking people understand by the word "torrens." All rivers which I have crossed have hardly any water when it did not rain for a long time, so we could ride through them very easily. They cannot carry boats; they have no river beds; they flow where they want, worse and more crooked than the river Giessen by Schlettstadt,

From Tórim I crossed the Red Sea on the 7th of May and arrived on the 9th in California at Loreto under the 26th latitude. |118| I traveled like a soldier, i.e., four, five or six hours a day. But I really made eight to ten hours in order to reach an inn, which means water for man and animal. On a long journey and with bad food one has to be careful with the animals, but, at the same time one cannot leave the necessary luggage behind.

Behold, what wonderful straight roads! Within a half of a quarter of an hour one has to go often in three different directions! Under these conditions the entire trip amounts to five hundred hours.

With the exception of the above-mentioned towns and some other places, at the beginning of our journey we always camped under two tents, sleeping on our mattresses. Later on, after Tepic, we wanted to be more safe from crawling vermin, scorpions, and snakes, so everybody slept under his own netting, which was stretched and hung up with sticks around the mattresses and tucked underneath it.

Here and there we stayed several days because the Spaniards, clerics, and others showed us hospitality for the sake of God's grace, in contrast to their custom in Europe. They feel honored when one puts up with them and are happy to see Europeans. And besides that, it does not cost much for them as it is in a country were everything is cheap. The entire country, especially from Leon on, is a veritable desert, as you can notice from what was said above, so little is taken from nothing. It is full of mountains but without forests because of the lack of water, for it rains only in July and August, and also in September, but very sparsely, and farther toward the north the less. That is why you see, except in the tropics, no high and thick trees. Also, outside the tropics from Mexico City on, the vegetation is very thin, but more shrubs and bushes than forests, with the exception in higher and farther away mountains.

Beyond Rosario one sees a lot of ebony and Brazilian wood. |119 Several times we cooked our meals with it. Both are not very high - as mentioned - and they do not have one round stem, but the stem is braided out of many.

I did not see any cedar trees. There are many in the area of Sinaloa. The Father missionary of Margarita has roofed his new church with it. [68] From Tepic on it is the only one made of stone and lime. The cedar wood is very copper colored and has a good fragrance. Here and there one sees palm trees but not of that species which bears coconuts. Once or twice I saw a tree that can form a whole forest, for out of its branches grow little stems which form roots and become trees. I also saw as far as Culiacán bitter oranges in different species in the forests growing under shrubs.

The other wood [in this region] is not worth a pipe of tobacco and-God forbid-that which I saw is hardly a shadow of an Illwald or Hagenauer Forest. The dear water, the rain, is lacking.

All farm land from Mexico City to Yaqui is not more than one hour's way to walk; all running and standing water is not more than half the river Rhine; and Yaqui is at least four hundred hours away from Mexico City. Several times we had to carry with us water for our night camp; another time we had - as already mentioned - to ride twice as long in order to reach water. Once it was so salty and dirty that even the animals did not want to drink it; another time it was so black even though it came from a well which was the only one on our entire journey from Guadalajara. We purified the water with a certain plant and the mud sank to the ground. Several times we drank out of a hole which we dug in a waterless riverbed - |120| as mentioned before. This kind of waterhole provides the entire supply of water which they have in the mission of Loreto in California.

Very, very often we were urged to take water from a hole in a rock one and a half yards wide. It had remained there from the last year's rain to comfort the travelers and vermin, as well as all the animals of the field and the wild asses in this locale, but at least it was drinkable when it was fresh. To travel a greater distance on from Yaqui, one can only go in a caravan during the rainy season or soon afterwards.

Our meal usually consists of sun-dried beef, beans, and ground corn. Little cakes baked on an iron are the only daily bread in the entire Mexican district. Also in one of the other colleges an addition of wheat bread, which is worth its money, is served.

One gets used to everything. Several times I left bread alone and ate what the Spaniards called tortillas, not because I liked them better, but because they are agreeable to eat. I have them in my mission, though I could have bread. However, I do not want to take the trouble for this one item. In the future I will take care to have some wheat. That is a better plant than corn and the proper food for man. Also the mentioned little cakes are better made of wheat than of corn, especially if you add shortening. The so - called tamales are miserable grub. They are made of corn which is moistened, grated, caked together - as an unthreshed corn. This way they are eaten, wrapped in corn leaves. This I ate some ten days on my journey but only out of emergency. I was lucky that the "fat Thursday" fell into this time period. [69]

The weather is very different; warm or fresh, or even cold, depending on morning or night. As soon as the dear sun has risen two yards above the horizon, it is warm all over, and it does not matter if it is Christmas or Ash Wednesday. The only |121| day when I had to put on gloves because of coldness was the 16th of December near Guadalajara. I perspired most during the entire trip on the day of the Holy Three Kings when I climbed a high mountain and that for a while on foot because of the precipice. The roads, as I described them in my letter from Mexico City, are as they were from the time when God created heaven and earth.

