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## Spanish Explorers, Trappers, and Smugglers Discover Catalina Island

### The Arrival of the Spanish

**C**atalina Island was discovered many years before most of the rest of the country. Cabrillo described two islands and, for many years, historians believed that he had seen both Catalina and San Clemente Islands. There is now general agreement that he had been confused by the low land at Isthmus and believed that he was viewing two separate, adjacent islands. He anchored his ship in White's Landing near Long Point, gave the Native Islanders beads, claimed Catalina Island for Spain, and continued to explore California's coast.

Sixty years after Cabrillo's brief stay at Catalina, a second Spanish explorer, General Sebastian Viscaïno, arrived. On November 24, 1602, he anchored near the Isthmus and named the Island for Saint Caterina.

Although both Cabrillo and Viscaïno made only brief visits to Catalina, they provided the first written records of the Island and her people. They also led the parade of many who came to Catalina to use her resources and profit from her location. Trappers, smugglers, ranchers, miners, and entrepreneurs came to Catalina, seeking wealth from this natural paradise less than twenty miles across the San Pedro Channel from the mainland.

The Spanish claimed ownership of Catalina Island and tried to control it. They had, however, neither the personnel nor the resources to accomplish this. As trappers and smugglers discovered the value of Catalina, it became more and more difficult for the Spanish to exert any control over the activities on the Island. For centuries, trapping and illegal trading thrived there.

## The Trappers

For awhile, trappers found instant wealth in Catalina's abundant and easy-to-trap otter. With the exception of the ruthless killing spree by the large group of Aleut hunters, most trappers arrived alone or in small groups. They traveled quickly, lightly, and quietly. The Spanish had a very difficult time finding and controlling them. Nevertheless, the Spanish authorities resented these trappers who were making such good profits from killing their otters.

They made it as difficult as they could for trappers to travel and trap in the area. When the well-known trapper, Jedediah S. Smith, arrived in San Diego, he was held prisoner for several months before well-respected citizens convinced the government that he was harmless and peaceful. When he was finally released he went to Catalina where he trapped otter for two days before moving on.

Although these solitary hunters did not loot or kill the Native Islanders, as had the Aleuts, they still left a bloody legacy: they brought disease to the tribes on the Island and exterminated the otter population.

## The Smugglers

Soon, the trappers needed a new source of income. Almost simultaneously, the Spanish imposed extremely high duties on trading. In need of income, many trappers saw these duties as an opportunity to turn to smuggling for their income. Already familiar with her isolation, well-hidden coves, and safe anchorages, smugglers selected Catalina as their safe haven and the Island's chapter as a smugglers' paradise began.

For two centuries, innumerable treasures, from pirate's booty to bootlegger's alcohol, have been successfully hidden on Catalina Island.

By the early 1800s, smuggling was flourishing all along the coast.

The Spanish had clearly lost their battle to control California. Soon, smuggling was so common that even reputable ship captains and wealthy traders routinely smuggled goods up and down the California coast. According to Sir George Simpson, a respected trader:

*These probationary exactions (125% of the value of the merchandise) defeat their object, by the encouragement they afford to smuggling, three-fourths of the goods introduced into the country being run ashore, and the remaining one-fourth only passing through customs.*

Richard Henry Dana observed and documented smuggling on Catalina in his famous, best-selling book, *Two Years Before the Mast*. He told the world how most of the vessels arriving in California hid their cargo on Catalina Island. A very small portion of this cargo was taken to Monterey to be declared and taxed. When the taxed portion had been sold, the ship was restocked in Catalina with the untaxed cargo. Ships continued trading up and down the coast and restocking at Catalina Island until all of the illegal cargo had been sold.

One of Catalina's most famous smugglers was the dashing, twenty-three year old co-owner of the *Lela Byrd*, Captain William Shaler. In 1803, he reached San Diego in need of wood and water. His ship was full of illegal otter skins. Spanish authorities suspected he was smuggling, and a skirmish began. Shaler escaped. No one was hurt, but his ship was damaged. He took his smuggled otter skins to China, where they brought excellent prices.

