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TOWN of TRINIDAD

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## TOWN OF TRINIDAD

A sleepy town may be only that, or its languor may hide a glamorous past. The latter was never more true than of Trinidad town on the Northern California coast, whose handful of faithful, numbering eighty in 1930, continue to live behind the headland and bay which bear the same name. The jutting, towering headland and the rather open bay have an ancient history; the town is more recent, a mushroom creation of the mining excitement on the Trinity River and at Cold Bluff, which began in 1848 and 1850. All the same, it is old enough to claim the distinction of being the first white settlement this far north on the California coast. But the story of headland, bay, and town is essentially one; the history of a place since white men first saw it.

Francis Drake, in 1579, while searching along the Northern California coast for a place to re-fit his treasure-laden ship, the Golden Hind, probably sighted the promontory in  $41^{\circ} 3'$  which later was named Trinidad Head,<sup>1</sup> although it is unlikely that he anchored in the

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1. Davidson, Identification of Sir Francis Drake's anchorage on the coast of California, 55-56.



bay behind it. Instead Spaniards, much later, were the first to enter it, to christen bay and headland, to claim the land for their sovereign, and to leave a landmark attesting the priority of their discovery. On June 11, 1775, the northwest coast explorer, Bruno de Hezeta, and his men, having anchored their two ships in the bay two days before, were the ones to do this, and with appropriate ceremony. Most of the company was disembarked; on the beach, Fathers Benito de la Sierra and Miguel de la Campa Cos "worshipped the Holy Cross" of pine-wood which had been constructed for the occasion, and chanted the Te Deum Laudamus. The procession, in martial order, then made its way to the summit of the sheltering headland, erected the cross with due solemnity, claimed the territory for Charles III of Spain, and christened the headland and bay "Trinidad," the particular day being the church feast of the Holy Trinity.<sup>2</sup> A few days later the Spaniards sailed away, having charged the Indians of the region, with whom they had had friendly relations, not to molest the cross which guarded the headland and which

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2. Wagner and Baker, "Fray Benito de la Sierra's account of the Hezeta expedition to the northwest coast in 1775," in California Historical Society, Quarterly, IX, 218-220.



bore witness to the visit of the white men. Nor did they, for the great English explorer, George Vancouver, saw the cross in 1793, and with difficulty read its inscription: "Carolus III Dei G. Hispaniarum Rex."<sup>3</sup>

The main force of Spanish expansion, however, was spent, and the founders of San Diego, Monterey, and San Francisco never succeeded in occupying California as far north as Trinidad Head. The task fell instead to other nations, the youngest and most restless of which was the westward advancing United States of America.

Americans reached the Pacific Coast by sea before they did so by land. With the opening of the nineteenth century, traders from Boston and other ports on the Atlantic seaboard appeared in the North Pacific to combine the seal and sea otter trade of Alaska and California with commerce of China. The first of such ships which we know to have entered Trinidad Bay was the Lelia Byrd, Captain William Shaler, in 1804, to be followed by a number of others during the next two decades, mostly American, but a few Russian and English.<sup>4</sup> Though Trinidad Bay was on the maps, for several decades it was prac-

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3. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 25-26.

4. Ibid., 27.



tically forgotten, until the days of the gold rush.

California had become United States territory, officially, on February 2, 1848, when Mexico ceded it to the United States by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. One week before, James W. Marshall had discovered gold on the south branch of the American River. During the six months following, the news spread, the fever grew, and a large part of the white male population of California went to the mines. Everywhere gold was sought, and everywhere along the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada it was found. Even the streams of the then inaccessible northern mountains, such as the upper Trinity, so named because it was believed to empty into the Trinidad Bay of the Spanish maps, were found to be rich in gold.

The Trinity River gold strike itself was made in July, 1848, by a company of American trappers led by Major P. B. Reading, and by the fall of 1849 that region had a large mining population.<sup>5</sup> With the winter season approaching there was considerable apprehension as to the manner in which these people, isolated from the

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5. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 37.



Sacramento River Valley, could be provisioned. It was that situation which led to the attempt by sea and land to "re-discover" Trinidad Bay, which the maps said existed, and to utilize it as a depot of supplies to the Trinity mines.

For this purpose an exploring party of eight men under Dr. Josiah Gregg set out from upper Trinity, across the mountains, in November. They suffered great hardships because of the lateness of the season, but on December 7, 1849, reached the coast at Trinidad Head, which they named Gregg's Point.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, from San Francisco as a base, repeated attempts were made to re-discover Trinidad Bay from the sea side. By March, 1850, twelve vessels were engaged in the search. March 16, 1850 the Cameo, sailing in this latitude, sent a party toward shore in a smaller boat to reconnoiter. Rounding a sharp point, the men saw Trinidad Bay.<sup>7</sup> Thereby the period of settlement was ready to begin.

