The South Cape Mystery

Assume that you have entered a contest of skill based on American geography. Assume further that one of the problems posed in the competition reads as follows:

“Identify that city or town in the United States or in one of its territories which is named SOUTH CAPE and which is most nearly due west of another such city or town by the name SAN ANTONIO, determining the relative east-west relationship precisely in terms of degrees and minutes of latitude.”

How would you go about finding the correct answer to this problem?

On the surface, the problem is a simple one. Actually, it involves fantastic complexities. Come, let us tackle it together, and see what we find.

There are very few reference books giving extensive lists of latitudes and longitudes for geographic locations. The outstanding exception is a British work, The Times Index-Gazetteer of the World, published in 1965, listing 345,000 localities, with latitudes and longitudes. Let us copy all American SOUTH CAPES and SAN ANTONIOS included in this gazetteer, compare the latitudes given, and select the pair of places most nearly in perfect east-west alignment. Our problem will have been solved.

Our quick and easy solution to the problem does not materialize. The gazetteer lists only 3 American SAN ANTONIOS, which strikes us as an incomplete list, and no American SOUTH CAPES at all. Evidently, we shall have to go to the trouble of checking comprehensive atlas indexes for SOUTH CAPE and for SAN ANTONIO, measuring the latitude of each location found on the map, using rulers and a magnifying glass.

We cheerfully set about our greatly enlarged task, and gradually accumulate a list of 19 SAN ANTONIOS. Most of them are in the southwestern part of the United States, corresponding to areas once under Spanish control, though one turns up in Florida, and another one in Missouri. The situation with SOUTH CAPE is disturbing, however: a canvas of scores and scores of atlases published during the past 100 years fails to turn up even one community by the name of SOUTH CAPE. Something is very wrong.

We decide to reread the problem presented to us. It speaks of “cities or towns.” Possibly, whoever worded the problem was using our language

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 loosely, and intended "cities and towns" to include all geographic locations, whether populated places or physical features. Accepting this broader interpretation would permit us to consider capes (points of land) for comparison purposes. Certainly, there are many points called SOUTH CAPE in the world, and some of them are probably American. We tentatively decide to try this tack.

Before plunging into physical geography, we take one last, unhappy look at our nonexistent list of SOUTH CAPE towns and cities. In checking atlas indexes and gazetteers, we have come across SOUTH CAPE MAY, a community at the southern tip of New Jersey, and SOUTH CAPERTON, a community in Fayette County, West Virginia. Is it conceivable that the contest sponsor made a mistake, cutting off the last few letters of one of these names to produce a seemingly fictitious SOUTH CAPE? Well, just about anything is conceivable, but it is most improbable. We must proceed on the assumption that the name SOUTH CAPE, as given, is correct. There is no evidence of a serious spelling error on the sponsor's part, and we start our search for physical SOUTH CAPES.

Noticing that the map of Alaska is dotted with capes, we examine detailed maps of Alaska with great interest. One of the westernmost Alaskan islands, St. Lawrence Island, attracts our attention immediately. It features a SOUTH-WEST CAPE, WEST CAPE, NORTH CAPE, EAST CAPE, and SOUTH-EAST CAPE. Why not a SOUTH CAPE, too? The most detailed maps available to us do not show a SOUTH CAPE. Consulting topographic and hydrographic maps, which show immensely more detail, we hope to find the missing SOUTH CAPE, but are foiled—it does not seem to exist. Continuing our Alaskan adventure, we come upon a small island, Chirikof Island, southwest of Kodiak Island. At its southern tip, plain as day, is a SOUTH CAPE.

The Alaskan SOUTH CAPE is at a latitude of 55° 46' North. All of our SAN ANTONIOS are south of the 40th parallel of latitude. The best match we could make would involve a latitude difference of almost 16 degrees, which is obviously unthinkable. There must be a SAN ANTONIO somewhere in southeastern Alaska, even though none of our maps shows it.

In 1940, the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey published a comprehensive gazetteer entitled Geographic Names in the Coastal Areas of Alaska. Plowing through this gazetteer, we discover a SAN ANTONIO on the western shore of Prince of Wales Island, in Ulloa Channel, at a latitude of 55° 17' North. Comparing it with our SOUTH CAPE gives a difference of only 29 minutes, or less than one half of one degree. Success at last!
Of course, SAN ANTONIO is not a city or town. It is another physical feature, also a point or cape. However, if the wording about cities and towns can be stretched for SOUTH CAPE, it can be stretched equally well for SAN ANTONIO, and the objection disappears.

