Rim Of Christendom: A Biography of Eusebio Francisco Kino - Pacific Coast Pioneer
Herbert Eugene Bolton

December 1684 - January 1685

Chapter 11 - First Across the Peninsula

|181|

LI - The River Of Santo Tomas

The expedition was made as planned, in spite of all handicaps and doubts. On December 14 the Almiranta weighed anchor and sailed for Mexico. On the same day Atondo and Kino rode to San Isidro, the rendezvous where men, provisions, horses, and mules were assembled. Next day the start was made.

It was an interesting company that marched northward that mid December day. Besides the Admiral, Father Kino, and Dr. Castro the surgeon, there were twenty-nine soldiers, two muleteers, and nine Christian Indians from the mainland, a total of forty-three persons. In addition there was a following of California natives to serve as guides. Kino with his astronomical instruments was prepared for his duty as cosmógrafo. He and Contreras were the principal interpreters. The soldiers wore cueras, or leather jackets - marvelous armor of bull hide. Each carried a shield, arquebus, a pound of powder, a hundred bullets, a hundred slugs and a calabash for a drinking cup - the cumbrous outfit of which the Admiral had complained.

There were five armored horses led "de diestro," in good medieval style, for Atondo had brought from San Lucas that many suits; of metal horse armor. There were thirty-two light-armored mounts in bull hide cueras, thirty pack mules loaded with provisions, two mules ridden by the arrieros, and twenty-two relay animals, a total of ninety-one mounts and sumpters. No wonder the natives fled when they saw such a cavalcade coming. In the packs there was a goodly supply of little wares, especially cowhide moccasins, called catles or cacles, to serve as presents for the Indians. [1]

[1] Atondo to the viceroy, December 13, 1684. Autos sobre Parajes, A.G.I. 1-1-2/31, Patronato 31. Atondo says there were eighty-one horses and mules, but the items total ninety-one.

|183|
As they passed through each village Kino and Atondo made a distribution of these gewgaws, and the guides were encouraged to broadcast a story of Spanish generosity. Nearly every day after camp was made, a squad of soldiers and Indian laborers were sent ahead to explore the road for the next day's march. Frequently the going was so bad that these pioneers had to spend hours, and sometimes an entire day, in opening a trail, cutting down trees, prying rocks out of the way with crowbars, filling holes, or leveling steep pitches. Often Kino, accompanied by two or more soldiers, climbed some commanding peak, in order with his telescope to learn the nature of the country, look for smokes of Indian villages, and prospect for signs of precious metals. As they neared the western side of the Peninsula the chief aim of these observations was to catch a glimpse of the majestic South Sea. [1]

One of the greatest difficulties of the journey was that of the horses' feet. The Admiral's fears were justified. The road was rough and terribly stony, and the animals often went lame. Horseshoeing was an almost daily business, and more than once a whole day was spent in camp to rest the animals and repair their shoes. More than one poor mount played out and was abandoned by the wayside as food for the hungry natives, who left nothing for crows or buzzards. The caballos did their part in the expedition. Timid though they were, the Indians several times disputed the passage of the Spaniards, as Moraza had feared they would do, but with presents and "good talk" they were won over, and they performed incalculable service as guides. Frequently the Spaniards were followed by troops of natives from one village to the next. The women especially were friendly, and sometimes made trouble for the commander.

The itinerary and the incidents of the journey can merely be summarized here. Only the full diary which was kept can do the adventure justice. And only one who has retraced the expedition can read

[1]The story of the expedition is admirably told by Atondo in his Diary of the Expedition to the Contra Costa, December 14, 1684, to January 14, 1685. In Testimonio de Autos de la Ultima Entrada que hizo en las islas de la California el Almirante Don Ysidro de Atondo y Antillón y de 10 que de ella Resultó, y la Resolución de Junta General en que consta la providencia y medios que se han elexido, A.G.R. 1-1-2/31, Patronato 31. Because there are two expedientes with almost identical titles, this one is cited as Autos de la Ultima Entrada (I). So far as I am aware, this diary has never been used before.

 |184|
the historic journal with full measure of understanding. Till the explorers had crossed the Sierra Giganta they followed essentially the trail taken by Kino and Contreras the year before - when young Eusebio trotted behind and the little black crow was mascot.

