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The Santa Cruz Valley in 1776

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The summer of 1776 was charged and alive, as summers always are in the Sonoran Desert. Cicadas droned. Cactus wrens rattled. Farmers peered anxiously at the sky, hoping for storm clouds to build. O'odham families from San Xavier del Bac and San Agustín de Tucson climbed into the mountains to harvest saguaro fruit, even though Franciscan missionaries, like their Jesuit predecessors, tried to discourage their annual saguaro wine ceremony.

But the young corn and bean plants were withering, and the rains had to be called down. The Southwest was suffering from its fourth year of drought, a drought that would last a decade. Dry years were lean years, even along the intermittent trickle of a stream known as the Río Santa María. The Santa Cruz River would not acquire its present name until after 1787, when the presidio of Santa Cruz de Terrenate moved to the abandoned mission of Santa María Suamca along the river's headwaters to the southeast.

Lt. Juan María de Oliva of the presidio of Tubac, a military garrison, must have been anxious as well. His commander, Juan Bautista de Anza the Younger, was away blazing a trail between Sonora and the infant Spanish communities of Nueva California on the Pacific Coast. Sixty years old, illiterate, with more than 29 years of service in the saddle, all Oliva wanted to do was retire. But it was his duty to move the Tubac presidio to its new post of Tucson 18 leagues - about 40 miles - to the north.

The year before, Hugo O'Connor, one of the Irish "Wild Geese" who fled their British-occupied homeland to fight for the Catholic king of Spain, decided to transfer the garrison downstream to better protect the land route Anza was pioneering. More than 20,000 "ar-gonauts" would follow that overland passage down the Santa Cruz to the Gila River, and down the Gila to the Colorado River, during the California Gold Rush of 1849.

In 1776, however, that route was little more than a dream - one Anza inherited from his Basque father, Juan Bautista de Anza the Elder, the captain of Fronteras presidio ambushed by Apaches in 1740. Spanish officials hoped that a steady stream of supplies and settlers would follow Anza to counter the Russian threat moving south from Alaska.

With customary vigor and skill, Anza succeeded, founding the Spanish colony of San Francisco. But Quechan Indians who controlled the key crossing on the Colorado soon rebelled, severing the land route in 1781. The dream of the Anzas was stillborn. The Colorado River crossing would remain in the hands of the Quechans until the founding of Fort Yuma in 1852.

But that was a future the inhabitants of the Santa Cruz Valley could not foresee. Oliva led his troops to Tucson sometime before November 1776. The documentary record is mute about exactly when, but the garrison may have remained in Tubac until summer crops were harvested. Franciscan missionary Pedro de Arriquibar baptized a

Sources: The best book on Arizona in the late 18th century is Jim Officer's "Hispanic Arizona, 1536-1856" (University of Arizona Press, 1987), followed by Henry Dobyns' "Spanish Colonial History" (UA Press, 1976) and Kieran McCarty's "Desert Documentary" (Arizona Historical Society, 1976). Tumacácori National Historical Park's Mission 2000, a free online database (www.nps.gov/tuma/M2000.html), allows you to search the mission records for Tumacácori, Calabasas, Guevavi, and other communities of the Pimería Alta - now the region encompassing Southwest Arizona and Northwest Sonora. Other free online databases from the Arizona State Museum's Office of Ethnohistorical Research (www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/drsw/index.html) enable you to search for People, Places, Ethnic Groups and other information from more than 500,000 pages of original Spanish documents about Northern New Spain, including Arizona and Sonora.

"Papago" boy named Ascencio at Mission Tumacácori on June 21 and a Papago girl christened María Regina on Aug. 26. No such events - births, baptisms, marriages, or burials - were recorded for Tucson that year.

Nonetheless, the arrival of the soldiers soon made Tucson the largest non-Indian settlement in the Santa Cruz Valley. By the end of the century, Tucson was a multiethnic community: presidial soldiers and their families on the east bank of the Santa Cruz, O'odham from San Agustín at the foot of Sentinel Peak ("A" Mountain), and Apaches Mansos - so-called "Tame Apaches" who made peace with the Spaniards in return for monthly rations of meat, flour, tobacco and brown sugar - north of the presidio in what became known as Barrio Tonto, then Barrio Anita.

Tucson remained the northernmost outpost of Sonora for the rest of the colonial period and beyond, cut off from Nueva California by the Quechans, and from New Mexico by the Apaches. As isolated as the little military community was, however, it still participated in some of the great events of the age. On Aug. 17, 1780, King Charles III of Spain informed his subjects, "The insulting tyranny of the English nation has precipitated me into a war." The "exorbitant cost" of that war forced Charles to extract a *donativo* of two pesos from every Spaniard and one peso from every "freeman who is an Indian or of mixed blood" in the Americas. Tucson's presidio raised 459 pesos for the cause.

Such donations helped Spaniards in Louisiana to reconquer Florida from the British and to keep the British navy off the Mississippi River. Although Mexico later lived to regret it, Spain's war with Britain protected the western flanks of the rebel 13 colonies as well, helping them win their independence in 1783. Less than a century later, the United States, not Britain, France or Russia, would wrest away the Hispanic Southwest. But not even a strategist like Anza, much less the aging Juan María de Oliva, could have envisioned such an outcome.

Americans turn their attention to Philadelphia and the birth of the nation each July 4 - the date in 1776 when the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence. But events under way here at that time, in the Spanish outposts of what is now Southern Arizona, would help ensure that the fledgling Thirteen Colonies could finally win their independence.

Southwest's singular destiny

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