

# SANTA MARIA TIMES

Gold and an Eerie Stillness: The La Panza Mountain Range

By Mark James Miller

April 5, 2025

Thirty years after James W. Marshall made his famous discovery at Sutter's Mill, a *Californio* named Efranio Trujillo was hunting in the La Panza region of eastern San Luis Obispo county. Losing track of a deer he had shot at, Trujillo stopped at a spring and peered down into the clear water. Glittering on the sand below were flakes of the King of Metals—Gold. His find set off San Luis Obispo's first and only gold rush.

Word soon spread, and a small but boisterous mining camp appeared, complete with a saloon, dance hall, and a general store. At least 600 people swarmed into La Panza, hoping, as so many have before and since, to find that Mother Lode.

While none did, (the amount of gold taken out was a mere \$100,000) the La Panza gold rush lasted long enough for a post office to be established there in 1879 (it closed in 1908), and mining continued until 1913. But the story of La Panza neither ends or begins there.

Adjacent to the breathtaking majesty of the Carrizo Plain, the La Panza Mountain Range and surrounding region were inhabited by the Salinan and Chumash people as much as 13,000 years ago, with the Chumash living more toward the coast and the Salinan further inland. Living peacefully and trading with one another, their range took them as far north as Monterey and as far south as Ventura.

When they became aware of the Europeans is unclear. Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, sailing under the Spanish flag, was the first European to see the California coast in 1543, and whether or not the Chumash saw the Spanish galleons sail past isn't recorded. Sixty years later, Sebastian Vizcaino made his way along the coast, going all the way to San Francisco. But it wasn't until the Portola Expedition, more than a century and a half later, that the indigenous tribes came face-to-face with Europeans.

All of this is as yesterday when you consider the demesne's geologic age. The bedrock dates back to the Mesozoic Era, 66 million years ago, when the granite and metamorphic rocks were formed, and to the Miocene Epoch, a mere 5 million years back, when the Pacific Plate and North American Plate clashed together.

The area is home to a wide variety of flora and fauna, such as the La Panza Manzanita Shrub, endemic to the area, and the La Panza Mariposa, found only in San Luis Obispo County. Black tailed deer, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, grey foxes and ground squirrels also live here. Before they were hunted to extinction, the California Grizzly, which adorns our state flag, was frequently seen in the La Panza Mountains. Golden eagles, hawks, quail, and tule elk also make these mountains and surrounding regions their home.

There are legends that gold was mined in La Panza long before Trujillo made his discovery. With the advent of the mission system, Native American converts may have been set to panning for gold by the Franciscans of Mission San Miguel Archangel, which was established in 1797. This was kept secret, to prevent the kind of gold rush that happened in 1878, and whatever gold was found was melted down into religious artifacts. With the secularization of the missions in the 1830's, the practice ended.

There is an eerie stillness to La Panza nowadays. No trace of the mining camp remains. You can see cattle grazing and rusting farm equipment alongside the rough roads. But there are rumors that some rugged individualists still dig in the hills or pan for gold in the small springs and rivers, searching for that elusive vain of Au 79 that will make them rich.

###

Mark James Miller is an adjunct English Instructor at Allan Hancock College, and president of the Part-Time Faculty Association.