By the following year, the *Lela Byrd* was leaking badly, but Shaler wanted more profit before taking the time to repair his ship. According to Shaler:

*The 14th of March, I paid a visit to the island of Santa Catalina . . . and I determined that, after collecting all the skins on the coast, I would return to it and careen the ship [rest it on its side on the sand], which she was by this time greatly in want of. After completing our business on the coast, we returned to Santa Catalina, and anchored in the harbor on the first of May.*

The Catalina Native Islanders enthusiastically welcomed Shaler and helped with the repairs. Six weeks later, the *Lela Byrd* was freshly caulked with lime and pitch and ready to cross the Pacific again. En route to Canton, Shaler came across a deal he could not refuse. Despite the exorbitant profits awaiting him in China, he sold his ship and all his otter skins to the king of the Sandwich Islands. Shaler never sailed again. Instead, he accepted a post as Consul for Havana, Cuba and remained there until his death from cholera in 1833 at the age of fifty-five.

When the Mexican government took over California, the high duties were not lowered. Instead, in addition to these high taxes, a law was passed that required that all coastal trading be done in Mexican vessels. If anything, this increased smuggling activities rather than stopping them. Two incidents involving Captains Cunningham and Bradshaw illustrate how ineffective the Mexican government was in its attempts to control smuggling:

1) In 1826, Cunningham and Bradshaw erected a hut on Catalina to protect their smuggled cargo. The Mexican government ordered them to tear it down. They replied promptly and reported that the hut had been destroyed. They were not telling the truth. This same hut, known later as Bradshaw's Hut, was still standing as late as 1886.

2) Two years later, the Governor of Mexico accused Bradshaw of a variety of illegal acts, including smuggling on Catalina Island. He was ordered to unload his cargo so that it could be examined. Instead, Bradshaw cut the cable that secured his ship and sailed safely out of port under a barrage of Mexican gunfire.

Smuggling changed, but did not end, when the United States gained control of California in 1848. High taxes were repealed, and it was no longer profitable to hide cargoes in the Island's coves. However, laws were soon passed that made it very profitable to smuggle people.

In 1882, the United States passed the China Exclusion Act that was designed to prohibit Chinese from entering the United States and to deport any Chinese who were already here. Ship captains were paid well to transport Chinese back to China.

Chinese workers were needed for the hard labor of building of railroads and railroad owners were unwilling to lose these hard workers. They were determined to keep their Chinese workers and looked to the same ship captains for help. The plan: Chinese workers were deported, as the law required. They were only taken as far as Catalina Island before they were smuggled into America again. Ship captains hid their human cargo on the Island in camps that sprang up all over the Island. (China Point was named for one of these camps.) At night, they smuggled these Chinese workers back into America through one of the three unguarded California ports: San Diego, San Pedro, or Monterey.

Ship captains had found an unending source of income—while they were being paid by the government to take deported Chinese back to China, they were also being paid handsomely by the railroads to smuggle the same people back into California. As this cycle continued, captains got richer and richer.

When Prohibition became a law in 1919, Catalina again became a smuggler's hideaway. Catalina's caves hid tons of bootlegged whiskey. Most of the bootleggers were not apprehended, for Catalina provided a perfect spot for bootlegging activities. Bootleggers with powerful lights hid on Catalina's hilltops and, when the coast was clear, signaled to the powerboats in the Island's coves which were loaded with illegal whiskey. These high-speed boats darted across the Channel to unload their alcohol on one of many deserted beaches on the mainland.

In 1923, one thousand cases of illegal whiskey were discovered near Eagle Rock. Pleasure boaters were warned to stay far from Eagle Rock until the bootleggers had been found.

For centuries, Catalina Island has provided a smugglers' haven for cargoes, people, and whiskey. No one knows how many rich caches of drugs have also been safely hidden in Catalina's coves. Some suspect there have been many. In 1966, a group of Explorer Scouts camping on the beach discovered a half-buried chest containing opium wrapped in gold leaf. How many other illegal secrets are still hidden in Catalina's coves—remnants of her rich history as a smugglers' paradise?

