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Ortega

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ORTEGA'S SIGNATURE

Two Letters
from Sergeant Jose Francisco Ortega
to Governor Felipe de Neve,
September 4th and 5th, 1781



Edited by TOMAS W. TEMPLE II.

INTRODUCTION

THESE letters by the intrepid pathfinder of the "Expedicion Santa" of 1769 with Serra and Portola, Don Josef Francisco de Ortega, written as *Teniente Comandante* of the San Diego Presidio, voice grave fears for the safety of the mission and garrison at San Diego. These fears are a direct result of a massacre on the Rio Colorado on July 17, 1781, when the Yuma nation rose up in vengeance against the feebly protected new settlements of La Purísima Concepción and San Pedro y San Pablo de Bicuñer. It was a distinct blow to Spanish domination on the Colorado, so well loved by Garces and Anza, who had both strongly advised founding the settlements. It was also an irreparable loss to the royal service and the cause of Christianity, for the doughty Capitan Rivera y Moncada, grown old in the service of both Cali-

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fornias, met ignominious death on the banks of the turgid Rio, where Garces and three of his companions wore their well deserved crowns of martyrdom. Ortega's warning to Governor Felipe de Neve admits too well Spain's precarious foothold on the infant province of Alta California, on whose pristine sands at San Diego, Portola and Serra but twelve years before had raised the royal standards and the holy cross.

Alferez Cayetano Limon, who by July fourteenth of that fateful year had escorted to the sheltering walls of San Gabriel Mission some forty soldiers and families which Rivera had recruited in Sonora and Sinaloa for service in the proposed Presidio of Santa Barbara, returned to the Colorado to find but charred remains of the settlements and the ghastly cadavers of the many who had quenched the Yumas' thirst for blood. By September first Limon, wounded and having lost two of his men, had brought the horrible news to de Neve at San Gabriel, and was dispatched to Sonora, via San Diego and Loreto.

Ortega, himself a veteran of the 1775 Dieguiño assault on the mission where Padre Luis Jayme was martyred, knew what he was up against. Lasuen, stationed at this ill-protected mission since Jayme's death, fearful of the worst, begs for more soldiers. His words need no comment; we experience his justifiable fears. Ortega saw to it that the local Indians, "so manifestly impudent, indifferent and war-like" to quote Lasuen's appeal for help, did not strike again.

Rivera had also recruited in Sonora and Sinaloa settlers for the new Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reyna de los Angeles de Porciúncula, but these had sailed from Guaymas to Loreto, then after a short voyage from Loreto to La Bahia de San Luis Gonzaga, overland from Mission Santa Maria to San Diego. They arrived at San Gabriel on August 18, 1781, where de Neve eagerly awaited them. When Ortega penned his first letter to de Neve, the infant pueblo had already been founded, for it seems the governor chose to show indifference to the Yuma affair, though taking all necessary precautions. This is shown by the original census, dated November 19th, which definitely establishes the date of founding as September fourth.

Father Englehardt and I corresponded at length over the found-

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ing date, he holding with Palou that it had taken place "a fines del ano de '81"; but a trip to Berkeley made accessible the copy of the first *Padron* at the Bancroft Library, and the proper date was fixed once and for all. The learned Franciscan makes a good point (in his work on San Gabriel Mission, appendix C, p. 344) that the Yuma massacre and local disturbances may well have delayed the pueblo's founding, but when I sent him a copy of the census, he gladly retracted his first conclusions. Certainly Limon's report must have struck terror to Lasuen, whose appeal for help must not have gone unanswered, and de Neve must have been pretty sure of his forces to have proceeded with the pueblo on schedule.