Four days after leaving San Bruno the cavalcade arrived at Santo Tomas, the arroyo by which Kino and Contreras had crossed the mountains.[1] With the heavy pack train the traverse now was a more difficult undertaking than it had been before, and Atondo halted a day to prepare the road. Adjutant Chillerón with ten soldiers and four Sinaloa Indians performed the back-breaking task. Equipped with picks and axes, they went ahead and spent the day cutting trees, removing rocks, and filling bad holes. When they returned in the evening they were a tired band. That night Chief Leopolda came to camp. Atondo gave him presents, and Kino urged him to send messages ahead, telling his people of Spanish friendship and especially of generous presents. Leopolda complied and thus rendered useful service. Moraza had misjudged him.

Early next morning the explorers sallied forth up the steep. In spite of all the road building of the day before, the loaded pack animals had a hard pull, "and although each soldier went up on foot assisting a mule, some of the animals did not fail to fall down." La Cuesta Trabajosa - the difficult climb - they very appropriately named this acclivity. Six toilsome leagues were covered that day, to an arroyo which the natives called Comondé. It was the Comondú, an affluent of the present Arroyo Purísima. Camp was in the vicinity of San Nicolás, the village visited by Kino and Contreras the year before, for thus far they were on their former trail. Among the natives familiar faces were seen, and friendly smiles of recognition.

Three grueling days were now spent descending this arroyo to the forks of the Purísima. Whoever has been in that rough country will not find this difficult to believe. For two of these days the camp was followed by friendly Didius, including "five pretty young women" brought by the rascal Leopoldo, who thus raised a new problem of discipline for Atondo. It was the Admiral who thus described the damsels. On the subject Kino was discreetly - silent. Camps were made at Santo

[1] The Indian name for it was Cupemeyení.

[185]
Domingo, Las Higueras (still on the map in the same vicinity) and La Thebaida - the Theban Desert. On this stretch they passed the canyon site of the later founded mission of Old Comondú, Here in this desolation began the territory of the Gümes , thirty of whom were met and given presents. In return their chief gave Atondo "a little toque of nacre which they use to bind up their hair." The Admiral probably did not wear it.

A pleasing sight now met their eyes. Two leagues down the arroyo on the third day took the explorers to "some springs of water which form a river. According to a report which the natives gave us, although it has not rained in fourteen months, it carries so much water that there is more than enough to run a mill." Man and beast alike now drank to satiety. The place was the one still called Ojo de Agua ­ the spring - at the forks of Arroyo de la Purísima. It is an unmistakable landmark in that unslaked desert, and an eternal joy to the thirsty.

Here Atondo's route swung sharply southward, down the river, and the country became rougher than before. Even yet no wagon road traverses it, and when in 1932 I told my local guide where I was bound, he looked dubious and shook his head. Three leagues farther on, fifty-four Gümes appeared on the trail and tried to turn the Spaniards back. The soldiers bristled, but Kino came to the fore. He had weapons more powerful than sword or blunderbuss. "With the good words which were spoken to them by the father superior ... and by showing them catles and other wares" they were soon won over. By now the San Bruno natives were so afraid of the Gümes that in spite of all Atondo's coaxing they turned back "on the dead run," as he says, "leaving us without guides in the middle of the sierra." But the loss was not serious, for the now affable Gümes filled the breach. Directed by these new friends, Atondo continued two leagues downstream and halted at Ebocoó, naming his camp Río Deseado de Santo Tomas, or Santo Delfín Pamplona. The river had indeed been desired, but the country proved to be not highly desirable.

Next morning men and horses awoke with sore feet and aching muscles. It was the day before Christmas, the men were homesick, and the hardest part of the entire journey lay before them. The road ran [186] in a canyon close to the stream bed. [1] Huge rocks lay hidden in the dense canebrakes through which they had to pass, and blocked the road. Five horses went down. "There was much danger of death to the horsemen, some by drowning and others from the boulders." Surgeon Castro was among those who came near drowning. Only two leagues were made, and camp was pitched in a little place called Noche Buena, "because we arrived on Christmas Eve."

"Here," says Atondo, "the heathen thought we were gods," - rather ragged ones, to be sure - "and that we had the rain in our hands." But the Admiral was less moved by the flattery than by his sense of helplessness in that barren land. "When we asked them if it had rained, lamenting and with the appearance of sadness, they said that it had not, and that they had suffered much hunger . . . and that we must make it rain." They were indeed a poverty-stricken fragment of humanity. "We witnessed such need among them that we saw them eating the sprouts of the reeds and the roots of tule," says Kino, "and yet, when we gave them some of our food they were afraid to eat it, thinking that in it we were giving them some poison." By these barbarians all strangers were regarded with suspicion.