Elated as we are by our discovery, we cannot help but wonder about that 29-minute difference. Couldn't there be a pair of names somewhere else in America, involving a smaller difference in latitude? We decide to play it safe by continuing our search for additional SOUTH CAPES.

Not to overlook any possibility, however marginal, we examine major foreign atlases. In an old German atlas, Stieler's, we find a SOUTH CAPE on the northeastern shore of Lower Michigan, facing Lake Huron, at a latitude of about 44° 55' North. Comparison with American atlases discloses that the same feature is designated as SOUTH POINT in most of them. By definition, a "cape" and a "point" are almost exact synonyms, so that this relationship is not at all surprising. We are not, however, yet aware of the impact that it is to have on the course of our investigation. As for the Michigan SOUTH CAPE itself, there is little we can do with it. It is more than 5 degrees north of our northernmost SAN ANTONIO. Its position in Michigan would require any SAN ANTONIO east of it and well aligned with it to be in New York or in one of several New England states. That is a most unlikely location for a Spanish place name, and we never do succeed in finding a SAN ANTONIO in that area.

We return to the original problem, for the umpteenth time. Why are states and "territories" mentioned? Alaska and Hawaii were formerly territories, but are now states. Most of the states in the western half of the United States were once territories. Puerto Rico used to be a territory, but is now a commonwealth. If we apply the word "territory" more generally, it could refer to any land area under the jurisdiction of the United States, now or at some past time. This would include the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, the Philippines, and assorted other islands and regions. We must widen the scope of our inquiry, leaving no stone unturned in the quest for SOUTH CAPE. For example, if any area of the Antarctic Continent was ever explored or claimed by the United States, that area merits our scrutiny.

We study the map of the Philippine Islands. In no time at all, we have found six different SAN ANTONIOS there. Any SOUTH CAPE matching one of them would also have to be in the Philippines, but none turns up, and we eventually abandon these islands as a lost cause.

Hawaii becomes our next object of inquiry, and here we stumble upon something of major importance. The southern tip of the island of Hawaii is called KALAE, or KA LAE. It is alternatively known as SOUTH CAPE or as SOUTH POINT! The latitude of this SOUTH CAPE, as determined by our atlas measurements, and as listed in The Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer of the World, 1962 Edition, is 18° 54' North. We note that The Times Index-Gazetteers of the World gives the latitude as 18° 58' North. After measuring the position of SOUTH CAPE in various leading atlases, we conclude that the British work is in error. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the longitude given therein is even more incorrect, being listed as 155° 54' West instead of 155° 53' West.

A cure for the longitude error lies at a latitude of 18° 53' North. There is a CAPE described as an almost flat-topped feature at a longitude of 155° 53' West. Thus, it seems we have found our SAN ANTONIO and our SOUTH CAPE in the same spot at the southern tip of the island.

We study the map of Puerto Rico. The southern tip of the island is called CAPE TO A MAP, or CAPE TO A MAP, but any point? The latitude of this point is 18° 54' North. We conclude that the British work is in error. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the longitude given therein is even more incorrect, being...
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listed as 155° 24' East, whereas it is actually 155° 41' West. Reference books are not infallible, and this is a case where we have caught the British gazetteer flat-footed.

A curiosity impinges on our consciousness. The Hawaiian SOUTH CAPE is at a longitude of 155° 41' West, the Alaskan SOUTH CAPE at a longitude of 155° 39' West. Had the problem placed before us been to locate a SOUTH CAPE directly north or south of another SOUTH CAPE, we would have had an almost ideal match here—the difference in longitude of these two SOUTH CAPES is only 2 minutes!

We stop dreaming, and get back to business. Our task is to match the Hawaiian SOUTH CAPE as perfectly as possible with a SAN ANTONIO east of it. However, we are in trouble again. Our southernmost SAN ANTONIO is the one in Florida, at a latitude of 28° 22' North, for a difference of about 9½ degrees. Such a difference makes the match worthless.

Studying a world globe, we notice something very interesting. The island of Puerto Rico is almost at the same latitude as the island of Hawaii. Neither island is part of the North American continent, but both belong to the United States, and both are former territories. Could there be a SAN ANTONIO on Puerto Rico?

