

Past tsunami strikes wreaked havoc on California

Dan Krieger, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 9-26-15

Krieger's column is special to The Tribune. He is a professor emeritus of history at Cal Poly and past president of the California Mission Studies Association.

A tsunami advisory was issued for coastal areas of California after a magnitude 8.3 earthquake hit central Chile on Sept. 16. There was minimal impact on the Southern California coast generating tide fluctuations of up to a foot.

A large tsunami destroyed much of Crescent City, California on March 28, 1964. Eleven people died in the small town when the Great Alaska Earthquake registered 8.4 on the Richter scale. The Surface-wave magnitude was later determined to have registered 9.2.

Readers have asked about large tsunamis striking the Central Coast in times past.

Father Luis Gil y Taboada's grave is marked at the right base of the sanctuary in Mission San Luis Obispo. In 1812, Father Luis witnessed what may be the greatest historically recorded earthquake and possible tsunami in Central and Southern California.

In December 1833, Father Luis went to Rancho Santa Margarita to say Mass for the neophytes who were engaged in planting the winter grain crop. Evidently the journey up over the rugged Cuesta trail sapped what remained of his health.

At the foot of the altar in the Assistencia chapel, he suffered a violent attack of dysentery and began vomiting blood. Father Juan Cabot was summoned from San Miguel and administered last rites before Father Luis died on Dec. 15, 1833.

Twenty-one years earlier, in 1812, Father Luis was stationed at Mission Santa Barbara when a 7.2-magnitude earthquake occurred on Dec. 21, 1812.

What appears to be the most complete historical record we have of a major tsunami in our region documents events following that temblor.

The earthquake had its origins near Santa Cruz Island in the Santa Barbara Channel. Within several minutes, it leveled Mission La Purisima to "rubble and ruin, presenting the picture of a destroyed Jerusalem." Missions Santa Ines, Santa Barbara, the Santa Barbara Presidio, Mission San Buenaventura (Ventura), and Mission San Fernando, covering a radius nearly 100 miles distant from the epicenter, were severely damaged.

Angustias de la Guerra Ord told oral historian Thomas W. Savage of a conversation in 1832 with Father Luis Gil y Taboada, probably in San Luis Obispo:

"Speaking of Father Luis Gil Taboada, he told me that when he was in Santa Bárbara in 1812, the earthquakes were very strong . . . While he was at the presidio of Santa Bárbara, there was such a strong earthquake that the sea withdrew and turned into what appeared to be a tall hill. He and all of the people from the presidio took off running toward the mission, singing litanies to the Virgin.

"He told me that they drove a pole with a ball tied to it into the ground at a place where the wind did not

blow. But the ball moved continuously for eight days. It stopped moving for two or three hours and then it began to move again. This lasted for about 15 days.”

Father Luis also reported that a sea otter trapping ship, The Charon, at Refugio, was carried up a canyon by the wave and returned to the sea apparently without any great damage to ship or crew.

Ironically, the ship was named after Charon in Greek mythology who ferries the dead across the river Acheron.

The grave site marker in our Old Mission links us with one of the great catastrophes in times past.