These letters are published for the first time, and form a very real but forgotten chapter during the pueblo's first days, by shedding additional light on a live danger that may well have prevented its founding.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

Englehardt's letters, excerpts

Letters of June 25, 1931: "Now the 'Vida' is not strictly a documentary history. While we had not any other, it was and is alright, only one must calculate with many things which are presupposed. Now what is meant by Fr. Palou's 'a los ultimos de ano'? That is the question. As you cleared it up, it cannot mean the last days." (I had sent him a copy of the original *Padron* of the Pueblo de la Reyna de los Angeles, made out by de Neve at San Gabriel, Nov. 19, 1781, giving Sept. 4, 1781, as the date of founding.)

Letter of Aug. 6, 1781: "To go back: let it go at Sept. 4th. Only a few of the eleven families first went to the spot selected for the town. That was imperative, as small-pox had been in the camp. Those affected staid behind. Then followed till November 19, all were there as Neve has it. So there could not possibly have been a parade. The fathers could not go on account of their duties, and because too, they had not been even asked, since it was not customary to start a colony with solemn ceremonies. Here it was out of the question, as they did not all go together, but groups, I mean the settlers. (Palou related that only four families started out, in *Noticias de La Nueva California*, Doyle's edition, 1874, Vol. IV, Chap. 38, 237; Bolton's edition, 1926, Vol. IV, Chap. 38, p. 209). Neve did not go along or he would have related as much to De Croix."

For the route covered by the *pobladores* and soldier escort, see map in 1931 *Annual* of Historical Society of Southern California, p. 118.

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THE LETTERS

Ortega to de Neve, San Diego, Sept. 4, 1781.

My dear Sir:

I forwarded the package of letters,¹ dated the 1st instant, as Your Excellency directed. It was handed me at 3 a.m. Monday the 3rd instant, and at 6 that same morning it was on its way to La Frontera in hands of Corporal Guillermo Carrillo,² escorted by five soldiers, all of them mounted on the best horses available, and forewarned of the vigilance and caution with which they must proceed.

At the Presidio I likewise warned the men that under no circumstances should the Indians get wind of the incident on the Colorado River, (Rio Colorado) and for this reason, both they and the couriers must be careful in discussing it in such wise that the heathen might learn of it. To make doubly sure, I gave orders not to permit any Indian to communicate with the prisoners, and that those on sentry or guard duty should take the food which their families bring them, and deliver it personally.

With this in mind, I deem it most important to inform Your Excellency that these natives for some time past have known of the disaster, because the Padre (Lasuen) coming of a Sunday to say Mass, informed me that on the very day it happened on the said Rio, a heathen Serrano had come down to the mission at dusk, and then stolen back that same night, bringing news that a number of Indians on horseback, had approached from the foot of the sierra by way of San Sebastian, and had massacred half a rancheria for having put up a stiff defence, mistaking the horsemen for soldiers. And that after this set-to, those on horseback had remarked that they would gladly join up with Indians who killed soldiers. Jose Maria, the page, reported this bit of news to Padre Lasuen the following morning, but later he tried to change his story, saying that perhaps it had not happened that way.

What I do know for certain, is that those from Pamo,³ Capitan Achil,⁴ Xaran, and their confederates, for some time now do not even come to Mass, although in order to gain this holy end the padre has promised him a jacket and breech-clout as soon as he

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brings the Christian Indians from his rancheria. But they have replied, by way of the San Dieguiño Indians, that they had learned the soldiers wanted to kill them, and that for this reason, even the heathen take to flight. In my estimation, these manifestations have always presaged the beginnings of unrest among these natives, and the method by which they color their nefarious and insolent designs.

Likewise, it behooves me to report to Your Excellency that the valley of San Luis,⁵ which pastures the cattle and horse-herd of the mission, is a strategic base which the enemies from the Rio can gain, should they succeed in approaching this far, thus to sustain their position, and make war against the mission and presidio, particularly against the former. Because reënforced with those animals they can to greater advantage give full rein to their selfish and blood-thirsty instincts.