There could be, and there is. We find one indexed in a giant Cram atlas published in 1903. Finding it on the map is another matter, however, for its map location is indexed as D-11, and there is no SAN ANTONIO at D-11, only a SAN ANTON, which is not the same thing at all. Almost on the verge of giving up, we finally spot the Puerto Rican SAN ANTONIO, in the Arecibo District, with a latitude of 18° 27' North and a longitude of 66° 53' West. It should have been indexed as being at location D-3, not D-11, but anything to make life difficult for us. Anyway, this SAN ANTONIO is 27 minutes south of the Hawaiian SOUTH CAPE, a slight improvement over our Alaskan pair with its 29-minute difference. We have actually made progress, but at a snail's pace.

Checking more atlases, we discover a second SAN ANTONIO in Puerto Rico. This one is in Aguadilla District, with a latitude of 18° 31' North and a longitude of 66° 55' West. We have scored another advance, narrowing the latitude gap to only 23 minutes.

23 minutes is better than 29 minutes, but falls far short of our goal: a zero difference. Can't we improve on our miserable performance up to this point?

The United States Office of Geography, a part of the Department of the Interior, published a Gazetteer (No. 38) in 1958, covering Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and other islands in the Caribbean. We dutifully check this gazetteer, finding a Puerto Rican "barrio" located at latitude 18° 26' North and longitude 66° 55' West, apparently the same SAN ANTONIO as the one shown in the 1903 Cram atlas. We also find a point called SOUTH POINT located at latitude 18° 24' North and longitude 75° 01' West. Referring to a map, we see that this SOUTH POINT must be on the coast of Navassa Island, a tiny island between Jamaica and Hispaniola. It belongs to the United States, so that it would correspond to the general meaning of "terri-

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tor." Since we have already found two physical features, one in Michigan and one in Hawaii, which are known either as SOUTH POINT or as SOUTH CAPE, it occurs to us that the SOUTH POINT on Navassa Island may be a third such case. If it were, we would have a SAN ANTONIO as a match for it, with a latitude difference of only 2 minutes, close to perfection.

An intensive search fails. Most maps show Navassa Island as a tiny speck. At a special map library, we find an old hydrographic map of the island, on which it measures some 7 or 8 inches across, with numerous physical features identified. Sure enough, SOUTH POINT is there, but as a point, not as a cape.

For some time, it has been in the back of our mind that most of the SAN ANTONIOS in the continental United States are in states such as Texas, New Mexico, California, Nevada, and Colorado. The logical way to match them with a SOUTH CAPE would be to find one on the coast of California. With grim determination, we explore this angle.

First to engage our attention is POINT SUR, on the coast of Monterey County, California. "Sur" is the Spanish word for "South." Can we convert POINT SUR, first into SOUTH POINT, then into SOUTH CAPE? We try, but are unable to find any substantiating evidence to that effect. A thorough examination of the California coastline does not yield a SOUTH POINT or a SOUTH CAPE.

Yet, we are not through. In the Pacific Ocean, off the coast of southern California, is a chain of islands known as the Santa Barbara Islands. One of the largest of them is the island of Santa Rosa. Its southern coast features a SOUTH POINT, at a latitude of 33° 52' North. Our file of SAN ANTONIOS includes one in New Mexico, at a latitude of 33° 54' North. If we could convert this SOUTH POINT into a SOUTH CAPE, we would again have a match with a difference of only two minutes.

An extensive search commences, but seems to be headed toward futility. The most detailed maps of Santa Rosa Island, including World Aeronautical Charts and topographic maps, show only SOUTH POINT, not SOUTH CAPE. On the verge of despair, we hit upon a tantalizing entry in the index to the 11th Edition of The Encyclopaedia Britannica, published 1910-1911:

"SOUTH, cape, California, 5-8 (C-5)."

Referring to the map indicated shows that the cape in question is, indeed, our SOUTH POINT on Santa Rosa Island, but the map labels it SOUTH POINT.

"SOUTH, cape" is not "SOUTH CAPE." A comma and a lower-case C have turned a brilliant victory into just another of many defeats. Alas, it was not meant to be. We are compelled to settle for the Hawaii-Puerto Rico combination, taking solace in the fact that the two places are about 5,800 miles apart, so that the latitude deviation amounts to only 1 minute for every 250 miles or so of distance—not bad.

Would you like to try a problem of similar complexity on your own? In that case, we ask you to find an ERIN in the United States most nearly due south of a NET LAKE. For those who make the attempt, an analysis will be given in our next issue.

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