

The Quest for Governorship of Spanish California

by Manual P. Servin

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Edited by MANUEL P. SERVÍN

INCONCEIVABLE AS IT may at first seem to Californians today, Spanish California possessed little attraction for settlers. Despite its temperate climate, which supposedly was "so good that all [were] . . . getting to look like Englishmen,"¹ and despite the Spanish government's generous subsidies to settlers from New Spain, the province lured few immigrants.² San José, the first pueblo, was founded in 1777 with a total of sixty-eight inhabitants;³ Los Angeles, the only Spanish pueblo in the south, began its existence in 1781 with only forty-four persons;⁴ and Villa de Branciforte, present-day Santa Cruz, came into being in 1797 with seventeen *pobladores*.⁵ By 1820, just prior to the end of Spanish rule, San José had about 240 inhabitants; Los Angeles, about 650; and Branciforte, about 75—a total municipal population in the neighborhood of 1,000 inhabitants.⁶

The sparcity of this Hispanized population was not, however, the only indication of the province's lack of attraction. The quality of the new settlers gave additional evidence. From the early period California experienced great difficulty in drawing substantial, ambitious immigrants. The founding fathers of Los Angeles were from the poorest and lowest classes of northwestern New Spain, and were largely unacceptable even to the missionaries.⁷ The founders of Branciforte, though being more European than those of San José and Los Angeles, were of poorer quality: some were ridden with syphilis, and the group as a whole was of class deemed not much better than petty criminals.⁸ To augment this meager, humble pueblo population, the Spanish government found it necessary to foster further immigration. Unfortunately, it found it expedient to encourage, and in some cases to require, petty criminals and foundlings to migrate to the peninsula. Between 1791 and 1798 at least twenty-eight prisoners and former prisoners

arrived; in 1800 nineteen foundlings were sent from the city of Mexico.⁹

If the *poblador's* life in Spanish California proved unalluring to the inhabitants of New Spain, the governorship of the province, on the other hand, appears to have been attractive and desirable to some exemplary military and naval officers. A concrete example of the desirability, and of the relative importance, of this position occurred in 1792 with the death of Governor José Antonio Roméu. Almost immediately after Roméu's death on April 9, 1792, the Viceroy received petitionary letters (which are translated below) recommending four remarkable, if not outstanding, candidates and officers for the gubernatorial post—Francisco Antonio Mourelle, of the Royal Navy; Lieutenant Colonel Manuel de Echeagaray, commandant of the Presidio of Santa Cruz in New Mexico; Captain Pedro de Alberni, commandant of the garrison at Nootka; and Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Diego de Borica, adjutant inspector of the Internal Presidios of New Spain. Whether other letters recommending additional candidates were received has not been definitely determined.

Probably the outstanding candidate for the position was Francisco Mourelle, who personally wrote to the Viceroy and enclosed a detailed, and not immodest, record of services rendered. Mourelle—whose imposing American record prior to his petition included two important explorations of the Canadian and Alaskan coasts under Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Cuadra, voyages to the Philippines and China, and the post of special secretary to the Viceroy—terminated his career splendidly. Returning to Spain a year after seeking the governorship, he distinguished himself numerous times against the British during the early Napoleonic period and against the French during the Peninsular War. He became successively *capitán de navío*, a flag officer, and finally commanding general of the *Gran expedición de ultramar* which had been formed to eradicate the Independence Movement in South America.¹⁰ Yet Mourelle, despite his excellent New World record, was not selected as governor of California.

A second but less distinguished candidate for the post was Manuel de Echeagaray, whose petition to the Viceroy was written by his father, Don Luis Gutiérrez, treasurer general of the royal patronage and royal treasury in Mexico City. Echeagaray already had a good frontier service record at the time he indirectly sought the governorship in 1792. As

captain of the presidio of Santa Cruz in northern Sonora, he had been selected to command a substantial expedition which was to establish the direct trade route between Sonora and Santa Fé. Despite the expedition's failure to reach Santa Fé, Echeagaray received the firm approbation of Commandant General Jacobo Ugarte y Loyola for discovering the pass to New Mexico and for his handling of the hostile Apaches. Shortly before his father solicited the California post, he was again chosen as commander of a second similar expedition, but was pushed aside and replaced by his immediate superior. Whether this action motivated Lieutenant Colonel Echeagaray to seek the governorship is difficult to determine. At any rate, Echeagaray did not come to California, either as governor or as a military commander, but remained in Sonora where he advanced to the position of military commandant.¹¹