Guadalajara is a Spanish town, as you can easily tell. It is the best after Mexico City and Puebla de Los Angeles. Besides these and Queretaro - about forty hours away from Mexico ­ you find buildings only one-floor high made of unburnt bricks. The corridors and floors in the houses are one with the fields. In the houses there is one window for the daylight and several wooden sticks are in front of it as a protection against thieves and murderers, but not against bats, which I saw and heard in bright daylight in churches and houses. One does not see anything better; the poverty must be generally great. The whole country, apart from gold and silver mines, has nothing that can attract. The main reason is the immense lack of water. The local mestizos surely do not owe thanks to their grandparents. Notwithstanding, I could not wonder enough about the show-off of the womenfolk, especially when we came to Culiacan at the time of Lent and saw the women going to confession. We hardly saw such a show-off in Mexico City, not to mention in Alsace, for there I noticed them dressed in velvet or in a gold material. On the other hand thousands and thousands of horses and cows roam incomparably better off in Alsace than these big-headed children of Adam, who are a hundred times as poor.

Talking about dresses, I have to report something about the clothes worn by some clerics whom we met. One Sunday one received us and walked with us through the village in the following outfit: yellow stockings, brown knickerbockers, a |122| white vest, a sash of red silk, brown coat, a slouched hat with a green ribbon woven with a golden thread. This is not close to the chapter about the life and honesty of the clergy, but it is the rural custom.

I will not say anything in this part of the letter about the Indians on the other side of the Sea of California, partly because they are much the same as the Californians, of which I will relate later on, and partly because there is not much to say about them. They are just black-brown people walking around naked, barefoot, without a beard. They do not wear pants nor hats; they sleep on the ground under the open sky; they devour snakes and other vermin; live without household, law and order, without any economy; and I almost could say without reason, A lot of this has to be blamed on the country­ the part I saw in which an orderly civilized life, as I thought and hoped for, cannot be introduced to them. However, if this thing is missing, one will find in this vast whirlpool a few areas where one could sow enough to support five, four, or even three hundred Indians. Then they could live together all year around or at least in a periphery of two hours and not be forced to wander together as the deer to look for their wildlife food.

Therefore, I think a thousand times, "O Altitudo," and cannot talk myself into believing that these countries are for people because it is not possible to live a human life in California, even though the scripture says, to be sure, "You will save the people and the beasts of burden," but the consequences are even more.

In Guadalajara in the cathedral I witnessed the following: when they opened the coffins of their former bishops, their holy green hats, fastened to the ceiling beams with cords, moved strongly. Some four hours [northwest] from Guadalajara is a high mountain of black transparent stones as the glass of certain black bottles. |123|

In all the rivers - mentioned above - one finds crocodiles in spite of the little water. The Spaniards call them cayman. My Spanish-Latin dictionary says Cayman, "Laeertus piscis antrapophagus", and nothing else. However, my French-Spanish dictionary says crocodile, crocodillo Cayman. They look as I always imagined, but they are not twenty-four yards long as those in the river Nile. Some may have measured five yards. I saw them very close to the passage near a brook. They are huge water lizards, but the mouth is - according to the proportion ­ more pointed and deeper split, as I noticed on a dead one we found. And they are armed all over their entire body. Now and then they snap children when they go for a walk along the river bank. It is an ugly animal. Once I saw a turtle while walking around. Many Californians who live on the western shore catch them - one and a half yards long-in the ocean. Recently they brought me two shells. It is known as a delicate tidbit, if one knows how to prepare it.

There abound plenty of deer and rabbits, but more here in California than on the other side. The Indians from my and the neighboring mission kill yearly with their arrows five to six hundred deer. The deer live opposite my mission on an island in the Sea of California which has no sweetwater. They have in their belly the bezoar-stone as big as a little chicken egg. I do not know if it is actually that stone of which is written, etc.

On the 1st of January, a few hours during the night, a pack of wolves came rather close to our tents and made an awful howling. There is also a kind of fox, called coyotes, but quite a bit larger than in our country, which make music every night. Among their pack they have a tenor who distinguishes himself very obviously from the rest of the choir.

I discovered five species of poultry but not a single one that could be compared with birds I know from Europe. There are:

1) Parrots, and to be sure, some are quite green, just as big |124| as larks. They make, wherever they are, much noise and they fly in flocks like starlings, but they are too stupid to talk. Those which do it are the big ones with a half-red tail. I met them only in one place; the others, however, more often. Both love areas where it always looks kindly, green and shady. That is why we do not find them in California where you do not find things like that.

2) Birds rosy-red all over, big as our geese. [70] They live near small lakes and ponds. They also cannot be found in California.

3) We found quails, as big as field chickens, blood-red. They are called here, as in Europe, Cardinal.

