

What's in a Name?

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PLACE NAMES have long been an alluring part of local history. In the greater San Luis Obispo area, several examples of variant sounds, plus variant spellings, date back many years. Nipomo or Nipoma? Bishop Peak or Bishop's Peak? Cerro Romauldo or Cerro Romualdo? The humorous also crops up at times: the adventurer George Nidever, born in 1802, rendered the Chumash name Huasna with a Tennessee twang. He always called that remote, southeastern part of the county "Wasner" (and spelled it the same).

Among the first place-namers were the Spaniards who marched north in 1769, led by Gaspar de Portola. The historic expedition was searching for Monterey Bay, described by Sebastian Vizcaino on his exploring voyage from mainland Mexico, clear back in 1602. The Portola group had already trekked through what's now Baja California. From there the soldiers, priests, and their livestock continued through San Diego, on past Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, and into our Central Coast region.

By September 8, 1769, the group was at Morro Bay. They called the setting San Adriano, where they "saw a great rock in the form of a morro." That and another mention of the "morro" should be enough to credit the name to the Portola Expedition. The landform itself had appeared minutely on a map stemming from the Vizcaino voyage, again as early as 1602. But no name was bestowed on the rock just then. Never mind Myron Angel and other writers who've associated

the ancient Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo and Morro Bay, as though the name dates from as long ago as 1542. It surely does not, and it's high time for this old tale to be laid to rest. Nor does the variant *Moro* carry much weight. That shorter spelling stems in part from the Moro y Cayucos land grant of the Mexican rancho period. *Moro* may translate simply as "blue roan horse" (although some still believe it means a Moor or a Muslim).

As for the Portola Expedition in 1769, those men saw a rock "que forma a modo de morro." An English version, provided by a modern Portola scholar, is "a high, round island rock in the shape of a sort of head." Make that a helmeted head, giving the appearance of a giant soldier.

Over the next two days the Expedition went from Morro Bay, past Cayucos and Villa Creek, and a short ways inland to the banks of Santa Rosa Creek, near present-day Cambria—"the pine grove of San Benvenuto," a Franciscan diarist in the group called that forested area.

September 12—still in 1769—found the trekkers reaching the San Simeon district. Just inland from what we know as San Simeon Bay, the same diarist noted: "While passing through, I thought one of these watering places, where two streams of water meet and there is a great deal of trees, to be a good spot for a fine little mission, with [good] soil and water, about two and a half or three leagues from San Benvenuto, and I named it in passing *San Juan de Dukla*, Saint John of Dukla."

Dukla, a town in Poland, had a Franciscan priest in the 15th century, later canonized as the St. John in question. We can let our imaginations run wild in wondering what San Simeon—in all its guises: point, bay, rancho, creek—would be called now if "San Juan de Dukla" had endured from 1769. The name never caught on, never stuck.

Beyond Dukla-become-Simeon, the Portola group marched to the future San Carpoforo Creek (later still "San Carpojo"). Avoiding the

sheer Big Sur cliffs, the Expedition turned northeast, climbing higher than anywhere else since leaving San Diego; the men passed inland into the modern era's Monterey County. They'd be back in San Luis Obispo County three months later, in December 1769, by then having gone as far as San Francisco Bay but having failed to recognize Monterey Bay, their original goal.

Through the final few days of that year, the group retraced many of its September steps near San Luis Obispo itself. This meant going down Price Canyon, between the Edna Valley and Pismo Beach—the domain of the strongman called The Goiter, *El Buchon* in Spanish, his name coined by the Portola Expedition for the large tumor on his neck. One of the diarists noted, “The Buchon [is] the man so renowned and feared in all these parts [that] we conceived him to be a sort of little King over these widespread good heathen peoples.” The Anza Expeditions of the mid-1770s would call this same man *El Buchon* as well, or “Big Throat” to them.

The Buchon's influence was felt as far up the coast as Cambria and San Simeon, from whose inhabitants the goitered chieftain exacted tribute, much as he did from native peoples well to the east and the south. And yet the name of the street in downtown San Luis Obispo that recalls him—Buchon—is pronounced softly by nearly everyone, as though it were French: *Boo-shawn*. The name in fact warrants a strong Spanish inflection, with sharply accented emphasis on the second syllable, as the Portola group would have said it: *Boo-CHONE*, with a brusquely chopping sound.

By late January 1770, Portola and his men reached San Diego. It was from there, some three months later, that one of the diarists began keeping “A Journal of the Second Journey Overland: Between the Harbor and New Mission of San Diego, and the Harbor of Monte-Rey.” The marchers were nearly a month in getting back to the Cambria-San Simeon area; May 14 found them at “the San Benvenuto pinewood.”

The next day they marched as far as San Simeon. The bayside point was described, but it wasn't named separately from the nearby San Juan de Dukla of 1769. It remains unknown when "San Simeon" was first spoken or written.

The second-stage Expedition kept heading north. A week later the men finally recognized a place they'd overlooked on the first trek—the long-anticipated "Monte-Rey Harbor."

Coffman has adapted this article from "The Portola Expedition," a chapter in his forthcoming book *North Coast Beginnings: The Early Days of Cambria and San Simeon*. Your comments or questions are welcome at taylorcoffman@aol.com. See also the author's website, www.coffmanbooks.com. The full-length Portola chapter is currently posted under <http://cambriahistory.org/?p=839>, as part of Jerry and Bev Praver's Cambria History Exchange.