Lieutenant Colonel Pedro de Alberni, who later in his career came to California as commander of the Catalonian Volunteers, was a third unsuccessful candidate for the post. Alberni, an officer whose accomplishments have been overlooked by California historians but not by his wife, was military commandant and governor of Nootka—New Spain's Siberia—when the incumbent Roméu died. Consequently, it was his wife who wrote and pushed, hoping to obtain California's governorship for her husband. Yet, Doña Juana Vélez de Alberni, as her letter below clearly shows, did not exaggerate her husband's accomplishments. Alberni had apparently distinguished himself by his participation in the Portuguese and Sonoran campaigns and by his administration of the province of Nayarit and of the port of Nootka, where he successfully promoted agriculture, built offices and houses, and strengthened relations with the aborigines. Alberni was promoted to a brevet lieutenant colonelcy but not to the governorship of California.¹² Alberni, however, was later stationed in that province where he became a lieutenant of the governor (Diego de Borica, the successful candidate for the position) in the founding of the Villa de Branciforte.¹³ Upon Borica's retirement and death in 1800, Alberni became the highest ranking officer in the Californias, but not interim governor.¹⁴

The successful applicant for California's highest post, Diego de Borica, possessed an exceptional frontier military record. Distinguishing himself in encounters and campaigns against the Comanches and Apaches in New Mexico and also in military administrative posts, Borica

received strong recommendations from his superiors, Interim Commandant General José Antonio Rengel and Commandant General Pedro de Nava, in 1784 and 1793 respectively.¹⁵ In addition to his excellent record, he had several advantages over his rivals. Of all the above-mentioned applicants, he held the most important frontier position—adjutant inspector of the Internal Presidios; he received his brevet lieutenant colonelcy first; he had been personally recommended by the commandant general of the Internal Provinces; and, most important, he was a friend of Viceroy Revilla Gigedo.¹⁶

Whether Borica's services were as distinguished as those of Naval Lieutenant Mourelle or as far-reaching as those of Pedro de Alberni cannot be judged. In any event, it is plausible that Borica's selection, if one places any reliance on his service record, reveals an appreciation of both military and administrative accomplishments by the Viceroy and by the commandant general of the Internal Provinces. Regardless of the reasons for his appointment, Borica proved to be a most successful governor. In the words of Hubert Howe Bancroft, he "was one of the ablest and best rulers the country ever had, always striving for progress in different directions, avoiding controversy, personally interesting himself in the welfare of all classes; a jovial bon-vivant, knight of Santiago, and a man of wealth."¹⁷

The letters that Borica and his unsuccessful opponents for the governorship wrote or that were written on their behalf are of consequence in understanding California and Hispanic colonial history.¹⁸ They clearly reveal the high character and ability of the gubernatorial aspirants, and clearly indicate the regard in which the office was held. Perhaps of less significance, they serve to combat to a limited degree some of the stereotype concepts of Spaniards and Spanish culture that some Americans are prone to accept—the ideas that Spaniards were universally easy-going and that Spanish women were quiet, retiring wives. These few letters, on the contrary, are proof that certain Spaniards, especially in the military, were pushed by the same drives for position and status that were found in the English-speaking world. Perhaps, the outstanding example of this drive is found in Mourelle's letter and enclosed statements of services, the first of the various letters of application that are translated below:

Señor:

Most Excellent Señor, the Viceroy of New Spain

After having served on the voyages which were made from San Blas to the discoveries [in the Pacific Northwest] and to Asia for a period of eighteen years beginning in February of [17]75, I obtained from our sovereign, through Your Excellency's respected influence, permission to return to Spain if Your Excellency should find it convenient.

My object in that petition was to escape from the climate of the Torrid Zone which so obviously always attacked my health. And, since I was supported by the merits earned during the indicated eighteen years, and by the six voyages from Spain to America before I was assigned to San Blas, I had hopes that the King's mercy would assign me to a country suitable to my health.

The death of the governor of Monterey gave me hope, upon seeing Your Excellency's justice, that you would grant me that command if this should be advantageous to the King's service and beneficial to those new establishments.

