

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF PINNACLES NATIONAL MONUMENT

Olaf T. Hagen  
Regional Supervisor of Historic Sites

The striking formations within Pinnacles National Monument have sometimes been called "Vancouver's Pinnacles"<sup>1</sup>, suggesting that they were seen by the famed British explorer, to whom the first published description of these features is attributed. On an excursion up the Salinas Valley from Monterey on November 19, 1794, he recorded his gratification "with the sight of the most extraordinary mountain" he had ever beheld

On one side is presented the appearance of a sumptuous edifice fallen into decay; the columns which looked as if they had been raised with much labour and industry, were of great magnitude, seemed to be of an elegant form, and to be composed of the same cream coloured stone, of which I have before made mention. Between these magnificent columns were deep excavations, resembling different passages into the interior parts of the supposed building, whose roof being the summit of the mountain appeared to be wholly supported by these columns rising perpendicularly with the most minute mathematical exactness....<sup>2</sup>

A sketch of this "Remarkable Mountain near the River of Monterrey" (Salinas River) "taken on the spot by J. Sykes" is reproduced to accompany Vancouver's published account.<sup>3</sup>

During the Spanish occupation of California, the Pinnacles were not far from several important settlements -- Missions Soledad (1791), San Juan Bautista (1797), and San Miguel (1897), all founded before 1800, being on a direct line only about 20, 30 and 60 miles, respectively, from the monument area. The main routes of travel in Spanish and Mexican California, however, lay some miles to the west of the Pinnacles, which were therefore not necessarily brought to the attention

of early travelers, but adventurers like Vancouver may have seen them before he did.

Mortars and pestles found at the head of San Benito Creek, about ten miles east of the monument, suggest that some prehistoric peoples lived in that locality, but the scarcity of relics found within the monument area itself indicate that it probably had no permanent Indian population.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the region seems to have received little attention until long after the American occupation of California. As late as 1886 the part of San Benito County south of Tres Pinos, and beyond it, was described as "that vast expanse of valley, foot-hill, and rolling land, now devoted mostly to grazing..."<sup>5</sup> The abundance of wild fowl in the region, however, is suggested by the fact that the village of Tres Pinos then supported a taxidermist, who

"devotes his whole attention to the killing and stuffing of birds for large millinery establishments to the east, and for collections in public and private museums, and the number thus slain and mounted is incredible. He also gathers for the same purposes all kinds of birds' nests with their eggs, and has a remarkable assortment of both. It appears pretty hard on the birds, but the ladies must have these things and Mr. Chalker seems to be doing his best to supply the demand."<sup>6</sup>

For a time when settlement in southern San Benito County was largely confined to activities related to the quick silver mines of New Idria the region southeast of San Juan Bautista was beyond the pale of organized law and became one of the settings for operations of California's bold highway men. Paicines (then Tres Pinos) was the scene of murder and plunder that led to the conviction and execution of the notorious Tiburcio Vasquez in San Jose in 1875. Legend persists to the effect that some of this lawless element found a convenient

hide-out among the recesses of Pinnacles roofed canyons which the holdings of nearby ranches gradually approached. The generally accepted hide-out of Vasquez seems to have been in another locality<sup>8</sup> but local residents claim that one early battle between officers of the law and the criminals occurred within the present monument area.<sup>9</sup>

Ranchers who took up lands in the surrounding region did not extend their claims to the Pinnacles proper, which except for a 160 acre claim,<sup>10</sup> appears still to have been public domain when the national monument was established in 1908.<sup>11</sup> President Roosevelt's action is accredited to the influence of David Starr Jordan who attributed his interest in the region to Mr. C. S. Hains of Tres Pinos.<sup>12</sup>

*Osborne 4-28-41*

1 Drury, Aubrey, Author of an Intimate Guide to California, in an interview, San Francisco, April 25, stated they were thus designated in publicity of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Wilson, Bourdon, San Benito County, California (Issued by the Sunset Magazine Homeseekers Bureau, San Francisco, California, n.d., but apparently published after 1910 has a map on the inside of the book cover which shows the area as "Vancouver's Pinnacles".

San Francisco Chronicle, April 8, 1917, p. 47. An article describing the monument reads: "The Pinnacles were first discovered by Captain George Vancouver of England, and to this day bear his name, being known as 'Vancouver's Pinnacles'...."

2 Vancouver, Captain George, A Voyage of Discovery to The North Pacific Ocean and Around the World, 1790 - 1795. London, 1801. 6 Vols. VI, 122 - 123.

3 Ibid., Opposite p. 123. The identification of the pictured mountain as that seen by Vancouver apparently is traditional, but is to the best of my knowledge generally accepted except possibly by Francis P. Farquhar, who, Custodian Hawkins says, has indicated doubt regarding the accuracy of this association.

4 of. Hoover, Mildred Brooke, Historic Spots in California: Counties of the Coast Range. Stanford U. Press (1937).

5 "Grand Army Edition" of the Hollister Free Lance, San Benito County, California, June 1886, p. 7.

6 Ibid., 12. Mr. J. R. Chalker.

7 Crimes, etc. of Tiburcio Vasquez.

8 Ibid.

9 Custodian Hawkins reports that Ben Bacon one of the early pioneers in the vicinity, "has told of a pitched battle in the Pinnacles, held when he was a child" and where the CCC camp now is." "It was between a band of bandits and officers and vigilantes. A few days after the battle Mr. Bacon's parents found a wounded white man near the caves. The stranger told a plausible story of having shot himself while hunting." But convalescing at the Bacon home the stranger was taken away by officers

and vigilantes.

10 Hawkins states that this claim was the tract formerly known as the Pinnacles and which has since come into the possession of San Benito County.

11 Proclamation dated

12 Hoover, op. cit., 315, quotes David Starr Jordan, in his The Days of A Man as Follows:

"From 1904 to 1908 it was my pleasure to assist an ardent mountain lover, Mr. C. S. Hains of Tres Pinos, in securing for the people as a Government Forest Reserve, a singular district known as the 'Pinnacles'."