This, notwithstanding the fact that I shall not fail to warn the padre to remove from said valley, with as little commotion as possible, all of the brood mares. I think it wise (unless Your Excellency should order otherwise) that one or two of the herds should remain there to serve as decoys and forewarn us in case of invasion. As usual Your Excellency shall in all things command whatever you consider most expedient.

Our Lord God keep Your Excellency many years.

San Diego, Sept. 4, 1781.

Your most courteous and faithful servant kisses the hand of Your Excellency.

Joseph Franco de Ortega
(*rubric*)

Ortega to de Neve, San Diego, Sept. 6, 1781

My dear Sir:

Having written Your Excellency on the 4th instant regarding my reactions to the disaster that occurred on the Rio Colorado, and what is not a remote possibility, may well happen here, I have thought best to add what Padre Lasuen on the 5th instant writes in his letter, whose contents verbatim are as follows:

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Viva Jesus

My Lieutenant Governor Don José Francisco de Ortega.⁶

My dear Sir:

We take it for granted that our Dieguiños are fully aware of the misfortune that befell our men on the Rio Colorado. This fact alone, I judge, should sufficiently influence your well-guided experience to reënforce this *escolta*⁷ and put it on a sufficient footing, were that in your power. But we know that the diversity of current problems calls for a variety of means to solve them, and as the measures to be used always vest those employed in the royal service, with the amplest of powers necessary to exploit them to the greatest advantage, we notify you forthwith, that if you do not reënforce this garrison with additional men we must fear, in light of the disaster referred to, the destruction of this mission within a short while.

We know too well, the price you and we have had to pay to insure the tranquillity which we have lately enjoyed with these natives, after so many hostilities. But we and you know full well that no manner of means nor efforts have availed to make them change their nature, so manifestly impudent, indifferent and war-like. As a result you must have inferred, much better than we, that it is prudently possible that, arrogant with the news that their equals were so victorious on the said Rio, they may dare to foment new hostilities and even worse, if they see fit to join up with those rebellious tribes.

Yesterday at dusk, while we were sitting in silence outside the door of our room, one of our Indians stealthily crept up to the little corridor, as if spying; and as soon as he felt he was being watched, he scampered away so fast that only with difficulty could we make out who he was; and just because we sent after him he has fled to Pamo, so they tell us. The brave Alferéz Limon,⁸ who has just returned from investigating that lamentable tragedy, greatly fears (we know) that similar hostilities may involve us here, and this fact alone suffices to urge upon you (as we do) the expediting of our request. We thus fulfill our duty in this regard, and when the occasion arises, the Supreme Government will know that there was no lack of appeal for help on our part.

Our Lord God keep you many years in His holy grace.

San Diego Mission, Sept. 5, 1781.

Your most courteous and faithful servant kisses your hands
Fray Fermin Francisco de Lasuen (*rubric*)

The incidents reported above, with those which I pointed out before, remind me of some of the depositions made concerning the uprising and assault in the year 1775. In them, the rebel Indians declared that two savages from the Rio Colorado had taken part in the battle, and that they had disapproved of the manner of attack. The proper method, they insisted, was to have a fixed purpose in mind and banish all fear, though many might die in the attempt.

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In this way, the soldiers can be captured alive, first having rendered them helpless by taking their cattle and horses. May God forbid their entertaining such thoughts and prevent their joining forces, for the dire results that must surely follow in spite of the concerted effort and unwavering resolve with which we will endeavor to frustrate them.

Our Lord keep Your Excellency many years.

San Diego, Sept. 6, 1781.

Your most courteous and obedient servant kisses your hands.

Joseph Francisco de Ortega^o

(rubric)

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NOTES TO LETTERS

¹These letters written by de Neve to the Viceroy, dated at San Gabriel, Sept. 1, 1781, report Limon's arrival with the news of the Yuma massacre: how on Aug. 21st this officer with seven men had been driven back by the Yumas, one of whom wore the uniform of the slain Captain Rivera, and how Limon and his son had been wounded, and two of his men ambushed. See Spanish transcripts and translations in 1931 *Annual*, Historical Society of Southern California.