My scientific knowledge in navigation would be useful in commanding those presidios and missions. The exploration of those neighboring coasts and even of the distant ones (when Your Excellency should order that they be examined from land), the investigation of the inland territories, the location and true position of the large rivers that flow through them, and all the geographical descriptions which to this day we do not possess, could be accomplished without expense to the royal treasury in such a case.

The products which would make that territory prosper would be promoted by me in accordance with the exportation that I have proposed since the year '85 to the Most Excellent Conde de Gálvez, which statement should be in Your Excellency's secretariat.

Concerning the destruction of commerce which the foreigners carry out in the fur trade, and from which, at some time, inevitable harm will result to our nation, I think that I can state that I have more ability and knowledge to achieve than anyone else.

If Your Excellency's goodness (after seeing the aforementioned reasons and the uninterrupted succession of voyages, which were made for eighteen years from San Blas to the discovered areas of the northern coasts of the Californias and to the establishments in Asia, which are attested to by the enclosed statements, and of which there are excellent recommendations in Your Excellency's secretariat) should accede to my petition, I would consider myself remunerated for my services and obligated to Your Excellency's kindness.

May Our Lord guard Your Excellency's life for many years.

Mexico, 30 July 1792
The Most Excellent Señor

Fran.^{co} Antonio Mourelle

FIRST

STATEMENT OF THE MERITS AND SERVICES THAT DON FRANCISCO ANTONIO MOURELLE, LIEUTENANT OF THE ROYAL FLEET, KNIGHT OF THE ORDER OF SANTIAGO, ACHIEVED WHILE IN THE DEPARTMENT OF EL FERROL.

On 10 April, [17]63 he was examined in the study of navigation at the Academy for Pilots at El Ferrol.

1. On the 19 March '65 he was ordered aboard the man-of-war *El Arrogante*, Don Juan Ponce de León commanding, in order to exercise the theory of his specialty. He travelled to Cádiz, Cartagena, Genoa, back to Cartagena, and finally to El Ferrol where he disembarked on 11 October of that same year.

2. On the 1 October '66 he embarked for the same reason on the bark *Peregrina*, Lieutenant Don Atanacio Barranda commanding, and travelled to Brazil, Caracas, Havana, and Cádiz where he disembarked on the 12 May '68.

3. On the 18 January '69 by command of the King, he was ordered aboard and placed in charge of navigation of the Catalonian settee, *Nuestra Señora del Buen Viage* which was transporting a company of the León Regiment to the island of Puerto Rico; he returned to disembark at El Ferrol on the 5 June of the same year.

4. On the 13 October '70, being an assistant to the regular pilot of the Royal Fleet, he embarked on the Catalonian settee *Nuestra Señora del Pilar* which was chartered by order of the King to transport a company of the Victoria Regiment from El Ferrol to Puerto Rico; and, after having had charge of its navigation, he returned to disembark at the said Department on 26 February '71.

5. On the 18 March of the same year he embarked on the frigate *Santa Catalina*, Captain Don Vicente Caamaño commanding; he disembarked from it on the 1 July of the same year.

6. On the 24 April he was ordered aboard the King's corvette *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*, Lieutenant Ignacio Milau commanding, destined for Cumaná, and the Ysla de Trinidad de Barlovento; he returned to disembark at El Ferrol on the 12 September '73.

7. On the 10 October of the same year he was ordered aboard the King's bark *Santa Rita*, Lieutenant Don Juan Palacios commanding, in which he travelled to Cádiz, Puerto Rico, and Veracruz, from where by order of His Excellency the Viceroy Don Antonio Bucareli he disembarked on 12 January 1775. He travelled to San Blas, being employed as first pilot in the explorations which were made from there to the northern coasts of America.

In the seven recorded embarcations and voyages, he has merited extraordinary recommendations which give him considerable credit in his specialty as is evident to His Excellency Don Manuel de Florez who was general and commandant general of the Department of Ferrol where this interested party rendered his first services.

