RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Juan Bodega Story, Chapter 2, The 1775 Voyage Begins

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Returning to the story about our hero, Juan Bodega, Teniente de Navio, or Lieutenant, of the Spanish Navy, was selected, along with 5 fellow officers, to be stationed at the Naval Department of San Blas on the Pacific coast of New Spain. It was 1774, and the Navy intended to send these young men, the best and brightest of Juan Bodega's class, into the wild unknown of the Pacific Northwest Coast.

The port of San Blas had been developed in 1768 to protect "Spain's natural and predetermined rights to the Pacific Coast". After Columbus "discovered" the "New World", Spain and Portugal divided it between themselves, and Spain got the lands on the Pacific. Having noted Russian activity along the northwest coast from 1740 to 1760, the Spanish were all the more uneasy when their minister in St. Petersburg learned that the Russians had organized stock companies for the commercial development of Alaska and were actively exploring the coasts of North America, moving south toward California.

Feeling an urgency to establish the Spanish presence along the Pacific coast and thwart Russian incursion into the "Spanish lake", the Viceroy of New Spain, at the capital of Mexico City, decreed that the Navy needed a port on the Pacific Coast from which to embark on explorations of the Coast.

Notwithstanding the inhospitable climate, torrential rains, and unending mosquito-infestation, San Blas possessed a small, but sheltered harbor and plentiful forests of cedar and other timber for building ships, houses, docks, wharves, and other buildings. The abundance of fresh water streams was also an attraction. Thus, San Blas was selected for Spain's

new naval station and supply depot for the missions in Alta California and the military outpost in Monterey.

The first expedition launched from San Blas to look for Russians had been earlier in 1774 by Juan Antonio Perez, who was dispatched from San Blas in the frigate Santiago. He was ordered to ascend to 60°N (Alaska), not divulge the reason for his expedition if asked, and to mark with a wooden cross any site deemed suitable for occupation. He got close to 60°N, met inhospitable conditions, was unable to make land to plant a cross and stake a claim for Spain, and returned back to San Blas, having never sighted Russians.

Yet the anxiety persisted that the Russians were active in the territories and seas north of Alta California. Fortunately, Juan Bodega and his classmates were on their way to San Blas for the next far-traveling expedition.

Before they departed Spain, the young officers received a crash course in the latest technology of the time. "The Six" undertook advanced training in astronomical navigation and mapmaking at the naval academy, Real Colegio de Guardias Marinas. When they left for San Blas, they took with them seven cases of new instruments, including azimuth needles to accurately record their course, observe the variation, and indicate land; sextants to observe the latitude and to make longitudinal observation; metal protractors and small tables on tripods to make charts; astronomical clocks; quadrants having a radius of thirty inches; and telescopes with a focal length of twenty-four inches.

After his education at the naval academy, nearly 10 years at sea, and up-to-date training, Juan Bodega was prepared for the great adventure awaiting him. He was overjoyed by his posting to San Blas and the opportunity to explore the New World. Yet when he arrived in San Blas, he found stifling humidity, rampant illness from bug infestation and bad sanitation, the port under and poorly staffed, and the accommodations rudimentary. Seeking to prove himself in the first land posting of his career, it was a rude awakening.

A three ship fleet was organized for the northward expedition under the command of Bruno de Hezeta on the Santiago, a 225-ton frigate, with 90 men. Santiago's second officer was the proven, yet cautious, sea-worn veteran of the first Pacific Northwest expedition, Juan Antonio Perez.

The two-masted, 32-ton, 37 foot schooner Sonora (built in San Blas) was captained by Juan de Ayala. Juan Bodega was the second-in-command. This much smaller and seemingly more nimble ship was needed to conduct coastal mapping and reconnaissance in places where larger ships would be unable to navigate. Most importantly, the Sonora was to be used on this expedition for getting close enough to the coast to allow a crew to take formal possession of territory.

To adapt it for the churning waves, unforgiving winds, rocky shoals, and strong currents of the northern Pacific sea, the Sonora was thoroughly refitted and careened in San Blas prior to the expedition. Despite the skillful modifications, the ship was still much too cramped to comfortably accommodate the 16 crew packed on board for the long and arduous voyage.

The Sonora pilot, Francisco Antonio Mourelle, wrote in his journal of the boat: "A deck and a tiny cabin were all it had for security or living quarters, with no chests or other baggage than the bunk and

what could be contained in a box underneath; the height and width of the space for the crew [was so small that] they had to remain in a sitting position; the meager deck did not allow the convenience of a walk; and in this inactive manner, we lived for ten months."

Juan Bodega outranked Juan de Ayala and had the qualifications and training necessary to be considered for a senior officer position. However, as a non-native Spaniard, born in Lima Peru, he was subject to the class prejudice common to Spain and the colonial Americas during that time. As such, he was passed over for promotions usually afforded native Spanish officers of equal training and skills. While history, and Bodega, pondered why he wasn't given a better position, it does appear that he volunteered to be second-in-command on the small Sonora, perhaps to be assured of getting in on some action instead of being left behind at San Blas. As events unfolded, this turned out to be a wise, career-enhancing move.

The third ship, the packetboat San Carlos, a 193-ton supply ship (built in San Blas), initially under the command of Miguel Manrique, carried provisions for the fledgling mission outpost at Monterey. It was also instructed to investigate and map the Bay of San Francisco, which a previous Spanish naval expedition had discovered in 1769.

The Sonora and Santiago were outfitted and provisioned for one year with an assortment of goods and supplies, including jerked beef, dried fish, hard tack (a hard biscuit made of flour and water), lard, beans, rice, wheat, lentils, onions, cheese, chili peppers, salt, vinegar, sugar, pork, cinnamon, cloves, saffron, pepper, chocolate, barrels of brandy and wine, and an assortment of fruits and vegetables.

The orders for the Sonora and Santiago were to reach Latitude 65° North (Alaska/the Bering Sea), make landfall, search for evidence of Russian intrusion, and conduct a formal act of possession.

The northbound flotilla set sail on March 16, 1775. Then, just three days out of harbor, the San Carlos fired its canons twice and hoisted its red signal flag atop its mast. This was an emergency distress signal to the other two ships. The Sonora and Santiago rushed to aid the San Carlos.

The journal of Father Miguel de la Campa, a Franciscan missionary who rode on the Santiago, tells what happened next: "We saw at once that [Capt. Manrique] was not in his right mind, for he had a notion that his life was threatened.

To protect himself he was carrying as many as six well-loaded pistols, with which he had disconcerted and alarmed all on board the supply ship. I did not share in the fear, but in the bad night as his aberration continued; he trusted no one but me and did not want me to leave him, and I had to keep him company all night."

After a brief meeting the next morning of the ships' commanders, surgeons, and chaplains, Hezeta ordered the ill Manrique be returned to San Blas. Father Campa described Captain Manrique's reaction: "[H]e did not wish to leave the frigate though we told him he had nothing to fear since he would go with two companions and with [Father Benito de la Sierra of the San Carlos], who also had come on board and had told us of being almost overborne with terror by those pistols. Finally, after more than two hours of obstinate dispute he was taken off."

At the meeting is was also agreed that Juan de Ayala would replace Manrique as the commander of the San Carlos and Juan Bodega became the commander of the Sonora! The winds of adventure and fortuity were blowing our hero northward! ■