On The Camino Real - 1751
From Mexico City To Conicari and Yaqui

Herbert E. Bolton
Chapter 66
"On The Camino Real"
"Rim of Christendom:
A Biography of Eusebio Francisco Kino: Pacific Coast Pioneer"

We do not know the details of Kino's journey to Sonora. Some future biographer may discover them. We saw him leave Guadalajara for the north country. We next catch sight of him at Los Frayles on Mayo River in the vicinity of Alamos, and then at Conicari, the Jesuit mission in the same region, where three years previously Father Goñi had obtained supplies and laborers for California. No account of his long trek has come to us. But we do have the story of a similar missionary journey over almost precisely the same trail, the twelve hundred miles from the capital to the Mayo River. From this we are able to approximate the outlines of Kino's odyssey.

Years behind Kino, Father Jacob Baegert came to Mexico, went thence by land to Yaqui and from there crossed the Gulf to Calfornia." As far as Conicari, places passed through and incidents of the trail were doubtless much the same for both travelers. Baegert's party was larger than Kino's and his pace was considerably slower. With nine other Jesuits Father Jacob left Mexico City on November 16. They had twelve servants and muleteers, mainly Indians, and twenty mules for mounts and to carry the baggage. Thus they made an impressive train. Passing through León, they reached Guadalajara |236| and continued through Tepic, Rosario, Culiacan, and San Felipe, reaching "Los Alamos or Los Frayles" on March 19, more than four months after leaving Mexico. On the west coast both Kino and Baegert probably passed also through Compostela, Mazatlán, and Fuerte. Coming from Mexico City on a Southern Pacific train today the traveler is close to the trail as far as Culiacán. There he leaves it at his right, for the old towns along the camino real, Mocorito, Sinaloa, Fuerte, and Alamos, and all the rest nearly to the Arizona line, were in the foothills or the mountains. There, and not along the railroad, is the ancient Camino Real. There is Old Mexico.

Baegert traveled "soldier fashion," from four to six hours a day, though sometimes eight or ten hours "in order to reach an inn, which means water for man and beast." His party went thus slowly in order to spare their animals for the long, hard journey. Here and there they stopped a week or more at a place, for priests and other inhabitants generously offered the travelers their best hospitality. The visit broke the monotony of life for the hosts, who rarely saw newly arrived Europeans. And besides, during these stops the Jesuits held high-pressure revival meetings.

Outside of the cities and towns most of their camps were in the open, with an occasional stop at some hacienda. At first the Jesuits slept on their mattresses in two tents. Beyond Tepic, where the hot country began, for protection against insects, scorpions, and snakes, each one slept in his own little tent, "which, supported by poles, was hung up lengthwise of the mattress and tucked well under it" to keep out vermin. The roads were rough, stony, mountainous, unimproved, and in most places mere mule trails; in fact "just as they were a year after the creation of the World."

Baegert had recently come from verdant, timber covered, and thickly settled Alsace, and he was struck by the sterility of the country and the sparseness of population along his trail. His comments are colored by homesickness and his customary pessimism. "If all the cultivated land between Mexico and Hiaqui were put together," he said, "one could walk through it in an hour." Excepting the widely separated towns strung along the trail, from León forward the whole country was "a wilderness full of mountains but without forests, . . . |237| God knows I never saw anything like the woods by the Ill or the forest of Hagenau." Poor homesick Nordic.

The aridity of the terrain depressed him. Often they had to carry water from one camp to the next. "All the streams and stagnant water in the same stretch of country would not fill a river half the size of the Rhine. . . . Several times we drank from a hole which we dug in the sand of a river bed. . . . Often we drank from a ditch, or a cavity in a rock a yard and a half in width, where some of the previous year's rain still remained for the consolation of travelers, insects, and beasts. This was not to everyone's taste, but we managed to drink it and thanked Heaven for it." At another season, of course, where he now saw the dry sand of the stream bed, Baegert would have found roaring torrents. And perhaps he would have complained at that.

For food Father Jacob had mostly sun-dried beef (tasajo or jerky) and tortillas, which he described for his German friends as "cakes made of Indian corn and warmed on a little piece of iron. . . . The so-called tamales are miserable stuff. .. . They are nothing but Indian corn dampened and grated, then rolled up again like an unshucked ear of corn, wrapped in some of the corn husks and eventually eaten. During our journey I was once obliged from stern necessity to eat this stuff for ten days." It is too bad for Baegert that he did not have rose-hued glasses such as Kino always wore. The two men represented diametrically opposite types.

"Throughout the whole dreadful journey," he continued, "Guadalajara is the best city after Mexico, and outside of these two cities and two others there is no attempt at architecture beyond one story of unbaked brick." The tree-grown plazas and the arched and columned portales of the little pueblos do not seem to have interested him. The missionary at Mocorito had recently roofed his new church with cedar. This, said Baegert, "is the only church from Tepique forward which is built of stone and mortar." "The streets and the floors of the houses differ in no way from the open fields. For windows they have only light holes, with a few bars across them as a protection against thieves and murderers but not against bats. . . . Nothing better than this is to be seen. It is not surprising to find such great and general poverty, |238| for the whole country has absolutely nothing to offer but a few un­ fortunate gold and silver mines."

After thus decrying the poverty he saw, Baegert was just as crochety at signs of wealth. "I have seen everywhere, but especially in Culiacan and Los Alamos, even during times of fasting, and when they came to us to confession as we passed through, such finery among the women as I scarcely ever saw in Mexico, not to speak of Alsace. For with astonishment and pity I have seen many a woman dressed in velvet cloth of gold, while in Alsace many hundreds of horses and cows are far better housed than these vain and pitiable children of Adam." Alsace always has taken good care of its horses and cows. Father Jacob was scandalized, too, by the gay dress of some of the Mexican clergy, "yellow stockings, brown knee breeches, a white waistcoat, a red silk scarf, a brown cloak, a battered little peaked hat, with a green and gold ribbon I In this costume one of them met us one Sunday and accompanied us through the village. It is true that this dress is not prescribed for the clergy, but it is the custom of the country."

And so poor Baegert thought it a hard trail which he had traveled. But Father Jacob was a pessimist. He wrote like a man with chronic dyspepsia. These things which to him looked so bad or so worthless, to optimistic Kino no doubt were matters of interest and delighted wonderment. One was perhaps as far from literal reality as the other. But what is reality? Is it what one sees, or what he thinks he sees?

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Notes: [1] It was in 1750. The story of Baegert's journey is told by himself in a letter to his brother. September 11, 1752. "Brief eines Elsasser aus Californien in Nord Amerika an seinen Bruder in Schlettstadt, 1752, von Pater Jacob Bägert, d.G.J." Aus dem "Patriotischen Elsasser." Strassburg und Colmar. 1777.