Fran.^{co} Antonio Mourelle

Mexico, 30 July 1792

SECOND

STATEMENT OF THE MERITS EARNED AND OF THE SERVICES RENDERED BY DON FRANCISCO ANTONIO MOURELLE, LIEUTENANT OF ROYAL FLEET, FROM HIS VOYAGES FROM THE PORT OF SAN BLAS TO THE DISCOVERIES REACHING 61 DEGREES LATITUDE ON THE NORTHERN COAST OF THE CALIFORNIAS, AND ALSO FROM HIS VOYAGES TO THE ORIENT.

1. On 14 March [17]75, commissioned as first pilot of the schooner *Sonora*, he departed from the port of San Blas for the discoveries of the northern coast of the Californias—discoveries that were carried out by this ship as far as 58 degrees of latitude. He returned to San Blas at the end of November of the above said year.

2. At the beginning of March '76, as an ensign, he sailed from San Blas, commanding the King's packet named *Principe*, in order to aid the presidio of San Diego on the northern coast of California. He returned to San Blas at the end of June of the same year.

3. At the beginning of February '79, he was second in command of the King's frigate *Favorita* which sailed that year from San Blas to the discoveries which reached as far as 61 degrees latitude. He returned to that port at the end of November of the same year.

4. At the beginning of February '80, he sailed as second in command of the King's frigate, *Princesa*, which travelled to Manila with troops, powder, and funds which due to the war were needed at that fortress where he disembarked at the beginning of July of the same year.

5. On the 24 August 1780, as an ensign, he took command of the same frigate *Princesa* and departed from Manila upon receiving favorable reports on the security of that fortress. He arrived at San Blas toward the end of September '81.

6. At the beginning of July 1783, he took command at San Blas of the frigate *Princesa* and carried the news of the peace to Manila, from where he returned in the same ship to the port of San Blas and disembarked on the first of December 1784.

7. In the beginning of January '85, he took command of the Department of San Blas, and he gave it up at the beginning of October of the same year in order to attend some other urgent affairs of the Royal Service.

8. At the beginning of October '85, he took command of small schooner, and in it he carried the first funds and royal orders for the establishment of the company of the Philippines. He arrived at Manila in this ship toward the end of December of the same year.

9. At the beginning of February '86, he took command of the King's man-of-war *San Felipe*, and with necessary funds he travelled to Canton in the empire of China from where he returned and disembarked at Manila on 4 June of the same year.

10. At the beginning of September '86, while in command of the same man-

of-war, he sailed to China and returned to Manila on the last of November of the same year.

11. At the beginning of January '87, while in command of the same man-of-war, he sailed to Canton in the empire of China, and returned to Manila in the first days of September of the same year.

12. In July '89, now being a lieutenant, he embarked on the King's man-of-war *San Andrés* and travelled to the port of Acapulco where he disembarked in January 1790.

13. In September 1791 he was commissioned by order of His Excellency the Viceroy to take command of a ship of exploration in the port of San Blas, where he embarked for the port of Acapulco. From there he returned to Mexico during the first days of March '92 due to new orders from your Excellency.

In the thirteen commissions which have been recorded and in which he was employed for eighteen years, he carried out his obligations so greatly in accordance to the will of his superiors that all of them made serious efforts to write excellent recommendations to the King concerning his conduct, activity, and intelligence. At the same time he merited the consideration of the foreigners who took as their guide his diaries.

Fr^{co} Antonio Mourelle

Mexico, 30 July 1792

Most Excellent Señor

Don Luis Gutiérrez, minister, treasurer general of the patronage and the royal treasury of this capital, in behalf and at the request of his son, Lieutenant Colonel Don Manuel de Echagaray, commandant of the Presidio of Santa Cruz, one of the Internal Provinces, with due respect informs Your Excellency that the governorship of the province of California has become vacant due to the death of Lieutenant Colonel Don José Antonio Roméu. Because the aforesaid Don Manuel de Echagaray possesses the necessary qualities of aptitude, military skill, sufficient rank, robust health, irreproachable conduct, and many merits, which he has minutely made known to Your Excellency and concerning which (including the military command at Arispe) the Commandant General Don Pedro Nava has informed Your Excellency, it is humbly requested that it pleases Your Excellency to confer the aforementioned governorship of the Californias upon Lieutenant Colonel Don Manuel de Echagaray, whose natural excellence hopes to merit the kindness of Your Excellency.