The re-discovery of Trinidad Bay crowned with success the attempt to find a shorter and more practicable

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6. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 37-40; Ansberry, Josiah Gregg, Western pioneer, M. A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1931.

7. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 44-45.



route to the Trinity mines, and was the signal for the founding of the first town on the Northern California coast. On April 8, 1850, the schooner James R. Whiting arrived in the bay, and Captain Robert A. Parker and a party of men went ashore to select a town site. A quarter section of land was chosen, surveyed, and laid out in streets and blocks. Tents and other temporary dwellings were erected in order to establish the respective claims of the squatters. Within a few days, these first settlers were joined by a second party under Captain Warner from the ship Isabel. It was then decided, in usual frontier fashion, to organize a government for the town of Trinidad, and on April 13 an election was held in which it is claimed one hundred and forty votes were cast.<sup>8</sup>

What Trinidad looked like, about a week after its founding, can be seen from the journal of Ernest de Massey, a Frenchman who, on his way to the Trinity mines with sixty-five others aboard the ship Hector, arrived in the bay on April 16. He says:<sup>9</sup>

On Saturday, April twentieth, my friends and I left the ship with our supplies and luggage, and installed our-

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8. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 49.

9. Wilbur (ed.), "A Frenchman in the gold rush" (translated from the journal of Ernest de Massey), Part V, in California Historical Society, Quarterly, V, (1926), 145-147.



selves in our tent overlooking the sea which commands a view of some fifteen (kilo) meters. There is no beach at high tide although at low tide it extends many meters. From it a steep bank arises abruptly. On its summit is the site of the young settlement. At present this is nothing more than a large flat area covering seven or eight hectares. It is completely surrounded by the sea and the virgin forests - which will soon fall before the axe of the American settler.

Thirty tents and three houses now under construction comprise the village. Plans have been made, however, for dividing it into enough lots, streets, and public places to hold twenty thousand inhabitants, with room for further expansion. My personal opinion is that this village has no great future. The harbor is dangerous, and there are no large streams or rivers accessible, merely some springs near the sea. Its future will be determined largely by the wealth of the placers.

Since the arrival of the Nector the population here has been temporarily doubled. The miners, most of whom have only scanty resources, only remain long enough to rest and get what information they can as to routes and directions. Nevertheless the information here is hardly more reliable than what we got in San Francisco ....

This tiny hamlet is controlled by an alcalde, a Spanish (sic) official who, at the approaching (?) elections, will be replaced by a mayor. This local alcalde is a kind of petty monarch with almost unlimited civil and judicial authority. The first settlers by virtue of their right as pioneers, took possession of plots measuring one hundred and sixty acres (one acre equals forty-one ares) starting from the sea



and going back as far as the forest. These they have already resold at good prices as building lots to those who have confidence in the future.

The shore and region around the bay are inhabited by Indians, who live in rancherias or settlements which lie two or three leagues apart, and are made up of four or five huts, each of which houses one or more families ....

During the summer of 1850 Trinidad grew rapidly, as ship after ship anchored in the bay and landed its quota of passengers for the mines. By June 1 it was announced that the trail from Trinidad to the Upper Trinity was open, and this drew new prospectors from San Francisco. A month later it claimed to have a population of three hundred people, who lived in fifty houses and about an equal number of tents. The mining excitement caused real estate values to soar, and extraordinary prices were asked and obtained by speculators. One of these sold lots during the first five months for which he was to receive in all 29,250 dollars. Provisions were equally high in price, and packers charged as much as two dollars per pound for freight carried from Trinidad to the Salmon mines. Yet the optimism of the times was such that few complained.<sup>10</sup>

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10. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 49-50, 69.



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The rapid growth of Trinidad during the first months of its existence, however, was only the prelude to a much greater population boom: the Gold Bluff excitement of 1850-1851. Along the beach, between Trinidad and Klamath, miners, in the summer of 1850, had found particles of gold mixed with the sand, but at first this discovery drew little attention. Later in the year, several parties of miners, however, began operations there, and, when the exaggerated reports of the new wealth reached the host of prospectors wintering in San Francisco, another great exodus began. Most enthusiastic of all was the specially organized Pacific Mining Company, capitalized at 150,000 dollars, which sent back the following report from Gold Bluff:<sup>11</sup>

The sands of this beach are mixed with gold to an extent almost beyond belief.... Mr. Collins, the Secretary of the Pacific Mining Company, measured a patch of gold and sand and estimated that it will yield to each member of the company the snug little sum of forty-three million dollars, and this estimate is formed on a calculation that the sand holds out to be one-tenth as rich as observations warrant them in supposing.

