

Letter from Father Junipero Serra



Date ★ July 3, 1769

Place ★ San Diego, California

Type of Source ★ Eyewitness (official letter)

Author ★ Father Junipero Serra

Context ★ Beginning in 1769, Spanish priests established a series of missions in California to teach Christianity and European ways of life. The first of these missions was San Diego de Alcalá, founded by Franciscan priest Junipero Serra near San Diego Bay. Father Serra went on to establish nine missions himself in California, with a total of 21 Franciscan missions eventually being founded along El Camino Real in California. In this translated letter to his future biographer, Father Serra describes the land in California and his impression of local Indians.

MY DEAR FRIEND:

Thank God I arrived the day before yesterday, the first of the month, at this port of San Diego, truly a fine one, and not without reason called famous. Here I found those who had set out before me, both by sea and land, except those who have died. The **brethren**, Fathers Cresp, Vizcaino, Parron and Gomez, are here with myself, and all are quite well, thank God. Here are also the two **vessels**, but the San Carlos without sailors, all having died of the **scurvy**, except two. The San Antonio, although she sailed a month and a half later, arrived twenty days before the San Carlos, losing on the voyage eight sailors. In consequence of this loss, it has been **resolved** that the *San Antonio* shall return to **San Blas**, to fetch sailors for herself and for the *San Carlos*.

The causes of the delay of the *San Carlos* were: first, lack of water, owing to the **casks** being bad, which, together, with bad water obtained on the coast, occasioned sickness among the crew; and secondly, the error which all were in respecting the **situation** of this port. They supposed it to be thirty-three or thirty-four degrees north latitude, some saying one and some the other, and strict orders were given to Captain Villa and the rest to keep out in the open sea till they arrived at the thirty-fourth degree, and then to make the shore in search of the port. As, however, the port in reality lies in thirty-two degrees thirty-four minutes, according to the observations that have been made, they went much beyond it, thus making the voyage much longer than was necessary. The people got daily worse from the cold and the bad water, and they must all have **perished** if they had not discovered the port about the time they did. For they were quite unable to launch the boat to **procure** more water, or to do anything whatever for their preservation. Father Fernando did every thing in his power to assist the sick; and although he arrived much reduced in flesh, he did not become ill, and is now well. We have not suffered hunger or other **privations**, neither have the Indians who came with us; all arrived well and healthy.

The **tract** through which we passed is generally very good land, with plenty of water; and there, as well as here, the country is neither rocky nor overrun with

brethren

fellow priests

vessels

ships

scurvy

disease caused by lack of vitamin C

resolved

decided

San Blas

headquarters of the Spanish Naval Department in Mexico

casks

containers used to hold liquids

situation

location

perished

died

procure

acquire

privations

hardships

tract

area

brush-wood. There are, however, many hills, but they are **composed** of earth. The road has been good in some places, but the greater part bad. About half-way, the valleys and banks of **rivulets** began to be delightful. We found vines of a large size, and in some cases quite loaded with grapes; we also found an abundance of roses, which appeared to be like those of **Castile**.

We have seen Indians in immense numbers, and all those on this coast of the Pacific **contrive** to make a good **subsistence** on various seeds, and by fishing. The **latter** they carry on by **means** of rafts or canoes, made of tule (**bullrush**) with which they go a great way to sea. They are very civil. All the males, old and young, go naked; the women, however, and the female children, are decently covered from their breasts downward. We found on our journey, as well as in the place where we stopped, that they treated us with as much confidence and goodwill as if they had known us all their lives. But when we offered them any of our **victuals**, they always refused them. All they cared for was cloth, and only for something of this sort would they exchange their fish or whatever else they had. During the whole march we found hares, rabbits, some deer, and a multitude of berendos (a kind of a wild goat).

I pray God may preserve your health and life many years.

From this port and intended Mission of San Diego, in North California, third July, 1769.

FR. JUNPERO SERRA

brush-wood
thicket of small bushes and trees

composed
made

rivulets
small streams

Castile
central Spain

contrive
devise a plan

subsistence
living

latter
the last of two groups or things (in this case a reference to fishing)

means
way

bullrush
tall, grass-like marsh plant

victuals
foods

Source: William Heath Davis, *Seventy-five years in California*, 371.
<http://memory.loe.gov/ammen/cbhtml/cbhome.html> and
<http://www.sandiegohistory.org/bio/serra/serra.htm>