

Boundary Lines

by Taylor Coffman

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TRADITIONALLY, going back many decades or more, Southern California has been said to end at Point Conception, in the remote southwestern corner of Santa Barbara County. There are notable exceptions. The revered Carey McWilliams, whose book *Southern California Country* appeared in 1946 and remains deservedly in print, regarded Point Sal Ridge as the boundary. Still within Santa Barbara County, Point Sal and Mt. Lospe are nearly as far north as the Santa Maria River, where our own county begins.

Another writer, one as respected as Carey McWilliams, thought of the terrain in question as extending much farther up the coast. I'm speaking of Franklin D. Walker. His *Literary History of Southern California* dates from 1950. A professor at Mills College in Oakland, Walker had a Northern California viewpoint. One of his earlier books, *San Francisco's Literary Frontier* (1939), was more down his alley. Yet his book about Southern California is first-rate nonetheless. It begins with:

This land stretches from the hill at San Simeon on which William Randolph Hearst perches in his baroque castle, like another Saint Simeon Stylites on his pillar, to the little Mexican border town of Tijuana where tourists gape at colored peasant-ware and lose money at roulette.

There's no arguing Walker's mention of the area near San Diego. But his citing of San Simeon surprised many in 1950; it still surprises most people today who chance upon his book. Somewhat similar

geography can be found in back issues of *Sunset* magazine, long based in Menlo Park near Palo Alto. *Sunset* defined the Northern-Southern dividing line as Cuesta Grade, just up the main highway from San Luis Obispo.

What about the Central Coast as a geographic name or entity? When did that term originate, and what is its commonly accepted meaning?

The answers require some digging. My best guess is that the terms Northern California and Southern California predate Central Coast in our regional lexicon. Speaking once more of tradition, the Central Coast mostly applies to the stretch from Point Conception all the way up to San Francisco Bay. Not everyone agrees, though, regarding these borders, especially as concerns their southern reach. Lately it's become common to include the Santa Barbara South Coast—from Gaviota down to Carpinteria—within the Central Coast. It's also getting common to hear Ventura mentioned in this middle-ground way, even Camarillo. Carey McWilliams surely wouldn't approve were he still living (he died in 1980). Nor would Franklin Walker (gone since 1978).

To complicate things further, *Westways* magazine—a younger variation on *Sunset*—has recently adopted some new terminology. In every issue, *Westways* now publishes a map headed Southern California's Regions. There are five such areas. The bottom of the map is a defensible San Diego & Environs. Above that in a thick block is Inland Empire & Desert, whereas a tiny Orange County resembles the district already so named. This leaves two other sub-regions: a gigantic Los Angeles & Environs, extending clear up toward Bishop, and a conglomerate called Points North, encompassing all of Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo counties.

It's hard to say how many people have embraced the new *Westways* approach. The notion of Points North certainly bolsters the trend of dipping southeastward to make cities like Santa Barbara and Ventura part of the Central Coast. A letter I wrote to the *Los Angeles Times* Travel section—following its overly casual use of “Central Coast” in this spirit—went straight into that paper's round file. My questioning words, meant to be civil, were ignored by the Travel editor.

Last month I noticed that someone in the Santa Ynez Valley tried to be regionally precise. This person spoke of being on the south Central Coast. It seemed all right to me. My hunch is that anyone subscribing to that term is apt to visualize a Southern California-Central Coast alignment at Point Conception.

But how far north that same person would place a Southern California boundary by itself (apart from any Central Coast considerations) might be another matter. As far north as Carey McWilliams placed it, near Point Sal? Or even as far north as Franklin Walker did, at San Simeon? Maybe the *Sunset* idea of Cuesta Grade would be more appealing.

Be all that as it may, if we agree that such entities as Southern California and Northern California do indeed exist, what about the area called Central California? Does this even come into play? For my nickel, Central California is a different semantic-historical animal from Central Coast. Central California is more inland, more landlocked. Many would say it's synonymous with the San Joaquin Valley and, in turn, with some of the Sacramento Valley, farther north. I don't think people in Atascadero, Paso Robles, or up toward King City regard their district as Central California. Those folks might say Central Coast. But that other term would run a distant second.

The person near Santa Ynez who said south Central Coast brings to mind the idea of micro-regions. In San Luis Obispo County we have

the North Coast, meaning the area from Morro Bay (or thereabouts) up to the county line, past San Simeon and Piedras Blancas. Once you cross that line, you're in the South Coast—of Monterey County. In addition, at least one other part of California has a North Coast. The main area so named is frankly a macro-region, more than 300 miles long, stretching from San Francisco to the Oregon border. (Fair warning: once you're within Oregon, a wholly localized South Coast-North Coast distinction applies.)

I remember in junior high, in the early 1960s, seeing a documentary called *Boundary Lines*, a film with a strong message for us kids. The film was about prejudice and narrow views, about their negative effects on a broadly geographic, even global scale. Anything like the limits of "Central Coast" was far from its purpose. I often think back to that rousing film. It's a good one to recall as we draw our imaginary, sometimes fanciful lines across the California landscape.

A native of Los Angeles, the author has lived in many of the places he describes. As a resident of San Luis Obispo since 2008, he has no qualms about regarding the town as the northernmost part of Southern California—overlapping all the while with the Central Coast. Your questions or comments are welcome at taylorcoffman@aol.com. See also the author's website, www.coffmanbooks.com.