

In late October, 1775, Juan Bautista de Anza, a Spanish explorer, set out with an expedition of settlers from New Spain (now Mexico) and headed toward California. They were on their way to found a permanent colony at San Francisco Bay. The trip was long and rugged, but those brave men and women persisted and eventually reached their goal.

“Tomorrow we start across the desert,” said Colonel Juan Bautista de Anza. “Today you must fill all your waterskins. Then cut bundles of grass and tie them to your saddlebags. Your life may depend on these things.”

The colonists, more than two hundred of them, listened carefully to Anza’s words. They trusted their leader. They knew he had made the trip before. He had blazed the trail for this overland route to California that they now traveled—the trail that could be so important in helping the Spanish make permanent settlements in that new land. Their journey had begun in what is now Mexico. The band had traveled north to Arizona and now they must cross the Colorado desert to reach the mountains.

Anza went out to gather grass with the rest of the party. He was more concerned about this trip than the colonists were. Already, he knew, many of the people were ill and the pack animals were bone-thin. Still, they must press on, for winter was coming and soon the mountains would be blocked with snow.

Anza knew that water holes in the desert would be scarce. To give everyone a chance to have water, Anza divided the colonists into three groups. They would travel twenty-four hours apart from each other.

Anza led the first group out the next morning. The sky was gray, the land was bleak. Only a few clumps of cactus and mesquite broke up the miles of blowing sand. The howling wind seemed to have no beginning and no end.

The next day they reached what Anza called the Deep Well of Little Water. It had saved the lives of him and his soldiers on the earlier journey. But now it seemed all too rightly named. There was hardly any water in it at all.

The people shared the water in their waterskins. They gave the animals the grass they had brought. Before long, their emergency supplies were used up.

The next day they had to ride thirty-five miles across the dunes to reach the Wells of Santa Rosa. They set off in the early morning. Anza sent soldiers ahead to dig the wells deeper. But when he and his party finally arrived, the wells began to go dry almost as soon as the people started using them.

The colonists stared numbly at death. They were too tired and cold to even protest this terrible turn of events.

But Anza was not. “I will not let it end here!” he shouted. “Give me a shovel.” He took off his coat and began to dig fiercely at one of the well holes. “There’s water here, but we must make it flow,” he insisted. “Come on! Dig!”

The people who were still healthy were heartened by Anza’s example. They began digging along with him. They kept it up all night. At last there was water for everyone.

The next day they moved on so there would be water left in the wells for the other two groups. Anza knew they had many more hard days ahead.

They celebrated Christmas in the mountains. Somehow, in spite of their hardships, the colonists found strength to dance and sing for the holiday.

Soon after the new year, Anza and his

people reached the settlement of San Gabriel. The worst of their journey was over now. They would rest here until their strength was restored. Then they would go on to make their homes by the bay of San Francisco.

CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. The settlers that Anza was leading came from New Spain, which is present-day**
 - A Panama
 - B Wyoming
 - C Mexico
- 2. Anza was leading them over a trail that he had**
 - A blazed himself
 - B never heard of before
 - C always wanted to try
- 3. The colonists were heading for California to**
 - A make permanent settlements for Spain
 - B search for gold
 - C find more fertile farmland
- 4. Anza was concerned about the settlers' welfare because**
 - A winter was coming
 - B already some people were ill
 - C Both A and B
- 5. At the Deep Well of Little Water the travelers found the water**
 - A almost used up
 - B poisoned by natural acids
 - C Neither A nor B
- 6. Since good water was scarce in the desert, Anza**
 - A sent some colonists back home
 - B divided the band into three groups
 - C led them along a new route
- 7. When things looked very bleak, Anza kept the colonists going by**
 - A cruelty and threats
 - B his own example of determination
 - C promising them free land
- 8. The colonists celebrated Christmas**
 - A in the mountains
 - B back home in New Spain
 - C at the bay of Monterey
- 9. The first settlement the colonists reached in California was**
 - A San Francisco
 - B San Gabriel
 - C San Bruno
- 10. The worst part of the journey was over**
 - A on Thanksgiving Day, 1775
 - B right before New Year, 1775/76
 - C a little after New Year, 1775/76