Next day was a gloomy Christmas for these boys from Spain and Mexico. To go forward seemed almost out of the question. Corporal Bohórques, who was sent out to reconnoiter, declared that the next two leagues were impassable for horses on account of the rocks. "Even for soldiers to go on foot with their arms it was necessary to give the weapons to someone who had gone up first and then for one to help another." Atondo sent men to try an opening seen in the mountain cliffs, "but such were the rocks, and the risks that the mules and even the armed men would go over the precipices," that the plan was given up. Another party of scouts tried still another way out through the cliffs, with no better results.

But Atondo was game. He would make the attempt right down the canyon in the bottom of the river, rocks or no rocks, for, he said, "although it might be at the risk of death we must go forward." So on the 26th they set forth down the middle of the stream. The men never forgot that day. It was not merely that canyon walls towered

[1] In some places the gorge of this stream is a thousand feet deep.

|187|
above them; the stream bed where they were forced to travel was a gray wilderness of boulders. The route lay "through rocks such that most of the men dismounted in order to pass. . . . Some fell on the boulders and others in the water, and most of the packs fell off. Nevertheless, those who went on foot filled up the holes with rocks and stones" so the horses could follow, until they came out to passable country. Here they met Indians who guided them, now over good terrain for three leagues, to camp at San Estevan. It was near the present Purísima, the first level spot in that vicinity big enough to stand on.[1]

Here a day was spent in camp to give the footsore animals a much needed rest and to repair their shoes. While the blacksmiths were paring hoofs and driving nails, Kino and two soldiers climbed a near-by peak to view the country. They strained their naked eyes and they squinted through the telescope. The soldiers thought they descried the sea; Kino, more cautious, "said that to him it appeared to be the sea, but he would not swear to it." They named this peak El Sombrerete for reason enough, "because it had the shape of a sombrero." Persons familiar with the country will recognize the aptness of the name.

The worst was over. In comparison with what had gone before, the rest of the way to the sea was like a boulevard. Next day Atondo descended the river five leagues to Los Inocentes, so named for a Church fiesta and not for the inhabitants. Because the animals were limping, he left most of them here, where pasturage was good, in charge of trustworthy Contreras.

LII - The South Sea

Now for the climax of the adventure! Now for the South Sea! With Kino, eighteen soldiers, three Christian Indians, and two packs of provisions, on the 29th the Admiral continued seven leagues to Santo Tomas. Three leagues next day took them to the junction of the

[1] Scherer in his maps has San Estevan out of position.

|188|
stream with another which they called Río de Santiago, in honor of Spain's fighting saint. It was the present San Gregorio. Here they found good water and a village so recently abandoned that the fires were still burning. Two more leagues that day, over the narrow peninsula that lies north of the estuary, took the explorers to the shores of the Pacific Ocean. They were the first Europeans to cross California anywhere in all its vast stretch of a thousand and then another half a thousand miles. For this feat alone, if for no others, the names of Kino and Atondo would go together down the ages.

Each man felt like a Balboa. Near the ocean there were great sand dunes. Climbing over a low gap in one of them they descended to the beach. The tide was out. To the south about a league lay the opening through which the united rivers emptied into the sea. To it the eager explorers rode, part of the way among stones and rocks, on which they found "shells of rare and beautiful luster, of all colors of the rainbow, everyone of them larger than the largest mother of pearl shells." Among them were blue abalone shells, so large that the natives used them as drinking cups. [1]

Father Eusebio never forgot those blue shells. Years later they became a central factor in another drama in which he played the leading part. "And we found various bones of whales, large, medium-sized, and small," says Atondo. "I ordered Corporal Gerónimo Valdés to measure the two largest jawbones, and he found that each one was thirty-one palms long. He tried to see if he could reach around one of them, but, although he is a good-sized man he was unable to do so." How human these fellows were!

They had now reached the estuary. Atondo sent Clemente Garda and Juan de Lara, who rode the tallest and most spirited horses, to see if they could cross its mouth, but the water was too deep. So they swung northeast, along the shore of the inlet as far as the Rio Santiago, where they pitched camp.