Limon must have carried other letters of the same import, as Ortega mentions Corporal Guillermo Carrillo, relaying the ones in question to Loreto, presumably after Limon and his men had passed through San Diego. Another letter reported that Corporal Pascual Rivera with nine *soldados de cuera* and a muleteer had been killed while bringing supplies to the Pueblos from Sonora.

²Corporal Guillermo Carrillo, born at the Royal Presidio of Loreto, Antigua California, in 1736, was the son of Juan Carrillo and Efigenia Millar, founders of an outstanding family in both Californias. They were parents also of Corporal Mariano Carrillo, veteran of 1769, whose personal account of the founding of Monterey was published as "The Stormy Catalan," in the 1933 *Annual*, Historical Society of Southern California, pp. 28-50; of Hilario Carrillo, father of Jose Raymundo, founder of the famed Alta California branch; of Maria Antonia Victoria, Ortega's own wife; of Maria Ygnacia de la Concepcion, wife of Juan Diego Verdugo, founder of that family; of Maria Micaela, mother of three Olivera *soldados de cuera* of the very first years of the conquest; and three other daughters, founder mothers of the Ruiz, Arce, and Marron families.

Guillermo was made corporal of the San Diego Company in 1770, was most active in chastising the war-like Dieguiños, having captured four chiefs in March, 1778, among them Aaran and Achil, mentioned in this letter of Ortega's. He died a sergeant and was buried Dec. 5, 1782 by Lasuen.

³Pamo. Site of one of the most warlike Dieguiño rancherias, where Chief Achil and his confederates held forth. It was from here in March of 1778, that Aaran, another chief sent a challenge to the Spaniards to come out and be slain. Corporal Guillermo Carrillo went out with a war party and captured four chiefs, Achil and Aaran among them.

⁴Carrillo not only captured and routed the Pamo denizens, but seized 80 bows, 1500 arrows and a large number of war clubs. On April 6th, the chiefs were tried by Ortega and sentenced to death. Their execution was not carried out, and we find them three years later as stubborn and belicose as ever. These Dieguiños had killed Serra's own servant in the attack of Aug. 15, 1770, had cruelly massacred Fray Luis Jayme on the horrible night of Nov. 5, 1775, and now threatened to unite with their Yuma allies, gorged with the blood of the innocent victims of the Colorado tragedy.

⁵A fertile plain, the site of the Rancho de la Santisima Cruz, *alias* Coapan, where the horse herd of the mission was kept. It was from here in 1777 that willow, poplar and alder timber was cut for the new mission structure to be built the following year.

⁶*Teniente de Gobernador* is Lasuen's usual title for Ortega. It is found also in

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the San Diego Mission records, Entry No. 697, Book I of Baptisms, Feb. 10, 1779. Perhaps the translation is not literal enough, and should read the Governor's Lieutenant, but Ortega was a favorite of Serra, who recommended him for Comandante to Bucarely, and the title used by Lasuen may have been used in that spirit.

⁷The mission *escolta* or guard, consisting of a corporal and a varying number of soldiers, seems to have been at its lowest at this time. The force at the Presidio had been augmented with the arrival of new recruits from the peninsula, recruited by Rivera in Sonora and Sinaloa, who had already arrived and enlisted as early as Aug. 8th, 1771. Among them were Francisco Xavier Sepúlveda, Maximo Alanis, Juan Segundo Valenzuela, Pedro Valenzuela and Juan Antonio Ybarra.

⁸Alferez Limon. He had been a soldier at Altar, Sonora, as early as 1760, when a daughter was baptized there by Padre Pfefferkorn. Anza himself had recommended him as Alferez for his second expedition, then with more than 20 years experience at the Presidio de San Carlos de Buenavista, between Tubac and Terrenate. Rivera picked him up at Altar, with an escort as far as the Colorado, and dispatched him with the soldiers and their families, to San Gabriel where all arrived on July 14, 1781, along with Lieutenant Diego Gonzales and Alferez Jose Dario Arguello.

