

SIR FRANCIS DRAKE IN CENTRAL CALIFORNIA - 1579

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This poster presentation reviews the famous voyage of Sir Francis Drake and the purpose of his stay along the coast of California in 1579. Since the voyage, the location has been assumed by historians and navigators to be around the latitude of 38° north, just above San Francisco Bay. However, there is evidence to challenge this assumption and to look elsewhere for a fit of the rather meager data on the voyage that brought Drake to the coast of California.

Drake's reasons for coming to the coast of California were **not** based on a desire for colonization, or a mission to explore or survey the land for the Queen of England, but to find a safe and quick way to return to England with his ship, the *Golden Hinde*, which was full of captured treasures from the Spanish galleons in South America. Upon returning home to Plymouth, England in 1580, Drake was knighted for the captured Spanish treasures that he brought to the Crown and his backers, crew, and himself. He turned over his diary of the voyage to the Queen who imposed a cloak of silence on the voyage as to the location, goals, and accomplishments. The original records have been lost to history. However, statements from other diaries and journals of members on the voyage, and a map of the voyage published in 1581 show the location of the "Good Baye" on a coast running east and west with four islands, but at the latitude of 38° instead of 34.5° for the central coast which these features represent.

According to these diaries and journals, Drake was looking for a safe place to stop so he could clean and reload the ship, the *Golden Hinde*, and to wait for calm weather in the western Pacific. Such a "Good Baye" was found after weeks of searching somewhere on the coast of California where he and his party stayed between June 17 and July 23, 1579.

Drake had captured pilots from Spanish ships on his raids along the coast of South America. They had been sailing across the Pacific for years on the Spanish galleons from the Philippines to Acapulco, Mexico. From them he learned much about navigating along the Coast in the northern latitudes of California and crossing the Pacific Ocean. Drake had ruled out returning home to England by way of South America and the Straits of Magellan for fear of being intercepted by the Spanish. His second option was to look for the Gulf of Anian (Northwest Passage), which many at that time believed connected the Pacific with the Atlantic Oceans. After weeks of searching in vain for such a passage, Drake sailed south to look for a safe harbor in which to prepare for a crossing of the Pacific.

Just where on the coast of California Drake stayed has become a historical mystery ever since. As mentioned earlier, Drake's diary has been lost to the modern world. While on the coast, Drake built a fort, met the local Indians (who considered him a god and crowned him king) and claimed the land for the Queen of England, naming it New Albion because the white cliffs outside the harbor reminded him of the English coast near his home at Plymouth. Drake had captured a ketch off the coast of Central America which he used to carry some of the Spanish treasure. Before leaving the coast, this ship was emptied and burned in the "Good Baye." Drake then sailed to one of the nearby islands where he spent a day collecting seals and birds as food for the long Pacific voyage.

Over the years many volumes have been written to identify the location of this famous visit on the coast of California. All the works have assumed that the location was in the vicinity of 38° north latitude. However, the proposed locations never quite seemed to fit the reported descriptions of the location and the characteristics of the Indians. Point Reyes, Bodega Bay, Tomales Bay, Bolinas Bay, and San Francisco Bay have all been considered as possible sites. The key consideration has always been latitude. But this is suspect in itself. Latitude readings during this period could vary from one to three degrees with increasing errors the farther north the readings were taken. Drake was not particularly interested in where he was, but in finding a safe passage to England. Even more importantly, the maps that followed the Drake voyage show the location of the "Good Baye" on a coast running east and west with islands in some maps and in some without. The first map showing Drake's voyage was the Van Syke map of 1581, which was reviewed and approved by Drake and shows the east-west coast and islands at 38°. Maps prior to this voyage, which were based on the Spanish Cabrillo expedition of 1542, show these features at 34 to 36° latitude. A map by Hakluyt of 1587 shows the east-west coast and the Santa Ynez River at 38°. It appears that Drake was not up north, but on the central coast of California.

Besides showing the map of the voyage, the Van Syke map depicts a harbor in which the *Golden Hinde* was cleaned and prepared for the trip across the Pacific. The outline of this harbor does not "fit" any of the harbors considered up north, but it does fit the original shape of the Goleta Slough, located at the present day Santa Barbara Airport. The Goleta Slough was used as a harbor in the nineteenth century. One

small ship, a cutter, was constructed there and at least two ships went aground near its entrance.

If we assume that this location is possible, then it becomes a relatively easy task to “fit” the rest of the descriptions of the area and the Indians into the picture. Some of these are: “thick stinking fog, bone chilling cold, cold wind from the northwest, low hills covered with snow, heavy fog - could not see sun or stars, land runs northwest, Indians in a canoe, white banks and cliffs toward the sea, islands off the harbor, homes like church steeples, trees without leaves and ground without green, people live near the shore, strange conies, reed bowls that hold water, dress-manners-customs similar to the Chumash Indians that inhabited the central coast, language, poles with baskets of feathers on them.”

These statements about the area of the “Good Baye” were published years after the voyage but they were known by many historians from the time of Drake’s return from the voyage. Years dim the accuracy of recollections, so some of the comments are puzzling. Just where the comments apply is not at all clear. However, if one considers the sum of all

descriptive comments, a probable best fit to a location is possible. In this case, the central coast runs east to west, there are bluffs outside the harbor which have white rock, and there are four islands a day’s sail away for a sixteenth century caravel. The “patches of snow” may have referred to the many patches of exposed sandstone and diatomaceous rock on the coast. The fog on the coast is heavy and cold on the central coast during the June - July period in most years. The Chumash built excellent canoes and water- tight reed bowls, and their ceremonial grounds were usually marked by a pole with a basket of feathers. The reference to steeple-shaped houses may refer to the temescal or sweat houses used by the Indians in many areas along the coast of California. The strange conies are probably the ubiquitous prairie dog.

All of these factors point to the original Goleta Slough as a possible location for the “Good Baye.” Some day if the Drake diary is found, maybe history will know for sure, but for now this is the most likely place to look. Why is all this important? To better define our history.