4) A species of birds which I did not see, but I heard them. When they start with 'their shouting, they form two choirs: one begins to sing when the other stops. That is why I call them "Canónicos" (roundsong singers). [71] However, they sing their evening songs with more breath than many of these gentlemen singers do.

5) Some birds of different color, approximately as big as our Maybugs (cockchafer). [72] After many tries I caught one and found out that the body is hardly as big as a hazelnut when the animal is plucked.

There are enough vermin, especially bats, which in many places bleed horses and mules and bite them bloody. One also finds them by the dozen in the houses of the missions. I am a special fan of them, as is known.

Scorpions are up to half a span long; some are red, others are brown, others greenish, and so on. In some areas their stings are very dangerous and soon bring death; not so in other areas. Many a time I killed several around me in my room. One cannot 125| not see where they have stung with their desperate tails. On our journey we found a woman, badly stung, who was left behind dead.

The tarantula is a fine animal. They are black or brown spiders and hairy as caterpillars. Not long ago I killed a little black one in the room. Some measure half a span and more in diameter.

You find here centipedes; that is how they are called, but the name is not appropriate for they are like our caterpillars, but flatter and without hairs. Some are one span long and proportionally thick. I caught one here in my bed. Another very big one I shook off not long ago at night when I sat at my table. These two latter ones are supposed to be poisonous and their stings deadly. These desperate animals climb into doors and windows from the fields.

There are snakes here, big ones and small ones completely fire-red, half-green, yellow, and black ones. In riding by I stepped on one. It was as thick as two fists and three yards long.

In certain areas the trees hang full of little bugs, garrapatas. [73] They creep into our ears and into the fur of animals. When there are a lot of them, many do what Ulysses did with his sailors." The land is deserted and impassable and without water. Really, a dreadful country in which all woods are full of thorns, but uncomparable more in California, of which it is now time to talk about.

I say uncomparable even though "Le grand dictionnaire geographique" of M. De Bruzen de la Martinière compares it with the most beautiful countries on earth, when he says, "il y a dans Californie comme le plus beaux pais du monde," "California |126| is the most beautiful country on earth," as we will see, it is certain that M. De Bruzen has never been in California."

The location of California can be seen on the new maps. Not to waste paper, I only say, it is proved by now that it is only a peninsula. It begins within the torrid zone and stretches out from southeast to northwest up to the 39th degree, where it bumps against the remaining North America. This has lately been explored by Father Fernando Consag in 1746 who went up to the Rio Colorado and with this did not leave any doubts about this discovery.

Up to the 30th degree, in a direct line, California is nowhere wider than sixteen hours. This is somewhat special and cannot be found on any other island or peninsula.

Referring to sunrise and sunset, in my opinion, the difference is nine hours in comparison to our homeland. This means when the clock of the Strasbourg cathedral strikes nine in the evening, I approximately have my lunch here. The longest day lasts fourteen hours.

In order to learn about the extraordinary nature of this country and to satisfy all those who are eager to know what kind of a country California is, and without being duped by some geographers or Father Piccolo, I, first of all, will give an exact and detailed definition which is partly foreknowledge, partly affirmed, and which says everything, though it consists only in differences because California can hardly be compared with any other European country since it has hardly any basic characteristics in common." [76] |127|

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Footnotes

[66] The month was December, not November.
[67] Tórim was situated on the northern bank of the Yaqui River not far inland from the port of Yaqui, from which Baegert no doubt embarked for Baja California. It was established as a pueblo as early as 1621 and became the rectorship for San Ignacio de Tórim. From May 174; to the expulsion Jose Lorenzo Garcia, S.J. (1713-1776) was the resident priest. Paul M. Roca, "Paths of the Padres Through Sonora" (Tucson, 1967), pp. 321-322, 422, note 45; Dunne, "Black Robes," p. 337.

[68] This would be San Miguel de Macoyahui, which was a substantial structure by 1678. Much of it still stands today, although only the walls and arches remain. It is certainly one of the largest mission churches in Sonora. Roca, "Paths of the Padres Through Sonora", pp. 332-333, which contains a 1960s photograph of the ruins.

[69] Fat Thursday" was a non-fast day.

[70] This would appear to be the Graza Colorado, a red water bird.

[71] Probably mocking birds.

[72] Hummingbirds.

[73] Ticks.

[74] Drown them!

[75] Antoine-Augustin Bruzen de la Martiniere (1662-1749) prepared and published "Le Grand Dictionnaire geograpbique, historique et critique" (La Haye, 1726-1730) in ten volumes. A six-volume edition was printed in Dijon in 1739. Pierre Larousse, "Grand Dictionnaire Universal du XIX Siecle" (17 vols., Paris, 1866-1890),10: 1285.

[76] Francisco María Piccolo (1654 - 1729), Italian-born, came as a Jesuit missionary to Baja California in 1697 ...