⁹Josef Francisco de Ortega, whom, in the writer's opinion, few who took part in the conquest could equal in service to King Carlos III and his God, gives his military record in a communication dated at Mission Rosario de Vinadaco, Baja California, June 8, 1786. At that time he had served the king 30 years and 8 months in the peninsula, enlisted as a soldier at Loreto Presidio, on Oct. 1, 1755, while Rivera was governor, serving 10 months and 2 days; made corporal on Aug. 3, 1756, for 2 years, 6 months and 6 days; made sergeant on Feb. 9, 1759, for 14 years, 6 months and 4 days in the Loreto Company. As lieutenant and Comandante from Aug. 13, 1773, he served 10 months and 18 days at San Diego "where he succeeded in putting down four Indian uprisings, capturing their chiefs and subjecting the restless and numerous heathen to keep faith and recognize their august Sovereign . . . having during that time founded the mission of San Juan Capistrano and restored the Mission of San Diego." For two years and two months he had been lieutenant Comandante of the newly established Presidio of Santa Barbara, and at the time of this letter had served as Comandante of the *fronteras* in Baja California a year and 9 months, with headquarters at Loreto. The following passages are taken from Ortega's own record of the first expedition.

"In the said expedition to Monterrey he was commissioned trailblazer of the roads the expedition was to follow, and as such was oft-times surrounded and threatened by numerous heathen. And likewise in this one (expedition) as in that in which they openly attacked him, he knew how to curb and pacify them, overcoming as well as many obstacles as those sierras, gorges and difficult passes thrust in his path, for he worked as sapper with his own hands, for the greater encouragement and relief of those troops in such dire need of food and racked by scurvy. Of the thirty-one *soldados de cuera* which he com-

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manded as Sergeant, nineteen were incapacitated, and the rest did all the work, suffering with patience and good will, and caring for those who fell by the road, day in and day out, in their ever-continuing tasks. . . .

"He would finish the day's *jornada* (march), then sally forth to explore the next day's route; continuing in this task from the 14th of June, 1769 (when the first expedition left San Diego) to January 24, 1770 (when it returned) with the additional circumstance of being subjected to eat the flesh of mules, and even that was scarce, without any other nourishment for a good while. . . .

"He rendered said services from San Diego to Monterrey, and beyond to the Puerto de San Francisco. (Ortega does not credit himself with discovering the port, though he mentioned having founded Mission San Juan Capistrano, etc.) But no less conspicuous were those (services) rendered from the 14th of March, 1769, when he was selected by the Lord Governor Don Gaspar de Portola, Commander in Chief of said expedition. On that day he took up the march for San Diego, with the sergeant (Ortega) who deponeth, nine *soldados de cuera*, four muleteers and more than 100 pack mules. And although from the Presidio of Loreto (whence began the march) to the *frontera* of San Fernando de Vellicata, the road was known from the latter to San Diego, there was no other guide-sign but the trail blazed (and this was mostly obscured) by the party which went on ahead to San Diego in command of the second Comandante Don Fernando de Rivera y Moncada, who with twenty-five *soldados de cuera* set out on that expedition on the 20th of March, 1769, and on the 14th of May of the same year, reached their destination. Their trail which in most places was cold, was for more than two months the guide that led the sergeant explorer through unknown terrain and into the midst of countless heathen. . . .

"In the performance of his duty, accompanied by a single soldier (Pablo Antonio Cota) he ventured forth in search of watering places and roads that the second contingent should follow, ever in the face of the very live hazards and dangers to which he was exposed; for on various occasions he found himself threatened by thousands of heathen, and when they attacked him at El Encino, and La Punta del Puerto de San Diego, he restrained them by force of arms, until they gave him leave to pass on."