Such fanciful claims as to the wealth of the new diggings were not without great effect upon the

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11. Alta California, January 9, 1851.



imagination of the excited miners everywhere in the State. Very soon, shipload after shipload of eager adventurers from San Francisco arrived at Trinidad, the natural gateway to the Gold Bluff area. By mid-year, 1851, the population of the town, it is said, had increased to the amazing figure of three thousand.<sup>12</sup> For a brief time Trinidad was the queen of the northern coast towns, the county seat of Klamath County (1851-1854), the chief gateway and supply depot to the Trinity, Salmon, Klamath, and Gold Bluff mines. From December to March, 1851, nearly thirty ships came directly to Trinidad Bay. The dream of the town's founders seemed, at last, to have come true.<sup>13</sup>

But then came the awakening and the decay. The elusive wealth in the sands of Gold Bluff proved disappointing, and therefore a large part of Trinidad's population immediately disappeared. Moreover, other towns, to north and south, with better and safer harbors, had meanwhile been founded and began to compete successfully against Trinidad, in the packing trade and in that by sea. Uniontown and Eureka, on commodious Humboldt Bay,

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12. Drury, California: an intimate guide, 352.

13. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 51, 69, 121.



and Crescent City, farther north, began to outstrip her and to drain her vitality. It was the town's decadent air which, very likely, induced the contemporary humorist, George H. Derby, to say, when he first saw it, that it consisted "of about thirty mules, being packed with whiskey for the miners on Trinity river."<sup>14</sup> By 1856, Trinidad was forced to concede the superiority of her rivals. Two years before, Crescent City had displaced her as the county seat of Klamath County, and now, with a population of eighty, Trinidad lapsed into comparative obscurity.<sup>15</sup>

Trinidad did not relinquish her early supremacy without a struggle. Not alone had her proximity to the Klamath and Salmon mines retained for her a share in the packing trade, but, long after that source of income had disappeared, a new industry of a more permanent nature, lumbering, was to give the people of Trinidad a modicum of prosperity for many years. On the nearby Little River, the first lumber mill had been built, in 1851, by Baron von Luffenholtz, an exile from Saxe-Coburg, who, with the collapse of the revolutionary movement in Germany

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14. The Squibob papers (New York, 1865), 112.

15. San Francisco Bulletin, January 7, 1856.



only a few years before, had been forced to flee his native land.<sup>16</sup> The following year a lumber mill was constructed at Trinidad. In 1859, a wharf, built out from the rock promontory which partly shelters the bay, improved the harbor and facilitated shipping. A whaling company made Trinidad Bay its base of operations in 1861. A decade later the first newer type logging railway was built at Trinidad, and about the same time a lighthouse was erected on Trinidad Head. In 1875, almost the entire commercial and industrial life of the town centered around its two lumber mills, in which two hundred persons were employed. Its total population was then estimated to be between three and four hundred.<sup>17</sup>

Some idea of what Trinidad looked like in 1880 can be seen from a description by A. T. Hawley. He says:<sup>18</sup>

It is only by stage or on horseback or afoot that one can get to Trinidad, over roads not always passable. When he does get there, but for a small Catholic church, a brick store, and a long building, the interior of which will forcibly remind the old Califor-

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16. Hawley, "Old port of Trinidad," in Overland monthly, II (1883), 277-278.  
 17. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 68, 95, 124, 219, 245, 288.  
 18. "Old port of Trinidad," Overland monthly, II (1883), 277.



nian of many a 'Long Tom' or 'Round Tent' of his earlier and rougher experiences, he would think he was almost at the ultima thule of progress and on the chosen grounds of decadence. Old and rickety and tumbledown and unhabited (sic) houses are too numerous for so small a place. Twenty-nine years ago nearly three thousand people made Trinidad a 'lively camp' etc.

Nor to this day has Trinidad changed materially. In 1930, it had a population of eighty. The traffic which moves past, on the famous Redwood Highway, alone disturbs its quiet. But few of the thousands of people who pass through Trinidad annually, who admire the stately pines and redwoods and the towering headland nearby, even dream that its soothing village quiet conceals so rich a heritage of the past, a saga of men, of ships, and of gold.



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