Mexico, 8 July 1792
Most Excellent Señor

Luis Gutiérrez

Most Excellent Señor

Doña Juana Vélez, lawful wife of the captain of the Catalan Volunteers assigned to the government of Nootka on the coast of Alta California, has requested that I appropriately recommend to Your Excellency the distinguished

merits of her husband for the governorship of Monterey that is vacant. And although I did not wish to make use of this friendship, considering the quality of the fairness which is evident in Your Excellency and being prevailed upon by her requests, I venture to do it—imploing Your Excellency to please consider this captain's revelant services, performed in that miserable assignment where it is required that the hardships, which he has suffered in the time that he has been confined in it, be greater than those suffered in the rigorous campaign. Therefore, I hope that the well-known goodness of Your Excellency, if he has not already named a person for that governorship, please consider this honorable officer and please forgive my boldness in bothering you.

God keep Your Excellency many years.

Guadalajara, 10 July 1792
Most Excellent Señor

Antonio Villa Urrutía

Most Excellent Señor

Doña Juana Vélez y Carrera, lawful wife of Don Pedro Alberni, captain of the Catalan Volunteer Regiment and at the present time stationed at the new establishment and exploration of the port of Nootka, with the greatest due respect and with confidence in Your Excellency's well-known integrity, humbly petitions that Your Excellency bear in mind the aforesaid captain in the filling of the governorship of Monterey (left vacant by the death of Don José Roméu) which appointment he has always desired, and which at the present moment would be most timely in obtaining relief from the famine and hardships that he is undergoing on the aforementioned expedition.

I do not doubt that this petition, based upon military services that could be concealed from Your Excellency's perspicacity, will have the desired effect upon Your Excellency's sense of justice.

May God Our Lord keep the important life of Your Excellency for many years.

Guadalajara, 26 June 1792
Most Excellent Señor

Juana Vélez

Señor:

Don Diego de Borica, adjutant inspector of Internal Presidios of New Spain, brevet lieutenant colonel of cavalry, with the greatest respect makes known to Your Honor that he has served a period of twenty-nine years, three months, and five days: one year, four months, and fifteen days as an infantry cadet; twelve years, eleven months, and eight days as an infantry and cavalry lieutenant; four years, seven months, and twenty-six days as captain of this branch; and ten years, three months and sixteen days in his present position of adjutant inspector with the rank of lieutenant colonel for seven years, four months, and sixteen days.

Within this period he took the census of the districts adjacent to Mexico, and has organized the militias of the province of New Mexico; he carried out two punitive expeditions against the Comanches and three campaigns against the Apaches, having punished the latter severely in two and having in all these expeditions from one hundred fifty to two hundred men under his command while he himself was under another commander in only one. He has had another encounter when he was commandant of the New Mexican cordon of frontier forts.

From the year 1779 he was assigned duty as subinspector of the presidios of Nueva Vizcaya, and up to the present date he has made twenty-three presidial inspections and four reviews of flying companies; he organized the militia of El Paso, drawing up its regulations; he carried out the work of consolidating such dispersed population in order to free the people from the sudden attacks of the enemy; he co-operated in the establishment of other military settlements following the corresponding requirements which were demanded by so many undertakings. On various occasions he has had command of the second and fourth divisions of the frontier of Nueva Vizcaya. In 1785 he was commissioned by the commandancy general to request help from the viceroyalty and to inform it of the state of the provinces. In '89, '90, '91, and part of the present year, he was commissioned to visit the Tarahumares, the Tepehuanes, the Spanish settlements, mining towns, haciendas, and ranchos of Nueva Vizcaya in order to apprehend all classes of offenders, and to introduce measures benefitting the Indians living in the pueblos. This he carried out, apprehending many criminals, pardoning those who voluntarily gave themselves up, and removing the extremely grave oppressions suffered by the Indians who numbered thirty-three thousand five-hundred individuals of every class and were living in seventy-five pueblos. Since his departure from Mexico, he has travelled, always on official business or on campaigns, nine thousand five hundred leagues throughout these provinces. In consideration of all this: he humbly entreats that Your Honor please confer upon him the political and military government of the peninsula of California, left vacant by the death of Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Don José Antonio Roméu—a favor which he hopes to merit from your sovereign clemency.

