

Reference

Explorers

For three centuries or more the Spanish explored the southwest using Native American guides and following their trails trying to establish an overland route from Arizona and Sonora to the California coast. In 1539, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado explored the lower Colorado River in search of Cibola, the fabled 'Seven Cities of Gold'. From his base camp in Santa Fe, New Mexico, he explored from Kansas to the east bank of the river. Melchoir Diaz, a member of his party, crossed the river into the Salton Basin for the first recorded time. He unfortunately impaled himself on his own lance before he found any gold. The area was virtually ignored for the next 150 years, until in 1687, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, while ministering to the natives in Arizona, tried but failed to establish a mission in Yuma. He crossed the 'Red River of the Martyrs' to explore the basin in 1701. After the establishment of missions along the California coast began in 1769, the Spanish again looked to an overland route. Father Francisco Garces crossed the basin from San Diego to Yuma in 1771, calling the trail 'El Camino de Diablo'. With the rumor of Russia advancing down the North Pacific coast, Juan Bauista de Anza led an expedition in 1774 to establish another mission at Yuma (which was destroyed by the local natives in 1781) and find a reliable route across the basin. Following Garces trail, he called it 'La Jornada de los Muertos', The journey of the Dead. In 1821, Mexico won independence from Spain and over the next 25 years many trappers and explorers crossed the Salton Basin including Jedediah Smith, William Wolfskill, Peg Leg Smith, and J.J. Warner. Beaver pelts were fetching \$6 to \$10 (a weeks wage) and the beaver felt hat was the most fashionable men's item on the east coast at the time. In 1846, the Mexican - American war broke out and General Stephan Kearney traveled across the basin from New Mexico to Los Angeles, with Kit Carson as his guide, to subdue the unruly 'Californios'. The war ended in February 1848 with the signing of the 'Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo'. Gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill a short time later and it is estimated that over eight thousand emigrants crossed the desert on their way to the California gold fields, avoiding the snow and high mountain passes of the northern routes. In 1853 Congress to authorized a series of explorations for the discovery of a practical railroad route to the Pacific Coast. Lt. K S. Williamson, of the US Topographic Engineers, was selected to lead the southern expedition. With him, as a geologist, went Professor William R. Blake of the Yale Scientific School. Professor Blake was the first to explain the origin of the Salton Sink, to trace its ancient history, and to give a name to the great fresh-water lake it had once held. Professor Blake noticed that the Cahuilla Indians raised crops of corn, barley and vegetables, using ditch irrigation to bring water from springs around the valley. He suggested in his report the possibility of irrigating this "Valley of the Dead" possibly with water brought in channels from the Colorado River. He said,

"With water, it is probable that the greater part of the desert could be made to yield crops of almost any kind." Reclamation of a desert was a bold and original idea in 1857. He could see that the sedimentary deposits needed only water to make them fertile. Blake's engineer, Ebenezer Hadley, recommended a canal location practically identical with that which was adopted 40 years later. Homesteaders in the mid-west started to flock to the west coast following the blizzards of 1886 and the drought of 1888.