Kino had a new thrill when some natives appeared on the top of a sand dune. He called to them and showed them some little presents. He shouted native words that he knew and waved his robes in pantomime. But they were afraid, and instead of descending to receive the

[1] From this incident Kino has been called the first conchologist of the West Coast.

|189|
gifts, they signaled him to come up. [1] With two soldiers he complied. As he ascended the natives withdrew, but when he hung his presents on some bushes, immediately the Indians descended and took them. Soon fifty more came, in two bands .. "The father again called to them in their idiom . . . and they replied that they feared lest we had come to make war on them. He told them not to be afraid, for we came only to give them presents." Atondo now joined Kino, "showing them what we were going to give them, calling them with tender words, and sitting down on the ground near where they were." This did the work. "Now four or five of them came down to receive from our hands hawks bells, scissors, knives, handkerchiefs, earrings, fillets, bracelets, and moccasins." Having accepted presents, they begged the Spaniards to go away from their water hole, in the desert their most precious possession. In spite of Kino's promise to regale them next day they departed and were seen no more. They would not trust the strangers.

Next day - it was Sunday, December 31 - Atondo and Kino made a rapid excursion up the coast. They traveled six leagues, saw scampering Indians, discovered a saline of fine white salt and returned to camp at Santiago. Here the wayfarers watched the Old Year out and the New Year in - those who were not too sleepy.

Next morning, January 1, 1685, from the camp at the head of the bay, Atondo made a careful description of the harbor. This evidently is the reason why they called it Año Nuevo, although they had discovered it two days before New Year's. The description is accurate and graphic. Those Spanish pioneers were thorough. It all looks now just as they described it exactly two hundred and fifty years ago, so accurate were their observations. [1]

This work finished, the explorers started back for San Bruno. In the main they retraced their own trail, traveling a little faster than on going. At Santo Tomas Kino set up his sextant and took the latitude of the mouth of the harbor. Two days later an armored horse fell into the river and was drowned. He was spared many an ache climbing the

[1] This sentence was written in 1934. The Estuary which they called Puerto de Año Nuevo now bears the name of Laguna de San Gregorio. Some distance from the sea the Laguna receives the Arroyo de San Gregorio. The entrance to the estuary from the sea is called Boca de San Gregorio.

[190]
mountain steep up Arroyo Comondú. On the 13th - lucky this time ­ the explorers were given a hearty welcome at San Bruno.[1]

Kino and his associates had made history. But their bright dreams of a sparkling stream on the Contra Costa bordered by rich and cultivated vegas went a-glimmering. The day after his return to San Bruno Atondo certified that none of the lands discovered were suitable for planting. Kino was more optimistic, and he told of the exhilarating exploit in a letter to his old friend, Father Wolfgang Leinberer, in Germany. He was blessed with rose-colored glasses. [2]

LIII - The Giantess Bars The Way

Atondo did not rest long from his journey to the South Sea. The river of Santo Tomas and the port of Año Nuevo were not what he had hoped for. He must have more glowing accounts to carry to the viceroy. So he was soon again on the move. The early sea explorers had given enthusiastic reports of Magdalena Bay, [2] near latitude 25°. There, perhaps, was better country, and perhaps the bay could be reached by crossing the Peninsula by a more southern route than the one just taken through the valley of Santo Tomas.

Therefore, on February 16, Atondo buckled on his armor once more.

[1] Kino to Leinberer, San Bruno, April 9, 1685 (Latin manuscript, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munchen, No. 282); Kino to the Bishop of Guadalajara, October 10, 1685 (A.G.I. 1-1-2/31, Patronato 31). Also Kino, Hist. Mem., I, 215-221, 238; Favores Celestiales, corresponding sections.

[2] At least two or three Kino maps showing the results of this expedition to the South Sea were printed during Kino's day. See the Bibliography for a discussion of his maps. The above account is the first one to make known the facts about the crossing of California in 1684, a matter which has occasioned much pointless guessing. Venegas, when he wrote the Empressas Apostólicas in 1739 did not know about the expedition, and in discussing Kino's Tabula Californiae published in 1705 he declared there was no Rio de Santo Tomas such as that map shows. Burriel, in his revision of the Venegas manuscript, confesses that he knows nothing of an expedition to the South Sea in 1684 or 1685, says that "Kino being extremely . .careful, ... it does not seem credible that he would be in error regarding the fact of the discovery," but is unconvinced nevertheless. Stitz, not knowing of the diary of the Atondo­Kino expedition, enters into a long discussion as to whether the discovery was made in 1684 or 1685, and opines that the River of Santo Tomas was the Magdalena, which of course is far to the south of the region explored by Atondo and Kino (Peter Stitz, Deutsche Jesuiten als Geographen, Saarlouis, 1932).

[3] For early explorations on the outer coast of Baja California see the authoritative work of Henry R. Wagner entitled Spanish Voyages to the Northwest Coast of America.

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Pages 182 - 190