

Special Feature: How California Got its Name

By Clem Dougherty

DID YOU KNOW....that the name “California” came from a 16th century Spanish novel? You may recall that in our last **Clarion** article we left Queen Isabella sending Columbus on his first journey westward from Europe which resulted in his 1492 discovery of the New World. Columbus eventually made four journeys to the New World focused mainly on discovery of the islands in the Caribbean and of the South American and Central American mainland bordering the Caribbean.

So began the age of the conquistadors, and no person fit the role of conquistador better than Hernan Cortes. Hernan Cortes was born in 1485 in the Spanish region of Extremadura – a region of western Spain – *terra extrema and dura*, that is, a land both extreme and hard. Extremadura was the birthplace of other conquistadors, all of whom accomplished their exploits in the New World during the reign (1516-1556) of Carlos 1, or as history better knows him, the Holy Roman Emperor CharlesV, grandson of Ferdinand and Isabella. All of these conquistadors epitomized in their person that Spanish spirit of national crusade begun during the reigns of Ferdinand and Isabella. Between the years 1519 and 1521 Cortes, with 600 Spanish soldiers and many thousand Indian allies, invaded what is now Mexico and defeated the Aztec nation. The Indian allies of Cortez had been so victimized by the Aztecs who had used captured Indian tribes for human sacrifice that the neighboring tribes were more than willing to join Cortez in the defeat of the Aztecs. Thus, by 1521 Mexico became part of the Spanish Empire.

A few years after Cortez conquered Mexico in 1521, he sent to the western shore of Mexico an exploring expedition which then crossed what is now the Gulf of California to what is now Baja California. The Spanish at first thought that Baja was an island. Around the year 1500, just before the conquest of Mexico, a popular Spanish novel written by Garci Ordonez de Montalvo circulated in Spain. The novel was called *Las Sergas de Esplandian* (“the Adventures of Esplandian”) something like “the Adventures of Superman.” The novel described a mythical island called “California” inhabited by women warriors described in the novel as “Amazons” and ruled by a queen called “Califia.” The novel described the island as a lush, green, verdant paradise full of gold and precious gems. In the novel the women on the island captured mythical creatures called “griffins.” (A griffin is a creature having the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion.) According to the novel, the women trained the griffins to seize men from the ground and drop them from great heights. Those men not so dropped were fed to the griffins. In the novel Califia married a relative of Esplandian, converted to Roman Catholicism, and then settled with her husband on the island called “California.” Some historians think that Montalvo did not invent the name but borrowed it from the *Song of Roland* written four centuries earlier in which the name “Califerne” appears in French and which Montalvo then hispanicized to “California.” Regardless of the ultimate origin of the name, however, historians today pretty much agree that the Spanish got the name “California” from the island so named in *Las Sergas de Esplandian* and, because the Spanish thought Baja to be an island, they first applied the name to Baja.

Some historians think that the Spanish may have given the name “California” to Baja as a joke, because the novel’s description of the island as a lush, green, verdant paradise is just the opposite of the desert that Baja actually is. Other historians think that since

Spanish soldiers were upset that in the novel women were the soldiers and men were the victims, the soldiers believed that such a desolate place as Baja deserved the name "California" which in their mind meant a "good-for-nothing place."

However, it did not take the Spanish long to discover that Baja was not an island but a peninsula. Finding out the truth that Baja was not an island did not prevent early Spanish and other European map-makers from continuing to draw the entire region together – both present day Baja and present day California -- as an island and naming the whole covered region "California" (see Derek Hayes: Historical Atlas of California, pp.28-35) . Thus, the name "California" stuck for the entire region. In today's parlance "Baja California" means "Lower California." We are "Alta California" or "Upper California."

Garci Ordonez de Montalvo, the author of *Las Sergas de Esplandian*, had no idea that the name he gave to the mythical island in his novel would some 513 years later describe a region of the world occupied by 38 million people – the State of California.

(Sources: Rawls and Bean: *California, An Interpretive History*, 9th ed; pp 22-23; Derek Hayes: *Historical Atlas of California*, pp.28-35) . Elliott, J.H., *Imperial Spain, 1469-1716*, pp.61-65; White, Jon Winship, *Cortes And The Downfall Of The Aztec Empire*, pp. 19, 29, 31, 118, 132-133, 186-193; Sale, Kirkpatrick, *The Conquest of Paradise-Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*, pp. 92-95;108-110;128-129;146-147;170-177;192-193.)