Chihuahua, 20 June 1792
Señor

Diego de Borica

The merits and service which the interested party states are true; and in view of the talent and of the fine execution and discharge of his command, I consider him most suitable for the office of governor of California which is now vacant and which he seeks, provided Your Honor deigns to confer it on him.

Chihuahua, June 21, 1792

Pedro de Nava¹⁹

NOTES

1. By this remark Governor Diego de Borica meant that the inhabitants, the *gente de razón*, were becoming lighter skinned because of the climate. See Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California* (San Francisco, 1884), I, 533; Charles E. Chapman, *A History of California: The Spanish Period* (New York, 1921), p. 408.
2. For the amount of the subsidy, see Felipe de Neve, "Reglamento," *Annual Publications, HSSC, XV* (1931), 248-249.
3. Oscar Osburn Winther, "The Story of San Jose, 1777-1869," *CHSQ, XIV* (March, 1935), 5; Bancroft, *California*, I, 312, gives sixty-six as the number of founders.
4. W. W. Robinson, *Los Angeles* (San Francisco, 1959), p. 14. Bancroft, *California*, I, 345, gives forty-six as the number of founders. For a complete and solid description of the founding of Los Angeles, see Thomas Workman Temple, "Se Fundaron un Pueblo de Españoles," *Annual Publications, HSSC, XV* (1931), 69-98.
5. Florian Guest, "The Establishment of the Villa de Branciforte," *CHSQ, XLI* (March, 1962), 38-39.
6. Bancroft, *California*, II, 377, 378n, 349, 390.
7. For an incisive, brief description of the *pobladores*, see John Caughey, *California*, pp. 140-141. Chapman, *California*, pp. 391-392, is decidedly harsh on the *poblanos*.
8. Guest, "The Establishment of the Villa de Branciforte," *CHSQ, XLI*, 38-39; Zephyrin Engelhardt, *The Missions and Missionaries of California* (Santa Barbara, 1930), II, 537-538.
9. Bancroft, *California*, I, 605-606; Chapman, *California*, pp. 384 and 392.
10. For a scholarly description of Mourelle's accomplishments see Donald Cutter, "California, Training Ground for Spanish Naval Heroes," *CHSQ, XL* (June, 1961), 109-114. The editor is indebted to Professor Cutter for making available research data on Pedro de Alberni and for kindly reviewing the final translation of letters appearing herein.
11. George P. Hammond, "The Zuñiga Journal, Tucson to Santa Fé: The Opening of a Spanish Trade Route, 1788-1795," *New Mexico Historical Review*, VI (January, 1931), 41-49, presents a scholarly picture of Echeagaray's contributions and activities in the opening of the trail.
12. "Viage a la Costa N. O. de America, por D. Juan Fran.^{co} de la Bodega y Quadra, . . . ano de 1782," MS, Huntington Library, San Marino, HM 141; El Rey to el Conde de Alange, Aranjuez, March 28, 1793, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, *Estado* 4287; Pedro de Alberni to Miguel Joseph Aranza, San Francisco, August 1, 1798, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, *Mexico* 1446; Bancroft, *California*, II, 5-6.
13. Guest, "The Establishment of the Villa de Branciforte," *CHSQ, XLI*, 33.
14. Conde de Revilla Gigedo to José Antonio Arrillaga, July 8, 1792, Archivo

General de la Nación, Mexico, *Californias*, Tomo 16 (microfilm in Bancroft Library).

15. Diego de Borica's Service Records, December 31, 1784, and December 31, 1793, Archivo General de la Nación, *Indiferente de Guerra*, Tomo 150 (microfilm). The editor is indebted to Mr. Michael Mathes, special collections librarian at the University of New Mexico, for supplying microfilm reproductions of the above records; *also see* Pedro de Nava's notation on Diego de Borica's letter translated below.

16. Bancroft, *California*, I, 531.

17. Bancroft, *California*, II, 724.

18. The letters recommending the four aspirants to the governorship are translated from the microfilm copies in the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, AGN, *Californias*, Tomo 16. The editor is indebted to Miss Helen Voll for rendering a preliminary draft of the letters by Luis Gutiérrez, Juana Vélez, Antonio Villa Urrutía, and Diego de Borica; and to Dr. Iris Higbie Wilson for reviewing the entire manuscript.

19. Pedro de Nava wrote this note on the upper left corner of Borica's letter which was translated above.