

Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail

As you watch the miles roll by between south-central Arizona and Los Angeles, imagine walking this route instead of riding in the comfort of the train. We are following the trail taken by an expedition in 1774. This was not a military expedition, but a group of families destined to start a colony in California and help to claim the Pacific coast region for Spain before the Russians or English were able to settle in.

The Spanish could, with difficulty, navigate small ships up the west coast to “Alta” or upper California, but they could not carry livestock or very many people. By 1773 the total Spanish population in California was only 70 people, huddled around two Presidios and five missions. If the Spanish were to colonize the area, they needed an overland route.

Juan Bautista de Anza, a third-generation frontier soldier of New Spain, was determined to forge this new route. He financed his own exploratory trip in 1774 to locate watering spots, sketch preliminary maps and make contact with Native American tribes along the route. When he successfully traveled from the San Francisco area to Mexico, Spain authorized Anza to launch a colonizing expedition in 1775.

Anza set off from Sonoma, now in southern Arizona, with 196 emigrants, soldiers to guard them, and 1000 head of livestock. Of the emigrants, over half were children under 12 years of age, and three babies were born during the trip.

When you look out the train window, picture the daunting task of walking these 12 hundred miles with livestock and children! You’d be leading mules and horses carrying all of the food and supplies for your five-month hike.

The expedition started off with 6 tons of food for the 240 people - flour, beans, cornmeal, sugar, and chocolate – plus tents, iron for horseshoes, and other necessities which had to be unloaded from mules each evening and reloaded in the morning!

The Quechan Indians helped Anza and his followers, but as they crossed the massive desert region of southern California, the journey became increasingly difficult. Anza divided the group into three parts, each traveling a day apart, so that water holes would have time to refill between groups.

All groups reunited south of present-day Los Angeles, and eventually completed their journey at a mission near Monterrey, California. From there Anza and his soldiers explored the San Francisco bay area. The expedition led to the founding of the Presidio of San Francisco and two new missions.

The National Park Service commemorated the expedition by establishing the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail. It’s not just a single park, but a cooperative collection of parks and historic sites covering the whole length of Anza’s route from Nogales, Arizona to San Francisco, California. The sites are operated by Arizona and California State Park Departments, as well as county and federal agencies. In many places portions of the trail and artifacts are preserved and open to the public, enabling you to follow in the expedition’s footsteps and learn more about their arduous adventure.

Source(s):

Hoffman, Eva J. "A Guidebook to Amtrak's Sunset Limited." Flashing Yellow Guidebooks, Golden, CO, 2009.

www.nps.gov/juba

Author(s):

Written by Susan G. Scott, Lecturer in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2009.